

The "Godfather" Gets A Star

Official USMC Photo

Story by Tom Bartlett

The "Godfather," Frank E. Petersen, Jr., has become the first black Marine selected to receive a star in the Marine Corps.

Petersen was one of eight colonels nominated for the rank of Marine Corps brigadier general by President Jimmy Carter. The others nominated were Richard M. Cook, Clyde D. Dean, Jerome T. Hagen, Mannon A. Johnson, Jr., James J. McMonagle, Dennis J. Murphy, Americo A. Sardo and Richard T. Trundy.

Born March 2, 1932, in Topeka, Kansas, Petersen began his military career by enlisting in the Navy after a year of study at Washburn University. Entering the cadet program, he was determined to be the first black Marine pilot. Upon graduation in October 1952, he received both his wings and commission at Pensacola, Fla.

He became the first black officer commissioned in the Marine Corps from the Naval Aviation Cadet Program; he was the fourth of his race to receive the naval aviator designation.

Following advanced flight training in the States, Petersen reported to Marine Attack Squadron 212 at Pyongtaek (K-6), Korea, in April 1953. He would fly his first combat mission in a Corsair while only 20 years old. Before being reassigned, he would fly 60 combat missions, earning a Distinguished Flying Cross and six Air Medals.

Frank E. Petersen, Jr.

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Following a brief tour at Itami, Japan, he was assigned to the Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, Calif., as an instructor with Marine Air Training Squadron 10. While there, he flew the TV-2, F9F8 and the F3 fighters and trainers. He also worked GCA (Ground Control Approach) from the tower at El Toro.

From 1960 to 1963, he flew with Marine Fighter Squadron 332 at the Marine Corps Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Then he went to Iwakuni, Japan, where he served as the Aviation Safety Officer and later as adjutant of Marine Aircraft Group 32 under Colonel George Dooley (later to become a general officer).

The next two years were significant for the 6-foot, 1-inch, 180-pound pilot. He would graduate from the Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico, Va., and he would obtain his Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

He was transferred to the Marine Air Reserve Training Detachment at Willow Grove, Pa., serving as Operations Officer and flying the F8 "Crusader." Petersen then made the transition to the F4 Phantom while serving at MCAS, Cherry Point, N.C.

In 1968, Petersen became the first black to command a tactical air squadron (Fighter Attack Squadron 314) in the Navy or Marine Corps. He flew "290 some odd" combat sorties in a Phantom jet, blasting off from a sandy strip known as "Chu Lai" in Vietnam.

Midway through his tour there, his Phantom was rocked by enemy fire, and he was forced to eject just south of the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam. ("I still don't know what it was that hit the aircraft, whether it was a rocket or what," he says.)

Rescued by a Marine Sea Knight helicopter operating out of the Quang Tri air base, Petersen would fly another 150 missions before being rotated back to the States.

Under his command, VMFA-314 received the coveted Hanson Award for aviation in 1968 as "the best fighter squadron in the Marine Corps."

To his personal collection, he added a Legion of Merit with Combat "V", a Purple Heart Medal and 17 additional Air Medals (including one for a single mission), giving him a total of 23 Air Medals.

In 1969, as a lieutenant colonel, he

returned to the States where he was assigned to the post of Special Assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps for minority affairs. In that capacity he served as an advisor to the Commandant, General Robert E. Cushman, on the fundamentals of minority problems and solutions. On a later tour, as a colonel, he served as Executive Assistant to the Assistant Commandant, General Samuel Jaskilka.

While serving in the Washington, D. C., area, he obtained his Master's Degree in International Affairs. In 1973, he graduated from the National War College.

Returning to Cherry Point, he assumed duties as Comptroller for the Second Marine Aircraft Wing, and later, was designated as the Commanding Officer of Marine Aircraft Group 32, which flew the (VSTOL) Harriers (AV8A). It was there he acquired the nickname of "Godfather."

"I had an FM radio, and I kept a pretty good eye on the various units and pilots. Whenever I had a message to pass, I'd get on the radio and say, 'This is the Godfather. You're being watched...' and the name stuck."

"I was the executive officer of Marine Attack Squadron-542," Maj David Corbett recalled, "and Colonel Petersen was our group commander. That was back in '75 and '76."

"He's a very fair man; fair to his men, and he's a hell of a stick!" Corbett now serves as the Harrier Avionics Systems Project Officer, Naval Air Systems, in Washington, D.C.



The 46-year-old Petersen has been serving as Chief of Staff for the Ninth Marine Amphibious Brigade on Okinawa. With his promotion to brigadier general came a new assignment—to the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington.

BGen Petersen became the 33rd black to achieve the rank of general or admiral in the armed services. The Army has 21 black generals on active duty and the Air Force has seven. The Navy has three black admirals.

Today, according to 2ndLt Nancy Laluntas, of the Division of Information at Headquarters Marine Corps, there are approximately 33,500 blacks in the Marine Corps. That represents about 3.7 percent of the officers, and roughly 19.3 percent of the enlisted strength of the Corps.

Petersen attributes the small num-

ber of senior black officers in the Marine Corps to the brief duration of their stay in the military. The Marine Corps was the last of the military services to accept black recruits. At the onset of American involvement in World War II, black Army volunteers and draftees were assigned to all-black units. The Navy restricted its black volunteers to steward duty, and the Marine Corps accepted no blacks at all until June 1, 1942.

"When I came in, there were no black aviators, let alone black officers," Petersen recalled. The young black entering the military today," he continued, "has the opportunity to stay on track and make a career without limitations."

During a recent interview, the general answered as follows pertaining to his philosophy:

"Decide on an objective and direct all your efforts towards that goal. Don't let anything at all detract you from that goal; let nothing stand in your way or detain you from achieving whatever it is..."

Hobbies or interests? "I enjoy chess and I jog. I don't keep a log, but I try to get in 40 miles a week. I know what's good for me, so I don't need to keep a log telling me what I've done."

As a general, will you continue flying? "Yes. I'll fly, by assignment."

What in your career as a Marine would you change if you had it to do over again? "Not a thing; not a damned thing. The drama or the trauma...I wouldn't change a thing."

Married to the former Alicia Downes, the general is as proud of his wife's accomplishments as he is his own. Perhaps prouder....Alicia is a professor, and during her husband's assignment on Okinawa, she taught courses for the University of Southern California.

In addition to having flown the propeller-driven, gull-winged Corsair in Korea, a variety of training aircraft, Phantoms and other jets, and the Harrier, BGen Petersen looks forward to the challenge of his new assignment and the addition of newer aircraft to the Marine Corps' arsenal.

"You need a professional military outfit if you're going to be a strong nation. The Marine Corps is very professional. It's cut and dry as far as I'm concerned. If it's time to go to war, I want to go to war with Marines."

"I don't want to do it any other way."

