

Unlike previous reenactments, Marines wore their M1917 steel helmets and full M1910/17 field equipment at the Antietam battlefield. A command decision was made to reenact this battle using modern equipment and tactics.



## Marines at the Battle of Antietam—1924

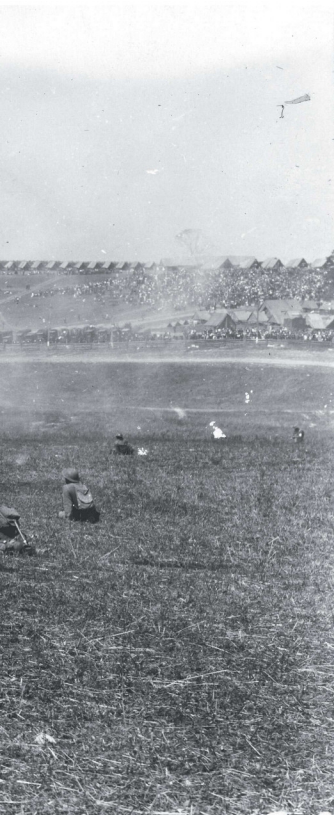
By Kenneth L. Smith-Christmas · USMC photos courtesy of the author

**T**he main body of the Marine Corps' East Coast Expeditionary Force boarded barges on the wharf at Quantico, Va., on 25 Aug. 1924, and sailed up the Potomac River to Washington, D.C., heading for the Civil War battlefield of Antietam, Md. That was the last of four reenactments that the Marine Corps staged in the early 1920s, under the initiative of the legendary Marine, Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler.

Joined at the East Potomac Park by the motorized section of the column the next day, the full brigade of Marines marched to Sharpsburg by way of Rockville, Gaithersburg, Ridgeville and Frederick, Md., arriving at the battlefield on 1 Sept., where it remained for two weeks.

During the reenactment, Marines employed range-finding equipment for the artillery. Of note, the Marines shown here are wearing both the new and old versions of the frame service cap, as it was being updated in 1924.





**First Lt Lawson H. M. Sanderson, the first Marine to employ dive-bombing tactics in combat, was the liaison officer for the Force Air Service squadron at the Antietam reenactment.**

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## Lieutenant Lawson H. M. “Sandy” Sanderson

The liaison officer of the aviation contingent for the Antietam reenactment was First Lieutenant Lawson H. M. Sanderson, who already had made a name for himself in Haiti, several years prior to the Antietam maneuver. A native of the state of Washington, “Sandy” Sanderson entered the Marine Corps during the World War I period, and by 1919 he was serving in Haiti with Marine Fighting Squadron (VF) 4M, flying the Curtiss JN-4 Jenny.

When both Marine and Haitian Gendarmerie forces in the area were directed by the commanding officer to bomb a derelict French stone fort in which a group of Haitian insurgents (*Cacos*) were hiding, Sanderson replied that the bomb racks that had been requisitioned had not yet arrived. Determined to carry out his orders, and with the assistance of Marine Corps legend Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, who was serving in the Gendarmerie as a lieutenant, Sanderson improvised a bomb rack from a canvas mail sack, ran a few practice runs and then scattered the Haitian *Cacos* by dropping light bombs on them. That was the Marine Corps’ first attempt at dive-bombing.

An intrepid flier, Sanderson flew in a series of air races sponsored by Ralph Pulitzer (the son of the famed newspaperman) during the early 1920s and placed third in the 1923 St. Louis Air Races while flying a Wright F2W-1 biplane. During the Antietam maneuvers, he coordinated the activities of sections of both fighters and bombers with the troops on the ground, while demonstrating the latest in aviation techniques.

After the Antietam reenactment, Sanderson assumed command of VF-9M and eventually rose to the grade of brigadier general during WW II, retiring as a major general after the war. Both a Marine Corps aviation trophy and an airport in his native state are named in his honor.

—Kenneth L. Smith-Christmas



Observation balloons were a big hit with the public and a featured part of the reenactments of the Wilderness, Gettysburg, New Market and Antietam battles. Several different types of balloons were deployed at these events.



Medical and military police units accompanied the brigade on all of its maneuvers in the 1920s and played a vital role in the success of the reenactments.

The main purpose of these reenactments was to provide training for the brigade, then consisting of Fifth Marine Regiment (infantry), 10th Marines (artillery) and battalions of attached engineers, signalers and medical corps, as well as detachments of aviation and chemical units. The reenactments also showcased new innovations in the Marine Corps and boosted publicity. The Antietam reenactment differed from previous reenactments—Wilderness (1921), Gettysburg (1922) and



BGen Dion Williams, who had assumed command of the brigade from BGen Smedley Butler, addresses the crowd at Antietam. During the reenactments, local dignitaries and senior Marines made speeches at the relatively new monuments on the battlefields.

New Market (1923)—because modern uniforms and equipment were worn, as opposed to earlier attempts to portray 19th-century soldiers.

BGen Dion Williams led the last reenactment of the 1920s, as BGen Butler had moved on to be the Public Safety Director of Philadelphia. Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune halted the program in 1925 because of the costs involved, but BGen Williams revived the series of reenactments in the late 1930s.

*Author's bio: Ken Smith-Christmas served on the staff of the Marine Corps Museum for nearly 30 years and was the senior curator on the exhibits design-planning team for the National Museum of the Marine Corps. In 2010, he retired from the Project Office of the National Museum of the U.S. Army, where he had been director of Exhibits and Collections.*

