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## IN MEMORIAM

# Major John M. “Jack” Elliott, USMC

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*By Timothy Heck*

Retired major John McClelland Elliott, better known as Jack, passed away on 22 March 2025 surrounded by friends and loved ones. A towering figure in Marine Corps aviation history, Elliott’s work and efforts are on display to every visitor to the National Museum of the Marine Corps (NMMC), located in Quantico, Virginia, where many of the large artifacts on display were originally acquired by Elliott while he was part of the Smithsonian Institution for the unbuilt National Armed Forces Museum. In addition to the exhibits, Elliott was the face of the Marine Corps to countless visitors as he volunteered thousands of hours as a docent, serving at the NMMC until he was almost 100 years old.

Born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, Elliott immigrated to the United States as a young child with his parents and two older brothers. His father, Robert, was a veteran of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War I. The local airport, which later became Marine Corps Air Station Santa Barbara, California, was a frequent stop on Elliott’s youthful bike rides, and there he saw the growth of naval aviation in the 1930s, which made a lasting impression on him. With America’s entrance into World War II, Elliott



*Courtesy of the estate of John M. “Jack” Elliott*  
Maj John M. “Jack” Elliott, as a technical sergeant in 1945 or 1946.

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Timothy Heck is a supervisory historian with Naval History and Heritage Command and a member of the *Marine Corps History* editorial board. An artillery officer by training, he is a reservist serving as a plans officer at Headquarters Marine Corps.



*Courtesy of the estate of John M. "Jack" Elliott*

Maj Jack Elliott (left) with MSgt Darrel D. Porter (right) at Outpost One, Suyon Beach, after driving from Daegu. This outpost is likely on Suycong-gu beach near Busan.

worked for the Army under the National Youth Administration, conducting maintenance on more than 300 M1903 Springfield rifles.

He then enlisted in the Marine Corps in November 1942, completing boot camp with Platoon 1020 at Marine Recruit Depot San Diego, California, in early 1943.<sup>1</sup> Assigned to Aviation Engineering Squadron (AES) 22 at North Island as an aviation ordnance striker, he worked on a variety of aircraft, including installing field fixes on Vought F4U-1 Corsairs destined for combat in the Pacific.

After several months with AES-22, Elliott reported to the Naval Air Technical Training Center, Memphis, Tennessee, for training as an aviation ordnanceman. He later described this experience as “a bit difficult as we had more practical experience than some of the instructors who had been in the class ahead of us.”<sup>2</sup> In his class book, he wrote that he “gets a kick out of making airplane models, and would like to retire from the Marine Corps.”<sup>3</sup> He graduated near the top of his class, later recounting that he and another Marine were constantly vying for top markings but

<sup>1</sup> *Marine Log: AOM*, Section G of Class G-5, author's personal collection.

<sup>2</sup> Maj John M. Elliott, “My Resume,” Elliott Collection, Archives, Marine Corps History Division (MCHD), Quantico, VA.

<sup>3</sup> *Marine Log: AOM*, Section G of Class G-5.

he was bested in the end. When looking at his class graduation book in February 2025, Elliott remarked with his traditional grin, “I can remember stories . . . they may not be true.”<sup>4</sup>

From Memphis, Elliott reported to Marine Scout Bombing Squadron (VMSB) 341, nicknamed the Torrid Turtles, then stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. VMSB-341 was flying the Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber. In September 1943, he was part of the squadron’s detachment that prepared the Dauntlesses for overseas deployment, embarking on USS *Nassau* (CVE 16) and arriving in American Samoa on 6 October. The squadron’s aircrews followed in trace and the squadron was based at Upolu, British Samoa, where Elliott disassembled the bomb fuses, which frequently became fouled with the dust from the red volcanic rock that comprised the runway. The job was a dangerous one and, as he later quipped, “There weren’t too many visitors to that hut.”<sup>5</sup>

In March 1944, Elliott moved to Green Island where his primary job was fusing bombs and later air-to-ground rockets. According to Elliott, VMSB-341 was one of the first Marine Corps squadrons to use rockets in combat and the only SBD (Scout Bomber Douglas) squadron to do so. Later that year VMSB-341, after a lengthy and uncomfortable sea movement for the ground echelon, relocated to the Philippines and joined Marine Air Groups, Dagupan (MAGSDAGUPAN). For the next few months, VMSB-341 flew missions in support of Army units liberating the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> While bombs and rockets were his primary work, Elliott also assisted in maintenance for the squadron’s weapons, including the aircraft’s machine guns. He later commented that there were so many machine guns to service that he learned to set the headspace and timing by feel rather than using the issued gauges, often working at night on the unlit airstrip. Later, as a student at The Basic School, El-



Courtesy of the estate of John M. “Jack” Elliott  
Maj Jack Elliott’s promotion to captain in the late 1950s.

liott did just that in class. He was questioned by his instructor. Never one to back down from a question of competence or knowledge, Elliott then proceeded to set every machine gun on the range and fired them without incident.

During his tour in the Pacific, Elliott frequently drove an ordnance tractor loaded with fused bombs out to the waiting aircraft. At one airfield, he was crossing an active taxiway with the right of way when a Vought F4U Corsair pilot attempted to cross in front of him. Elliott was able to wave the pilot off but caught several obscene gestures in the process, much to his delight. In later years, he referred to the Corsair’s pilot as “that young pilot,” despite the fact that while driving the tractor Elliott was barely 20 years old.

Returning to the United States in the spring of 1945, Elliott was once again assigned to AES-22, now at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, this time in the cleaning section of the ordnance shop working on machine guns. War’s end saw him reassigned as an ordnance inspector, evaluating material being turned in by Marine Corps air stations in southern California.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Elliott, interview with LtCol Timothy Heck and Annette Amerman, 2 February 2025, transcript (Oral History Section, MCHD, Quantico, VA).

<sup>5</sup> Elliott, “My Resume.”

<sup>6</sup> For more on MAGSDAGUPAN, see Charles W. Boggs Jr., *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1951).



*Courtesy of the estate of John M. "Jack" Elliott*  
Maj Jack Elliott, after Korea, with Helen Giles on the day she finally accepted his proposal of marriage.

He was discharged in November 1946 as a technical sergeant and reenlisted a month later.

Initially assigned to VMF-312 at El Toro, Elliott attended Marine Corps Aviation Technical Schools at Marine Corps Base Quantico in 1947 and 1948 with other senior enlisted aviation specialists and officers. After graduation, he returned to El Toro and F4U Corsair squadrons.

The Korean War saw Elliott deployed and reassigned to VMF-214, where he became noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) of the advance echelon. After completing a tour with VMF-214, he moved to the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing as NCOIC of the wing's ordnance section. It being a small Marine



*Courtesy of the estate of John M. "Jack" Elliott*  
Jack and Helen in 2010.

Corps, Elliott's boss in Korea was Major Charles B. "Charlie" Guy, who had been VMSB-341's ordnance officer during World War II. Ever downplaying their success, Elliott described their efforts in Korea as the blind leading the blind but that "we managed to learn the ropes and turned in a creditable job."<sup>7</sup>

The return from Korea brought two major changes in his life. First, Elliott was engaged to and married Helen Giles, a schoolteacher he met while home on leave in 1946. It took him several proposals of marriage before she finally agreed. The two were happily married until her passing in 2021. Second, at the insistence of Major Guy, Elliott applied for and was accepted to a commissioning program. Initially reluctant, he later remarked, "It was Charlie that forced me to apply for a commission. It was either that, or explain to Lieutenant General Christian F. Schilt, a boyhood hero, why I didn't want to be a Marine Corps officer." General Schilt was, at the time, the commanding general of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and had received the Medal of Honor for actions in Nicaragua in 1928.

Elliott was one of a handful of senior NCOs attending The Basic School with the 22d Special Basic

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, "My Resume."

Class. While there, he, like the others, wore his master sergeant insignia. Unlike the others, he was granted a period of absence to support the testing of an experimental aircraft fire control system he had developed. Being excused from instruction at The Basic School was certainly uncommon but had its advantage, as only Elliott and one other lieutenant were assigned to aviation on graduation in April 1953.

The remainder of the 1950s and early 1960s saw Elliott filling aviation ordnance officer billets at the squadron, group, and wing-level, in Japan, California, Florida, and Virginia. His career at this point also involved a series of firsts and lasts, including serving in the first squadron to receive the North American FJ-2 Fury and in the last aviation engineering squadron (AES-12) aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico. Helen accompanied Elliott around the world, teaching in a variety of schools in local communities.

In June 1965, Elliott deployed to Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam, as the ordnance officer for Marine Airbase Squadron 12, part of MAG 12. The air base was part of expanded American efforts in South Vietnam and a central hub for Marine Corps aviation. At Chu Lai, Elliott oversaw "ordnance support for four tactical jet squadrons flying around-the-clock combat operations."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Chu Lai featured a short airfield for tactical support (SATS) system, which was a metal landing mat placed over the ground with a catapult and arresting system, in effect mimicking a carrier's landing deck. The SATS was installed in the months prior to Elliott's arrival and it was a system he was familiar with from previous tours.<sup>9</sup> From June 1965 until April 1966, Elliott continued the expansion of facilities at Chu Lai, including personally planning and initiating construction of the ammunition dump, and organizing an ordnance trailer repair facility to keep the valuable assets working. For his time in Vietnam, Elliott was awarded the Navy Commendation

Medal with Combat V. He returned to the United States in April 1966 and retired from active duty that June, accomplishing the goal he laid out as a young private in 1943.

His retirement, however, did not end his affinity for and affiliation with Marine Corps aviation. Within a month of retiring, Elliott joined the staff of the Smithsonian Institution. He was hired to help create a Smithsonian military museum. As a member of the National Armed Forces Museum Advisory Board, he located, acquired, and preserved major end items from around the world, ranging from the last U.S. Navy Martin P5M Marlin flying boat to the M65 Atomic Cannon. While the museum never came to fruition, his work and efforts resulted in multiple historic aircraft and armored vehicles being preserved and restored for future generations. With the phasing out of the planned museum, he transitioned to contract management for the Smithsonian.

After 18 years, Elliott left the Smithsonian and became an assistant naval aviation historian in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare) in the mid-1980s (later part of the Naval Historical Center, now the Naval History and Heritage Command). He remarked, "As I had been working with this office in my spare time for a number of years, and I could now be paid for doing what I enjoyed, there was no time lost in accepting the position."<sup>10</sup> Here, his previous hobby of researching, collecting, and preserving early naval aviation stories and artifacts, often from the pilots themselves, came into its own. Elliott contributed to a variety of projects, including the 75th anniversary of naval aviation commemorative series.<sup>11</sup> Even after his retirement, he continued to work as a volunteer at the Naval Historical Center.

It was while with the Navy that he participated in a commemoration of the May 1919 Transatlantic Crossing of Seaplane Division One. When the flying boat he was in hit a buoy in the United Kingdom, El-

<sup>8</sup> Navy Commendation Medal citation, John M. Elliott personal files.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the installation of the development of Chu Lai and the installation of the SATS, see Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), especially pages 39–42. Visitors to the NMMC can see a SATS in the Vietnam gallery.

<sup>10</sup> Elliott, "My Resume."

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, MajGen John P. Condon, *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation*, ed. John M. Elliott (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986).



*Courtesy of the estate of John M. "Jack" Elliott*

Maj Jack Elliott, at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in 2023, with Annette Amerman, one of the many historians he taught, mentored, and inspired. Hanging behind him is his beloved Douglas SBD Dauntless.

liott and the others just walked ashore without going through formal immigration proceedings. Only on his attempted return did he realize the mistake when he was briefly detained as his paperwork was sorted. That was not the only mishap on the trip. On his return to northern Virginia, he was greeted by Helen at the door, who asked him where he had been. It seems, in his excitement to participate, he forgot to mention the trip to his wife.

In 1990, he retired again, ending 47 years of federal service. Helen also retired from the Prince William County school system, and they set out to enjoy retirement to the fullest, engaging in worldwide travel, often to aviation museums and sites, square dancing, and a series of very-loved cats. As with his retirement

from the Marine Corps in 1966, Elliott's retirement from federal civilian service did not end his love of naval and Marine Corps aviation history. In 1985, the Marine Corps Air Ground Museum opened at Brown Field at Marine Corps Base Quantico. Elliott volunteered as a docent there until its closure nearly two decades later. When the NMMC opened in 2006, Elliott was one of its first volunteers. Many of the aircraft on display there, including the SBD Dauntless, were preserved as a direct result of his previous efforts at the Smithsonian. During the next 14 years, Elliott volunteered tens of thousands of hours of his time. He quipped that he was one of the oldest living artifacts at the museum. When he turned 100, the museum hosted his birthday party. He was surrounded by Ma-



Courtesy of the estate of John M. "Jack" Elliott

In a pose familiar to all who worked with him, Maj Jack Elliott is seen here reviewing the manuscript for the revised edition of *Marine Aviation at Quantico, 1918–1941*, at age 101.

rines, friends, historians, and admirers who came to see him honored in what was effectively his second home. At 101, he was the oldest Marine present for the Corps' birthday celebration and thoroughly enjoyed his piece of cake.

Elliott's scholarly legacy includes dozens of published and unpublished books, monographs, and articles, mostly focused on pre-World War II Marine Corps aviation. Among his titles are *Marine Aviation at Quantico, 1918–1941* (privately published), three volumes of *The Official Monogram U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Aircraft Color Guide*, and a history of VMSB-341. His files are currently being accessioned by Marine Corps History Division's Archives Branch.

Although he lacked a college degree, he had many years of practical experience and counted many

historical figures in Marine aviation as dear friends. He was a historian of the highest caliber who took the time to train, mentor, and develop those entering what he rightfully considered his world of naval aviation. Elliott's legacy as an aviation historian remains present in the successor organization, the Naval Heritage and History Command (NHHC), where books bearing his personal bookplate stamp still turn up on the desks of NHHC's historians, librarians, and archivists. His last book, *Marine Aviation at Quantico, 1918–1941*, was completed after his 100th birthday.<sup>12</sup> Even at 101, he continued to contemplate additional books that

<sup>12</sup> A commercial version is available for purchase. Elliott, ever seeking to refine and expand his work, privately published a revised edition at the age of 101.

needed to be written and encouraged other historians in their research and writing, this author included.

His awards included the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V, four Good Conduct Medals, and numerous campaign awards, including the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three bronze stars, the Korean Service Medal with four bronze stars, Philippine Liberation Medal, and the Vietnam Service Medal with two bronze stars. Numerous civilian and writing awards also followed. Jack and Helen Elliott had no children, but their legacies, especially hers in the generations of students she taught, live on.

On the event of his passing, the NMMC remarked, “We bid farewell to a devoted Marine and a living connection to our history. Elliott dedicated his life to service, first in uniform and later as a passionate steward of Marine Corps history.” He was noted for bringing “history to life with a depth and authenticity that only a Marine of his era could provide. He will be missed, but his legacy will live forever.”<sup>13</sup> In his last hours, he summed his life up, quietly whispering, “I had a happy life.” Jack was buried in the Quantico National Cemetery next to Helen on 2 May 2025.

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<sup>13</sup> National Museum of the Marine Corps, “Farewell to a Legend: Major John “Jack” Elliott, USMC (Ret.). It is with deep sadness that we share the passing of Jack Elliott, a devoted Marine, historian, and longtime docent at the National Museum of the Marine Corps,” Facebook, 25 March 2025.