Every Marine an Historian

The sequel

by Annette Amerman

It has been more than 40 years since the publication of Col Frank C. Caldwell's "Every Marine an Historian" in the March 1966 *Marine Corps Gazette*. The historians of the Marine Corps History Division are charged with the responsibility of collecting, researching, writing, and perpetuating the history of the Corps and its Marines. However, just as Col Caldwell explained 45 years ago, "the official histories are only as good as the material that forms their basis. Marines provide that material." It is the responsibility of all Marines, not just we historians, to ensure that accurate information and proper documentation is compiled and thereby retained.

Command Chronology

The Marine Corps has required various types of historical reports from units—after-action reports, command diaries, special action reports, etc. Regrettably though, there was no single program or report that was required of all units, bases, air stations, and commands prior to 1965. For this reason, there is a large gap in the history of the Corps for significant periods of time.

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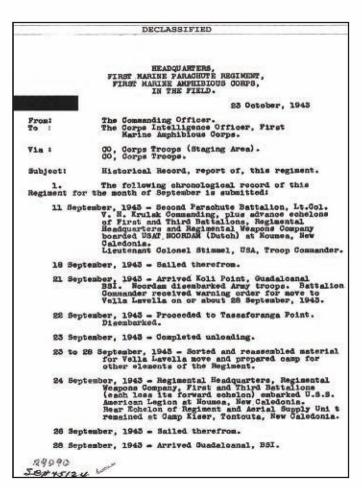*"Chances are, the opportunity to improve official history will come your way during your career; make the most of it!"*
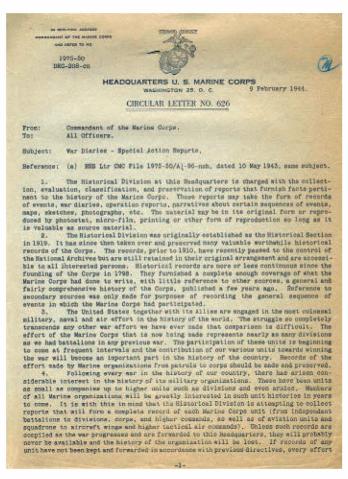
—Col Frank C. Caldwell, March 1966

In an attempt to remedy this glaring omission, historians and archivists of the Corps created the command chronology. The Commandant approved the new report and subsequently issued *Marine Corps Order 5750.2 (MCO 5750.2)* in July 1965, which formally established the Command Chronology Program. It not only replaced the command diary, but also required all Marine units down to the battalion/squadron level, separate posts and stations, and special detachments to submit command chronologies at least twice a year. Those units engaged in combat or other operational deployments (noncombatant evacuation operations, humanitarian assistance, etc.) were required to submit command chronologies on a monthly basis.

Maj Richard Sullivan (left) and LtCol Donald Schmuck, in the G–3 (Operations) tent, 1st MarDiv, Korean War, March 1951. Korean War records are some of the best operational records by Marine units. (Marine Corps photo.)

Command chronology from October 1943 and Commandant's letter to all officers concerning unit war records and reports, 1944. (Courtesy of author.)

Today the command chronology is *the* document for historians; it is the primary source. Command chronologies are the garden from which numerous products grow, such as official histories, monographs, and battle studies. Corps historians also mine the command chronologies for information needed to prepare the official lineage and determine battle honors for eligible units through Certificates of Lineage and Honors. Well-written command chronologies that include an array of supporting documents, such as letters of instruction, operation orders, after-action reports, and other supplemental reports created by the unit during the reporting period, are invaluable sources to more than just historians. The records are heavily utilized by elements of Headquarters Marine Corps, such as the Military Awards Branch, Manpower Support Branch, and Plans, Policies, and Operations Department, as well as other government agencies and the units themselves; the historical documents can be used in professional military education programs. Seemingly a wearisome and onerous requirement, the command chronology is the foundation document upon which many rely. Units have often queried History Division about historical events, names of previous commanding officers, verification on dates of activation, and specifics of past operations for professional military education and esprit de corps. Without the command chronology, historians would be unable to respond positively to a unit's request.

Increasingly, one of the most significant users of these reports is the veteran (and/or his family). "Once a Marine, always a Marine" should remind commanders of their responsibility to their Marines—past, present, and future. Today's Marines are tomorrow's veterans, and in order to obtain the hard-earned benefits of service, the Department of Veterans Affairs requires documentation. Inadequate, lacking, or missing command chronologies leave veterans wanting and can even keep them from the benefits they so rightly deserve.

Room for Improvement

Excellent command chronology submissions have become the exception, instead of the norm, over the past two decades. The advent of computers, the ease of "copy and paste," and the reliance upon technology instead of writing skills have succeeded in degrading the quality of the all-important reports. Since Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, command chronology submissions in times of conflict, war, and deployments have suffered due to the mistaken belief that the report is a frustrating and burdensome requirement that is less important in the bigger picture of the unit's wartime responsibilities. However, nothing is further from the

Col David Shoup, Chief of Staff, 2d MarDiv, Tinian, 1944. He knew the importance of wartime reports. *(Marine Corps photo.)*

truth. To ensure that the command chronology submitted is topnotch, a few suggestions are hereby offered to those assigned the task of preparing (and those with signing responsibility for) the unit command chronology.

Full names and ranks of all staff. Ensuring that full names and ranks are utilized can save historians hours of searching for the elusive "1stLt J. Smith."

Do not recreate the wheel. When compiling and preparing the command chronology, a quick reference to reports or lengthy documents in the body of Section II or III, and then including the cited reports in Section IV, can save a great deal of writing time and effort.

Less is not more. Including supporting documents is an excellent means of easing the writing effort; however, if supplemental documents are not available, include the necessary information and details within the appropriate sections—even if it seems excessive.

Specific dates and locations. Streamers, such as those for the Iraq and Afghanistan Campaign, have specific campaign periods; without exact dates of arrival in or departure from operational areas, units can find themselves lacking enough information for historians to determine participation credit. Veteran benefits can sometimes come down to

a simple, seemingly insignificant piece of information within the command chronology.

Size of detachments. Streamers, again such as the Iraq and Afghanistan Campaign streamers, are percentage-based streamers; for example, battalions and squadrons are required (by *MCO P10520.3B, Flag Manual*) to have at least 50 percent of the unit deployed in the operation for the entire unit to be entitled to the streamer. Knowing the exact strength of detachments deployed is critical to making the above determination.

Command chronologies are signed by the commanding officer, not "by direction." It is the commander's report, and therefore the commander should take the time to read it before signing it. Does the report cover the period accurately? Does it include the various reports already prepared throughout the period?

Improperly classified submissions have made large numbers of command chronologies unusable for immediate needs. If the report must be classified, ensure it is done so properly. Appropriately mark every paragraph as classified or unclassified. Furthermore, separating classified documents (after-action reports, etc.) to Section IV is acceptable.

A disturbing trend in the past decade has been the tardy and outright missing

submissions of command chronologies. Timely submissions are imperative to writing relevant and well-timed battle studies, reports, and decision papers. Biannual command chronologies cover the reporting periods of 1 January to 30 June and 1 July to 31 December each year; units have 90 days to submit the hard copies, via their chain of command, to the Marine Corps Archives at Quantico. Many reports are delayed while making their way through the chain of command; therefore, a simultaneous electronic submission directly to the Marine Corps Archives is encouraged. To arrange this option, units should contact the Marine Corps Archives for further instructions.

A few attendees of the Commanders Course may recall hearing me state that:

> . . . the Marines that serve in your command are forever and always your Marines. If you fail to ensure that their deeds, accomplishments and operations are recorded in your command chronology, you fail them again in the future.

Marines are resourceful, and if the record lacks the necessary information, the veteran will seek out his former commanders for the "eye witness" or "personal" account of events for his various Veterans Affairs claims. Relying upon one's memory is unnecessary when the well-written and well-documented command chronology is on file in the Marine Corps Archives.

Remember, wartime commanders from World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam recognized that preserving the record of their command was one of the commander's major responsibilities.

>*Editor's Note: For specific information relating to the Command Historical Program or the submission guidelines for command chronologies, please visit www.history.usmc. mil and review MCO 5750.1H (Chapter 5 and Appendix A). Specific questions regarding submitting the command chronology should be directed to the Marine Corps Archives at 703–784–4685. Other questions regarding the Marine Corps historical program should be directed to the Marine Corps History Division at 703–432–4877.*