

# H-Net Reviews

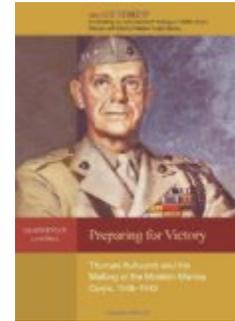
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David J. Ulbrich. *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2011. xiv + 285 pp. \$35.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-903-3.

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In *Preparing for Victory*, David J. Ulbrich, a 2007 PhD from Temple University currently teaching at Rogers State University, has written the first book-length biography of General Thomas C. Holcomb, the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps from December 1936 until December 1943. Replacing two pioneering articles by John C. Gordon, the book is by far the most authoritative and detailed account available of Holcomb's life and career.[1] Born in 1879, the son of a prosperous Delaware attorney and state legislator, Holcomb obtained a commission in the Marine Corps in 1900. In the next seventeen years he held a succession of important and prestigious assignments that prepared him for even more important postings. He served tours with the Atlantic Fleet; with the Marine Guard in Beijing; in Washington, DC, as an aide to President Theodore Roosevelt; as acting quartermaster for Marines stationed in the Philippines; as post quartermaster of the Marine Corps Barracks in Washington, DC; as aide to the commandant of the Marine Corps, Maj. Gen. George Barnett; and as a member of an ad hoc war plans committee organized by the assistant commandant, Col. John A. Lejeune. In this last capacity Holcomb became one of the first Marines to work out the implications of the plan for a naval campaign against Japan, War Plan Orange, for the Marines' advanced base force concept. As a major during World War I he commanded the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, at Belleau Wood and Soissons, winning the Croix de Guerre on both occasions. Promoted to lieutenant colonel of the 6th Marines, he acted as the plans officer for the regiment. He ended the war as one of the most decorated Marine officers of the conflict.

After the war Holcomb received a series of assignments that suggested that senior leaders in the Marine

Corps were grooming him for the highest positions in the organization. He was a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff School from 1924 to 1925 at a time when the school was focused on how best to breach a stabilized front. In 1925 he became the director of the Operations and Training Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, and held the position for two years, a period in which Marine planners first developed detailed plans for amphibious landings in support of the Orange plan. As a student in the senior course at the Naval War College, 1931-32, he participated in war games simulating a naval campaign to relieve the Philippines. Holcomb explored the technical issues involved in mounting an amphibious assault while a student at the Army War College during the 1932-33 academic year. Assignment to the Naval War Plans Division from 1932 to 1935

followed. At the end of that tour he was promoted to brigadier general and appointed commandant of the Marine Corps School. These tours ensured that Holcomb was repeatedly exposed to the latest thinking about the Marines' advanced base force concept, to War Plan Orange as it evolved from a cavalry charge across the Pacific to a careful step-by-step advance, and to the development of Marine Corps amphibious doctrine and equipment.

Holcomb's surviving correspondence from this period is sparse; Ulbrich nevertheless weaves a very interesting outline of a life and a career from official documents, interviews with Holcomb's contemporaries, and news accounts. The types of sources Ulbrich used often limits him to showing that Holcomb was exposed to certain developments but not how he contributed to them. While Holcomb was commandant of the Marine Corps School, for example, the faculty and students were en-

gaged in either writing or revising what the chief historian of the Marine Corps, Charles D. Melson, labels “the Holy Trinity” (p. 35) of Marine Corps doctrine—the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* (1934), the *Tentative Manual of Advanced Bases* (1936), and the *Small Wars Manual* (1935). The available evidence does not indicate, however, what personal impact Holcomb had on these documents, or even what he thought about them. This circumstance is somewhat frustrating for the reader, but it must have been even more frustrating for the author.

Ulbrich is very scrupulous about not pushing his analysis any further than his limited evidence will allow. Holcomb was a very junior brigadier general (only ninth in overall seniority among Marine Corps generals) when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt selected him to become commandant of the corps beginning in December 1936. Not since 1864, when Abraham Lincoln selected Maj. Jacob Zeilin to be commandant, had a president selected such a junior officer for the post. The author identifies three figures likely to have been key to the decision: President Roosevelt, who had known Holcomb ever since he served as assistant secretary of the Navy in the Wilson administration; Assistant Secretary of the Navy Henry Latrobe Roosevelt, who was both the president’s cousin and a retired Marine Corps colonel who probably knew Holcomb at least by reputation; and the retiring commandant, Maj. Gen. John R. Russell, who was a proponent of both amphibious warfare and promotion by selection. Sometime in 1935 Henry Latrobe Roosevelt approached the president and suggested that he appoint Holcomb commandant when Russell retired. FDR was open to the idea but told his cousin to check with Russell and get back to him. Henry Latrobe Roosevelt apparently did so, although, as Ulbrich points out, the evidence is ambiguous because Henry died unexpectedly before the president made the official announcement. So much for the mechanics of the appointment. The reasons for Holcomb’s selection were his unflappable temperament, his obvious intelligence, his diversity of career assignments, and his support for the Marines’ amphibious warfare mission. Nowhere does the author’s skills as an analyst stand out better than in his discussion of Holcomb’s selection.

The core of *Preparing for Victory* consists of five chapters that Ulbrich devotes to Holcomb’s service as commandant from December 1936 until December 1943. Fortunately, Holcomb’s personal correspondence has survived from these years, while the official documentation is very rich given his position. His tenure naturally divides into three phases: 1936–39, the Depression-era Marine Corps; 1940–41, preparing the Corps for war; and

1941–43, mobilizing and fighting the Corps. Ulbrich devotes one chapter to each of the first two phases and three chapters to the war. In many ways the Corps of which Holcomb assumed command was already a going concern. Since early 1934, his predecessor Russell had arranged for Marine participation in annual fleet exercises in the Caribbean that included simulated opposed landings. They gave Marines an opportunity to test both emerging amphibious doctrine and to identify equipment shortfalls. The most important of these were the lack of specialized craft to carry assault forces from ship to shore, revealed glaringly in the 1937 exercises, the first conducted while Holcomb was commandant. The problems in the exercise led the Navy Equipment Board to fund one prototype flat-bottom Eureka boat manufactured by Andrew Jackson Higgins. That same year Holcomb became interested in Donald Roebling’s “Allegator,” a true amphibian. In 1938 Holcomb saw a

demonstration of a prototype that Roebling had built with his own money and exclaimed: “My God, that’s the future of the Marine Corps!” (p. 55). Even with his strong personal backing, however, Holcomb could not convince the Navy Equipment Board to fund even one prototype until 1941—so tight was the Navy’s development budget. Fortunately, Roebling continued to use his own funds to refine his craft. This lack of funds may also explain why Holcomb chose not to replace the bolt-action 1903 Springfield with the semiautomatic M1 Garand when the Army offered it in 1939. In contrast, Ulbrich claims that the overriding factor was Holcomb’s technological conservatism—a point that I do not find altogether convincing (pp. 97–98).

Throughout his years as commandant, Holcomb placed great emphasis on cultivating close relations with key members of the Naval Affairs committees, such as Representatives Carl Vinson and Melvin J. Maas and Senator David I. Walsh. He made a point of always giving a direct, straightforward answer when testifying before congressional committees and when he did not know an answer stating that he would get back to the questioner the next day with the facts. Over time he developed trust, but in the short term he was hard-pressed just to maintain the existing budget against economizers. The Corps that Holcomb inherited consisted of some 17,200 officers and men, a force smaller than the contemporary New York City Police Department. Holcomb’s initial objective was the buildup of the Fleet Marine Force, an organization created by Russell, so that it had real military capacity. To achieve this objective, he needed to increase the active duty force to its peacetime legal limit of 17,000 en-

listed men, but he discovered that the Marine Recruiting Service was too anemic to maintain the force, let alone provide modest growth. Holcomb's solution was to shift money and men into the service so that it could. At the same time, his staff began a detailed study of how headquarters could expand the Corps in an orderly fashion to its wartime limit of 57,000 enlisted men in the event of an emergency. These early years were frustrating for Holcomb, but they prepared the ground for his future success.

The plan to increase the Corps paid off following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. The Corps grew to 26,000 by July 1940 with plans to expand to 50,000 by July 1941. Working closely with Representatives Vinson and Maas, Holcomb secured congressional authorization for such an enlargement. When recruiting fell off in early 1940 as the economy began to revive due to war orders from the Allies, Holcomb reorganized Marine Corps headquarters, creating a Recruiting Division reporting directly to the commandant, and gave it the men, resources, and publicity to meet and exceed the goal for 1941. At the same time, expanding the force meant shifting emphasis from developing new amphibious equipment to outfitting new Marines with existing equipment. Fleet Exercise 7 in early 1941 showed that both the Higgins boat and Roebing's *Allegator* were very useful in landings. Moreover, Holcomb was finally able to secure funds from the Naval Equipment Board—he had been trying since 1937—to redesign the Higgins boat by adding a bow ramp, which would be the final redesign of what became the landing craft, vehicle, personnel (LCVP). The main point of contention in 1941 (it would continue through the Guadalcanal campaign) was who would command the landing force once ashore—the senior admiral afloat or the senior Marine Corps officer ashore.

Following the fall of France in June 1940, the new chief of naval operations, Adm. Harold R. Stark, articulated Plan "Dog" as the proper strategic stance for the United States. In the event of war, the United States would take the offensive against Germany first and stand on the strategic defensive in the Pacific until Germany was defeated. Adopted by the Roosevelt administration, the plan as developed by Stark involved holding a defensive line west of Hawaii and maintaining a line of communications to the Philippines, Australia, and Malaya. Holcomb began organizing Marine defense battalions and dispatching them initially to Midway, Johnson, and Palmyra Islands with subsequent deployments planned to Wake, Guam, and Samoa as Marines became available.

At the same time, Holcomb organized two Marine divisions destined to be the Corps' amphibious strike force. In the midst of these momentous changes, the president opted for continuity and reappointed Holcomb as commandant for a second tour.

Holcomb remained unfazed by the disastrous opening of the war in the Pacific. He set an example, working quietly at his desk, showing "urgency ... but not frantic desperation" (p. 106). In so doing, he demonstrated both his strength of character and what Ulbrich, drawing on the work of political scientist Fred I. Greenspan, labels "emotional intelligence"—the ability to master and direct his emotions toward completing the task at hand. The Marine Corps grew from 51,000 on December 7, 1941 to 55,500 on December 31, 1941. By July 1942 it reached 143,000. Holcomb successfully opposed congressional efforts to immediately increase the Corps to 200,000 by July 1942, explaining that the available training facilities limited capacity for the moment to a force of 150,000. The Marine Corps expansion was much more orderly than might have been anticipated given the magnitude of the increase over a seven-month period.

What is even more impressive is that all these men were volunteers. The success owed much to the Division of Public Relations led by Brig. Gen. Robert L. Denig, Sr. Holcomb's relations with Denig illustrated one of his great talents as a leader—an almost intuitive ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his subordinates and then to place them in positions that used their abilities to best advantage. Holcomb was content to give general direction to the public affairs effort and leave the day-to-day decisions to Denig, who responded with a brilliant campaign to support the recruiting drive.

Holcomb was not nearly as successful when forced to confront social issues, but here he mirrored the attitudes and prejudices of his generation. He succeeded in barring open homosexuals from the Corps—as did all the other services. Presidential directives followed by legislation forced him to accept women and blacks in the Corps over his vehement objections. Holcomb insisted that the latter serve in a segregated battalion led by all white officers. Later, commenting on new units in the Corps, he observed that war dogs were a great success, that the women Marines were working out better than he had anticipated, and that the black troops "made it difficult to carry out our work," apparently referring to the diversion of scant training resources from white units (p. 168). At the same time, when he had a positive attitude toward a racial group, he could be inclusive. Holcomb

became an enthusiastic proponent of the Navaho code talker program. Inclusiveness did not extend, however, to most specialized units. In his view, all Marines were elite. He saw no need for an elite within the elite. He remarked that any “properly trained and led fleet Marine rifle battalion” could do anything that a Marine raider battalion could do (pp. 124-125). Once again, however, the president’s opposing view prevailed.

The interwar Marines were a naval service, a small, relentlessly tactical organization focused on a few lines of effort. The rapid mobilization of the Corps and the importance of the amphibious mission changed both the organization and the role of the commandant. Holcomb attended the Washington ARCADIA Conference (December 1941–January 1942) at which he advised the conferees on possible amphibious operations in the Pacific. ARCADIA was the first high-level conference to which a Marine Corps commandant had been invited. Holcomb’s growing importance and that of the Corps were confirmed in January 1942 by his promotion to lieutenant general. At this time, the Naval War Plans Division envisioned a limited counteroffensive in the Solomon Islands to protect the line of communications to Australia beginning in early 1943. The under-strength, partially trained 1st Marine Division deployed to New Zealand in May and June 1942 intent on a six-month shakedown before commitment to combat. The Japanese advance in the Solomons changed the time table, and Operation WATCHTOWER, the landing on Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942, was the result.

Ulbrich devotes an entire chapter to the Guadalcanal campaign, a decision that makes sense on several levels. The Guadalcanal campaign was the end to which the initial Marine mobilization was directed. Moreover, the 1st Marine Division was commanded by Holcomb’s protégé, Maj. Gen. Alexander A. Vandegrift. Holcomb also visited the island in October 1942 to monitor the progress of the campaign. During the visit, he took Vandegrift aside and told him that he intended to retire for age when he reached his sixty-fourth birthday in September 1943. He intended to recommend Vandegrift as his replacement. At the end of the inspection, he took Vandegrift back to Nouméa for a two-day conference with the theater commander, Vice Adm. William F. Halsey, and the naval amphibious commander, Rear Adm. Richmond Kelly Turner. The Marines were hanging onto the beachhead at Guadalcanal—but just barely. Holcomb’s and Vandegrift’s report on conditions there elicited from Halsey the commitment that he would give the Marines “everything he had.” As important as this commitment

proved for the ultimate success of the Guadalcanal campaign, Holcomb brokered an agreement about command relations in amphibious operations that proved equally important in the long term, both during the war and after. Disputes about command had continued throughout the campaign. The conferees agreed that during the planning phase the senior Navy and Marine commanders would have co-equal responsibilities. During the movement to the objective and the assault phase, the senior naval officer would command. Once ashore, the senior Marine officer would command all ground forces and shore-based air forces. Holcomb then shepherded this agreement up the chain of command all the way to Washington where it became official doctrine. In recounting this episode Ulbrich puts all of Holcomb’s considerable skills as a military politician on full display.

Once the Marines reached a strength of 143,000, Congress established a new objective of 223,000 by July 1943. The Corps exceeded this figure by January 1943. These new Marines were, however, the last of the volunteers. Beginning in February 1943, as mandated by FDR’s Executive Order 9279, the Navy (and its Marine Corps) must receive all new members from Selective Service. Holcomb spent his last year battling to maintain Marine standards when accepting new inductees. The victorious end of the Guadalcanal campaign in February 1943 raised morale and validated all the Marine Corps’ efforts to develop the amphibious concept during the interwar period. The horrendous losses at Tarawa in August 1943 suggested that everyone, including the Marines, had more to learn. An emergency kept Vandegrift in the Pacific longer

than expected, and the president extended Holcomb’s tour until the end of the year.

Holcomb was nevertheless serious about the need for a younger man with recent combat experience to take over as commandant. As he remarked to his successor on January 1, 1944, his last day in office, when he walked out the door twenty years was going to lift off his shoulders and fall on Vandegrift’s. As he went through that door, Holcomb wore on those shoulders the four stars of a full general. He was the first full general in Marine Corps history.

After Holcomb stepped down as commandant, President Roosevelt appointed him U.S. minister to the Union of South Africa. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Holcomb reacted very negatively to race relations in South Africa. He damned both the supposedly liberal prime minister, Jan Christian Smuts, and the opposition

Afrikaner Nationalist Party that favored an even harsher policy of Apartheid. Ulbrich suggests that perhaps Holcomb's views on race had evolved since stepping down as commandant. That is possible, although it is equally likely that Holcomb looked upon South African practices as more nakedly exploitative than American segregation. (Holcomb would have been most familiar with race relations in Virginia, the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Delaware.) It is never wise to underestimate the ability of Americans to look at their own institutions and practices through rose-colored spectacles. Holcomb stepped down as minister in April 1948. Fully retired, he lived in the Washington area until his death in 1964 at age eighty-five.

Ulbrich sees Holcomb as a prototypical progressive manager who stressed rationality and efficiency, streamlined bureaucracy, and delegated authority to capable subordinates. He set goals and coordinated the efforts of subordinates but left them free to achieve those ends in what they conceived the most efficient manner. He stressed the open flow of information both up and down the chain of command and across divisions. This interpretation gives thematic unity to *Preparing for Victory*. Apparently Holcomb did not study formal management theory, but these ideas permeated his times. Furthermore, he got to see one of the very best early practitioners of progressive management in action—Maj. Gen. John A. Lejeune, when commandant in the early 1920s.

Ulbrich's end notes and bibliography attest to the fact that he is an assiduous researcher. Given his painstaking and detailed work, I was surprised to discover that he had not visited the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library. Of course, FDR was notorious for doing business orally and not committing details to paper, but his impact on Holcomb's life and career would have justified at least an exploratory trip to Hyde Park.

Marine Corps historiography is with a few honorable exceptions notably parochial, with many of the books written by serving or retired Marines. Ulbrich, of course, had to master this literature, but he also appears to have absorbed some of the attitudes through his pores. Douglas MacArthur was "delusional" to believe that he could successfully defend the Philippines (p. 64), but Navy and Marine Corps plans to defend Guam and Wake with Marine defense battalions pass without comment (p. 80). The fact is that all American leaders, civilian and military, underestimated the Japanese army's and navy's military capacity and the Japanese government's recklessness. Almost everyone thought that they would have

much more time to get ready than they actually did.

Something similar is at work in Ulbrich's discussion of the Roosevelt administration's decision in 1941 to send marines to garrison Iceland rather than soldiers. Ulbrich comments that marines were selected because the soldiers were not "prepared" (p. 84). In mid-1941 neither Army nor Marine units were well trained compared to the levels of proficiency they attained later. Army units did not go to Iceland because they were filled with draftees, guardsmen, and reserve officers, all of whom were prohibited by law from serving outside the Western hemisphere. Marine units contained only volunteers and did not fall under this prohibition.[2]

Finally, in his discussion of the Guadalcanal campaign Ulbrich, drawing on the work of John B. Lundstrom, presents a long discussion of the factors that caused Vice Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher to pull his carriers out of range of the island less than three days after the initial landings (pp. 133–134, 137–138). Then without any effort to explain why this rationale was flawed, he casually refers to Fletcher having "abandoned" the Marines and continues his narrative (p. 141). Left unanalyzed is that this was the Marines' first experience in working with a carrier task force in wartime. Similarly, Admiral Fletcher, while very knowledgeable about carrier combat, had never worked with a landing force before. Both sides had a lot to learn, a task not made easier by the U.S. Navy's very thin margin of carrier superiority in the Pacific. Nowhere else in the

book is its origin as a dissertation more glaringly on display than in this half-digested critique of Fletcher's actions. In general, interservice rivalry is best left to the services. They are past masters of the genre.

These flaws are minor when compared to the author's overall accomplishments. He has conducted in-depth research among many seemingly unpromising sources and has presented his findings in clear, unadorned prose. Ulbrich has both a real analytical flair and an ability to make significant generalizations. His major conclusions are buttressed by an abundance of evidence. Moreover, he has rescued an important figure known only to a few specialists from undeserved obscurity. General Holcomb was a key figure in the development of one of the most important military institutions of the modern age. Students of the U.S. Marine Corps, World War II, and modern military history generally will want to read and reflect on this book.

Notes

[1]. John W. Gordon, "General Thomas W. Holcomb and 'The Golden Age of Amphibious Warfare,'" *Delaware History* 21 (September 1985): 256–70, and "Thomas Holcomb, 1936–48," in *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Jack Shulimson (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 253–81.

[2]. For a discussion of the legal issues, see Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engleman, and Byron Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts, U.S. Army in World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964), 469.

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