

## CHAPTER TEN

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### Ambiguous Application

The Study of Amphibious Warfare  
at the Marine Corps Schools, 1920–33

*Bruce Gudmundsson*

*History is lived forward but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was like to know the beginning only.<sup>1</sup>*

In general histories of the U.S. Marine Corps, the treatment of the years between the great world wars of the twentieth century often takes the form of an account of straightforward progress along a single track. More specialized works pay due attention to the many delays and discursions encountered in the course of this journey. Nonetheless, the story is essentially the same: at the end of the First World War, far-sighted Marines imagined the need for forces capable of making opposed landings on islands in the Pacific Ocean and, despite many obstacles, developed the means to realize their vision. The records of the two senior resident courses of the Marine Corps Schools in the years between 1920 and 1933 tell a different tale, however; one in which the path that plays such a large role in the institutional iconography of in-

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<sup>1</sup> C. V. Wedgwood, *William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, 1533–1584* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), 35.



FIGURE 34  
Historical image of Quantico, VA, ca. 1920.  
*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo*

terwar innovation forms but one of many threads in a spider's web of possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

The Marine Corps Schools sprang to life on 1 August 1920 (figure 34). Located aboard the Marine Barracks in Quantico, Virginia, it initially consisted of three component schools. The Basic School, which had been in operation for a generation, provided entry-level training to recently commissioned subalterns.<sup>3</sup> The Company Officers' School focused on the things that an experienced junior officer, whether a senior first lieutenant or a junior captain, needed to know before taking command of a company. The Field Officers' School prepared officers, most of whom were either senior captains or majors, to meet the challenges that they would face in the ranks of major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel.<sup>4</sup> The curricula for each of these schools provid-

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<sup>2</sup> The author would like to thank Jennifer Mazzara and Martin Samuels for their careful reading of the drafts of this article and the unfailingly helpful critiques that followed. He would also like to express heartfelt appreciation to those at the Marine Corps Archives (now Historical Resources Branch) who went out of their way to help with the search for sources, particularly Alissa Whitley, Nancy Whitfield, John Lyles, Stephen Coode, and Dominic Amaral.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of The Basic School during this period, see Jennifer L. Mazzara, "Shared Experience: Organizational Culture and Ethos at the United States Marine Corps' Basic School, 1924-1941" (PhD thesis, King's College, London, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For an early, semiofficial account of the founding of the Marine Corps Schools, see MajGen Cmdt John A. Lejeune "Professional Notes," *Marine Corps Gazette* 5, no. 4 (December 1920): 405-17.

ed a thousand hours or so of resident instruction spread during an academic year that began in the late summer or early autumn and lasted until late the following spring.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the peculiarities of its mission, its direct links to Headquarters Marine Corps as a whole, and after 1924, its location in Philadelphia, The Basic School lived a life apart from that of the other component courses of the Marine Corps Schools. The same can be said for the correspondence courses, which, notwithstanding colocation with the two resident courses for mature officers, also enjoyed a separate existence. Thus, for Marines active between the great World Wars of the twentieth century, the term *Marine Corps Schools* was more likely to bring to mind the two senior resident courses than the command as a whole.

All three of the resident courses of the Marine Corps Schools borrowed much from counterparts belonging to the U.S. Army. In particular, The Basic School, Company Officers' School, and Field Officers' School adopted much in the way of materials and methods from the Basic Course, Company Officers' Course, and Field Officers' Course at the Army's Infantry School at Camp Benning, Georgia.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the resemblance between the three Marine institutions and their counterparts at Camp Benning was so strong that, starting in 1922, official documents described them as "the Basic Course," "the Company Officers' Course," and the "Field Officers' Course."<sup>7</sup> The Field Officers' Course also borrowed a great deal from the Army School of the Line at the General Service Schools at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.<sup>8</sup> Where the Field Officers' Course at Camp Benning taught infantry officers how to command infantry battalions, regiments, and brigades, the Army School of the Line instructed majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels of all arms and Services to handle combined-arms formations.<sup>9</sup>

For the Marines charged with creating the component courses of the Marine Corps Schools, extensive borrowing from the Army usually had been the path of least resistance. Army teaching materials were close at hand and could be acquired

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<sup>5</sup> For a concise treatment of the first 10 years of the Marine Corps Schools, see BGen Randolph C. Berkeley, "The Marine Corps Schools," *Marine Corps Gazette* 15, no. 5 (May 1931): 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the courses offered by the Infantry School in the academic year that began in the fall of 1920, see "Infantry School Courses," *Infantry Journal* 17, no. 4 (October 1920): 330-31.

<sup>7</sup> For an early example of a semiofficial use of the term *course* in the names of these schools, see "Assignment of Students to Marine Corps Schools," *Leatherneck* 5, no. 36, 8 July 1922, 1. For a late instance of an official use of the term *school* in the title of one of these courses, see "Schedule, Field Officers' School 1924-1925," folder 3, box A-18-F-7-5, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>8</sup> In 1923, the two component schools of the Army General Service Schools at Fort Leavenworth—the School of the Line and the General Staff School—merged to form the Command and General Staff School. For details of this merger, see the *Annual Report of Major General H. E. Ely, USA, 1923* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: General Service Schools Press, 1923). For a highly sympathetic description of the use of the applicatory method at Fort Leavenworth during this period, see Peter J. Schifferle, *America's School for War: Fort Leavenworth, Officer Education, and Victory in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 100-22.

<sup>9</sup> For a description of the Army School of the Line, see the *Annual Report of Colonel H. A. Drum, 1921* (Fort Leavenworth: General Service Schools Press, 1921), 26-27.

more easily, cheaply, and quickly than comparable materials from other sources. This was particularly true for high-quality maps, which were far harder to improvise than text.<sup>10</sup> Army teaching methods, moreover, were already familiar to the many Marine officers who had graduated from various Army schools. The rationale for extensive imitation of Army schools was, however, much more than a matter of convenience. Twice, in the previous decade, substantial bodies of Marines had been grafted onto formations of the U.S. Army. The first of these incorporations had taken place during the expedition to Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914. The second, of greater duration, took the form of the assignment of a seven-battalion Marine brigade to the 2d Infantry Division of the American Expeditionary Forces in 1917 and 1918. Because of this experience, many Marines of the 1920s, and in particular, the early years of that decade, thought it likely that any large force of Marines that went to war in the foreseeable future would do so in close proximity to units of the Army.

Some advocates of the use of materials and methods imported from Army schools also argued that the definitive tasks of both the Marine Corps Schools and its Army counterparts were the same. According to these officers, both sets of institutions existed to replace a cacophony of military opinions, born of varied experience and study, with a uniform way of thinking. No less of an authority than John A. Lejeune, who had commanded the 2d Infantry Division during the World War and had recently been appointed as Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps, believed that the purpose of the Marine Corps Schools was “to make all the Marine Officers think along the same lines.”<sup>11</sup> Another argument in favor of the wholesale adoption of Army materials and methods came from Colonel Robert H. Dunlap, who held that the organization, techniques, and teachings developed by the Army in the aftermath of the First World War, the result of a “prolonged and exhaustive study of the best military minds in the country” applied “in every detail to the missions normal to Marine Corps Forces.”<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding enthusiasm for Army ways on the part of colleagues, some influential Marines saw a need to temper the use of Army methods and materials with those used to prepare Marines for the many peculiar situations in they might find themselves. The author of an official announcement of the creation of the Marine Corps Schools, for example, defended planned deviations from Army ways by arguing that “small bodies of [the] Marine Corps must often act independently.” This, they added, made it necessary for the Marine Corps Schools to “develop initiative, correct thinking and ready decision on the part of subordinate officers.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The author is indebted to Dr. Mazzara for this observation.

<sup>11</sup> LtCol R. B. Sullivan, “To Make All Officers Think Along Same Lines,” *Leatherneck* 7, no. 27, 28 June 1924, 7.

<sup>12</sup> R. H. Dunlap, “Recommendations Based on Report of Critique on Joint Army-Navy Problem Number 3, by Officers of Marine Corps Schools, June 1 to 5, 1925,” folder 756, Historical Amphibious File, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>13</sup> “Professional Notes,” 409–10.

## THE APPLICATORY METHOD

The approach to teaching that the Marine Corps Schools imported from the Army was called the “applicatory method.” It consisted of exercises in which students were asked to compose suitable orders for fictitious military units facing highly specific—but equally imaginary—situations on actual pieces of ground. In most instances, these hypothetical problems were depicted on a map and the solutions composed by students were reduced to paper. In some, however, students took part in outdoor exercises known variously as “tactical walks” and “tactical rides” that allowed them to view firsthand the terrain in which such speculative scenarios had been set. Similarly, while some of the situations emerged from the interplay of actions in two-sided “map maneuvers,” most were single-sided problems in which the predicament was entirely the product of its author’s imagination.<sup>14</sup>

The version of the applicatory method that the Marine Corps Schools of the 1920s copied from the Army was an import from another institution, the Army of the German Empire.<sup>15</sup> In the course of conveyance, a process that took place during a period of 30 years, much of the original “applicatory teaching method” (*applicatorische lehrmethode*) had been changed.<sup>16</sup> In some instances, such as the replacement of format-free orders with those formed on a formal template, these changes stemmed from American attempts to improve on the models they were copying.<sup>17</sup> In other cases, the American incarnation of the applicatory method diverged from its German predecessor because of differences between the German and American armies of the years between 1890 and 1920. In particular, while the German Army was optimized to conduct short-notice campaigns of rapid maneuver in the vicinity of its frontiers with France and the Russian Empire, the U.S. Army had been designed to provide multiple services in a wide variety of places. Thus, while German soldiers necessarily

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<sup>14</sup> For descriptions of the American incarnation of the applicatory method, see two works by Even Swift, the first, and, arguably, the greatest, of its champions within the U.S. Army. “The Lyceum at Fort Agawam,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 20, no. 86 (March 1897): 233–77; and “The Development of the Applicatory Method of Military Instruction,” *Military Engineer* 14, no. 73 (January–February 1922): 30–32. The first of these articles, which introduced the applicatory method to the U.S. Army, is necessarily prospective. The second, written a year or two after Swift’s retirement from active service, provides a largely retrospective perspective.

<sup>15</sup> Strictly speaking, the military forces of the German Empire (1871–1918) were composed of the armies of the component monarchies of that federation, each of which was tied to the other by a series of treaties. These armies, however, were so well integrated that both contemporaries and historians of subsequent generations found it reasonable to refer to them as a single German Army.

<sup>16</sup> For an account of the years in which the U.S. Army first adapted the applicatory method to its purposes, see Timothy K. Nenninger, *The Leavenworth Schools and the Old Army: Education, Professionalism, and the Officer Corps of the United States Army, 1881–1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 44–50.

<sup>17</sup> Marvelous to say, the five-paragraph order format, which has since become an inescapable element of American military culture, made its debut in an article that laid out, in considerable detail, a substantial professional development program based entirely on the applicatory method for the officers of an isolated post. For the original template for the five-paragraph order, see Swift, “The Lyceum at Fort Agawam,” 250.

knew much about the enemies they would face, their American counterparts faced a much broader range of possibilities.

One of the more salient characteristics of the problems posed by German practitioners stemmed from an understandable reluctance to identify the fictional forces in a game with those of a real-world state. Thus, unless the game in question was explicitly based on a historical event, one side was invariably referred to as “blue” and the other as “red.” In doing this, however, few of the German participants in an exercise had any doubts about the affiliation of the forces in question. For example, the first problem in one of the best-known collections of applicatory exercises to be published in Germany in the 1890s, the *Tactical Assignments* of Helmuth von Moltke (1800–91), is free of any explicit reference to the identity of the belligerents.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the location and armament of the units in play made it clear to contemporary observers that the situation depicted was set in an imagined war between the kingdoms of Prussia and Saxony in the late 1850s. Indeed, one of the more obvious purposes of the game, which made its debut in 1858 at a class for junior officers of the Prussian General Staff, was to force participants to consider the operational implications of a new type of field piece that had recently been adopted by the Saxon artillery.<sup>19</sup>

Whether copied directly from tactical problems described in German texts or merely inspired by them, the games that made up the American incarnation of the applicatory method retained the convention of designating friendly forces as “blue” and hostile hosts as “red.” However, as the American officers playing such games usually lacked the background knowledge needed to read between the lines, the exercises proved far more abstract than their German progenitors. In the case of problems that were mere translations of German originals, American officers necessarily lacked the sense of connection, immediacy, and relevance that enlivened the way that their German counterparts dealt with the same situations. In instances in which the problem had been transplanted to a map representing terrain located in the vicinity of military posts, on the battlefields of the American Civil War, or an entirely imaginary place, the gulf between applicatory exercises and the realm of reasonable possibility was wider still.

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<sup>18</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, *Taktischen Aufgaben aus den Jahren 1857–1882* (Berlin, Germany: E. S. Mittler, 1892).

<sup>19</sup> The field piece in question was the Saxon incarnation of the 12-pounder “gun-howitzer” [*canon-obusier*] invented by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (1808–73). While equal in mobility, accuracy, and rate of fire to the standard Prussian field gun of the day, it fired projectiles that were twice as large. For a contemporary argument in favor of pieces of this type, see Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and Idelfonse Favé, *Nouveau Système d'Artillerie de Campagne de Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte* (Paris: Librairie Militaire de J. Dumaine, 1851). For technical details, see Johann Woldemar Streubel, *Die 12-Pfündige Granatkanone und ihr Verhältnis zur Taktik der Neuzeit* (Kaiserslautern, Germany: Hugo Meuth, 1857); and Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and Idelfonse Favé, *Études sur le Passé et l'Avenir d'Artillerie*, vol. 5 (Paris: Librairie Militaire de J. Dumaine, 1846–71), 225–28. For a contemporary overview of European artillery in the 1850s, see Alfred Mordecai, *Military Commission to Europe in 1855 and 1856: Report of Major Alfred Mordecai* (Washington, DC: George W. Bowman, 1861).

The American experience of the First World War, which might have mitigated the already powerful tendency toward abstraction in instructional exercises, served to exacerbate it. This was, to a certain extent, a function of the peculiar circumstances in which most members of the American Expeditionary Forces found themselves while serving in France. In particular, memories of movements during the last six months of the war, where ill-advised instructions issued by unschooled staff officers and neophyte commanders often caused as many delays as enemy action, convinced many officers that modern war was largely a matter of traffic management and internal arrangements of various kinds. This conviction, in turn, soon gave birth to problems that placed far more emphasis on internal arrangements incidental to movement than the effects that action might have on the enemy. What was worse, an attempt to promulgate an “American Doctrine” that was, at once, uniform and universally applicable, deprived problems of any clear connection to real-world circumstances, whether historical or contingent.<sup>20</sup>

As might have been expected, the absence of context created many opportunities for form, formulas, and formality. Thus, the lineal descendants of exercises designed to enable officers to quickly make sense of the essential features of a specific situation became multi-hour exercises in which the chief task of the student had little to do with the grasp of the problem as a whole. What was worse, the “approved solutions,” which in the best practice of the German Army had served as a baseline for comparison and the start of an essentially Socratic critique of the problem as a whole, became increasingly arbitrary collections of previously promulgated templates.<sup>21</sup> “Reading an approved solution is like playing bridge with your wife,” wrote one student at Fort Leavenworth in 1922, “everything that you did was wrong.”<sup>22</sup> Worst of all, this formalism was exacerbated by the practice of assigning numerical grades to student solutions, thereby giving students an incentive to devote far more time and trouble to the acquisition of points than to the engagement of the conundrum at the heart of each exercise. As might be imagined, the grading of student solutions, as well as the many discussions about the award of points that inevitably followed, also consumed a great deal of time that instructors might otherwise have devoted to the study of war.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For an unequivocal statement of the desire to impose a uniquely American doctrine on students at the Army School of the Line, see “Explanation of Course and Other Pertinent Comments,” memorandum, 12 August 1919, Army Service Schools, Fort Leavenworth, KS, digital collections, Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS. This handout was created for the sake of both students and instructors. The great exception to the rule that deprived Fort Leavenworth problems of their context is provided by “domestic disturbance” problems set in particular American cities.

<sup>21</sup> For a description of critiques conducted by a master of that art, see Max Jähns, *Feldmarshall Moltke* (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Hofmann, 1906), 312–14. A translation of this passage can be found in “Helmuth von Moltke and the ‘School Solution,’” *Case Method in PME (Extra)* (blog), 30 June 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Bernhard Lentz, *At Kickapoo* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: privately published, 1922), 8.

<sup>23</sup> For a thoughtful critique of the use of the applicatory method at Fort Leavenworth in 1922, see Maj Bernhard Lentz, “The Applicatory Method,” *Infantry Journal* 20, no. 6 (June 1922): 604–9.

## THE FIELD OFFICERS' COURSE

Between 1920 and 1926, instructors at the Field Officers' Course made many minor adjustments to the curricula imported from Army schools. In most cases, this was largely a matter of replacing the Army units represented in problems with their sea Service counterparts. Thus, for example, a domestic disturbance problem in which Marine and Navy units were called on to deal with a riot in Baltimore, Maryland, replaced one in which Army units provided "aid to the civil power" in Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>24</sup> In other cases, however, instructors at the Field Officers' Course developed materials, problems, and lesson plans that were entirely original. As might be imagined, some of these dealt with the definitive Marine Corps mission of the time—the establishment and defense of advanced naval bases.

In 1926, the Field Officers' Course departed from the route it had followed since its founding. In that year, it established a Department of Overseas Operations for the exclusive purpose of designing and executing a five-week "course within a course" on the design of the defenses for improvised naval bases and the landing of substantial bodies of Marines on hostile shores.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the class that graduated in 1927 devoted more than a hundred classroom hours to this subject, which encompassed both the defense of advanced naval bases and landing operations. During this period, they attended 19 lectures, took part in 71 seminar discussions (known as "conferences"), and during the last four days, worked through a substantial "staff exercise."<sup>26</sup>

In the academic year that began in 1927, the number of conferences in the course on overseas operations increased slightly (from 71 to 85), while the number of lectures was reduced (from 19 to 14). However, rather than being taught as a coherent block, these classes were distributed throughout the program of instruction.<sup>27</sup> This interleaving provided thoughtful students with frequent opportunities to compare two very

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<sup>24</sup> The working materials for the domestic disturbance problem set in Cincinnati identify it as a Fort Leavenworth product that had been modified by the replacement of Army units with equivalent organizations from the Navy and Marine Corps. The documents for the exercises set in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, PA, however, bear no indication of such provenance. Thus, they may well have been created at Quantico for the express use of students studying at the Marine Corps Schools. Materials for such exercises used at the Field Officers' Course can be found in folders 1-6, box A-18-E-2-1, Marine Corps Schools: Field Officers' Course, 1926-1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>25</sup> For the formation of the Department of Overseas Operations, see BGen Dion Williams, "The Education of a Marine Officer," *Marine Corps Gazette* 18, no. 2 (August 1933): 19.

<sup>26</sup> "Schedule: Field Officers' Course, 1926-1927," folder 5, box A-18-E-7-5, Marine Corps Schools: Field Officers' Course Schedules, 1921-1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA, 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> "Schedule: Field Officers' Course, 1927-1928," folder 6, box A-18-E-7-5, Marine Corps Schools: Field Officers' Course Schedules, 1921-1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA, 11-32.



different approaches to teaching the art of war. At the same time, the fact that class standing depended heavily on the accumulation of points awarded to solutions to Army-style map problems led officers who were eager for promotion to devote the lion's share of their study time to preparation for such exercises.<sup>28</sup> Students of the class that graduated in 1928 worked through 80 graded map problems, only 8 of which dealt with overseas operations.<sup>29</sup>

At first glance, the map problems developed at Quantico for the sake of the study of overseas operations had much in common with those provided by Army schools. The format of both kinds of assignments, for example, was entirely the same. A closer examination of the maritime map problems, however, reveals features that distinguish them from their land-locked predecessors. Thus, while Army problems asked students to deal with situations that were, at once, both highly improbable and painfully conventional, the Marine-made map studies asked them to plan the defense of advanced naval bases in places such as the Hawaiian Islands or the Caribbean—locations that were expected to play a role in possible naval campaigns. The hostile forces depicted in these problems, moreover, while designated only by colors, bore a curious resemblance to opponents Marines might reasonably expect to meet in such places. The map problem set on “Contiqua,” an entirely imaginary island placed in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, halfway between Brazil and French West Africa, provides a rare exception to this rule.<sup>30</sup>

In 1928, the need to provide officers for service in Nicaragua created such a shortage of instructors at the Marine Corps Schools that the Company Officers' Course had to be shut down and the Field Officers' Course run by a skeleton crew. Thus, in the absence of people who had the time to make changes, the program of instruction for the handful of students who graduated from the Field Officers' Course in June 1929 differed little from the course of studies that had been taught in the previous academic year.<sup>31</sup> In the academic year (1929–30) that followed, however, the number of hours devoted to overseas operations grew by nearly 25 percent, from 104 to 146. The count of hours allocated to overseas operations excludes the talks on related topics delivered by outside experts, many of whom were officers of the U.S. Navy. The topics for these lectures ranged from the use of naval gunfire to support Marines ashore to

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<sup>28</sup> For the pernicious impact of graded map problems on the studies of students at the Field Officers' Course, see LtCmdr H. S. Jeans, USN, “Field Officers' Course at Marine Corps Schools,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 15, no. 3 (November 1930): 50, 105.

<sup>29</sup> “Schedule: Field Officers' Course, 1927–1928,” 24–25.

<sup>30</sup> Materials related to advanced base defense map problems can be found in folders 12, 13, 14, and 36, box A-18-E-2-1, Marine Corps Schools-Field Officers' Course, 1926–1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. For the St. John's problem of 1928–29, see folder 209, Historical Amphibious File, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony A. Frances, *History of the Marine Corps Schools* (unpublished manuscript, 1945), 37.

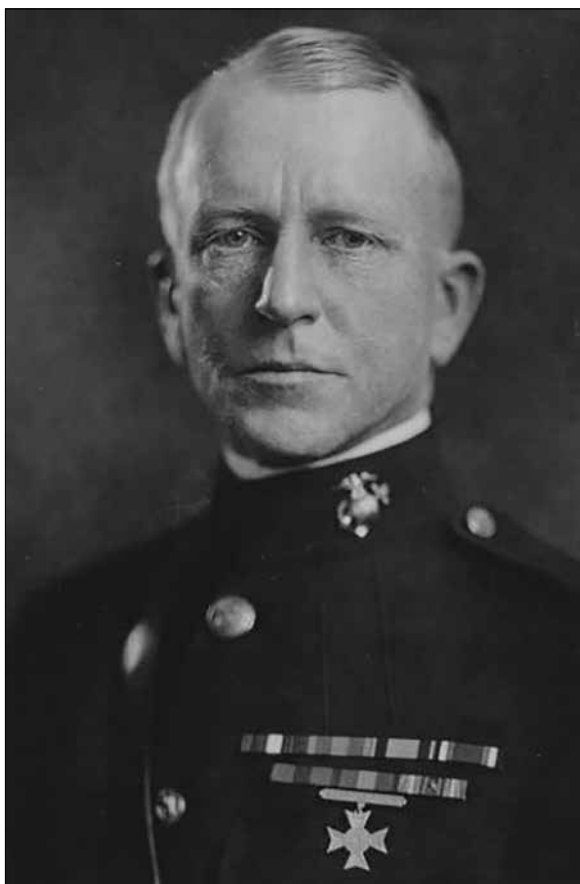


FIGURE 35  
LtGen James C. Breckinridge,  
ca. 1935.  
*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo*

Operation Albion, the German landings that, in 1917, resulted in the capture of the fortified islands that controlled the entrances to the Gulf of Riga.<sup>32</sup>

The great dearth of students of the academic year that ended in 1929 coincided with the first year in which James C. Breckinridge served as commandant of the Marine Corps Schools (figure 35). Breckinridge took the helm of the Marine Corps Schools on 1 July 1928, a little more than two months before the start the Field Officers' Course in that year. Like most Marine officers of his generation, Breckinridge, who had joined the Marine Corps in July 1898, had much experience of life on board warships of the U.S. Navy and service with ad hoc expeditionary forces on various

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<sup>32</sup> Schedule: Field Officers' Course, 1929–1930, folder 11, box A-18-E-7-5, Marine Corps Schools: Field Officers' Course Schedules, 1921–1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA, 51, 54–55. The islands, which were then known as Ösel, Moon, and Dagö, were then occupied by forces of the short-lived Russian Republic. Currently called Saaremaa, Muhu, and Hiiuma, they now belong to Estonia.

foreign shores.<sup>33</sup> Between 1916 and 1918, however, Breckinridge performed duties of a very different sort. At a time when so many of his contemporaries were devoting their energies to the needs of the American Expeditionary Forces in France or small wars in the Caribbean, he had been seconded to the Office of Naval Intelligence, which sent him to various places along the Baltic littoral to observe the collapse of the Russian Empire and the beginnings of the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>34</sup>

As was the case with so many of his contemporaries, the experience of multiple expeditions gave Breckinridge a keen appreciation of the highly specific nature of the particular problems faced by military leaders and the consequent need for custom-tailored solutions.<sup>35</sup> While many military and naval officers of the interwar period viewed the setting of such situations as something that changed slowly, Breckinridge was aware of the possibility of radical change in the broader context of tactical endeavors. Thus, while celebrating the “lesser individualists” who approached tactical problems with “an abundance of confidence born of experience, much reading, and a mind in athletic thinking condition,” Breckinridge reserved his greatest praise for those “Juggernauts of history” who had proved able to exploit revolutionary changes in the realms of strategy and statecraft.<sup>36</sup>

Belief in the need to prepare Marines to deal with a wide variety of situations, few of which were purely tactical and all of which were in settings that were subject to sudden change, put Breckinridge at odds with the champions of methods and materials borrowed from the Army. In a year in which the instructors at the Field Officers’ School had little time to spare for the creation of new classes, let alone adoption of a radically different philosophy of teaching, Breckinridge had to be clever in the way in which he promoted his reforms. Thus, rather than mandating the wholesale

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<sup>33</sup> Glenn M. Harned, *Marine Corps Generals, 1899–1900: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 238–43.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed account of the services performed by Breckinridge in Russia, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, see Leo J. Daugherty III, “A Leatherneck Reports, Part 1: The Correspondence of Lieutenant General James Carson Breckinridge, USMC, Assistant U.S. Naval Attaché to Petrograd, 1916–17,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 2003): 51–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040308430559>; and Leo J. Daugherty III, “A Leatherneck Reports: The Correspondence of a Naval Attaché to St. Petersburg in World War I: Lieutenant General James Carson Breckinridge, USMC on Russia, 1916–1918, Part II,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 4 (December 2007): 693–704, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040701703179>. For more on subsequent studies conducted by Breckinridge in the realm of Russian history, see Col J. C. Breckinridge, “Russia,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 1 (March 1921): 16–30; Col J. C. Breckinridge, “A Russian Background, Part I,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 12, no. 4 (December 1927): 229–37; and Col J. C. Breckinridge, “A Russian Background, Part II,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 13, no. 1 (March 1928): 37–45. For an appreciation of the legacy of these studies, see LtCol A. M. Del Gaudio, “Russian Reflections and Military Renaissance,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 100, no. 9 (September 2016): 75–79.

<sup>35</sup> For an argument that ascribes Breckinridge’s belief in the specificity of military problems to the frustration he experienced commanding Marines in the field in the Dominican Republic in 1919, see Troy R. Elkins, “A Credible Position: James Carson Breckinridge and the Development of the Marine Corps Schools” (master’s thesis, Kansas State University, 2011), 1–3.

<sup>36</sup> BGen J. C. Breckinridge, “An Evaluation of the Tactical School,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 60, no. 11 (November 1934): 1538.

replacement of Army-style exercises with activities of a different sort, he encouraged his subordinates to make changes at the margins of the curriculum, some of which offered the additional benefit of reducing the time they spent grading student solutions to map problems. Thus, the course of study begun at the Field Officers' Course in September 1929 saw a reduction, from 52 to 44, in the number of Army-style map problems and an increase in material borrowed from the U.S. Naval War College. The latter included a number of guest lectures on naval strategy and amphibious operations, as well as a case study in international law.

In December 1929, Breckinridge yielded command of the Marine Corps Schools to Randolph C. Berkeley. This premature change of duties stemmed from the desire of the Commandant of the Marine Corps to have a general officer at the helm of that organization. At that time, Breckinridge was a colonel and Berkeley a brigadier general. Earlier that month, the *Marine Corps Gazette* had published an article by Breckinridge on the subject of military education.<sup>37</sup> "Some Thoughts on Service Schools" called for the replacement of arbitrary methods of teaching with "open forums for the discussion and dissection of special episodes."<sup>38</sup> This, he argued, would result in the "habit of thinking and analyzing (but not of fulfilling a ritual) that will be suitable to every situation encountered in military life."<sup>39</sup> In making his argument, Breckinridge refrained from any mention, let alone criticism, of the particular methods he had seen in use at Quantico during the course of the previous 18 months. Rather, he employed a lengthy discussion of a pamphlet produced by the University of Wisconsin's Experimental College to lay out an approach to "learning by doing." Breckinridge believed that the Marine Corps Schools "must cultivate curiosity, encourage investigation, stimulate discussion, and inspire criticism that will result in improvement."<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, the institution that Breckinridge held up as a paragon of the sort of learning he wished to see at the Marine Corps Schools held little appeal for most contemporary Marines. Eschewing such goals as the cultivation of character and the preparation of students for the world of work, the Experimental College focused entirely on the development of what its founder, Alexander Meiklejohn, called "social intelligence."<sup>41</sup> This lopsided emphasis appealed chiefly to students of decidedly Bohemian inclinations who, by their "shabby dress and supercilious air irritated many" and whose fondness for horseplay resulted not merely in food fights in the dining hall but also in disproportionate damage to the fixtures and furnishings of their dormito-

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<sup>37</sup> Col J. C. Breckinridge, "Some Thoughts on Service Schools," *Marine Corps Gazette* 14, no. 4 (December 1929): 230-38.

<sup>38</sup> Breckinridge, "Some Thoughts on Service Schools," 231.

<sup>39</sup> Breckinridge, "Some Thoughts on Service Schools," 238.

<sup>40</sup> Breckinridge, "Some Thoughts on Service Schools," 231.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed description and defense of the Experimental College written by its founder, see Alexander Meiklejohn, *The Experimental College* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932). For a sympathetic retrospective, see Erin Abler, "The Experimental College: Remembering Alexander Meiklejohn and an Era of Ideas," *Archive: A Journal of Undergraduate History* 5 (May 2002): 50-75.

ries.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding this handicap, Brigadier General Berkeley maintained many of the reforms that Breckinridge had made, and at least where subject matter was concerned, moved further along the trail that Breckinridge had blazed.

Thus, the academic year that ended in 1931 saw further expansion of that part of the curriculum dealing with the seizure and defense of advanced naval bases. This subject, which had been redesignated as “landing operations,” accounted for 216 hours. Of these hours, 138 were devoted to classes offered in previous years, while 88 were set aside for the engagement of a substantial war game, known as the Naval War College Problem, that lasted for more than two weeks. Another major change that was introduced in the academic year that ended in 1931 took the form of a considerable increase, from 11 to 32, in the number of classes on amphibious matters that took the form of “conference problems.”<sup>43</sup> These were decision games that were simple enough for students to work through and critique in the course of a single hour.<sup>44</sup> Better yet, they were far easier for instructors to create than map problems, and they were free of the administrative overhead associated with marking written solutions and calculating grades. Best of all, whether the problems in question were drawn from real life or the products of imagination, the conference problem method provided instructors with an easy means of giving students opportunities to rapidly devise, concisely describe, and thoughtfully defend responses to predicaments that were entirely new to them.

The proximate cause for the addition of the Naval War College Problem to the Field Officers’ Course seems to have been the report of a board, convened by order of Major General Commandant Ben Hebard Fuller early in 1931 to review the curricula at the Marine Corps Schools. In a letter directing the Marine Corps Schools to adopt the recommendations of this board, Fuller expressed his belief that

*there is a field in the conduct of war that can be properly covered only by Marines, and that is military operations connected with naval activities. Once ashore, there is no great difference between Army and Marine forces, but skillful execution of the vital operation of transfer from troopship to a safe position on the beach, of itself, justifies the maintenance of an efficient Marine Corps as an essential part of the Naval Establishment.*<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The quotations come from Michael R. Harris, *Five Counterrevolutionists in Higher Education: Irving Babbitt, Albert Jay Nock, Abraham Flexner, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Alexander Meiklejohn* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1970), 163. Accounts of student misbehavior can be found in Adam R. Nelson, *Education and Democracy: The Meaning of Alexander Meiklejohn, 1872–1964* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 172–73.

<sup>43</sup> Schedule: Field Officers’ Course, 1930–1931, 38–39.

<sup>44</sup> For examples of conference problems, see Capt LeRoy P. Hunt, “Professional Notes,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 3 (September 1921): 354–58; and Maj Ralph S. Keyser, “Professional Notes,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 4 (December 1921): 492–98.

<sup>45</sup> Both the letter by MajGen Commandant B. H. Fuller to BGen R. C. Berkeley, 13 May 1931, and the enclosed report of the board, 13 January 1931, can be found in box 116, Record Group 127, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, hereafter Fuller letter and report.

The corollary of this axiom, Fuller added, was that “the design of courses at the Marine Corps Schools should, therefore, have in view that the Marine Corps is not an Army but an essential part of the Navy to be employed for naval purposes, and that emphasis in the education of its officers should be placed on the requirements for that purpose.”<sup>46</sup>

## THE COMPANY OFFICERS’ COURSE

The Company Officers’ Course began as a means of providing remedial training to lieutenants and captains who had been commissioned in haste during the First World War. Thus, the training program dealt largely in the skills associated with service in the ranks, the work of noncommissioned officers, and the day-to-day administration of platoons and companies. With each passing year, however, as a larger proportion of each class consisted of officers who had mastered those subjects at The Basic School, the greater became the resemblance between the Company Officers’ Course at Quantico and its namesake at the Army Infantry School.<sup>47</sup>

In 1926, the Company Officers’ Course added a great deal of material related to seizure and defense of advanced naval bases. In the years that followed, this portion of the course evolved in much the same way as its counterpart at the Field Officers’ Course, with the hours devoted to the subject growing from 52 in the academic year that ended in 1927 to 121 for the class that graduated in 1931. The official designation for the subject also mirrored that of the Field Officers’ Course, with overseas operations giving way to “landing operations” in 1930. Indeed, the chief difference between the way that amphibious matters were taught in the two senior resident courses of the Marine Corps Schools lay in the realm of small wars. Where instruction on that subject at the Field Officers’ Course was limited to a handful of lectures, students at the Company Officers’ Course worked through a variety of exercises, whether map problems or conference problems, dealing with campaigns against insurgents. In the academic year that ended in 1931, 62 of the 121 hours of instruction in landing operations dealt with matters directly related to small wars.<sup>48</sup>

In 1931, the Company Officers’ Course added more material related to the task

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<sup>46</sup> Fuller letter and report.

<sup>47</sup> The earliest schedule for the Company Officers’ School on file at the Marine Corps History Division’s Historical Resources Branch belongs to the class that graduated in May 1925, which can be found in folder 1, box A-18-F-7-4, Marine Corps Schools: Company Officers’ Course, 1924–1933. Thus, the characterization of that course in the paragraph linked to this note depends heavily on Maj Jesse F. Dyer, “Military Schooling in the Marine Corps,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 7, no. 1 (March 1922): 22–30; Col Robert H. Dunlap, “Education in the Marine Corps,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 10, no. 3 (December 1925): 154; and Berkeley, “The Marine Corps Schools,” 14.

<sup>48</sup> “Master Schedule: Company Officers’ Course, 1926–1927,” folder 4, box A-18-F-7-4, Marine Corps Schools: Company Officers’ Course, 1924–1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA, 41–42; and “Schedule: Company Officers’ Course, 1930–1931,” 40–42.

of preparing Marines to fight insurgents in Latin America. The lion's share of this increase took the form of a substantial (166 hours) series of classes in the Spanish language. In addition, the Company Officers' Course added material on subjects such as animal management and the organization of pack trains that, had it not been for small wars, would have been of no interest whatsoever to Marines. While these additions coincided with a considerable increase in the length of the academic year at the Company Officers' Course, they resulted in a reduction of emphasis on landing operations of a conventional sort. In the academic year that ended in 1931, the Company Officers Course devoted 59 hours to conventional landing operations. In the academic year that ended in 1933, that number declined to 44.<sup>49</sup>

## THE RETURN OF BRECKINRIDGE

In April 1932, Brigadier General Breckinridge resumed command of the Marine Corps Schools, where he found a curriculum for the Field Officers' Course in which 254 hours, and thus a good one-quarter of the total program of instruction, were devoted to landing operations. Of these hours, 128 were allocated to the Naval War College Problem and 36 to conference problems on various aspects of the defense of advanced naval bases and landings on a hostile shore. The schedule laid out for the following academic year (1932-33) bore a remarkable resemblance to that followed by the class of 1932. Indeed, the only significant difference between the two programs of instruction was the loss of approximately 70 hours of instruction in the program as a whole, only 2 of which could be considered landing operations.<sup>50</sup>

The absence of change during the academic year that ended in 1933 proved to be a proverbial calm before the storm. Within the Marine Corps Schools, the appointment of Colonel Ellis B. Miller in July 1932 as assistant commandant provided Breckinridge with the sort of thoughtful, energetic, and self-directed assistance that had been lacking in 1928 and 1929. While attending two Army schools and the U.S. Naval War College, Colonel Miller had developed opinions about the former that resembled those of Breckinridge.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, two years of teaching at the U.S. Naval War College provided him with a seabag full of alternate approaches to both subject matter

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<sup>49</sup> The schedule for the academic year ending in 1932 is missing from the collection of schedules for the Company Officers' Course held by the Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division. Thus, the paragraph linked to this note is based on "Schedule: Company Officers' Course, 1930-1931," 40-42, 48; and "Schedule: Company Officers' Course, 1932-1933," 12-25.

<sup>50</sup> "Schedule: Field Officers' Course, 1930-1931," 26-32, 42-43, 48-49; and "Schedule: Field Officers' Course 1932-1933," schedules for weeks 23, 24, 29, 30, 31.

<sup>51</sup> For a brief biography of Ellis B. Miller, see LtCol Kenneth J. Clifford, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the United States Marine Corps, 1900-1970* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1970), 44. For the way that Miller imagined the relationship between the Navy and the Marine Corps, see Ellis B. Miller, *The Marine Corps in Support of the Fleet* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Schools Press, 1933), 7.

and teaching methods that accorded well with the ideas of his immediate superior.<sup>52</sup>

Within the larger Marine Corps, initiatives pursued by two successive major generals Commandant of the Marine Corps—Ben Hebard Fuller and John Henry Russell Jr.—changed the relationship between Breckinridge and his command.<sup>53</sup> In particular, in the years between 1931 and 1935, Fuller and Russell issued a series of mandates that required the Marine Corps Schools to replace classes borrowed from the Army with periods of instruction that had been custom tailored to the needs of a Marine Corps and, in particular, those units cooperating closely with elements of the Navy. The most important of these changes required that the Marine Corps Schools cooperate closely with the Naval War College, create authoritative texts on the subjects of landing operations and small wars, and replace problems in which the friendly forces were organized and armed in the manner of the Army with exercises in which such troops displayed the distinct features of Marine Corps units.<sup>54</sup>

In 1928 and 1929, Breckinridge had been an institutional insurgent, making marginal changes while trying to convince other officers—whether superior, subordinate, or peer—to embrace an approach to both method and materials that was, for the most part, alien to them. Between 1932 and 1935, however, the reforms pursued by two successive Commandants of the Marine Corps provided both high-level blessing and official impetus to his attempts to change the content of curricula. “Your decisions relative to the immediate conduct of the Schools, and their preparation for the next year,” Breckinridge told the Commandant in 1934, “open a door so wide that even you do not realize how great will be the improvement.”<sup>55</sup>

When, however, it came to reforming the teaching methods used in the Marine Corps Schools, Breckinridge faced two obstacles. The first was the tendency of some instructors to obey the letter of the official program of reform, while making few, if any, efforts to embrace the spirit. Thus, many of the map problems that students were asked to solve were preexisting exercises in which the Army units serving as blue forces were replaced with their Marine Corps equivalents. In one case, an instructor met the formal requirement to exorcise Army material from the curriculum of the course by describing the Civil War battlefield on which a thoroughly terrestrial map

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<sup>52</sup> Breckinridge described the harmony between his views and those of Miller in a letter that he wrote to John H. Russell Jr., then serving as Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps, on 4 December 1933. This letter can be found in folder 8, box 2, Personal Papers of James Carson Breckinridge, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>53</sup> Ben Hebard Fuller served as Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps from 9 July 1930 to 1 March 1934. John H. Russell Jr. became Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps in February 1933, after which he succeeded Fuller as Commandant. For concise biographies, see Alan R. Millett and Jack Shulimson, *Commandants of the Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 224–52.

<sup>54</sup> Clifford, *Progress and Purpose*, 44–45.

<sup>55</sup> This quotation comes from a lengthy letter that Breckinridge sent to Russell on 13 February 1934. A carbon copy of this letter can be found in folder 8, box 2, Personal Papers of James Carson Breckinridge, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.



problem had been set as “Antietam Island.”<sup>56</sup> The second obstacle was Breckinridge himself. While familiar with the use of the case method to teach law and a great proponent of the thoughtful study of military history, he failed to create the “forums for discussion and dissection of special episodes” necessary to the realization of his philosophy.<sup>57</sup>

During the years that Breckinridge served as commandant of the Marine Corps Schools, a number of Army officers, the best-known of whom was George C. Marshall, introduced a new type of map problem at the Infantry School at Fort Benning. These “historical map problems” differed from conventional map problems in several ways. First, they were based on real problems faced by actual people at some point in the past. Second, they asked students to quickly provide solutions that were brief and to the point. Third, they only provided the sort of information that might reasonably have been available to the protagonist of the problem. The historical map problem was not entirely new. A pair of such exercises had been used as conference map problems in the Marine Corps Schools in 1921.<sup>58</sup> The reformers at Fort Benning, however, built programs of instruction around a combination of historical map problems, retrospective case studies (many of which took the form of combat memoirs), and speculative decision games in the style of historical map problems.<sup>59</sup>

The poignancy of the failure of Breckinridge to embrace the historical map problem, something that can only be ascribed to lack of familiarity with the full panoply of the applicatory method, is underscored by two papers he wrote in 1934, the last full year of his second term as commandant of the Marine Corps Schools. The first of these is a somewhat pessimistic essay titled “Tactical Problems,” a piece that rests heavily on the assumption that such exercises were a necessary evil that could not escape being “intricate,” “artificial,” and “mechanical” activities in which “justly arbi-

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<sup>56</sup> Several of the map problems used at the Marine Corps Schools in the early 1930s are preserved in box A-18-F-7-4, Marine Corps Schools: Company Officers' Course, 1924-1933, and box A-18-E-2-1, Marine Corps Schools—Field Officers' Course, 1926-1933, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. While this collection is not large enough to permit determination of trends or tendencies, it does give a sense of the variety of approaches used by the creators of map problems and other exercises.

<sup>57</sup> “Some Thoughts on Service Schools,” 231.

<sup>58</sup> For complete copies of these problems, see both Hunt's and Keyser's “Professional Notes,” 354-58, 492-97.

<sup>59</sup> The best source for examples of the types of exercises introduced to the Infantry School at Fort Benning by Marshall and his collaborators are the issues of the *Infantry School Mailing List* published between 1930 and 1939. For a brief explanation of the underlying philosophy, see the letters reproduced in *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, vol. 1, “*The Soldierly Spirit*,” December 1880-June 1939, ed. Larry I. Bland (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 409-16.

trary results” necessarily followed “standardized acts.”<sup>60</sup> The second is a lecture that he gave on the central problem he faced as the commanding officer of the 15th Marine Regiment in Santo Domingo in 1919 and 1920. This combat memoir (as it would have been called at Fort Benning) had all the makings of a splendid historical map problem. However, rather than asking the students in his audience to put themselves in his shoes and attempt to deal with this problem themselves, he moved directly from his description of the situation he faced to an explanation of the decision that he also made.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In November 1933, Breckinridge canceled classes at the Company Officers’ Course and the Field Officers’ Course to free talent for the task of preparing authoritative texts on the subjects of landing operations and small wars. In doing this, he marked the end of an era. When, in summer 1934, the two resident courses at Quantico opened their doors again, they bore different names—Junior Course and Senior Course. Moreover, while not entirely free of the residual influence of approaches and attitudes imported in the early 1920s, each possessed a specialty that distinguished it, not only from contemporary Army schools, but from each other as well. These two courses, moreover, prepared a generation of Marine officers not merely for the challenges that actually took place in the Second World War, but also for contingencies that might have taken place had events in the early 1940s turned out differently. In other words, in addition to laying the foundation for the famous island-hopping campaigns of 1942 to 1945, the Marine Corps Schools also provided the United States with leaders able to defend Pacific islands against Japanese landing forces or return to the Caribbean to fight the proxies of a triumphant German Reich.

Stories of the changes that took place within the Marine Corps in the 1920s and 1930s often take the form of Whig history. Thus, from their first class in Marine Corps history at Parris Island, San Diego, or Quantico, Marines hear tales so full of unavoidable progress and unalloyed purpose that they might bring tears to the eyes of Thomas Babington Macaulay.<sup>62</sup> The account laid out in the preceding paragraphs, however, is so full of unhappy coincidences, missed opportunities, and good Marines acting at cross purposes that it belongs to a different type of history altogether, one

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<sup>60</sup> Two copies of “Tactical Problems” have been deposited in the archives of the Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA. The first, dated 8 December 1934 and located in folder 631 of the Historical Amphibious Files, is a typescript. The other, which bears no date and seems to be a carbon copy of the first, can be found in folder 4, box 19, Personal Papers of James Carson Breckinridge.

<sup>61</sup> James Carson Breckinridge, “The Problem of the Eastern Military District of Santo Domingo, 1919–1920,” folder 631, Historical Amphibious File, Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

<sup>62</sup> Best known for his studies of the English Civil War, Macaulay argued that progress achieved by the champions of Parliament in the seventeenth century (the eponymous Whigs) laid the foundations of the representative institutions of the Victorian era.

# ON CONTESTED SHORES

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The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations  
in the History of Warfare



Edited by Timothy Heck  
and B.A. Friedman

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that is, at once, both tragic and Clausewitzian. In other words, the saga of the Marine Corps Schools between 1920 and 1934 reminds us that, when it comes to changing the course of a curriculum, let alone a national institution, everything is simple—but the simplest things are often extraordinarily difficult.