



Story and photos by
SSgt Bob Bowen, USMC

Editor's note: On July 20, 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong took mankind's first steps on the moon. In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, we turned to the Leatherneck archives for a look back at the Marine Corps' contribution to the "Space Race."

The author of the article, Bob Bowen, now a retired captain, said he vividly remembers standing on the beach 50 years ago with the amtrac Marines, watching the launch of Apollo 10. "Thousands of seagulls and assorted other birds scattered at the sound" of the huge Saturn V rocket, he recalls.

"Two months later when Apollo 11 blasted off ... I was in Vietnam walking with Marines of 1/1 in the paddies of Go Noi Island. Almost every Marine had a small transistor radio tuned to the news of the moon walk," Bowen said.

Left: Astronauts Gene Cernan, Thomas Stafford and John Young began their ascent when the powerful Saturn V rocket roared to life.

BLAST-OFF!

Left: SSgt Mike Wahren, on top of the spacecraft, and Sgt James Steinke, left, practice retrieving a mock-up capsule before the May 18, 1969, Apollo 10 launch. The Marines were part of the teams assigned to recover the spacecraft in case there was a problem during the launch.



During one of the daily recovery practices conducted in the weeks prior to the Apollo 10 launch, one helicopter carries the mock-up capsule while another carries firefighting equipment.



An amtrac maneuvers a mock-up spacecraft into the surf as an Air Force helicopter hovers overhead.

When the Apollo 10 spacecraft blasted off from Cape Kennedy, May 18, 1969, several Marines were among those closest to the launch pad.

Perched aboard two cumbersome-looking amtrac retrievers, the 13 Marines appeared out of place on the Florida island where speed is measured in microseconds, but their mission was nonetheless a vital one.

If something had gone wrong during the first few seconds of the launch, the capsule carrying the three astronauts would have been blown free of the huge Saturn V rocket.

The Marines were there to pluck the capsule from the raging surf should such an abort take place. Three Air Force helicopters hovered nearby in case the capsule landed in deep water or in the swamps during an abort.

Fortunately, everything went like clockwork and within seconds the Marines

found themselves with nothing to do but watch as the rocket began its climb out of the earth's atmosphere.

Pelicans paused in flight and then beat a hasty retreat to all corners of the compass as the rocket's five liftoff engines roared to life. Bright orange flames belched out and the massive launch pad complex 39-B was enveloped in smoke as the engines built up an initial thrust of 6,499,016 pounds.

As if awakening from a nightmare, the rocket began its slow climb. From the Marines' position about 6,000 yards away, it seemed as if it would never get off the ground. For the thousands of spectators who lined the beaches on the mainland, about 10 miles away, Apollo 10's struggle to get aloft was painfully slow. Women cried shamelessly as much from anxiety as from fear for the well-being of the astronauts who sat atop the rocket.

Comments from the Marines ran the superlative gauntlet from "Wow!" to "Fantastic!" and back again. Some stood

mute, necks craned, hands shading eyes as the rocket gained speed and headed downrange into the clouds. The fumes and noisy clanging of the amtracs went unnoticed. The Marines were witnessing history in the making—hell, they were part of it—and they were relishing every moment.

And then it was over.

In less than 60 seconds, the rocket was no longer visible to the naked eye. It was traveling over 1,500 knots on its way to orbiting the Earth.

"It's been front row center for us on every shot," Gunnery Sergeant Lucien Hayden said as the amtracs began a slow crawl to their shelter 5 miles down the beach, "but there's always that chance we'll be needed."

That chance of being needed has taken Marines to the cape for every major space shot since 1965. Gunny Hayden, senior enlisted man on the team, made all 10 Apollo shots and the last Gemini space



Above: Amtrac retrievers and a replica of the spacecraft before a practice run. Marines arrived at Cape Kennedy about two weeks prior to each mission's launch to ensure they were prepared for any possible problems.

mission. Apollo 10 was his last official visit to the Cape. Selected for master sergeant, you might say he was promoted out of a job.

When the United States first began its space program, the Navy's amphibious vehicle LARC was used as the launch recovery craft, but when the capsules began carrying two astronauts, and then three, they became too heavy and awkward for the LARC and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) turned to the Marine Corps for help.

The amtrac retriever, with a few modifications, proved to be just what the doctor ordered and the Marine Corps found itself involved in the race to the moon.

The space-minded Marines, members of 2nd Amphibious Tractor Bn, Force Troops, Camp Lejeune, N.C., arrive at Cape Kennedy about two weeks prior to each shot to begin rehearsals. Shortly after their arrival, a contact team from Marine Corps Supply Center, Albany, Ga., visits the Cape to install radio equipment in the amtracs and to ensure the vehicles are ready to roll.



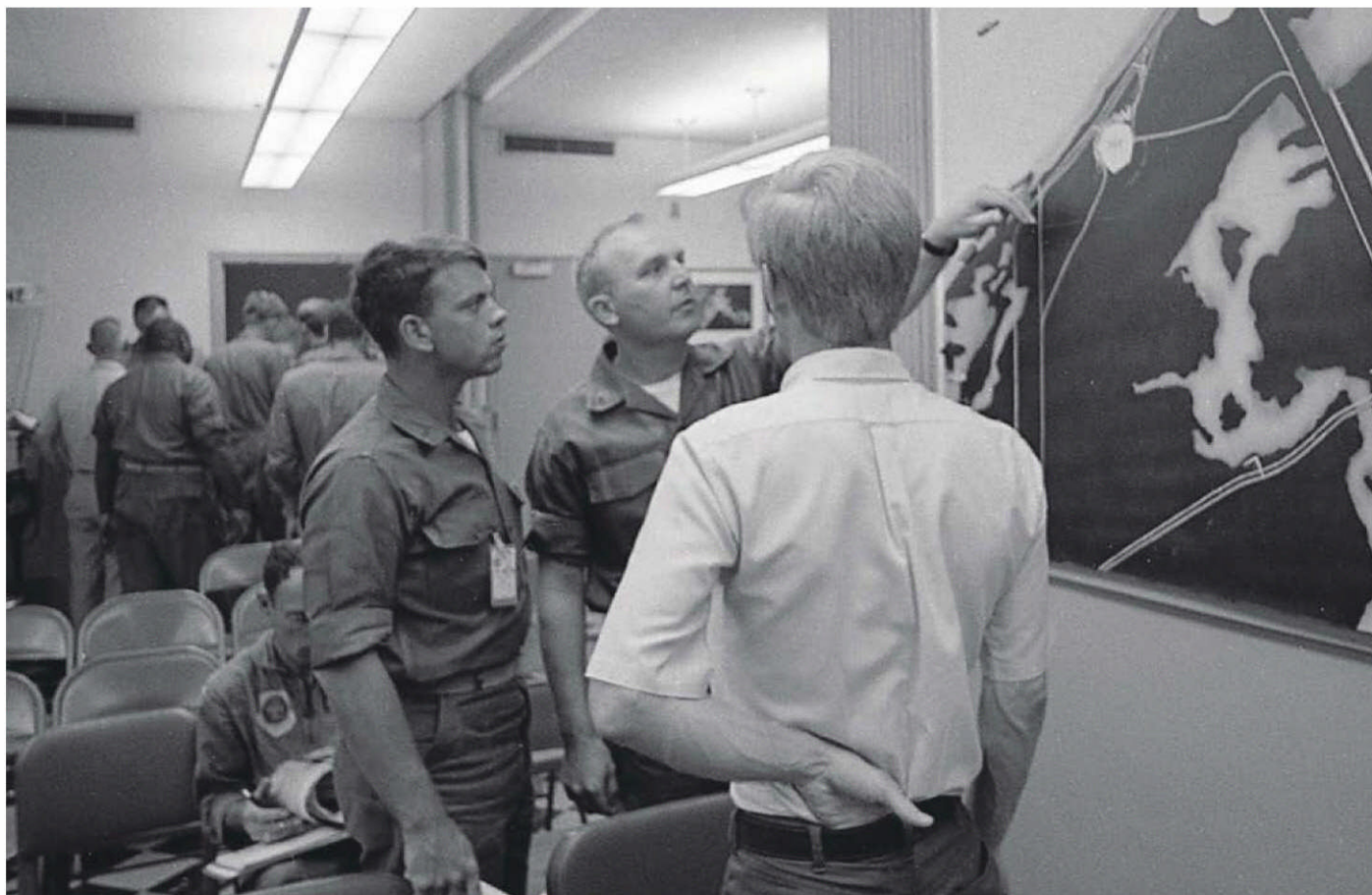
In a practice run, Sgt James Jackson operates the winch mechanism after the spacecraft is attached to the amtrac. Sgt Jackson was one of 13 Marines from 2nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion who supported the launch.

When the amtracs have been declared "all systems go," the Marines begin the daily ritual of carrying a mock-up capsule into the surf, returning to the beach, then back to the surf to retrieve the capsule. The routine varies only when the Marines work with the Air Force. Then, the choppers bring the capsule back to the beach.

During the final week prior to the shot, rehearsals begin in earnest. NASA officials at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, Texas, run the show with everything as close to the way it would be if the shot were actually taking place, including the countdown.

Each amtrac carries six men: the officer in charge of the detail or the

GySgt Lucien Hayden, center, points out a recovery area to 1stLt John Fowler and a NASA official. Gunny Hayden participated in 10 of the Apollo launches and one Gemini launch as part of the team from 2nd Amphibious Tractor Battalion.



noncommissioned officer in charge, the crew chief, one communications man, a driver, a winch operator, and one man to handle the cables used to pick the capsule out of the water. Both teams are thoroughly schooled in their assignments, and after reaching the capsule, it takes less than a minute to have it out of the water and on its way to the beach.

Once on the beach, the Air Force would take over. The astronauts would be removed from the capsule, if they hadn't already been freed by pararescue personnel, and flown directly to the hospital at Patrick Air Force Base, about 35 miles south of the Cape.

In practice, everything goes according to schedule but no one is anxious to see what could be done in an actual situation. The opportunity to prove their abilities would mean a setback in our space program, and if that's the only way the public is going to find out Marines are involved at the Cape, the amtracmen would just as soon remain anonymous.

The work isn't hard, nor does it require a lot of time. The Marines are usually free by mid-afternoon and chances are you'll find them lying on the beach soaking up that warm Florida sunshine, or splashing in their motel's swimming pool.

While working with NASA, the Marines live at a motel in Cocoa Beach, some 25 miles from their working area at Cape Kennedy. Each man receives per diem (\$16 a day), while he's there, but after paying for lodging, chow and laundry, there isn't much left to squander on the town.

Liberty is good there, but expensive. What in the 1950s was just an orange grove with a few small farms scattered about, has mushroomed into a thriving resort area where 10-dollar bills are tossed around like small change.

Most Marines are content with afternoons on the beach or an occasional fishing outing. No license is required for fishing the waters surrounding the Cape and the men have a ball reeling in everything from salt water catfish to trout and flounders.

Sunburns are a dime a dozen and by the time the Marines are ready to head back to Camp Lejeune they look as if they'd backed into the fiery blast of the Saturn V rocket. The discomfort of blistered backs is of little consequence to these Marines, however. They've been given an opportunity most Marines would give their can of ham 'n limas for. 🍷



Cpl Nick Manning climbs out of an amtrac after ensuring all systems were go prior to one of the rehearsals for recovery of the Apollo 10 capsule.

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