

Leadership, John Lejeune Style

Quiet, determined, and dignified

by Maj Ralph Stoney Bates, Sr., USMC(Ret)

John Archer Lejeune is the most underrated and unrecognized leader in the history of the Marine Corps. Not that he isn't somewhat known by the average Marine or Fleet Marine Force sailor—he is. He is known for accomplishments such as establishing the Marine Corps birthday with its significant ceremonial festivities and for beginning the embryonic process of the Navy–Marine Corps role as the world's preeminent amphibious assault force. Let us also add that he had a Marine Barracks on the east coast that eventually became a base named after him. But, in addition to mispronouncing his and the camp's name as “La-June” instead of the proper French-Creole “Le-Jern” or “Luh-Jern,” most Marines and sailors still don't know too much about the man or why they should. Frankly, they seem not to understand that had John Archer Lejeune not existed, so too might the same fate have fallen onto the United States Marines. You would think that Marines would and should appreciate that fact.

Ask any Marine who the greatest Marine of all time is and you will likely hear Chesty Puller. Ask who is the most famous Marine of World War I, and you will likely hear Dan Daly of “Come on you sons of b—, do you want to live forever?” fame. Ask about the Banana Wars and—in all probability—you'll get Smedley Butler in response. As a matter of fact, check out the website, Rankopedia, to obtain an unofficial ranking of the most famous Marines in Corps history and you'll find John Lejeune listed as 18th out of 20. Ask the same website who the greatest World War I general is and you'll find John Lejeune ranked 24th out of 25. Yet,

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MajGen Lejeune and GEN “Black Jack” Pershing. (File photo.)

John Lejeune's 2d Infantry Division, composed of Marines and Doughboys, killed and captured more Germans and took more territory from the enemy than any other division of the 10 divisions in the American Expeditionary Forces, and it did so while being at the tail end of the supply and support chain.

The question again is, why? Why is John Lejeune not up there in the history books and in the hearts and minds of all Marines and Fleet Marine Force sailors? He should be right there with Chesty

Puller, Holland M. “Howling Mad” Smith, Alexander A. Vandegrift, “Red Mike” Edson, Louis Wilson, Smedley Butler, and even Patton, MacArthur, and Nimitz. Why is Lejeune not in that league?

In the process of answering that question, let us begin with the early development of the son of Ovide and Laura Lejeune of Pointe Coupee Parish, LA. John Archer Lejeune was the second child of Ovide and Laura. His older sister, Augustine, would play a

central part in John's life. As a midshipman and Marine, he would write her often, revealing some of his innermost thoughts, actions, and feelings. His mother homeschooled him until he was 12 when he was sent to his aunt and uncle's boarding school near Natchez, MS. From Natchez he would attend the military school founded by William Tecumseh Sherman, the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, in Baton Rouge. Today it's simply called LSU.

John's family was poor. Ovide was essentially a sharecropper. His father lost his earlier accumulated wealth due to a divorce from his first wife and from the aftermath of the Civil War. Ovide and Laura had to scrape funds together for their son's education. John learned to embrace hard work, deprivation, pestilence, and frequent floods in his native Creole region of 19th-century Louisiana. As a result, he developed a somewhat quiet, strong determination and unflinching patience. At the military school he acquired military bearing and adherence to military customs, plus he studied languages and the classics. After gaining an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy, he studied intently to pass the entrance exams. His persistence drove him, and his introvert personality protected him.

He arrived at the Naval Academy wearing the best clothing he had; unfortunately, the best clothing he had was his grey LSU military school uniform, which drew unforgiving attention, as did his slow, French-Creole-accented southern drawl. He had a tough couple of years earning respect through his resilience, toughness, and his quiet, almost bashful, demeanor. He also earned a nickname, derived from the Wadsworth poem about the flight of the Acadians to become Cajuns. The poem was "Evangeline," and Gabriel was a character in the poem. Though he was French-Creole, not Cajun, the nickname "Gabriel" was bestowed upon him by an upperclassman and would eventually be shortened to "Gabe," and remained his name all his life.

Gabe graduated from the Academy with more demerits than any known graduating midshipman. He was from

the South, identified as a Cajun, possessed with little formal schooling, and talked with that funny accent—strong French actuated Creole sounding, southern drawl. He was an attention getter, and Academy upperclassmen and Navy officers alike "rode" him hard.

Midshipmen of his day endured a long, 2-year voyage after completing studies at the Academy. His voyage was from California to Samoa via Hawaii. A hurricane in Samoa almost killed John and did destroy his ship and drown many of the officers and crew. He and other midshipmen from the destroyed USS *Vandalia* received a written commendation for their actions during the storm and the hazardous work during the recovery from that devastating hurricane, yet he never mentioned it throughout his life. He often downplayed his accomplishments.

He commanded a Marine sergeant and gun crew during this voyage to Samoa, and through his close association with those shipboard Marines it gradu-

ally caused him to request assignment to the Marines upon returning to the Academy and completing additional testing for graduation. The Navy had other ideas. He was to be appointed as a Navy ensign engineer. "Frankly, Mister Lejeune, you have too much brains to be a Marine," he was told. He would not have it. He immediately went through the Academy Board, the Superintendent, the Bureau of Navigation, and eventually to the Secretary of the Navy to finally receive his appointment as a second lieutenant of Marines. All along this important path, he was polite, persistent, resourceful, and determined. Plus, he developed his presentation process by carefully studying the record and accomplishments of those with whom he was to have audience in

order to make the most artful appeal. In short, he had his act (there's another word for it) together. Lejeune's naval career was not unlike any other Marine officer of his time, yet he seemed to possess innate, deep-rooted, or acquired abilities to bestow, or cause to be bestowed, praise on others while reserving nothing above the simple "just doing my duty" for himself. He was neither boastful, loud, arrogant, nor unkind. Indeed he was the exact opposite. He respected his men and paid attention to their ideas and suggestions. He gave orders and directions in a quiet, dignified manner. But he clearly expected to be obeyed. He suggested rather than commanded. He inscribed praise on the accomplishments of his subordinates and seniors, yet expected none and solicited none for himself.

For example, at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, almost everyone who went ashore, and some who didn't, received some type of high award, including a record number of Medals of Honor.

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John Lejeune did not desire, solicit, or receive any such award. He could have. He was the senior Marine ashore, commanding all sailors and Marines, and his friend, the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, was recommending those medals to the president. He could have had one. He chose not to.

When he went to France in 1918, he was initially assigned by GEN John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, whom Gabe had known since his assignment to the Philippines, just to "observe." Marines had been forced on Black Jack, and he reluctantly accepted them into the American Expeditionary Force. And, during that observation period, he made suggestions, conversed with men and officers, and quietly made himself simultaneously useful and unobtrusive. Finally,

Pershing placed him in command of the 4th Marine Brigade, followed days later by reassignment to command the 2d Army Infantry Division composed of Marines and Doughboys. This assignment caused much consternation among many senior Army officers who resented a Marine commanding soldiers but who had no problem with Army BG James Harbord commanding the 4th Marine Brigade before Lejeune arrived.

While most senior officers, Army and Marine Corps, used interpreters to communicate with French counterparts, Lejeune did so directly in French. In Europe he was visited once by Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels and twice by Assistant Navy Secretary Franklin Roosevelt. Gabe did not forget the “little guy” either. He befriended and reassigned an older Marine private, Edwin Denby, and assisted the college-educated lawyer in obtaining a commission. Denby ultimately became a major and later became the Secretary of the Navy while Lejeune was Commandant.

Lejeune trained his men hard and often used competitive sports and games, as he was known to do often in the past, to build teamwork, cooperation, coordination, and esprit de corps within his division. He emphasized coordination of effort and trust in mutual support. His artillery and engineers would rather die than be unable to support his infantry. Once, higher headquarters removed his artillery support and offered him support from another artillery unit. Lejeune would not hear of it. In his own quiet but determined way, he got *his* artillery back.

Lejeune would sometimes jeopardize his own status to protect his men from unwarranted rigors and decreased safety. Once, after hostilities ceased, he was ordered to march his division several miles to cross a river and return to a point on the other side of the river opposite his starting point. There was a much closer crossing nearby. The general who gave the order was asleep and the aide would not awaken him. Lejeune ordered the aide to awaken the sleeping general or he would personally come over and awaken him. The general was awakened and rescinded the order. Lejeune crossed where it benefited his men. He

stated to the aide, “It is better to wake one sleeping general than to march an entire division all night to cross a river where there was a much closer bridge to accomplish the same thing.” Lejeune was beloved and respected by his men, soldiers and Marines.

In LtCol Clyde Metcalf’s *History of the United States Marine Corps* (Van Rees Press, New York, 1939), John Lejeune is barely mentioned in the chapter titled “The World War.” Instead, Metcalf rightly and properly heaps praise on Eli Cole and Smedley Butler of the 5th Marine Brigade. The only mention of Lejeune in the chapter titled “On The Western Front” is that Lejeune kept the 2d Infantry Division from being broken up and assigned to other units. There is no other mention of Lejeune connected to the 2d Infantry Division, even though Lejeune led the division in some of the most savage combat of the war.

As a national hero, Lejeune led the victory parade of the 2d Infantry Division in New York upon its return to the United States; however, *someone(s)* in authority decided that Lejeune was to be kept out of a later parade of the 4th Marine Brigade, marching before

President Woodrow Wilson in Washington, DC. Without the knowledge of anyone, except perhaps his wife, Ellie, he chose to attend that parade on his own as a spectator. Lejeune had his detractors—Army and Marine.

Those who wrote the history of the Great War were not always fair to the lone Marine general who commanded the 2d Infantry Division in combat in France and occupation duty in Germany. To be fair to LtCol Metcalf, in the chapter “Twenty Years After,” in that portion dealing with Marine Commandants, he praises Lejeune’s accomplishments as Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps. Indeed, Metcalf describes Lejeune as “a man of exceptionally strong character who always commands respect” and “one of the best reputations for integrity and ability of any officer who had ever served in the Marine Corps.” By contrast, *The American Heritage History of World War I* (American Heritage Publishing Company, New York, 1964), narrated by S.L.A. Marshall, makes no mention of MajGen Lejeune at all. Not surprising. The history of World War I (the Great War) was to be written primarily from the viewpoint of John J. Pershing, who



MajGen Lejeune and members of his staff. (File photo.)

had no great love for the Marines. That same American Heritage publication does pay great respect and admiration for the 4th Marine Brigade at the battle of Belleau Wood, though the narrative is strikingly similar to the earlier writings of Metcalf. There are several mentions of the 2d Division, but no mention of Lejeune.

John Lejeune simply did not complain. He was the gentle persuader, a behind-the-scenes mover and shaker. His life had been devoted to doing what he had to do with what he had. Only when you tried to take what he had away from him did he rise to a level of controlled, invisible anger combined with artful suggestions. Lejeune got his way in a quiet, subtle manner. Today we refer to such a character as “laid back.”

In more modern times, specifically the 1950s, there was another Marine general very similar in style, mannerism, and deportment to John Lejeune: MajGen Oliver P. Smith. Gen Smith was the commanding general of the 1st MarDiv in Korea. One of his regimental commanders was Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller. Puller was flamboyant, and his colorful style of flamboyance was most effective in accomplishing his mission of leading Marines, especially those in combat. Colorful quotes from his time as the commanding officer of 1st Marines in Korea are repeated again and again—some on target, some wildly exaggerated. This is not to detract from Chesty Puller at all. Puller is, and always will be, a great Marine. However, recounting the Marines’ war in Korea, MajGen Smith was Puller’s opposite in style and mannerism. He was not the flamboyant, outspoken type, yet proved conclusively to be a skillful, tactful, and highly effective leader of Marines. From the Marine amphibious landing at Inchon to the breakout from the Chosin Reservoir, Smith demonstrated leadership and tactical resourcefulness during combat operations and *saved* the 1st MarDiv and other elements of the Army’s X Corps from possible total destruction during the Chosin Reservoir Campaign. In fact, MajGen Smith did *save* the 1st MarDiv, and in like fashion, another Marine, in another time, of similar personality, John Archer

Lejeune, a Marine called Gabe, *saved* the entire United States Marine Corps.

Sometimes in a man’s life, there is a single, dominant event that, standing alone, gives the measure of character in a man. As Lejeune was preparing to exchange positions with Commandant George Barnett to become the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Barnett was very upset that the Navy Secretary and the President had replaced him. He took it out on Lejeune in the presence of at least one junior officer. Barnett had Lejeune stand at attention in front of his desk minutes before Lejeune officially became Commandant and chewed him out.

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Place yourself in Lejeune’s shoes at that moment: a major general standing at rigid attention in front of the Major General Commandant being tongue lashed right before becoming the next Major General Commandant. What would you have done? What would you have said? Lejeune took the “chewing” standing at attention. Lejeune knew that Barnett was very hurt and very upset, but he didn’t add fuel to the fire. He took his butt chewing (there’s another word for it) without objection. Lejeune’s response to the chewing was, “General, I will always praise your accomplishments in this office,” and after Barnett was reduced to brigadier general and transferred to the west coast, Lejeune quietly worked with the Navy Secretary to get Barnett promoted once again to major general. Now that’s class.

Before, during, and after Lejeune’s 9 years as Major General Commandant, he would set the stage for a Marine Corps that would be prepared to fight and win the war in the Pacific some 20 years later. He set the standards and direction of movement that, once firmly established, would take our corps of Marines right up to the Corps of today.

He changed the Corps’ headquarters, and then he changed the Corps. His unique accomplishments are many. For example, there was a strong move to consolidate all aviation into one air corps, yet he and the Navy Secretary kept aviation within the Marine Corps and the Navy. He also is recognized as beginning the genesis of a doctrine when he envisioned a mission of assault from the sea against fortified positions ashore and set events into motion to make it happen. To maintain positive public exposure, he began the Marine Corps sports programs of the 1920s and ’30s. He held field maneuvers, inviting presidents, members of congress, and the public to observe. He even enticed Hollywood into producing movies about Marines. He wisely began periodic communication with the officers via his famous Commandant’s letters. He insisted on higher educational standards for Marine officers. The list of accomplishments continues and is lengthy.

When Lejeune resigned as Commandant of the Corps, he accepted the position of superintendent of Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, VA. Then the Great Depression hit. Yet, throughout the Depression, when other schools, institutions, and academies were cutting back, Lejeune was building physical structures, increasing cadet enrollees, and enhancing the cadet program at the Institute. Most of this was accomplished even with a leave of absence due to a fall Lejeune took at VMI that fractured his skull, rendering him unconscious and speechless for almost a month. It took him almost a year to recover and resume his duties.

Much of his success at VMI can be traced to his quiet but dogged determination and a lifetime friendship he developed with Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. FDR visited Lejeune twice in Europe, once in France (1918) and once in Germany (1919). He also approved the secret mission of Lejeune and LtCol Earl Hancock “Pete” Ellis to the Pacific from 1921 to 1923. Ellis predicted the Pacific War with Japan. Lejeune believed in Ellis. Revealing the strength of the relationship, FDR, as

governor of New York, visited Lejeune and his wife at VMI just for lunch on at least one occasion, traveling from Albany to Lexington by train. It was FDR who pushed to have Lejeune promoted to lieutenant general in 1942.

Lejeune retired from VMI in 1937, and he and Ellie moved to Baltimore, MD. He died in November 1942 while his Marines were wresting Guadalcanal from the Japanese, beginning the assault from the sea, across the Pacific to the doorstep of Japan.

What else did John Lejeune give the Marine Corps, the Navy, and our country? Here's a short list of some of his accomplishments:

- Founded the Marine Corps Association and its magazine, the *Marine Corps Gazette*.
- Established *The Leatherneck* as a base newspaper in 1917 to tell the Marine Corps story—it became *Leatherneck* magazine.
- Created via congressional act the Marine Corps League (“Once a Marine, Always a Marine”).
- Established the Marine Corps birthdate (10 November 1775 instead of 11 July 1798).
- Created and conducted the first Marine Corps birthday celebration (Philadelphia, PA, 1923).
- Established the Marine Corps Institute for enlisted Marines.
- Established the Overseas Depot in World War I to train Marines for deployment to combat.
- Supported the assignment and establishment of the first female Marines (World War I).
- Drafted war plans in the 1920s (revised in the 1930s) for the conduct of an amphibious war in the Pacific against Japan.
- Maintained the Marine Corps as a positive force in readiness in the eyes of the American public.
- Believed strongly in and required academic education combined with professional training for all Marine officers.
- Was a strong proponent of marksmanship training.
- Employed Marines to stop mail robbery and the murder of mail employees in the 1920s.
- Started the creation of a Marine Corps amphibious force permanently attached to the east and west coast Navy fleets.
- Established the genesis of the *Small Wars Manual* (finally published 1940).
- Endorsed and supported close air support and medevac by air during the Banana Wars.
- First Commandant to travel by air in a combat zone (Nicaragua).
- Along with Navy Secretary Denby, kept Marine Corps–Navy aviation within the Marine Corps and Navy.
- Supported the creation of a Marine division in World War I (it was not established).
- Started the search for amphibious craft to go from ship to shore while under hostile fire.
- Enhanced the building program, curriculum, and cadet corps at VMI during the Great Depression.
- After Poland was invaded by Germany, he again offered his services to the Corps. (At 72 years old, he was gently and respectfully turned down.)
- Was promoted to lieutenant general by FDR in April 1942.
- Died in Baltimore, MD, on 20 November 1942.
- Buried in Arlington National Cemetery on 23 November 1942.

The Marine Corps, all Marines, and the citizens of this Nation owe John Archer Lejeune more than we can ever repay. We as Marines should know more about the man and Marine he was. His reputation is set in stone but fails to fully aggrandize the man he was and the deep roots of his character. It's difficult to dig deeply into him through official channels and documents, but the contents of many personal letters to and from John Lejeune, especially those to and from his sister, Augustine, reveal much about his character and innermost thoughts. To properly praise his accomplishments and deeply respect his style of leadership, we need to know him well. He was a quiet yet determined man. He never tooted his own horn. He never relished the spotlight. He sought no awards, but bestowed them on others. John Lejeune was a dignified, highly professional man of great integrity who saw the future of his Marine Corps and convinced the

Nation to allow him to position our Corps to move steadily in the direction of that future. His actions and guidance established the foundation for all future Marines—and especially for our many great Commandants—to take us to where we are today. John Lejeune was a strong leader of Marines and the fruit of his style of leadership is evident throughout today's Marine Corps.

Even in the twilight of life, just weeks before he died, Lejeune personally assisted a cousin, William “Booty” Scott, to move from private to second lieutenant in the Army. Booty survived World War II to become mayor of New Roads, LA, and as mayor, dedicated a plaque in front of the birthplace of John Lejeune. Gen Lejeune led the Corps during a time of tremendous budget cuts, antimilitary attitudes, and isolationist paranoia, yet he prevailed in his goal to point the Marine Corps toward its destiny.

What pride he must have felt for the Marines, his Marines, when they took the offensive against Japan at Guadalcanal in the Pacific just before his death. That massive amphibious force eventually marched into Japan, on a path blazed and a process envisioned, as the cornerstone of our Marine Corps. He is more than a Marine of great reputation—he is also a Marine of great character and intense vision.

It is unfortunate that, inadvertently or deliberately, many writers and historians who write about the accomplishments of many great Marines of our Corps have omitted John Archer Lejeune. Interestingly, Lejeune himself would not have cared, but we should! In the evening hours, at Parris Island, San Diego, and especially Quantico, drill instructors and sergeant instructors should, as they retire their recruits and candidates for the night, in addition to their verbal salute to Chesty, quote and praise the Marine who made it all possible: “John Archer Lejeune—we are because he was!”

> *Editor's Note: Maj Bates' book, A Marine Called Gabe (Create Space Publishing, North Charleston, SC, 2013), is the primary source for the information contained in this article.*

