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IN MEMORIAM

Lieutenant General Jefferson D. Howell Jr., USMC

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Lieutenant General Jefferson Davis Howell passed away on 1 July 2025. He served 37 years in the Marine Corps, starting his career as an infantry officer then becoming a fighter pilot. General Howell's most defining attribute was his wise, powerful, and inspiring leadership. He rose through the ranks of Marine Aviation from lieutenant colonel in charge of a fighter squadron to the command of Marine Forces Pacific. General Howell was influential in this time of transition as Marines built a force that proved effectively lethal and efficient in the wars of the twenty-first century.

General Howell was born in 1939 in Victoria, Texas, to parents who were career educators. While attending the University of Texas in Austin, a friend who was a Marine reservist dared him to join the Marine Corps. Howell met an officer selection officer on campus and immediately signed up. His hasty decision was not a bad one. He attended the Platoon Leaders Class (PLC) summer session in 1961, where he fell in love with the Marine Corps and finished school as quickly as possible. After graduation, he was commissioned into the Marines as a second lieutenant.



*Official U.S. Marine Corps photo,
Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division*

LtGen Jefferson D. Howell Jr.

Graduating from The Basic School with a military occupational specialty of infantry officer in 1962, he then served with the 7th, 3d, and 5th Marine Regiments. While he enjoyed working and succeeding

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as an infantry officer, he also had a long-held desire to fly. He was encouraged by helicopter pilots with whom he served during “floats.” He applied for flight school, was selected in 1964, and was “winged” in October 1965. He performed well in flight school and earned his choice of aircraft to fly tactically. He selected the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II. At this time also, he married his life’s love, Janel Crutchfield. At the time of General Howell’s death, they had been married nearly 60 years.

He flew the F-4 and trained in fighter tactics for the next two years with Marine Fighter Attack Squadrons (VMFA) 531 and 323. In 1967, Howell went to war in Vietnam, joining VMFA-542, the Tigers, at Chu Lai, South Vietnam. In this yearlong tour, the Tigers flew principally close air support strikes in support of Marines battling in I Corps, including strikes at the hard-fought, pivotal battle of Khe Sanh. Other missions were flown over the Ho Chi Minh trail, where Marine F-4 crews struck North Vietnamese vehicles moving supplies for the Communist army.

After this combat tour, Howell, to his great delight, was assigned to Kingsville, Texas, first as a flight instructor with the Navy’s advanced Training Squadron (VT) 21. A notable event during this tour was the introduction of the Douglas TA-4J Skyhawks as a new training aircraft, with VT-21 being the first squadron to fly it. He was among the squadron’s first pilots to pick up factory-fresh Skyhawks and fly them to Texas. Howell was then selected for the advanced degree program and earned a master’s degree in economics at the University of Texas in 1971.

He was next assigned to Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron (VMFAT) 101 as an instructor in the Corps’ F-4 replacement air group. There, instructors trained recently designated naval aviators (pilots) and naval flight officers (radar intercept officers) in the tactical operation of the F-4 Phantom. Howell, now a major, revealed a real talent for running squadron aircraft maintenance. Along with other Marines, he initiated an integrated weapons review of its F-4s that positively and significantly increased the number of “up” aircraft. This earned him a reputation for being an outstanding aircraft maintenance officer.

In 1972, General Howell returned to Vietnam, where the North Vietnamese Communists had launched a powerful conventional-style invasion of South Vietnam. Howell had just joined VMFA-115, the Silver Eagles. The Silver Eagles were first based at Da Nang then redeployed to a jungle base in Thailand, the austerity of which caused the Marines there to christen it “the Rose Garden.” That name derived from a period recruiting poster featuring a drill instructor screaming at a recruit and emblazoned with the phrase “We Never Promised You a Rose Garden” (a play on the title of a popular country and western song by Lynn Anderson). Marine squadrons specialized in close air support and employed that tactic with good effect in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Indeed, the ability of Marine fighter crews to hit enemy troops who were in close combat with friendly troops caused forward air controllers to specifically request Marines for these missions. Marines also flew interdiction missions and combat air patrol missions in support of the war-ending Operation Linebacker. General Howell flew 12 barrier combat air patrols in support of Linebacker.

He flew 334 combat missions during his two tours in Southeast Asia and was awarded a Bronze Star for a particularly effective close air support strike. Additionally, he received the Air Medal, two individual and 25 Strike Flight Awards, a Navy Commendation with Combat V, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

General Howell returned to the United States in 1973 and commenced a three-year assignment as an economics instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. This was followed by a year at Marine Corps Command and Staff College in Quantico, Virginia.

In 1977, Howell and his family were back in Hawaii (his favorite duty station outside of Texas) where he served, initially, as the executive officer of VMFA-212, the Lancers. In 1978, he became the Lancers’ commander. This was probably General Howell’s favorite tour of duty of his career. He led the Lancers through personnel issues and aircraft maintenance issues that produced a superior fighter squadron. Gen-



Photo courtesy of Fred H. Allison

LtCol Jefferson B. Howell in 1980 at the change of command ceremony for Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 212.

eral Howell's leadership inspired squadron Marines toward a professional and Marine-like devotion toward mission accomplishment. During his command (1978–80), the Lancers deployed twice to the Western Pacific for six months as part of the Unit Deployment Program (UDP) where they trained toward war readiness. Indeed, war loomed in the form of the Iranian Revolution (1979) and hostage crisis, which lent an urgency to their training. During the UDP, the Lancers, at times, had detachments in as many as four far-flung locations. This reflected the high quality of Lancer officers and enlisted Marines and the confidence he had in them.

During the second UDP, Howell and his radar intercept officer, Gary McCutcheon, cheated catastrophe, if not death, when in a training dogfight with Japanese Mitsubishi F-1 fighters, a mid-air collision occurred. The tip of their F-4's nose and the stabilator

of the opponent's F-1 tail came in contact and small pieces were knocked out of both. Fortunately, it was so mild that neither Howell and McCutcheon, nor the Japanese pilot knew it. Only when the fiberglass nose of the F-4 began to unravel, producing a glob of fiberglass threads blowing in the wind, was it obvious that something bad had occurred. Both aircraft landed safely. The international incident blew over when the Japanese assumed responsibility for the collision.

After completing of his tour as commanding officer of the Lancers, General Howell was awarded the prestigious John Paul Jones Award for Inspirational Leadership by the Navy League. Under his leadership, the Lancers had developed a strong sense of unity and family. Veterans of this period continue to regularly reunite to renew friendships and celebrate the memorable times as a Lancer (even though the squadron has been decommissioned for years).

Howell commanded other units as he rose in rank: Marine Aircraft Group 24 (1984–86) and the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing (1992–94). His final command before retirement was Marine Forces Pacific (1995–98), headquartered at Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii, the Corps' largest operational command.

Howell attended the Air War College (1980–81), served in important staff positions including three tours at Headquarters Marine Corps, Department of Aviation, as a staff member in the Plans and Programs Office (APP), and the Navy's OP-50M (1981–84), then as head of APP (1987–89) and OP-50M and as assistant chief of staff for the Department of Aviation (1991–92). He was the chief of staff for the 1st Marine Brigade (1986–87); assistant chief of staff and senior naval officer at NATO Headquarters, Northern Command; and chief of staff- operations, senior naval officer, Kolsas, Oslo, Norway.

In retirement, General Howell joined Science Applications International Corporation as senior vice president from 1999 to 2002, and he served as the director of NASA's Johnson Space Center from 2002 to 2006. It was a time of great success, with Howell leading the center as it built the International Space

Station and launched four shuttle flights. It was also a time of tragedy with the loss of the *Columbia* shuttle in 2003. Howell led the center through this extremely challenging time, and NASA awarded him its Outstanding Leadership Award in 2003. In 2006, he retired. Not ready to rest easily at his Austin home, he then taught leadership, a subject for which he was well-qualified, as an adjunct professor at the University of Texas.

General Howell flew a total of 4,292 flight hours during his career. More importantly he earned the respect, love, and admiration of Marines with whom he served. Howell had a distinct influence on fellow Marines. His Christian faith was displayed as he sought the best interest of those with whom he served as they strived toward mission success. He loved and respected his Marines; they knew it, and they in turn loved him.

His wife, Janel, passed away on 10 November 2025. Howell is survived by his son, Jefferson Davis Howell III and his wife Beth; his daughter, Melissa Jane Howell Strubbe and her husband Steve; and his grandchildren, Colton, Teegan, and Beckett Howell, and Wolfgang and Johann Strubbe.

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