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Chesty Puller, Dan Daly, Smedley Butler, John Basilone -- these men and their accomplishments are known and revered by generations of Marines. However, if you say the name Thomas Holcomb you will most likely get a blank stare. It was this man, more than any other, that made the modern Marine Corps and prepared them for victory during World War II.

“Holcomb is one of those figures that have not gotten a lot of attention in history,” said Dr. David Ulbrich, a historian at the U.S. Army Engineer School. “He didn’t have a cool nickname like Gen. Holland “Howlin’ Mad” Smith, he didn’t have the personality that Nimitz or Marshall did. However, by inspiration and hard training Holcomb transformed the Marines from a police force aboard naval ships and in banana republic interventions, into division-sized units of elite assault troops that helped lead the United States to victory in the Pacific.”

Ulbrich’s lecture, “Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943” was the topic of this month’s Perspectives in Military History lectures at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center.

Thomas Holcomb became the 17th Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1936 and led the Marines through their largest expansion and reorganization ever. He also succeeded in shaping it into the amphibious offensive force that brought Japan to its knees.

Holcomb’s vision for this monumental transformation took shape while he was a student at the Army War College.

“While Holcomb was a student at the Army War College he wrote a paper entitled, “Marine Corps Mission: National Defense and its organization for a National Emergency,” said Ulbrich. “That paper outlined the training that would allow Marines to take and defend islands in the Pacific, and also outlined how the force structure could be realigned to accommodate a larger force.”

When Holcomb assumed the office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps he inherited a small force, beset with fiscal restraints, manpower shortages, promotion bottlenecks and isolationist sentiments.

“When Holcomb assumed the office of Commandant, the Marine Corps had fewer men than the New York City Police Department,” said Ulbrich. “Marines were primarily used in counter-insurgency and guerrilla operations in Latin America, the Philippines, China and Latin America.” There were many in Washington who doubted whether the United States needed a Marine Corps.

Realizing that war with Japan was inevitable, and that the Marines would play a significant role in the coming war, Holcomb moved to streamline the Corps and reorganized it more efficiently to facilitate the flow of information.

“Holcomb strengthened the position of assistant commandant,” said Ulbrich. Prior to this each department operated as its own little fiefdom, so consequently little got done. Under the new system the departments were answerable to the assistant commandant.”

He also realized that for the Marine Corps to exist, it had to be justified in the eyes of the American public so one of the new departments at Headquarters Marine Corps were a public relations division to make sure the Marines got good press.

However the most important change that Holcomb undertook as Commandant benefited not only the Marine Corps but the way America fights its wars.

In 1942, when the Marines were fighting at Guadalcanal, ground operations were being directed by Admiral Richmond Turner, commander of the Amphibious Force, South Pacific Force, instead of by the commander Marine commander on the ground, Gen. Alexander Vandergrift.

Realizing that it was more efficient to have the ground commander direct operations, Holcomb established the autonomy of the ground commander. “The Marine leader on the ground should direct operations on the ground, not an Admiral on the ship,” said Holcomb.

During Holcomb’s tenure as Commandant the Marine Corps also saw for the first time, female Marines. However, while he was forward thinking on the subject of allowing women to serve, he was not in favor integrating the Marine Corps.

In April 1941, Holcomb explained that he did not want African Americans to serve in the Marine Corps because it would undermine efficiency. Like many of his generation, he believed that African Americans were not able to follow orders and that they would run away in battle. “If it were a question of having a Marine Corps of 5,000 whites or 250,000 Negroes, I would rather have the whites,” said Holcomb.

“Because of his skill and calm intellect, Holcomb deserves not only to be placed among the great

commandants of the Marine Corps, but to be placed with Marshall, Nimitz and Eisenhower,” said Ulbrich. “He prepared the Marine Corps for victory, and he made the modern Marine Corps.”

The next Perspectives in Military History lecture will take place on Aug. 17. Maj. Gen. Gregg Martin, the Commandant U.S. Army War College, will present a lecture on, " Transforming the Army and its Strategic Leaders: A wicked Problem."

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