

# Smedley Butler

**Gimlet Eye and the unjust Medal of Honor**  
by Capt Kevin M. Boyce & Vance Osterhout

**G**enerations of Marines have been imbued with a ritual history that can be recited upon command. Who was the only Marine to receive five Navy Crosses? Chesty Puller. Two Marines to receive two Medals of Honor? Dan Daly and Smedley Butler. Such a purely legendary existence strips these figures of their true dimensions and reduces them to a version of bar room trivia for Marines only, though perhaps it at least keeps them alive in public memory.

Recently, we were presented with a rare opportunity to see another side of Smedley Butler. We were able to read a collection of his family's letters in the Green Library at Stanford University's Special Collections and Archives. Opening the boxes of ancient correspondence under the high ceilings of the special archives, we were overawed with the sense of having our very fingers on history. Butler's handwriting was often difficult to interpret, but we became accustomed to it with time, be it pencil on lined paper or pen on Gendarmerie d'Haiti letterhead.

Butler's service is unmatched. He fought in the Spanish-American War in Cuba, the Philippine-American War at Manila, the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Banana Wars in the Caribbean and Central America, and finally, World War I. From 1898 to 1931, Butler led Marines fearlessly across some of the most treacherous and distant foreign lands. Smedley Butler's decorated service proved for itself and in April 1914, then-Maj Butler would receive his first Medal of Honor. The citation reads, "For distinguished conduct in battle, engagement of Vera Cruz, 22 April 1914. Major Butler was eminent and conspicuous in command of his battalion. He exhibited courage and skill in leading his men through the action

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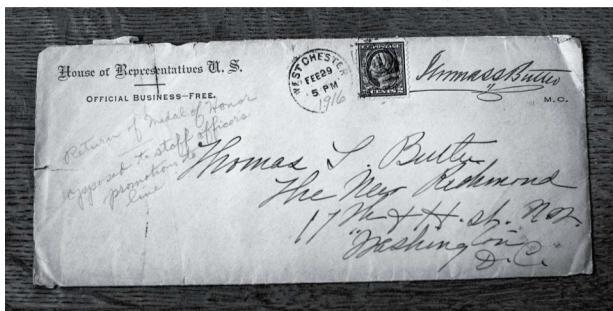
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of the 22d and in the final occupation of the city."<sup>1</sup>

Before the smoke cleared from battles in Mexico, Butler and his Marines were sent to intervene in Haiti after the assassination of Haitian President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam.<sup>2</sup> Butler took command of the Haitian military police force known as the Gendarmerie d'Haiti, fighting against "armed insurgents" known as the Cacos rebels.<sup>3</sup> It was here on 17 November 1915 where Maj Butler earned his second Medal of Honor for conspicuous bravery during the attack on Fort Riviere, Haiti.<sup>4</sup>

During all of these wars and battles, one thing remained constant—Smedley Butler wrote home, and he wrote frequently. Butler was a beloved family man. He wrote often to his wife, children, and parents while deployed on foreign soils. The contents of the letters were no different from the correspondence a Marine would pass along to his or her family today. He noted the weather, his aches and pains, heartache from being separated from family, finances, and even the food.

After hours of reading through boxes of seemingly mundane letters to



*Butler frequently wrote to his parents. (Photo by Vance Osterhout. See footnote 5.)*

LIBERTE

EQUALITE

FRATERNITE

GENDARMERIE D'HAITI

PORT-AU-PRINCE, LE February 21<sup>st</sup> 1916

Dearest Mother:

About this time each year it has been my habit to acknowledge the approach of their and Father's wedding anniversary so here goes for this year's effort.

Each year I am away & swear faithfully to myself that I will make it a point to be at home the next time one of these days rolls around, but duty of some sort always seems to crop up and keep me away.

Thirty seven years is a mighty long time to live with any one person but this and Father seemed to have secured

**A letter to his mother.** (Photo by Vance Osterhout. See footnote 5.)

his family, we were presented with a revelation. Writing to his mother on 21 February 1916, Butler first pays tribute to his parents with a fantastic display of filial piety. Clearly his parents' wedding anniversary was a date he valued, and he addressed his mother with the loving "thee" and "thine." He expresses regret, "that all this foreign service, away from every one you love, is hardly worthwhile, yet what am I to do?"<sup>75</sup> He has, of course, some quite material concerns in this regard, that his work, "is a man's size detail and will be the foundation in which I hope to build my future career," and that, "If all goes well I shall be able to save enough from my salary of nearly \$9,000 a year to educate my Babies and ... to have a little nest egg for Bunny and myself when we get old."<sup>76</sup> We found not merely a legendary figure, but a man who wished he could be with his loved ones, understanding, however, the sacrifice of building a better place for himself in society. Butler loved his wife, affectionately called Bunny in sev-

eral letters, and ended each letter to her with a lengthy and elaborate admission of love, which involved a bit of secret codification.

Beyond this, he immediately launches into the revelatory business of the Medal of Honor he was awarded for action at Vera Cruz. Perhaps in vague and hurried reference, you may have heard that he didn't particularly want the medals he was awarded, these famous medals for which he is ritualized in Marine Corps boot camp history.<sup>77</sup> For example, in a 1983 *Marine Corps Gazette* article, retired LtCol M.L. Bartlett wrote "His sense of honor was without peer; for example, his second award of the Medal of Honor (at Vera Cruz) was so specious that he pleaded with his father to have the award withdrawn."<sup>78</sup> Additionally, in 1992, former Marine and author of numerous books, George B. Clark wrote "Here [Mexico] he earned his first Medal of Honor, which had recently been approved for awarding to officers. He made a half-hearted attempt

to return it, expressing his belief that no one really had earned one during the campaign."<sup>79</sup> Although this piece of information has been shared many years ago in *Gazette* articles and glanced over in the scholarship of a dated history book, we found that Butler had vehemently denied this particular medal. We must quote at length to convey the wording he used to describe what he called a "perversion of our country's greatest gift."<sup>80</sup> With original emphasis:

A Medal of Honor, awarded me for Vera Cruz, has arrived here. Now this is one of those Medals, authorized by Congress for heroism and in my opinion should not be given to every man who takes part in a campaign just because he happens to be in the vicinity. This is my case and I, in even my most puffed up moments, can not remember a single action, or in fact any collection of actions of mine that in the slightest degree warranted such a decoration. I did my duty as best I could in Vera





**MajGen Smedley D. Butler.** (File photo.)

Cruz but there was absolutely nothing heroic in it.<sup>11</sup>

He demands that his father, Congressman Thomas S. Butler, somehow force the Department of the Navy to take the medal back, stating that the award for action in Mexico has "an element of fraud." He says that he wants the Marine Corps' Medal of Honor to remain one only given for true heroism, where he feels that the Army and Navy have awarded them "unjustly."<sup>12</sup> We got the feeling that Butler wanted to make sure that he was his own man, and not the son of a Congressman, when he received his promotions and awards.

The point of this act of tearing scales from eyes is not to imply that Smedley

Butler should be stripped of this Medal of Honor, though this does appear to be his fervent wish in February 1916. It is rather to illustrate his humbleness and desire to perform his duty, to be awarded when he had truly been heroic and not merely because of who his father was or as the culmination of a successful campaign. No doubt, indeed, that anyone reading this has met or at least heard of a person who, upon being presented with an award, felt reluctant or undeserving at having been recognized. Those around them can clearly see the quality of their character, but the individual wishes for nothing more than to be able to continue his work. Seeing that Smedley Butler was such a glory denier,

and to the degree that he expressed such feelings, made us feel that he was more worthy of recognition than we had ever realized in our ritual recitals.

#### Notes

1. United States Marine Corps, "Major General Smedley D. Butler, USMC Medal of Honor Citation: Haiti," United States Marine Corps History Division, (Quantico, VA), accessed 16 February 2015, at <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>.
2. Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 64.
3. Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 10.
4. F.A. Smith, "Major General Smedley Darlington Butler, USMC," *Leatherneck Magazine*, (Quantico, VA: August 1940), accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.
5. Smedley Darlington Butler letter to Maud Darlington Butler, 21 February 1916, box 3, Smedley Darlington Butler Family Correspondence, 1894–1973 M1975, Green Library, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University), 1.
6. *Ibid.*, 1 (back).
7. *Above and Beyond: A History of the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to Vietnam*, (Boston, MA: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 113.
8. M. L. Bartlett, "Smedley Butler's Story," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 1983), 75, accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.
9. George B. Clark, "Letters of Old Gimlet Eye," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 1992), 96, accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.
10. Butler letter 2 (back).
11. *Ibid.*, 2 (front).
12. *Ibid.*, 3 (back).

>Author's Note: Mr. Vance Osterhout took photos of the letter and envelope from an archives box at Stanford University's Cecil H. Green Library.

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