



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

A Brief History of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1775–2025

All information in this brief history is derived from the Marine Corps History Division's contribution to the Marine Corps 250th celebration, a survey history called *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*. Each section provides a summary of the corresponding chapter in the book. To access a digital copy of *Semper Fidelis*, click [here](#). To request a paperback copy, click [here](#).

The U.S. Marine Corps has been a vital and evolving force in American military history since its founding. Born from the need for a versatile naval infantry during the Revolutionary War, the Corps quickly established a reputation for discipline, adaptability, and expeditionary skill that would define its identity across centuries. In response to shifting threats and missions, Marines have continuously refined their role, from pioneering amphibious warfare and professionalizing military education to navigating complex counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns. As it moves into the 21st century, the Corps continues to adapt, embracing new technologies and concepts to maintain its readiness against evolving threats, underscoring its enduring commitment as an agile, elite expeditionary force. Even as it adapts to a rapidly changing strategic environment, the Marine Corps continues to balance tradition with transformation, ensuring it remains a ready, elite force capable of meeting the nation's most urgent challenges.

Origins of the U.S. Marines, 1775–1820

The U.S. Marine Corps' origins stretch back to 10 November 1775, when its predecessor, the Continental Marines, formed to support naval operations during the American Revolution. The Continental Marines proved their versatility in shipboard duties, in raids such as the attack on New Providence, and in land battles such as Trenton and Princeton. Though the Continental Marines disbanded in 1783, the U.S. Marine Corps was established in 1798 and quickly demonstrated their strategic value during the Quasi-War with France and the First Barbary War, most notably in the capture of Derna, Libya—a campaign that became foundational to Marine identity. During the War of 1812, Marines distinguished themselves both at sea and on land,

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earning praise at battles such as Lake Erie, Bladensburg, and New Orleans. Throughout this formative period, the Corps built its institutional foundations under early Commandants, expanded its infrastructure, and overcame internal challenges. By 1820, the Marine Corps had solidified its reputation as a disciplined, adaptable, and indispensable military force, establishing the enduring legacy that would guide its evolution over the next two centuries.

Archibald Henderson's Corps, 1820–1859

Under the leadership of Commandant Archibald Henderson from 1820 to 1859, the Marine Corps underwent a period of significant professionalization and transformation, earning him the title “grand old man of the Corps.” Henderson raised standards in discipline, training, and appearance while guiding the Marines through the technological shift from sail to steam and strengthening their role as a naval landing force. Throughout the mid-1800s, Marines served in anti-piracy operations, humanitarian missions, and diplomatic expeditions, including the Perry Expedition to Japan and landings in the Falkland Islands. Domestically, they supported the Army during the Seminole and Creek Wars, with Henderson personally leading troops in the field, and later distinguished themselves in the Mexican War through amphibious assaults and the iconic storming of Chapultepec. Between major conflicts, Marines protected American interests abroad and intervened in crises from Asia to Latin America, while also responding to domestic unrest, such as the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry. By the end of Henderson’s unprecedented 38-year tenure, the Corps had evolved into a disciplined and flexible expeditionary force with an expanding role around the globe.

Toward a More Professional and Modern Marine Corps, 1860–1898

Between 1860 and 1898, the Marine Corps navigated a period of internal strain, professional reform, and growing international relevance. The Civil War deeply fractured the Service, with nearly a third of its officers joining the Confederacy. Marines nonetheless played a vital role in early Union victories, naval blockades, and key amphibious operations. After the war, the Corps resumed its traditional duties, intervening in foreign conflicts such as the 1871 Korea expedition and responding to domestic unrest. At the same time, Marine leaders placed a greater focus on professionalism and identity. Successive Commandants modernized training and education and promoted a distinct ethos with the adoption of “Semper Fidelis” as the Marine



Corps official motto and the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor as its emblem. These efforts culminated in the Spanish-American War, where Marines demonstrated their expeditionary effectiveness in Cuba, the Philippines, and beyond, securing key bases and earning public recognition for their courage and readiness. By war's end, the Marine Corps had evolved into a more modern, capable, and professional force, poised to assume a greater role in U.S. foreign policy.

Marine Expeditions in Support of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1899–1920

Between 1899 and 1920, the Marine Corps transitioned into a global expeditionary force in support of the expansion of American power abroad. As the United States acquired overseas territories and asserted influence, Marines secured key outposts, fought insurgents in the Philippines, and defended American legations during the Boxer Rebellion in China. In Latin America, Marines became the primary instrument of U.S. intervention, serving in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic to stabilize governments and protect American interests. World War I marked a major turning point, with the Service expanding rapidly and Marines earning international acclaim for their valor at Belleau Wood and other key battles. At the same time, Marine aviation was born, conducting limited but pioneering missions that laid the foundation for future air-ground integration. Alongside these developments, the Marine Corps also redefined its strategic purpose through the creation of the Advanced Base Force, a specialized unit developed to seize, defend, and support forward naval bases in response to growing demands for overseas access and mobility. The Advanced Base Force became a key component of the Corps' expanding expeditionary role, as the United States extended its influence through territorial acquisitions, interventions abroad, and global military engagements. The sum of these developments meant that the Marine Corps had evolved by 1920 from a naval security force into a versatile arm of U.S. power projection, capable of responding to both irregular and conventional conflicts across the globe.

Between the World Wars, 1920–1940

After World War I, the Marine Corps underwent a significant transformation under the leadership of Major General John A. Lejeune, transitioning fully from a 19th-century naval infantry force into a modern, professional military organization. Major General Lejeune emphasized education, training, and structural reform, establishing Marine Corps Schools at



Quantico, Virginia, and forming expeditionary forces on both coasts. Despite postwar isolationism, the Service remained active in Latin America, gaining counterinsurgency experience in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, building experience in its officer and enlisted corps and capturing lessons that were collected in the *Small Wars Manual*. Marine aviation also matured, developing tactics like dive-bombing and aerial resupply. Strategically, the Corps began preparing for future conflict in the Pacific, with Major Earl H. “Pete” Ellis’s 1921 plan laying the foundation for amphibious warfare doctrine. The establishment of the Fleet Marine Force in 1933 and the publication of the *Tentative Landing Manual* in 1934 further institutionalized this focus. By 1941, the Marine Corps had grown substantially in size and capability, ensuring it was well-positioned for the global conflict to come.

World War II, 1941–1945

During World War II, the Marine Corps transformed from a small, dispersed force into a massive, battle-hardened organization central to U.S. success in the Pacific. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Marines fought fierce defensive battles on Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippines before shifting to a sustained offensive after the pivotal victory at Midway in 1942. The rapid wartime buildup brought the Marine Corps to its peak size and led to the establishment or expansion of many bases and stations that exist today. The amphibious warfare doctrine from the interwar period was tested at Guadalcanal and refined through campaigns in the Solomons, Marianas, and elsewhere, becoming the Corps’ signature strength. Brutal battles at Tarawa, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa highlighted Marine courage and adaptability. The iconic flag-raising at Iwo Jima, in particular, came to symbolize Marine determination and fighting spirit. By war’s end, the Marines had cemented their role as the nation’s premier amphibious force, leaving a legacy of sacrifice and professionalism that would define the Service for generations.

The Origins of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force, 1945–1960

The Marine Corps emerged from World War II determined to solidify its identity as a flexible, rapid-response force. Despite significant postwar reductions in manpower and intense interservice rivalries regarding unification, the Corps adapted to Cold War demands by emphasizing mobility and amphibious capability. The Korean War proved a defining moment: Marines played a pivotal role in early victories at the Pusan Perimeter and Inchon, and their



legendary fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir showcased their resilience and professionalism. The conflict validated the effectiveness of the air-ground team and spurred innovations in aviation, including rotary-wing and jet aircraft integration. In the years following the war, the Corps continued refining its structure and mission, building the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) concept that endures today.

Marines in Southeast Asia, 1954–1975

Between 1954 and 1975, the Marine Corps played a central and complex role in the Vietnam War, navigating the challenges of both conventional warfare and counterinsurgency. Beginning with advisory roles, the Marines escalated their presence with the March 1965 landing at Da Nang, eventually taking responsibility for the I Corps Tactical Zone in South Vietnam's north. There, they confronted both North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas while pursuing pacification through initiatives like the Combined Action Program. Major operations demonstrated Marine effectiveness, but the protracted nature of the conflict shifted U.S. policy toward Vietnamization and gradual withdrawal. By 1971, Marine combat units had redeployed from Vietnam, leaving advisors and support personnel who played vital roles in defending against the enemy's 1972 Easter Offensive. By April 1975, however, Communist forces overwhelmed government forces in both Cambodia and South Vietnam, necessitating Marines to conduct emergency evacuations in Phnom Penh and Saigon. Between 1965 and 1975, approximately 500,000 of the 730,000 men and women who served in the Marine Corps deployed to Southeast Asia. Of those deployed, 13,091 were killed in action and another 88,594 were wounded—nearly one third of all American casualties. Despite the war's controversial legacy, Marines distinguished themselves with professionalism and resilience under extreme conditions.

Post-Vietnam Reforms and the Rise of the Joint Force, 1975–2001

The Marine Corps underwent significant reform and transformation in response to post-Vietnam challenges. Strained by issues like racial tension, drug abuse, and declining discipline, the Corps, under leaders like Generals Louis H. Wilson and Robert H. Barrow, focused on improving recruitment and training during the transition to the All-Volunteer Force. Emphasizing quality over quantity, the Corps rebuilt its elite identity. Operationally, the Marines returned to



their expeditionary roots, preparing for NATO reinforcement and rapid global response, highlighted by involvement in crises from Iran to Lebanon. The 1983 Beirut bombing underscored the complexities of modern warfare and the need for better strategic planning. The 1980s also brought a doctrinal shift under Commandant General Alfred M. Gray, who institutionalized maneuver warfare and professional military education. In the 1990s, the Corps demonstrated flexibility in joint operations during the Gulf War, deploying as part of a coalition to defend Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait from Iraqi forces. Operation Desert Storm was one of the most successful Marine operations in the 20th century, illustrating advances the U.S. military had made in joint operations over the previous five years. The Marine Corps next demonstrated its flexibility by responding to a series of humanitarian crises in Somalia, Bangladesh, and Haiti. By the turn of the century, the Marine Corps had successfully redefined itself as a modern, agile, and globally responsive force, ready for the complex demands of the 21st century.

A Marine Corps for the 21st Century, 2001–2025

Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the Marine Corps responded with speed and resolve, illustrating its expeditionary capabilities in Afghanistan. By the end of the year, Marines had helped topple the Taliban after a deep amphibious assault from the sea and conducting counterterrorism operations. In contrast, their March 2003 invasion of Iraq featured a Marine Expeditionary Force-sized mechanized and armored force conducting maneuver warfare, culminating in the fall of Baghdad at the beginning of April. While the fight in Iraq expanded into a protracted counterinsurgency campaign in Anbar Province, the Corps also maintained a steady presence in Afghanistan under NATO and U.S. command, supporting security, training, and reconstruction. The dual wars demanded constant adaptation, with Marines conducting complex operations across both theaters, often redeploying between them. The establishment of U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) in 2006 and new Marine tactics in Iraq the same year—such as partnering with Sunni tribes during the Anbar Awakening—showcased the Corps’ evolving approach to irregular warfare. By 2010, Iraq operations wound down as Afghanistan surged again, with Marines leading major offensives in Helmand Province and expanding their advisory role. As combat faded, the Service renewed its focus on expeditionary and naval operations, all while remaining engaged in global counterterrorism missions—including against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and insurgents in the Philippines. The final



chapter of this era came with the August 2021 evacuation from Kabul, where Marines helped end America's longest war amid chaos and tragedy, closing a historic period of sustained combat and reaffirming their role as a flexible, resilient force in an unpredictable world.

By then, the Marine Corps had begun to shift its focus from counterterrorism toward preparing for near-peer conflicts, particularly with China and Russia. Guided by the 2018 National Defense Strategy and Force Design 2030, the Corps restructured to enhance naval integration and develop new concepts such as Distributed Maritime Operations and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations. This transformation emphasizes lighter, more mobile forces and forward presence through Marine Littoral Regiments in contested Indo-Pacific regions. Under current leadership, the Marine Corps continues divesting heavy equipment in favor of advanced reconnaissance, long-range strike capabilities, and joint operations, demonstrating a historic pattern of evolving to meet changing global threats.

Conclusion

The history of the U.S. Marine Corps is defined by its unique adaptability, resilience, and enduring commitment to serve as the nation's agile force-in-readiness. From its origins as a small naval infantry supporting shipboard and land operations during the Revolutionary War, through its evolution into a modern, multi-domain expeditionary force, the Marine Corps has repeatedly transformed to meet the changing character of warfare. Whether shifting from ship's guard duties to forming the Advanced Base Force, pioneering amphibious assault doctrine, innovating air-ground integration, or adapting to counterinsurgency and joint operations, Marines have consistently demonstrated their value by answering the nation's call under the most challenging circumstances. This legacy of determined leadership, rigorous professionalism, and a deep respect for tradition continues to shape the Corps as it navigates new threats and technological advances. As it looks toward its future, the Marine Corps remains steadfast in its mission to produce courageous leaders and warfighters ready to meet uncertainty with decisive action—embodying the spirit of *Semper Fidelis* for generations to come.