

HISTORY DETECTIVE

Volunteer Researcher Works to Unearth the Stories of Missing World War II Marines



Author, historian and MissingMarines.com founder Geoff Roecker, center, is presented with the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's 2019 General Roy S. Geiger Award for his profile of 2ndLt Elwood Ray Bailey, a Marine fighter pilot shot down over Guadalcanal in August 1942. Bailey's name was among the missing and unaccounted-for Marines listed on Roecker's site until his remains were recovered and identified in 2017.

COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HERITAGE FOUNDATION

By Sara W. Bock

It all began with a series of letters that made their way home to New York from the far-off islands of the Pacific, and one family's stories of the young Marine officer who penned them, never to return home himself.

Two generations later, Geoffrey Roecker grew up hearing about his grandmother's cousin, First Lieutenant Philip Emerson Wood Jr., who was killed in action on Saipan in 1944 while serving as a weapons platoon leader with Company A, 1st Battalion, 24th Marines. In the early 2000s, Roecker, then an undergraduate student at Vassar College, got his hands on a few of Wood's letters home, which had been

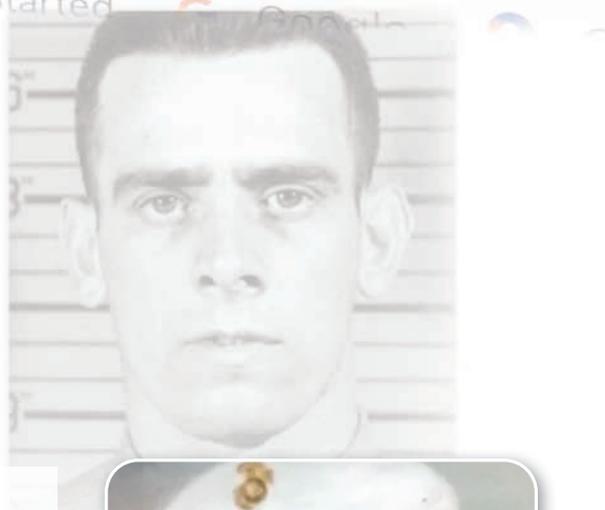
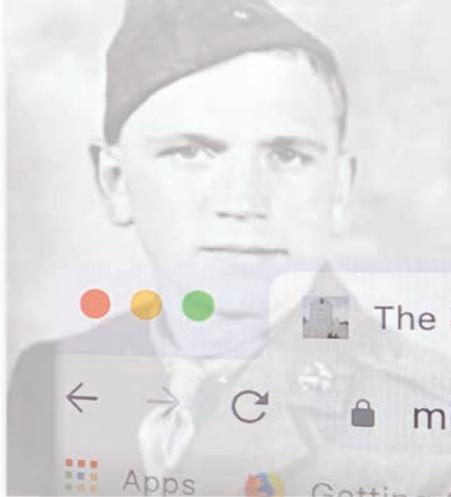
saved by a sister, Gretchen, to whom many of them were addressed. (*Editor's note: One of Wood's letters was featured in Roecker's article "Lay Bare a Few More Nerves: Under Fire at Roi-Namur" in the February 2021 issue of Leatherneck.*)

Roecker was captivated by the detailed accounts of combat that Wood had recorded in his letters and developed a keen interest in the Marines of 1/24. He began to track down veterans of the battalion, hoping that their firsthand accounts would help him piece together his cousin's service, the details of his death, and the stories of the brave men he served alongside during World War II.

As he delved into the unit's history, one name kept popping up both in Wood's

letters and in Roecker's conversations with the surviving Marines of 1/24: Sergeant Arthur Ervin. Wood's early letters implied that Ervin had not made the greatest first impression on him, "but you could sort of see the two of them growing closer and closer as time went by," Roecker said. Eventually, Ervin became Wood's second-in-command of the company's mortar platoon. On July 5, 1944, while on a patrol to bring back civilians who had been stuck between the lines during the Battle of Saipan, they were ambushed.

"Phil Wood was mortally wounded, and Ervin went running out after him to get him and was shot in the head and killed, so the two of them died side by side," said Roecker. "Obviously he [Ervin] had



“Where is Sgt Ervin? Where is he buried? What could have happened that all the rest of them could be recovered but he was not?” Roecker recalls asking himself. “So that was sort of my first ‘toe dip’ into this realm of research.”

been out there trying to rescue him, so I wanted to learn as much about this guy as I could.”

A preliminary search revealed that Ervin’s name was on the official “missing” list maintained by the now-defunct Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), which was merged with other agencies in 2016 to form the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). This didn’t make sense to Roecker, who had collected numerous accounts that Wood and Ervin died together and were buried side-by-side in the 4th Marine Division cemetery along with the other Marines who were killed on the patrol. He knew that in 1949, Wood had been disinterred and buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, known as the Punchbowl, and had assumed that the same could be said for Ervin, a Pearl Harbor survivor and Marine Raider who had been awarded both a Bronze Star and the Navy Cross.

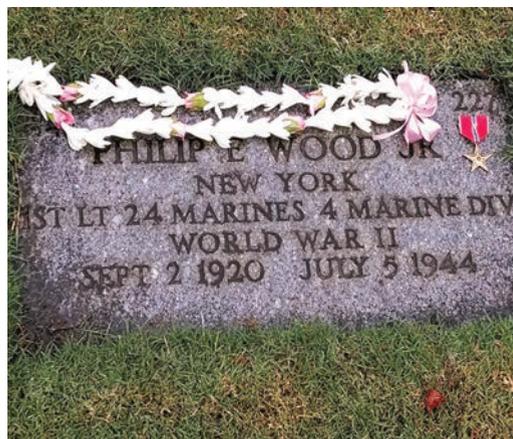
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Roecker spoke with various Marines who had served in Co A, but none had any clear memories of that fateful patrol. He did, however, find Ervin’s military records;



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COURTESY OF GEOFF ROECKER

Roecker’s quest to provide detailed research on every missing Marine from WW II began with his interest in the death of his grandmother’s cousin, 1stLt Philip E. Wood Jr., who was killed on Saipan in 1944 and is buried at the Punchbowl in Honolulu, pictured in the left photo. Roecker has spent more than a decade trying to understand why Sgt Arthur Ervin, pictured in the above photo and who was killed during the same incident, is still unaccounted for.

relevant photographs from the National Archives and several written accounts containing key details. He even tracked down some distant cousins, nieces and nephews of Ervin's and encouraged them to provide DNA samples that might enable a positive identification by DPAA officials. Eventually, in 2011, Roecker connected with Ted Darcy of WFI Research Group, who helped him decipher documents he had collected, including Ervin's medical records and Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF), and showed him how to compare key details against a file for a set of unidentified recovered remains that had been disinterred from the division cemetery and classified as "X-64."

"He showed me how to put all those together, and we got a burial chart of the 4thMarDiv cemetery, and wouldn't you know it, X-64 has a strong physical resemblance to Sgt Ervin. His dental's a pretty close match, and who's he buried right next to, but 1stLt Philip Wood," Roecker said.

To Roecker's knowledge, X-64, once buried in Manila, the Philippines, continues to sit in a DPAA lab awaiting identification. For now, the case has yet to be closed, but in the meantime, the mystery of Sgt Arthur Ervin's whereabouts became the impetus for what Roecker considers his "off the clock" job. In 2011, Roecker, who spends his days working as a creative director and copywriter for a Manhattan-based advertising agency, launched MissingMarines.com, an independent research project devoted to assisting with missing in action (MIA) recovery efforts by gathering official

records and firsthand accounts to compile individual biographies and case files. Over the last decade, Roecker has devoted an incalculable number of hours to providing volunteer research assistance in support of the efforts of recovery agencies like DPAA and nonprofit organizations like History Flight, which sends teams to locations across the globe to locate, exhume and repatriate MIA service-members, many of whom had previously been deemed "non-recoverable." In that span of time, the prolific researcher also earned a master's degree in military history and authored a book, "Leaving Mac Behind: The Lost Marines of Guadalcanal," which was published in 2019.

"When I went on and looked up the official list of the missing and saw all of

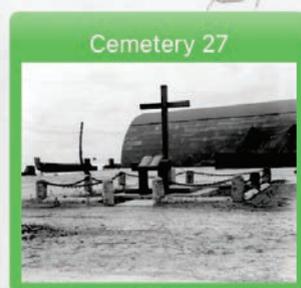
these names, I thought, 'Man, there's got to be a story behind every single one of them,'" Roecker said. "The idea behind Missing Marines originally was to try and tell as many of those stories as possible."

Roecker's site provides a searchable database of the nearly 3,000 missing and unaccounted-for Marines and attached Navy medical personnel from WW II. To date, Roecker, who singlehandedly runs the operation and provides his research free of charge, has compiled detailed profiles of more than 1,000 of these missing Marines which can be accessed through his exhaustive "Missing Marines List."

When listening to Roecker speak about his endeavors with Missing Marines, it's easy to discern that this is not merely a

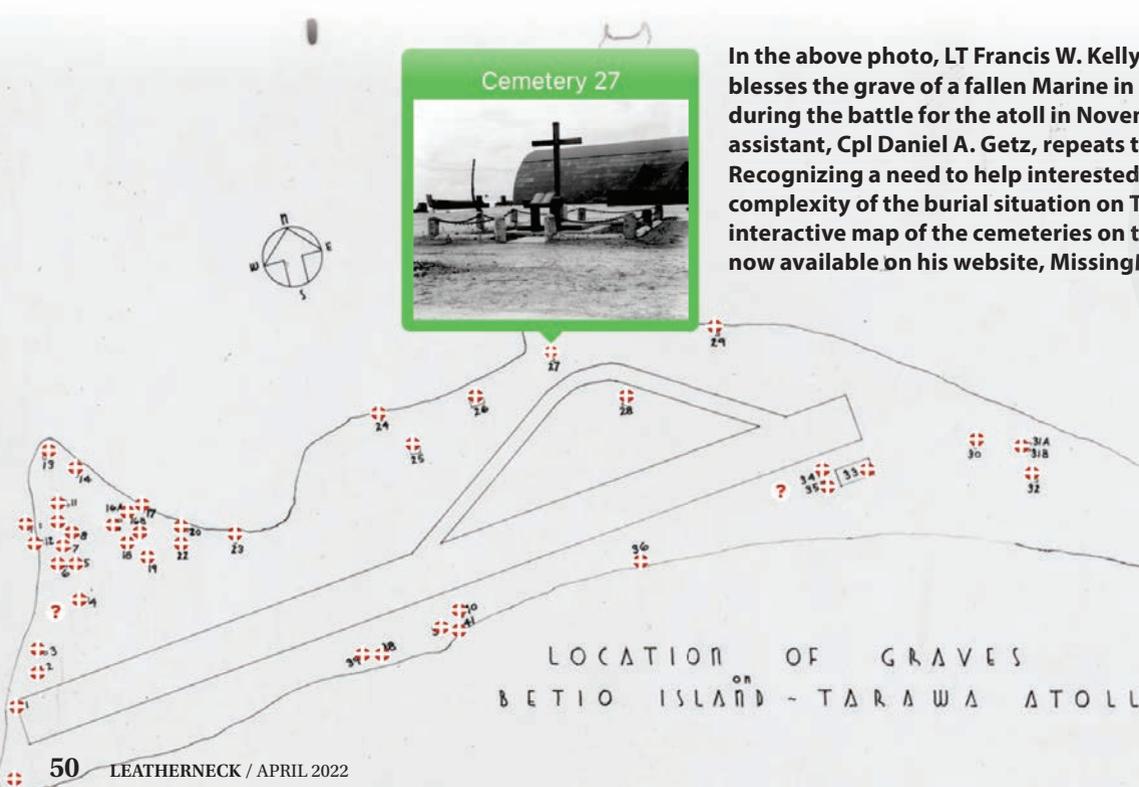


USMC



Cemetery 27

In the above photo, LT Francis W. Kelly, Chaplain Corps, USNR, blesses the grave of a fallen Marine in a cemetery on Tarawa during the battle for the atoll in November 1943, while his assistant, Cpl Daniel A. Getz, repeats the Prayers for the Dead. Recognizing a need to help interested researchers understand the complexity of the burial situation on Tarawa, Roecker created an interactive map of the cemeteries on the island of Betio, which is now available on his website, MissingMarines.com.



COURTESY OF GEOFF ROECKER



“When I went on and looked up the official list of the missing and saw all of these names, I thought, ‘Man, there’s got to be a story behind every single one of them.’”—Geoffrey Roecker

hobby, but a passion, and that while he’s never worn the uniform, he has an acute understanding of the cost of war and the need for closure felt by those whose loved one or brother-in-arms remains unaccounted for.

In 2016, Roecker attended a burial cemetery on Long Island, N.Y., for Private First Class John F. “Jack” Prince, who was killed on the island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands in 1943 and whose remains were recovered by History Flight. The experience had a profound impact on him and served as a tangible reminder of why the often tedious and emotionally taxing work of MIA research is worth the investment of time and energy.

“What really impressed me was that nobody present at the funeral had known him in real life. They were all born long after he was killed, but they’d grown up hearing stories about him and they passed those stories on to their children,” Roecker recalled. “It brought them all together. People came from all over to come to this, it was like a big family reunion, and like there had always been an empty chair at previous events, and Jack Prince was in his chair finally after being killed that long ago. It was really moving.”

While attending that burial ceremony, Roecker met History Flight researcher Katie Rasdorf, who provided key research that aided in the recovery of Prince’s remains. She’s become a mentor of sorts for Roecker, a close ally and friend in what he describes as a small community of MIA researchers and has acted as a guiding force in the evolution of his website, he said.

Through his work with Missing Marines, Roecker has relished the opportunity to connect not only with fellow researchers like Rasdorf, but also with direct descendants and family members of the missing. In these interactions, he strives to empower them to reach out to recovery agencies and contact their representatives in Congress, as well as facilitate connections with whichever entity will, when circumstantial and material evidence supports, decide to disinter an unidentified set of remains.

“It’s not so much that you’re doing this for the deceased individual—you’re doing it for the people who remember them. It felt like putting a missing piece back into this family or healing a scar that maybe

they hadn’t even known was there and was hurting them, but once it was healed, they could feel the difference,” said Roecker.

Sometimes Roecker contacts family members directly when he’s working on a “cold case” of a missing Marine and finds contact information for their lineal descendants or extended relatives. In many cases, individuals stumble upon his website while conducting their own investigations and reach out to him on their own accord.

He finds it particularly fulfilling when he receives messages of gratitude from website visitors; for example, “I found my ancestor’s picture here, and I learned something I didn’t know about them before. Thanks for keeping their story alive,” he recalls one individual saying.

“That’s kind of all I need, you know?” Roecker said. “I put the information out there and people come and find it,” he added, saying that it’s interesting to see the spikes in website traffic and messages he receives around the anniversaries of battles like Iwo Jima in February.

But MissingMarines.com is not solely geared towards the novice researcher or curious family member. The detailed individual biographies, interactive maps and user-friendly Missing Marines List available on Roecker’s site have become a go-to resource for officials from well-known MIA recovery organizations like History Flight, who rely heavily on the work of vetted volunteer researchers like Roecker to help further their mission.

“[Roecker] is honest, truthful and truly cares about telling peoples’ stories, for the right reasons ... His website at Missing Marines is fascinating and a person could get lost in there for years. I refer to it constantly as a source of great and valid information,” said Sergeant Major Justin LeHew, USMC (Ret), the chief operating officer for History Flight. “The level of research Geoff goes to is unmatched.”

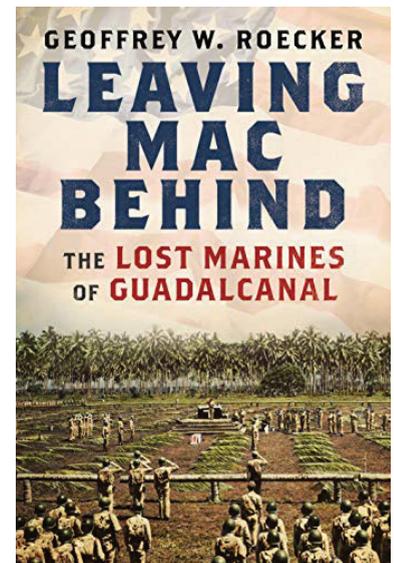
The opportunity to support recovery operations, even on a small scale, is an endeavor Roecker finds extremely fulfilling.

“We do this in the hopes that it will make their jobs easier, that it will lead to the return of more of these cases in a more timely fashion,” he said of his and other volunteer researchers’ work for various organizations and agencies.

A perfect example of this is the newest feature on the Missing Marines site: an



Roecker, pictured in his home office in the above photo, not only has earned a master’s degree in military history since launching MissingMarines.com in 2011, but also wrote the book, “Leaving Mac Behind,” pictured below, which was published in 2019. (Photo courtesy of Geoffrey Roecker)



interactive map of the cemeteries on the island of Betio, in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. The Tarawa cemeteries, Roecker says, offer a unique case study in MIA recovery due to their high percentage of non-recovered casualties, many of whom fell during the Battle of Tarawa, part of the 1943 invasion of the Gilbert Islands known as Operation Galvanic.

Along with the interactive map, Roecker provides a detailed explanation of how so many came to be missing on Betio; why they were never recovered; and why surviving families received conflicting information about their loved ones’ locations



Entitled “The Cost of Guadalcanal,” this interactive map from MissingMarines.com shows the home of record for each KIA in the 1942 campaign. A similar map, “The Cost of Tarawa,” also can be viewed on the site.

in memorial cemeteries that were established across the island. Recognizing a need to break down a complicated topic, Roecker’s Tarawa Cemetery Tour does just that, giving visitors an overview of the conditions that were faced by troops trying to bury people and the evolution of the different burial grounds and infrastructure on the island. The topic has become particularly relevant in recent years, as the remains of dozens of Marines have been recovered on Betio by the History Flight team and subsequently identified.

“It’s intended as a resource that I hope will be equally as useful for people who are kind of new to researching the battle or have had very minimal military history background, like family members who are looking for information, but also for somebody, if you’re working for History Flight and you need to be able to direct somebody to a single resource, ‘OK, here’s some very specific information about what’s going on with this individual case and whether or not there’s a chance that they may be recovered or not,’” Roecker said.

A visit to Roecker’s website is a bit like

a visit to a museum from the comfort of one’s own home. The Missing Marines site also features two additional interactive maps, entitled “The Cost of Guadalcanal” and “The Cost of Tarawa.” Each is based on a map of the continental U.S., on which Roecker has taken the list of Marine

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fatalities in their respective campaigns and created “pins” that mark the homes of record for each of the fallen, color coded to denote their status as missing, buried at sea, identified or recovered.

Above each map is an impactful statement: “There’s a massive difference between seeing a number and seeing what that number *really* looks like.” It’s Roecker’s hope that the data visualization the map provides causes viewers to take a pause.

“The neat thing about having the map be interactive is you can hover over it and see where they’re from, and it just kind of brings it home, the gravity of it is so much more—it’s much easier to grasp,” Roecker said. “You can read a number, but your tendency is to just take on a more academic view of it ... It’s so easy to look at a list or look at a number and not feel anything. The point of all of these exercises and these sites and storytelling is you want to remind people what it feels like. You can use the old trope about ‘those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it.’ If you view death and loss in just purely academic, historical terms then the impact is lost and the real meaning of the sacrifice is lost, I think.”

For Roecker, who is a gifted writer and storyteller, that’s a big part of what MissingMarines.com is all about: putting faces to the names of the missing and telling the stories of the lives they lived and the families they left behind. He achieves this in the more than 1,000 detailed profiles he’s written thus far, which contain photographs and as much biographical information as he can collect through his extensive research. One such profile, written about Second Lieutenant Elwood Ray Bailey, a Marine fighter pilot shot down over Guadalcanal in August 1942 and accounted for in 2017, earned Roecker the 2019 General Roy S. Geiger Award presented by the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation.

Roecker is passionate about empowering interested individuals to try their hand at conducting their own research about missing Marine family members or other unaccounted-for servicemembers they might have a connection to. He hopes that his Missing Marines website will serve as a jumping-off point for them.

“Find out everything you can about what their unit was doing, where they were based, the exact circumstances of loss, where they were engaged at the time, and sort of see how much you can pinpoint from there based on what you know about your individual,” said Roecker. “Once you have that, you’ve got the bones of your story put together.”

There are numerous resources Roecker uses daily that he recommends for gathering information. These include paid subscription-based site Ancestry.com and its sister sites, Newspapers.com and Fold3.com, the latter of which is a database of historical military records. He also relies heavily on the National Archives, which accepts Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for declassified military

COURTESY OF GEOFF ROECKER

Marines with Marine Forces Pacific participate in a repatriation ceremony to honorably transfer the newly recovered remains of several missing Marines on Betio, Tarawa Atoll, Republic of Kiribati, Nov. 20, 2018.

records of those who left service more than 62 years ago. These records can include Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPF) and can be requested via the National Archives website, www.archives.gov.

“It’s interesting to kind of see how many of these cases potentially can be solved just by taking a closer look at these records,” Roecker said. “People just starting this up are surprised by how much information is there and is available. You just need to know where to look, and it just takes a little bit of practice to figure out what you’re looking for.”

Due to a backlog of requests at the National Archives, which has worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Roecker advises that requests may take months to be filled. On that note, he has two pieces of advice. First, requests may be expedited if an immediate next-of-kin family member like a spouse or child is the individual requesting the records. If it’s within a researcher’s budget, he recommends two independent research groups that are based in St. Louis, Mo.,



SGT TIMOTHY TURNER, USMC

where the National Personnel Records Center is located: Golden Arrow Research and Redbird Research. For a fee, they will go into the archives, pull a file and make color copies of it.

After records and supporting details have been collected, Roecker recommends reaching out to the Marine Corps History Division, located on Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., which has casualty cards on file and can send copies of them upon request.

If someone successfully gathers pertinent information about an unaccounted-for ancestor, Roecker encourages them to contact an organization like History Flight to express interest in learning about the likelihood of that individual being recovered.

Since Roecker launched his site in December 2011, 166 missing WW II Marines have been accounted for by DPAA. But there’s still one name that weighs heavily on his mind that hasn’t yet made that list—his “white whale,” he calls him figuratively. Until Sgt Arthur Ervin is laid to rest, Roecker won’t stop searching for clues about the 23-year-old from Oklahoma who ran into harm’s way, refusing to leave his lieutenant behind. Perhaps Ervin is, indeed, “X-64,” or maybe he’s yet to be disinterred. But in the meantime, Roecker, who runs a separate website that tells

the detailed history of 1/24 at www.1-24thmarines.com, has had the opportunity to foster meaningful connections with those who also have a vested interest in seeing Ervin and other missing Marines from the battalion brought home.

“In the 10 years I’ve been working on this I’ve met a lot of veterans and a lot of family members who met me sort of in the tail end of their lives and got really interested and really involved,” Roecker said.

One in particular was George Smith, also of Co A and a friend of Ervin’s, who developed a close bond with Roecker, serving as a grandfather figure of sorts. The pair first met in 2007 when Roecker was researching the stories of 1/24, and Smith was shocked to learn that Ervin had never been recovered. He got involved in helping Roecker try to crack the case and wrote letters, made phone calls and even connected with some of Ervin’s extended family.

“His one big dream was to go to the funeral when we brought Sgt Ervin home,” said Roecker of Smith, who Roecker believes was the last living veteran who knew Ervin. The aging Marine had duplicate sets of Ervin’s dog tags made for the two of them to wear until he could be brought home to rest.

Sadly, Smith didn’t live to see the day, but Roecker is determined to stay true to the last words he spoke to his dear friend, who died last year:

“His memory started to go, and the last time I went to see him I gave him one of the tags that I had been wearing all that time, and told him not to worry, we were going to get him back.”



USMC

The story of missing Marine pilot 2ndLt Elwood Bailey captivated Roecker, who had the chance to get to know some surviving members of his extended family in recent years. His profile of Bailey, which earned him a prestigious award (left) from the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, was largely based on photos and information the family provided him. (Medal image courtesy of Marine Corps Heritage Foundation)

