



The MARINES' COMMA

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Under the guidance of very different commanders, the 1st and 2d Marine Raider Battalions excelled when operating behind enemy lines or fighting as conventional infantrymen.

In February 1942, the U.S. Marine Corps embarked on a radical experiment by establishing the 1st and 2d Raider Battalions. The 1st Battalion, commanded by the cool and calculating Lieutenant Colonel Merritt “Red Mike” Edson, was stationed at Quantico, Virginia, while the 2d Battalion was based at Camp Pendleton, California, under the command of the enigmatic Major Evans Carlson. In part based on British Commandos and Chinese communist guerrillas,

the elite Marine Raiders would serve as force multipliers while conducting unconventional as well as conventional operations against Japanese forces.¹ While the Marine Corps of the interwar period, despite its relatively small size, maintained that its purpose was to conduct amphibious landings against hostile beachheads, the Raiders would be highly trained light infantrymen whose foreseen role was to execute strikes behind enemy lines.

The Raiders initially benefited from President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s strong interest in the units, particularly the 2d Battalion. In 1935 its future commander, Evans Carlson, had served as the executive officer of FDR’s protective Marine detachment, and he and the First Family developed a close friendship. When Carlson was deployed to China in 1937, Roosevelt asked the captain to write him personally about Japan’s invasion of the country. Carlson continued this correspondence when he was embedded as an observer with the Chinese communist 8th Route Army.²

While serving as a presidential guard, Carlson had developed a lasting friendship with FDR’s son, James Roosevelt, a Marine Corps Reserve captain. Carlson believed that with his own military knowledge and James Roosevelt’s connections they could create an elite Marine



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unit to strike back against the Japanese. In January 1942, Captain Roosevelt, who shared Carlson's enthusiasm for the creation of such a force, addressed a memo to Marine Corps Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb titled "Development Within the Marine Corps of a Unit for Purposes Similar to the British Commandos and the Chinese Guerrillas."³ Despite stiff opposition from some Marine officers who maintained that any Marine could be used as a commando, the commandant approved the idea and established the first two Raider battalions. Carlson selected James Roosevelt to be his second in command.

Selection and Training

The lineage of Edson's battalion went back to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5), which under Red Mike's leadership had become a sort of prototype Raider unit. Once the two Raider battalions were created, Edson's unit detached a reinforced company to serve as a cadre for the 2d Raiders. To fill their ranks, Edson and Carlson relied on a selective recruitment process that featured personal interviews with prospective Raiders to examine their physical fitness and question their rationale for volunteering for the dangerous units. Even

original members from 1/5 were asked to volunteer for duty with the Raiders. The commanders knew that the Corps rejected nearly two-thirds of its applicants, which resulted in the acceptance of men who were already fit and motivated.⁴ However, Evans and Carlson wanted to ensure that their battalions were composed of men who were willing to join up a second time.

In early 1942, because of the massive influx of recruits to Parris Island, South Carolina, many were shipped to Quantico for rifle-range qualification, where members of Edson's 1st Battalion conveniently served as marksmanship coaches, as well as unofficial Raider recruiters. Edson would ask for volunteers and often pluck them straight from training into his battalion. Interviews were typically short and direct but rarely followed a distinct format. Edson would commonly ask if the prospect could swim, a critical skill of

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Native guides lead a Marine Raider reconnaissance patrol over rugged terrain during the 2d Raider Battalion's "Long March" in pursuit of Japanese forces on Guadalcanal. The November 1942 operation enabled the Raiders put into practice lessons learned in guerrilla tactics.

an amphibious commando. Asked about a hernia scar, one recruit replied that he had to have the surgery to be eligible to enlist in the Marines; otherwise, he'd be exempted from service. Impressed by the man's desire to be a Marine, Edson grinned and said, "You are now a Marine Raider."⁵

At Camp Pendleton, in contrast to Edson's orthodox standards of fitness and skill, Evans Carlson searched for strong ideological motivation as well as physical competency among prospective Raiders. He and Roosevelt would ask questions ranging from "can you cut a Jap's throat without flinching" to "where are you from" and "why do you believe the war should be fought."⁶ Both Edson and Carlson searched for men with specialized skill sets—exceptional swimmers, graduates of Chief Marine Gunner Henry P. "Jim" Crowe's Scout-Sniper School, and skilled volunteer Navy corpsmen and surgeons, for example.⁷

Edson's and Carlson's training methods differed, each being derived from their distinct personalities and individual experiences during the interwar period. Edson had served as an officer in Nicaragua and in China and earned a Navy Cross for heroism while under fire along the banks of the Central American Coco River in 1928.⁸ Veteran war correspondent Richard Tregaskis wrote that Edson "could wither a man with his China-blue, gimlet eyes. . . . I thought of Edson's eyes as being as purposeful as a killer's and as unemotional as a shark's. . . . But, although he did not look the part, he was the bravest, the most effective killing machine I met in fifteen years as a war correspondent."⁹

Edson, a tried and true professional Marine officer, subjected his Raiders to intense physical and military training. Rigorous endurance marches often stretched for dozens of miles. During brief breaks, Edson would walk down the battalion line to check over his men before jogging to the front to lead onward. In addition to arduous exercise, Edson's Marines practiced marksmanship with each type of Raider weapon so that each man could field whatever was available. Hand-to-hand combat instruction included a strong emphasis on killing stealthily with knife, garrote wire, and hands.

The 1st Battalion also practiced night-fighting techniques. Edson knew from his own experiences in Nicaragua that they would experience night warfare and that this training

would prove its worth in the future. And he was right.¹⁰ Additionally, the unit trained extensively in jungle warfare in American Samoa during May and June 1942. They endured long hikes over mountains and through dense jungle as they prepared to fight the Japanese. Their training culminated in a mock raid against a top-secret mountaintop radar station. The Raiders crept silently through the jungle for three days before surprising the station's defenders and capturing the site in a predawn assault.¹¹

While Edson's training methods were rigid and orthodox, Carlson's were informal and irregular. Like Edson, Carlson had earned a Navy Cross in Nicaragua. He ensured that the 2d Battalion received the same combat training as the 1st Raider Battalion but added an ideological component. According to Lieutenant John Apergis, who served with Edson's battalion before being transferred to Carlson's command:

Carlson was the opposite of Edson. Edson was conservative; Carlson was extremely liberal. . . . [He] picked up a lot of ideas in China that weren't too popular with the establishment. He arranged daily meetings with his men to preach his version of Oriental philosophy, the gospel of "gung ho" [Chinese for "work together"]. Any enlisted man had the right to see Carlson without going through the chain of command. Rank had no privileges.¹²

Carlson's Raiders were not required to salute officers, and rank was commonly disregarded. Men were encouraged to speak openly

about current issues in large gung-ho meetings held on the weekends; topics would range from tactics to constructive criticism of the chain of command to the purpose of fighting the Japanese.¹³ Carlson believed that his men would fight harder if they embraced his gung-ho philosophy and became intellectually invested in the war.

Rigorous combat training for both Raider battalions included visits from guest instructors. Edson primarily invited fellow Marines, such as the master of close-quarters combat Colonel Anthony Biddle, who challenged several Raiders to attack him with unsheathed bayonets before



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Lieutenant Colonel Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, pictured after his promotion to colonel, molded the 1st Raider Battalion into a highly trained light-infantry unit adept at special operations as well as conventional fighting. He received the Medal of Honor for his "marked degree of cool leadership and personal courage" in defense of Guadalcanal's Henderson Field.

quickly disarming them all.¹⁴ While Carlson also invited Marines, he included non-Marine veterans of foreign wars as well, such as members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, who had fought with Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. The combat vets would offer instruction varying from how to shoot a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) from the hip to how to repel human-wave assaults.¹⁵ The demanding physical and mental instruction the Raiders received further set them apart from fellow Marines.

Weaponry and Innovation

The Raider battalions' specialized equipment also differentiated them from other Marine Corps units. Through James Roosevelt's influence, the 2d Battalion was able to acquire any special gear Carlson desired. Within weeks of writing a request, the battalion would receive the very best equipment, from automatic weapons to new radios. John Apergis recalled that initially "We were the only outfit in the Pacific that had the M-1 [Garand] rifle. . . . The M-1 was reserved for units in Europe, but Carlson used his influence with Jimmy [Roosevelt] to get it for Carlson's Raiders."¹⁶

Both the 1st and 2d battalions were equipped with cloth helmet covers, jungle rucksacks, lightweight hammocks with mosquito netting, camouflage ponchos, and jungle first-aid kits. The Raiders also carried a wide variety of specialized knives, such as the U.S. Marine Raider stiletto (patterned after the British Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife), a massive nine-inch Bowie knife known as the Gung Ho knife, and the World War I-era Mark I trench knife.¹⁷ In addition, the Marine Raiders abandoned cumbersome 81-mm mortars in favor of lighter 60-mm mortars. Edson argued that the larger, heavier weapons would slow down "fast moving operations."¹⁸

To maintain their nimbleness, Raider companies were smaller than regular Marine companies. Consequently, the Raiders fielded much less firepower when outfitted with standard-issue weapons. To address this problem, they equipped themselves with a different variety of weapons. An early World War II Marine infantry squad typically would field one BAR and eight Springfield bolt-action rifles. The 2d Raider Battalion, using Carlson's White House connections, managed to acquire additional BARs as well as Thompson submachine guns and the M1 Garand semiautomatic rifles. The 1st Battalion managed to augment

its Springfields and BARs with Reising submachine guns and some M1 rifles.¹⁹

With his additional weaponry, Carlson rearranged his ten-man infantry squads to carry three Thompsons, three BARs, and four M1 rifles. According to Private First Class William Onstad, the 2d Battalion's weapons gave them an advantage in firepower that the Japanese could not match. When a Ranger squad made contact with an enemy patrol, "within fifteen seconds the Japanese would be caught in an organized hail of 275 bullets," he said.²⁰



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Lieutenant Colonel Evans Carlson (left), pictured with his executive officer, Major James Roosevelt, instilled in the 2d Raider Battalion the "gung-ho" philosophy he'd learned while an observer with the Chinese communist 8th Route Army. Carlson earned Navy Crosses for heroism during two Raiders operations: the raid on Makin Atoll and the Long March.

This additional firepower allowed Carlson to implement the revolutionary idea of the fire team. A contemporary Marine infantry squad, with only one automatic weapon, was forced to act as a single group because it lacked the firepower to divide into effective smaller forces. But Carlson divided each of his ten-man squads into three three-man fire teams commanded by a squad leader. Each team fielded a BAR, Thompson, and M1.²¹ While the concept would later be widely adopted, standard U.S. infantry squads did not possess the necessary weapons and firepower to subdivide into fire teams until late 1944.

Typically, conventional Marine forces used a veritable fleet of ships and craft to conduct amphibious operations, starting with large troop ships to carry thousands of men

and their weapons and equipment. Traveling light, the Raiders could operate from a variety of platforms.

The most common one used by the 1st and 2d Battalion was the humble APD high-speed transport. In 1939–40 several four-stack, flush-deck destroyers were converted into lightly armed troop transports. Changes included reducing the number of 4-inch guns or replacing them with 3-inchers and removing torpedo tubes, two stacks, and two boilers. At best, they could only make 25 knots. Belowdecks, the APDs had barely enough room for 135 passengers and absolutely no space for the heavy equipment that usually accompanied Marine units.²² This suited the Raiders perfectly. Their heaviest weapons were their 60-mm mortars.



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A 1st Battalion 60-mm mortar squad poses with their weapon on Guadalcanal. After joining the Raiders, Bob Addison (kneeling at left) had been assigned to an 81-mm mortar squad, but to facilitate mobility, Edson persuaded the Marine commandant to allow the battalion to deploy overseas with out the larger, more cumbersome mortars.

Plank-owners in Edson's battalion trained extensively with APDs before and after the founding of the Raiders. They much preferred the ships to larger transports. The APDs had shallow drafts and could approach close to shore before deploying inflatable rubber boats or Higgins boats full of Marines.²³ The high-speed transports could also provide limited fire support.

Marine Raiders in Action

Members of the 2d Raider Battalion experienced a much different mode of transport: submarines. After special training in Hawaii, most of the battalion's A and B

companies set out in two massive submarines, the *Argonaut* (SS-166) and *Nautilus* (SS-168), for a raid against Makin Atoll, the main purpose of which was to divert Japanese attention, reinforcements, and supplies from Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Disembarking from the subs early on 17 August 1942, the Raiders, led by Carlson, who had been promoted to lieutenant colonel, made their way to the atoll in rubber boats. By noon they had virtually wiped out Makin's Japanese garrison. Some Raiders made it back to the submarines that night; however, rough surf delayed others for 24 hours.²⁴ Although hastily trained for deployment from submarines, the 2d Battalion had easily adapted to the platform to accomplish the raid.

In fact, the Marine Raiders' adaptability led to them serving two roles early in the Pacific war: commando-type raiders and conventional Marines. Both battalions conducted successful raids and acted as regular infantry units when needed.

The 1st Battalion initially saw combat on the small Solomon island of Tulagi. While the 1st Marine Division encountered light opposition when it invaded Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942, less than 25 miles away that day the Raiders faced tough Japanese resistance on Tulagi, which Edson declared secured at 1500 on the 8th. A month later, the battalion conducted a classic amphibious raid, capturing a Japanese base on the Guadalcanal coast at Tasimboko and destroying food, ammunition, weapons, and equipment there. The strike also reaped intelligence about a coming enemy attack against Guadalcanal's Henderson Field.

Days later, the Raiders found themselves on the airfield's defensive line, holding high ground that would become known as Edson's Ridge. On the nights of 12–13 and 13–14 September, the 1st Raider Battalion, supported by the 1st Marine Parachute Battalion, faced repeated Japanese attacks. The fighting was vicious and often hand to hand, but Edson's Marines held onto the ridge. The Raiders suffered almost 25 percent casualties—34 killed and 129 wounded—but more than 600 Japanese bodies littered the area. The 1st Raider Battalion's advanced training had paid off, and their courageous defense of Edson's Ridge earned them fame.²⁵

Two months before the Makin Raid, the 2d Battalion's C and D companies had deployed to Midway to reinforce the atoll's Marine garrison when it was facing threat of Japanese invasion. Once there, the Raiders spent most of their time helping to strengthen Midway's defenses. Although the Japanese did not land on the atoll, the garrison was subjected to an intense air raid on early on 4 June; later that day Navy dive bombers sank four Japanese carriers, turning back the enemy offensive. Although their role had been relatively minor, Marine Raiders

had experienced their first taste of combat and performed admirably.²⁶

While the 1st Raider Battalion departed Guadalcanal in October, the 2d Battalion arrived there early the next month, and on the 6th embarked on the epic “Long Patrol.” The month-long foray through dense jungle outside of the Marines’ Guadalcanal perimeter featured numerous skirmishes with and ambushes of Japanese troops. Moreover, Carlson’s Raiders put into use their hard-learned lessons in stealthiness and guerrilla tactics.²⁷

Changes and Early Demise

While the battalions were performing outstanding service on Guadalcanal, the Marine Raider force was changing. Edson left the Raiders to take command of the 5th Marines in September, the same month the 3d Raider Battalion was organized. The next month the 4th Raider Battalion was created, with Major James Roosevelt in command. Then in March 1943, the battalions were organized into the 1st Marine Raider Regiment; Colonel Harry B. Liversedge served as CO, and Carlson temporarily was regimental executive officer before heading stateside. Roosevelt also soon departed the Raiders.²⁸

In the Southwest Pacific, meanwhile, the Raiders rendered valuable service during the U.S. drive up the chain of Solomon Islands. But the Marine Raiders’ days were numbered. The end came on 1 February 1944, when most of the 1st Raider Regiment was redesignated as units in the 4th Marines and the 2d Raider Battalion was disbanded.²⁹

As an experiment, the Marine Raiders were unsuccessful, but the fault did not lie with the commanders or the Marines in the ranks. They had performed admirably and excelled in combat. In truth, the Marine Corps did not require special commando units in 1944. Once the U.S. war machine fully mobilized, there was no need to raid Japanese territory when it could be seized or bypassed. Additionally, intense opposition had come from many Marine officers who believed that the term “Marine” alone meant a warrior who could perform any mission, conventional or unconventional. A small, elite Marine Corps was the exact opposite of the needs of the U.S. military. It required a large amphibious force to retake the vast Japanese possessions in the Pacific. The Raiders simply could not fill that role. ⚓



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A group of 2d Battalion Raiders surround Evans Carlson while displaying weapons and a flag captured on Guadalcanal. Marine Raiders would continue to fight in the South Pacific until early 1944, when the Corps ended its Raider experiment by redesignating or disbanding the elite units.

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22. Alexander, *Edson's Raiders*, 14–15.
23. *Ibid.*, 16–18.
24. Smith, *Carlson's Raid*, 83, 170–77.
25. Hoffman, *From Makin to Bougainville*, 9–16; Alexander, *Edson's Raiders*, 192.
26. Wukovits, *American Commando*, 73–80.
27. Hoffman, *From Makin to Bougainville*, 19–22.
28. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
29. Updegraph, *U.S. Marine Corps Special Units of World War II*, 35.