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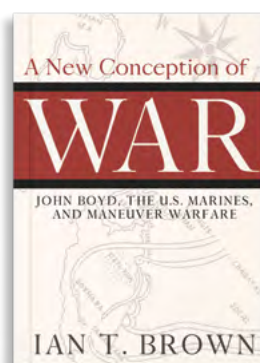
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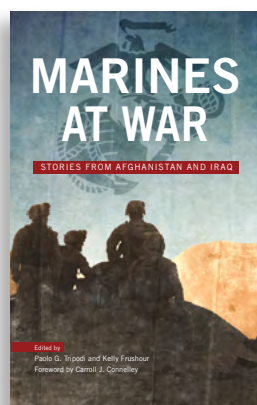
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IN MEMORIAM

General Alfred M. Gray Jr.

USMC (RET), 29TH COMMANDANT
OF THE MARINE CORPS

22 JUNE 1928–20 MARCH 2024

By Charles P. Neimeyer, PhD

In what arguably is Shakespeare's most famous play, *Hamlet*, the bard has young Prince Hamlet lament the passing of his father, the late King of Denmark: "He was a man, take him for all in all, we shall not see his like again."¹ Shakespeare used this moment to point out that the old king was a man just like any other person, whose time on earth is finite. However, this particular person's life had been extraordinary and was one whose *like* (meaning *similarity*) was not going to be replicated by anyone. Indeed, it was one of the few positive comments Shakespeare wrote about any of the characters in the entire play. In a similar fashion, but unlike Hamlet's fictional father, the late General Alfred Mason Gray Jr. was an actual living person, about whom one can also safely say, "We shall not see his like again." And truth be told, General Gray was a force of nature and a highly unique Marine Corps officer. He was energy personified and a virtual whirlwind of activity from the moment he went on active duty down to his dying day at the age



RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service
Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA

Retired CMC, Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr., in his green service uniform alpha, photographed in 1995.

Dr. Charles P. Neimeyer retired as the 27th director of Marine Corps History Division in 2017, having led the division for 11 years. He has authored multiple works about various aspects of the U.S. armed forces, including the Marine Corps. Dr. Neimeyer served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 20 years and has taught at the U.S. Naval Academy, Naval War College, Valley Forge Military Academy and College, and the University of Central Oklahoma. He lives in Stafford, VA.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare-Online.com, accessed 11 May 2024.

of 95. His impact on the development of the modern-day Marine Corps was as significant as that of the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Lieutenant Gen-

eral John A. Lejeune, and—even more remarkable—he was able to pack several lifetimes of experience into a single term of service to his country and his Corps. Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, former director of Marine Corps History, once perfectly summed up Gray's character and noted that even before he became the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, he was "imaginative, iconoclastic, articulate, charismatic, and compassionate. His Marines love him."² Gray was indeed one of a kind.

Although today we can imagine Gray champing at the bit to do so, during World War II, he was too young to join the military. Nevertheless, he always knew he would join the Service sooner or later. As a teenager rapidly coming of age in the 1940s, Gray was keenly aware of America's emerging role as the leader of the free world and one that would likely be confronted by the other remaining post-World War II superpower, the Soviet Union. Gray did, however, come from a long line of people who had served in the U.S. military during times of war. For example, Gray was very proud that his father "Al Sr. had joined the Navy as a seaman [during World War I] and [had] served aboard [the] troop ship *Edgar F. Luckenbach* [ID 4597], which made eight trips to France."³ He had several uncles who also served during the Great War. Thus, it was no surprise that when Communist North Korea began to conduct a campaign of violent aggression against South Korea in 1950, Gray, who previous to the outbreak of the conflict had attended Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, and even dabbled a bit with semiprofessional baseball, joined the Marine Corps as an enlisted man. Coincidentally, Gray was sworn into service by the future 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps and Medal of Honor recipient, Major Louis H. Wilson Jr.⁴ Wilson was the first of many "old breed" senior leaders who would make a great impression on the newly enlisted Marine from Rahway, New Jersey.

Soon finding himself in front of the legendary drill instructors at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina, Gray quickly passed through recruit training and was assigned a military occupational specialty (MOS) of communications—one of the many MOS associations Gray was to make during his storied military career. Gray soon reported to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California where he volunteered to serve in an amphibious reconnaissance platoon. This platoon was unique for its time and typically trained to deploy from submarines and required its members to be exceptionally fit. Gray quickly advanced in rank, and it was not long before he became the platoon's communications sergeant. It was due to his meritorious service with his platoon (and perhaps the fact that he was one of the few enlisted men at the time who already had three years of college education) that Gray was recommended for the enlisted commissioning program. Graduating from Officers Candidate School at Quantico, Virginia, in 1952, Gray was assigned yet another MOS of field artillery officer (as the need for forward observers in the then-stalemated Korean War was urgent). Arriving in Korea in April 1953, Gray was assigned to the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, and later served as a forward observer for the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. After the Korean armistice was signed in July 1953, Gray volunteered to remain in Korea, received a promotion to first lieutenant, and ultimately became an infantry officer with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, serving as a platoon leader, company executive officer, and briefly as an infantry company commander. His first infantry battalion commander was Lieutenant Colonel Michael P. Ryan, a Navy Cross recipient from the Battle of Tarawa. Ryan was impressed with Gray's emphasis on physical fitness and concern for the morale and welfare of his Marines. In a period of more than four years, Gray had risen in rank from private to first lieutenant and had served in three different MOSs.⁵ In fact, it may have been this early exposure to a wide variety of military specialties and experiences that gave Gray his unique understanding of how the entire

² BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret), as quoted in Col Gerald H. Turley, USMCR (Ret), *The Journey of a Warrior: The 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps (1987–1991)*, General Alfred M. Gray (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2010), 47.

³ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 30.

⁴ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 41.

⁵ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 43–45.

Marine Corps came together as a unique Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF).

By early 1955, Gray returned to the United States and thanks to his infantry experience with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, in Korea, he was assigned to the 8th Marine Regiment, 2d Marine Division, at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Then began a series of assignments with the 2d Marine Division that eventually resulted in his command of this unit by the 1980s. However, at that time, command of the division was in the far distant future for Gray. Instead, he was placed in charge of the regiment's 4.2-inch mortar company—a hybrid assignment that combined both of Gray's military specialties of artillery and infantry. One of Gray's 2d Division commanders was the legendary five-time Navy Cross recipient, Major General Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller. When First Lieutenant Gray was asked to interview to potentially become Puller's aide de camp, he made it clear to the general that he really preferred to remain with the 8th Marines—a request that Puller magnanimously granted. This incident is illustrative of another of Gray's traits—that he desired above all things to be a direct leader of Marines and, if given the choice, would always opt to remain in the operating Fleet Marine Forces for as long as possible. Staff assignments were not and never would be Gray's cup of tea.⁶

Nevertheless, and despite Gray's strong preference to remain with the infantry, he received orders to attend the Communications Officers Course at Quantico. Most likely assigned to this school due to his enlisted MOS experience, Gray was told by a senior mentor he knew from Korea, Colonel Gordon H. West, then serving as the Commandant's military secretary, that while he could likely get Gray's orders changed, he felt that "it is best for Marine officers to accept whatever assignment they are given and make the best of it."⁷ As Scott Laidig, one of Gray's biographers noted, the future Commandant followed this sage advice for the rest of his Marine Corps career. And while this did not mean that Gray stopped mak-

ing his preference known for continued service with the Fleet Marine Forces, whenever he found himself assigned to other duties, he was determined to succeed there as well. And it was one of these chance noninfantry assignments that ultimately proved to become a transformational experience for the rapidly developing Marine officer. In fact, in the late 1950s, by pure happenstance, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Randolph McCall Pate, was asked by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, for help with manning Navy security groups (NSGs) then being established in detachments around the world. The role of the NSGs was to "provide cryptologic and special communications capabilities to both the Fleet and the National Security Administration (NSA)."⁸ Since the U.S. Navy was charged with being a global force in readiness, so were its NSGs. With Gray fortuitously due to graduate from the Communications Officers course, he soon found himself at the forefront of this new Navy-Marine Corps effort at improving its signals intelligence capacity. Most likely because Gray was a bachelor (and would remain one until age 52), he drew an overseas assignment to Japan. In fact, throughout his career, Gray relished overseas assignments. Gray performed in his role as a newly minted signals intelligence (SIGINT) officer as superbly as he had as an infantry or artillery officer just a few years before. His pathbreaking performance in the field of tactical signals intelligence had been so noteworthy that in 2008, the NSA inducted him into its hall of honor noting that "his early work and establishment of two units, one assigned to Europe and the other to the Pacific, formed the nucleus of what is known today as the Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion."⁹

In fact, it was Gray's long and close association with the signals intelligence field and the rapidly deteriorating political stability in Southeast Asia that earned him the first of what became many assignments to the region. By 1962, Gray "commanded the first Ma-

⁶ Scott Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine: The Early Years, 1950–1967*, vol. 1 (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute Press, 2012), 43–45.

⁷ Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 57.

⁸ Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 58.

⁹ "General Alfred M. Gray, USMC: 2008 Hall of Honor Inductee," Cryptologic History, Historical Figures, National Security Agency, accessed 11 May 2024.

rine Corps ground SIGINT unit to deploy to South Vietnam. He implemented and refined doctrine and practice for direct support to combat units in the war in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ The field of signals intelligence would be Gray's focus throughout the years leading up to active combat operations in the Republic of Vietnam in 1965. One of the most unbelievable things about all of Gray's work during this time was that he was flying blind. There was no prior doctrine or organizational structure before Gray created his composite radio and signal intelligence units. Gray, however, instinctively recognized that the United States needed to catch up with its potential adversaries (most notably the Russians and Chinese). Consequently, he urged his operators to become fluent in foreign languages and even pioneered the creation of "fly away" detachments for rapid deployment and worldwide service. Transferring from Hawaii in 1961, Gray was ordered to perform one of his few tours of duty (prior to becoming Commandant in 1987) at Headquarters Marine Corps. He also continued to champion the establishment of Marine security battalions—a distinctively Marine counterpart to the NSGs that Gray had been supporting just a few years before. At that time, and much to the ire of many Headquarters assignment officers, Gray found himself briefly in a bit of hot water over his predilection for sending more Marines (officer and enlisted) to foreign language school. But fortunately for Gray, Commandant and Tarawa Medal of Honor recipient General David M. Shoup, who remembered Gray when he had been commanding officer of The Basic School in 1952, approved of the initiative. In sum, it would be a mistake to underestimate the transformative role that Gray played in the early 1960s in getting the signals intelligence field established as a legitimate MOS within the Marine Corps—and just in time to put these newfound skills to the test as America prepared, in 1965, to conduct ground combat operations in South Vietnam. In fact, during the years 1962–64, Gray (now a major) was in and out of Southeast Asia establishing his cryptologic detachments in the region, especially around an area



Photo by PH1 Joe Leo, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
BGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., commanding general, 4th Marine Amphibious Brigade, participating in a briefing aboard the amphibious command ship USS *Mount Whitney* (LCC 20), which served as flagship during allied Exercise Teamwork '76 on 8 September 1976.



Photo by PH1 Joe Leo, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
BGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., commanding general, 4th Marine Amphibious Brigade, on the telephone, 11 September 1976, prior to allied Exercise Teamwork '76.

¹⁰ "General Alfred M. Gray, USMC."

of northwest South Vietnam known as Dong Voi Mep (Tiger Tooth Mountain), where he saw significant and up-close combat with the Viet Cong.¹¹

By late 1965, as larger scale ground combat operations in Vietnam commenced and after years of working in the field of signals intelligence, Gray found himself back with the artillery, where he served as the regimental communications officer and later as operations officer (S-3) for the 12th Marine (artillery) Regiment. The 12th Marines would eventually grow into one of the largest artillery units ever fielded by the Corps in its history. During this time, Gray pioneered the use of recently developed electronic sensors and was intensely interested in determining whether they could be used to interdict the vast North Vietnamese and Viet Cong supply line known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. Just like during his time with his cryptologic units, Gray was a whirlwind of activity with the Marine artillery and was instrumental in organizing and executing a massive ground movement of the entire regiment to the Dong Ha region of South Vietnam, and nearer to the demilitarized zone (DMZ). This was Gray's first tour with a line unit in Vietnam, although prior to 1965 he had more experience on the ground in Vietnam than just about any other officer in the Marine Corps. Gray even flew some missions as an aerial observer for the artillery, and unlike many who served in Vietnam, he unhesitatingly and repeatedly extended his tours of duty there. This decision consequently found him, in the spring of 1967, in the middle of the heavy fighting that took place between Marine Corps units and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong around a region located along the DMZ known as Leatherneck Square. It was here that Gray was to see his most intense combat of the entire war and also the location where he would later be awarded the Silver Star for valor.¹²

During the month of March 1967, Gray requested and received command of the composite artillery base at Gio Linh. This Marine Corps-U.S. Army-Army of the Republic of Vietnam firebase was located toward

the northeast corner of South Vietnam and very close to the DMZ—so close that North Vietnamese gunners regularly plastered the combat base with rockets, heavy artillery, and mortars, inflicting significant casualties on Gray's gun crews. Moreover, Gio Linh was a well-known target for the North Vietnamese. Each night brought new terrors for Gray's troops (although people were amazed that it never seemed to personally affect him) as enemy ordnance rained down all around them. For example, on the night of 27 April 1967 alone, enemy gunners inflicted 80 casualties on Americans at Gio Linh—1 for about every 10 men Gray had on hand at that time. During the Battle of Con Thien (6–8 May 1967), Gray's batteries fired in support of the Marine Combat Base, but this in turn drew even more enemy artillery fire down on Gio Linh. Even after the U.S. Army brought in numbers of huge 175-mm self-propelled guns, this still did not stop the volume of enemy rounds hitting the firebase. Moreover, to mitigate effective U.S. counterbattery fire, Gray noted that the enemy's batteries frequently displaced to multiple locations in a single night. But this gave Gray an idea. If the enemy could maneuver at night, so could he. Consequently, he drew up plans to displace his batteries from their usual (and targeted) locations at Gio Linh, move during the night to alternate firing positions, hammer the enemy with U.S. ordnance, and then return at dawn and resume daytime operations when the enemy fire on Gio Linh (part of the McNamara Line) was usually reduced. Gray, along with his S-3, Captain Patrick Pate, planned this audacious move with meticulous care, although there was a risk that his artillerymen might be caught out in the open. Nevertheless, Gray and Pate's plan worked like a charm and his mobile force fired their rounds at pre-planned North Vietnamese Army (NVA) targets and, for once, his Marines did not have to endure another night of enemy incoming. Gray noted that the impact of just this one night of fooling the enemy caused morale to skyrocket. It also might have planted the seed in Gray's mind about a future concept he was to later champion known as *maneuver warfare*.¹³ However, like

¹¹ Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 197–207.

¹² Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 284, 298–305.

¹³ Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 306–11.

Gray's experience with getting signals intelligence established within the Marine Corps, his time at Gio Linh was also a transformative moment in his development as an outstanding combat leader.

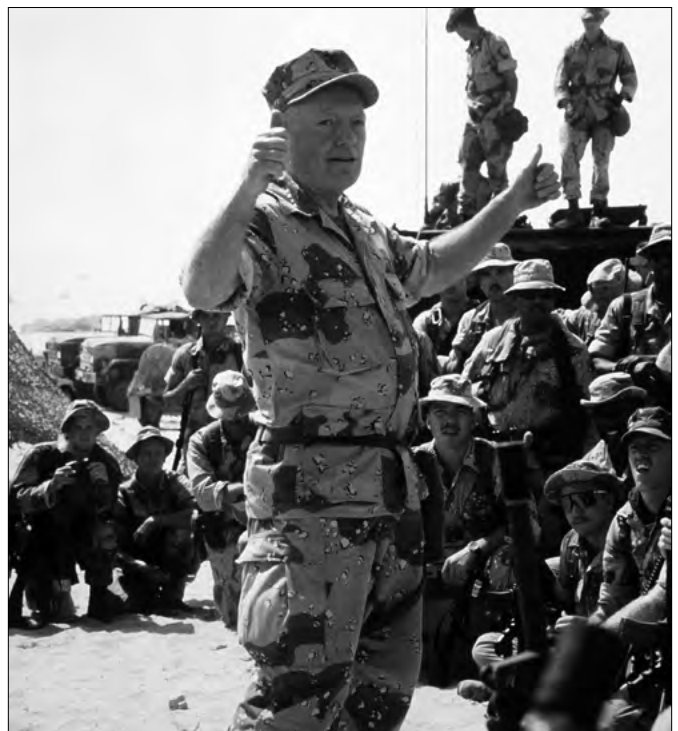
It was also during his time at Gio Linh that Gray would be awarded the Silver Star. On the night of 14 May 1967, during yet another heavy enemy artillery attack on the Gio Linh firebase, Gray was notified that a "three-man listening post patrol [had become] disoriented and inadvertently entered one of the base's [protective] minefields."¹⁴ One of the three Marines had already detonated a mine and was killed, a second seriously wounded, and the third Marine frozen in place by fear and unwilling to move in any direction whatsoever. Gray immediately sprang into action and on his own volition, while enemy incoming was still dropping all over the area, he patiently and carefully worked his way through the minefield to the surviving Marines and brought them out of the field to safety and medical aid. It was an amazing act of heroism.

Incredibly, Gray was to repeat this performance in a second minefield incident about a month and a half later. In much the same circumstances, yet another listening post team had wandered into a minefield whose markers had been blown away by an incoming enemy artillery barrage. Some of these men had been wounded. This time, however, the wounded Marines were much deeper into the field and Gray and a U.S. Army medic were working their way on their bellies toward the stranded listening post team when the NVA decided to launch a full-on artillery and rocket attack against the base. Nevertheless, despite the shrapnel spraying all around, Gray continued to slowly and calmly work his way through the field with the stalwart medic right behind him and brought the stranded team to safety.¹⁵

The amazing thing about Gray's experience in Vietnam was that it did not seem to have an end. After having spent 22 months with the 12th Marines, by July 1967, Gray was hoping to gain an infantry command. However, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, the



RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service
Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
BGen Alfred M. Gray, 1 September 1978.



RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service
Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
BGen Alfred M. Gray, 1 September 1978.

¹⁴ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 58.

¹⁵ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 59; and Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine*, vol. 1, 318–20.

III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) commanding general (and future 25th Commandant of the Marine Corps) had other ideas and wanted Gray to utilize his signals intelligence experience and take command of the 1st Radio Battalion. Cushman knew Gray well and believed he was the perfect choice for this assignment. However, in January 1968, Gray's father passed away and he returned home on emergency leave. Much to his chagrin, the now thoroughly seasoned Vietnam War veteran was informed by Headquarters that it was time to stay home for a while, and Gray was eventually assigned to Marine Corps Base Quantico and was given the opportunity to attend the Command and Staff School (1970–71). If it had not been for the death of his father, Gray may well have continued to extend his Vietnam tours even further. Once graduated, Gray, now a lieutenant colonel, was able to wrangle another assignment to his beloved 2d Marine Division at Camp Lejeune and given command of the 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. It was here that Gray would face a different set of leadership challenges than what he experienced in Vietnam. As the most unpopular war in American history wound down to a close for America in 1973, the detritus of the social unrest evident in American society made itself manifest in the ranks of all the Armed Services, especially that of the Marine Corps. Rampant disciplinary problems, poor conduct, racial issues, and a generalized disaffection for military service by the population at large were new challenges that the Corps needed to confront and overcome. For example, when word was passed on to one of Gray's subordinate companies that they were going on deployment to the Mediterranean, the company commander noted that "this bit of news caused thirty Marines to go into unauthorized leave status by the following morning." The contagion soon spread to other units as well. As was his habit, Gray went after the line leadership (junior officers and noncommissioned officers) and got them to rise to the challenge. If they did not, he soon took steps to get rid of them, and he did not hesitate to relieve two company commanders prior to the battalion's Mediterranean deployment. While it took some time, it was not long before his Marines began to positively respond to

Gray's "take care of the troops" leadership style. He told every Marine he talked to that if they had a problem to come and see him—and he meant it.¹⁶

Gray's successful leadership experience with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, during those difficult days must have been noticed since, while still a lieutenant colonel, he was selected to command the 2d Marine Regiment, normally a colonel's billet. Moreover, he got to stay with the Fleet Marine Forces (always his goal) at Camp Lejeune. During his time in regimental command, Gray constantly focused on improving warfighting skills and worked to deploy the 2d Marines to cold-weather exercises at Camp Drum, New York, since it was becoming apparent in this immediate post-Vietnam era that the 2d Division was likely going to be slated to support NATO's northern flank in Norway with operations taking place above the Arctic Circle. Gray favored regiments being used as maneuver elements. At the time, a regimental command was largely seen as more of an administrative post. But Gray pressed to deploy major elements of his regiment to the desert at Twentynine Palms, California, and successfully led it through an exercise called Alkali Canyon. The more difficult the weather and terrain, the more Gray seemed to like it. He believed that frequent, tough deployments cut down on the disciplinary problems running rampant (at that time) at Camp Lejeune. And to some degree, this proved to be true. Busy Marines seemed to be happy Marines. However, Gray's time in regimental command at Camp Lejeune ended when he was selected to attend the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania (1973–74). Nevertheless, Gray was given a second regiment to command—a rare event then as it is today—the renowned 4th Marines, then homebased at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan. He was also now a colonel.

However, the racial and disciplinary problems experienced by Gray at Camp Lejeune were also evident on Okinawa, Japan, perhaps even more so than the Corps' stateside commands. Furthermore, not only was Gray in command of the 4th Marines, he was also named Camp Hansen commandant with control

¹⁶ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 64–66.

and responsibility for numerous other separate battalions then in residence. It was a major responsibility he took very seriously. Gray recognized the need for Marines to improve themselves both personally and professionally and started a special education program that proved to be very popular with nearly everyone assigned to duty on Okiinawa. It was during this time that the very last days of the Republic of Vietnam were playing out and Gray was called on yet again to return to Vietnam to help with Operation Frequent Wind (the evacuation of South Vietnam). Once again, his performance during this operation that featured numerous ad hoc solutions to complex problems—a Gray specialty—was superb. Following his Okinawa sojourn, Gray returned to the United States as the deputy commander, Training and Education Command at Quantico, and, to the surprise of no one, he was soon selected for brigadier general.¹⁷

Gray's meteoric rise from Marine private to brigadier general had been truly extraordinary. But it was as a general officer that Gray seemed to really hit his stride. Moreover, he continued his habit of seeking and successfully leading line commands. Gray headed back to Camp Lejeune for yet another pivotal command assignment. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, and largely due to the fallout over the Vietnam War, most military planners saw the NATO mission as possibly the only one to which the U.S. would commit. What this meant was that U.S. military forces, for the first time since World War II, might possibly face a true peer competitor in the Soviet Union. At the time, the Red Army was highly mechanized, tank- and artillery-heavy, and able to maneuver across vast swaths of territory with ease. Conversely, the Marine Corps was seen by NATO planners as predominately light infantry and not really able to militarily compete with Soviet mechanized brigades. Thus, Gray's assignment as the 4th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) commander was fortuitous. It was not long before the 4th MAB was being referred to as the "Carolina MAGTF" due to its home base being Camp Lejeune. Gray was also known as a voracious consumer of military his-

tory and other professionally related works. One of his favorite books was Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. He possessed numerous versions of this book in his personal library and had perhaps one of the finest collections in the country. During this same timeframe, again largely due to the fallout over Vietnam, the United States was undergoing a period of military reform and the term *maneuver warfare* was increasingly being bandied about. One reason behind its popularity was the idea that to defeat a numerically superior mechanized opponent, as the Soviet Union surely was, the way to even the odds was to outmaneuver, move faster, and decide quicker than your larger and likely slower-moving (and thinking) opponent. It was around this time that Gray became aware of the ideas of an eccentric U.S. Air Force colonel named John R. Boyd—the originator of the famous OODA loop (observe, orient, decide, act) decision-making model. Out of this theory emerged Boyd's ideas on maneuver warfare. As a retired officer working at the Pentagon, Boyd was formally introduced to the Marine Corps in 1980 thanks to the prescient invitation of Colonel Michael D. Wyly, then director of the Tactics Department at the Amphibious Warfare School (AWS) at Quantico. Wyly asked Boyd to present his findings to his students. Prior to coming to Quantico, Boyd was also renowned for his lengthy and riveting lectures and, as Wyly predicted, the Marine captains of AWS could not get enough of his remarkable ideas or flair in telling them. Due to Gray's intense study of the works of Sun Tzu and his fascination with Boyd's theories, he became the Marines Corps' number one advocate of the maneuver warfare concept.

Even before this 1980 lecture, word of Boyd's theories had already found their way to Camp Lejeune, and they coalesced nicely with what Gray was trying to do with the Carolina MAGTF. Soon Gray was determined to make maneuver warfare the official operational doctrine of the 4th MAB and eventually, when Gray became the commanding general, of the entire 2d Marine Division as well. In fact, in 1978, in a major test of Marine Corps maneuverability across large expanses of European terrain, during NATO Exercises Bold Guard and Northern Wedding, Gray's 4th MAB,

¹⁷ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 88–90.



Photo by SSgt Benda, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA MajGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., new commanding general, 2d Marine Division, at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune receiving the division colors from outgoing commanding general MajGen David M. Twomey (right) on 5 June 1981. BGen Joseph E. Hopkins, assistant commanding general, 2d Marine Division, is in the background.



Photo by Cpl Kummerfeldt, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA MajGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., commanding general, 2d Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, welcoming 3d Battalion, 8th Marines, home to Marine Corps Air Station New River, NC, with a large cake on 8 March 1983. The battalion was part of the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit returning from Lebanon.



Photo by Sgt Potter, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA MajGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., commanding general, 2d Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, being interviewed by a local news team as the 32d Marine Amphibious Unit returned home to Camp Geiger from Lebanon, 25 November 1982.



Photo by PH1 Jeff Hilton, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA LtGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., as commanding officer, Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic (left), talks with GySgt Ronald Kirby of the Marine detachment on board the battleship USS Iowa (BB 61) during the International Naval Review, 4 July 1986.

with his ground combat element built around his former regiment, the 2d Marines (now commanded by his friend Colonel Gerry H. Turley) proved that a Marine expeditionary unit using its armored amphibious vehicles (AAVs) as mechanized transport and supported by a robust air and logistics element would likely be able to outmaneuver and defeat any similarly sized Soviet mechanized brigade in the difficult terrain of northern Europe. As Colonel Turley later wrote, Bold Guard/Northern Wedding was a “notable success” for the Corps in that “for the first time, NATO’s most senior leaders understood and witnessed the valuable role amphibious forces could play on both flanks of the European continent, should Russian divisions attempt to sweep across the steppes of Poland.”¹⁸ They also thought Gray had been amazingly innovative by using his AAVs as armored personnel carriers. The Corps had the firepower and mechanization to keep up with any Soviet brigade. In reality, Bold Guard/Northern Wedding ’78 had been a major operational watershed moment for the entire Marine Corps.

Gray relinquished his command of the Carolina MAGTF and briefly moved to the Development Center at Quantico. He was now seen as the Corps’ leading advocate for mechanization of some of its force structure and was instrumental in the acquisition of the Canadian-built light armored vehicle (LAV), a weapons platform still in use by the Marine Corps. Gray was all over the maneuver warfare concept and due to his proximity to the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, he grew increasingly more aware of the advantages the concept gives to force commanders who know how to implement it. However, it should be noted that the concept was not universally accepted by others in the Corps, and it was going to take a nearly decade-long fight to get it thoroughly imbued within the cultural fabric of the Corps. It was while he was at Quantico that Gray surrounded himself with many other like-minded, forward-thinking Marine officers, many of whom had previously served with Gray as part of his 2d Marines “mafia.” But more than this, Gray engaged a wide variety of officers of

all ranks and encouraged them to debate the maneuver warfare concept in the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette*. It was exactly what John A. Lejeune had done when another controversial mission moment—the advanced base concept—was being discussed in the early 1920s. However, out of this vigorous 1980s debate emerged a roadmap for Gray, now a major general. It was also at this time that Gray married the love of his life, Jan Goss. When Gray was appointed to command the 2d Marine Division with his new wife Jan in tow in 1981, he instinctively knew it was time to implement the concept throughout what he considered was the Corps’ premier combat division and the one most likely to face Soviet mechanized brigades in Europe. Indeed, as soon as he arrived at Camp Lejeune, Gray ordered the appointment of a maneuver warfare board consisting of junior and senior officers to devise a way ahead for the 2d Marine Division to implement the concept. It was an exciting time.

Gray soon became known throughout the division by his informal callsign, “Papa Bear.” As usual, he focused on improving the warfighting ethos of the entire division. During his time in command, Gray became a teacher, mentor, instructor, father confessor, and maneuver warfare advocate, all at the same time. But events of the early 1980s meant the North Cape of Norway had to wait, as Gray’s subordinate Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) commanders were tasked to become part of the Multinational Peacekeeping Force inside volatile Beirut, Lebanon, and situated in defensive positions around the international airport. Starting in 1982 and continuing through 1984, Gray’s 2d Marine Division formed the bulk of the U.S. forces in Lebanon. The situation for the Marines around the airport grew increasingly worse as the long, hot summer of 1983 wore on in civil war-torn Beirut. While the new Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Paul X. Kelley, and General Gray, among other senior military and civilian notables, visited the various MAUs doing tours of duty trying to keep the airport open, it was not long before the Marines took their first casualties since Vietnam. With the Corps slowly being dragged deeper into the conflict largely due to political decisions being made in Washington, the

¹⁸ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 113.

commander of the 24th MAU, Colonel Timothy J. Geraghty, a Vietnam veteran and longtime friend of General Gray, was growing more apprehensive about his situation in and around the airport. This was the opposite of maneuver warfare. This was Gio Linh all over again. Although several Marines had been killed and wounded by enemy artillery and sniper fire, Geraghty was informed that their role was solely a peacekeeping one, and therefore his response to attacks on his Marines was limited by fairly restrictive rules of engagement. He could do little to change their very vulnerable situation. However, at the same time, he was tasked with openly supporting the Christian-led Lebanese national government whenever he could in their rapidly devolving civil war against Muslim militias in and around Beirut. To the Muslim militia leaders it looked very much like the United States had taken sides in the conflict, instead of limiting its forces to peacekeeping. On 23 October 1983, a suicide truck-bomber drove his vehicle past a Marine checkpoint and plowed it directly into Geraghty's battalion landing team headquarters, collapsing the building and ultimately taking the lives of 247 Marines and sailors.¹⁹ It was a calamity of catastrophic proportions.

The tragedy of the Marines in Beirut was an event that would affect Marine Corps leadership for years to come. For General Gray, however, it required his staff to create a massive casualty assistance plan to not only assist with identifying the killed and wounded but to deal with grief-stricken families desperately searching for information about their loved ones. Fortunately, Gray was an exceptionally empathetic person already, especially when it came to things that affected his Marines. He worked tirelessly to "establish a common disaster-control center and prepare for the difficult task of notifying local families on the status of their Marines."²⁰ Gray rounded up every chaplain that he could locate and essentially created a bereavement center for the families. He also "set up a program that ensured he or another senior officer represented the 2d Division at every funeral throughout the nation."

Gray personally "attended more than 140 funerals."²¹ When the battered 24th MAU returned home to North Carolina not long after the bombing, Gray was there to shake the hand of each returning Marine. Gray also hosted the president of the United States, the First Lady, and other senior government officials at a 4 November 1983 memorial service held at Camp Lejeune in a driving rainstorm. However, from this moment forward, Gray was determined to never again allow his Marines to be victimized by terrorists. Gray was instrumental in starting a program for all deploying MAUs called Special Operations Capable (SOC) training that was eventually adopted Corps-wide. While such training was too late for the 24th MAU, it did improve the general awareness of every Marine to the growing threat of worldwide terrorist activity and allowed them to be better prepared to deal with it.²²

By 1987, the office of Commandant of the Marine Corps was due to change and because of a rather remarkable series of coincidental events (most importantly that the new secretary of the Navy James H. Webb, a former Marine infantry officer who received the Navy Cross during Vietnam, strongly championed his case), Gray became the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps on 1 July 1987. While some were concerned that his lack of Headquarters and Joint Staff experience might hamper his effectiveness in the highly politicized world that was and is Washington, DC, Gray hit the ground running. As the eminent Marine Corps historian Allan R. Millett noted about General Gray as Commandant, "He acted like a man possessed, a man who heard a ticking clock (or bomb) behind him and who could not do enough fast enough to suit himself."²³ That Gray was an action-oriented Commandant was a true understatement. Gray's commandancy also came along just as the Ronald W. Reagan-era defense buildup was coming to an end and (as no one predicted) so was the Soviet Union. Many U.S. political leaders saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact as an opportunity for the nation

¹⁹ Benis M. Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982–1984* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1987).

²⁰ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 166.

²¹ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 168.

²² Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 169.

²³ Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1991), 632–33.



Photo by Sgt Kissling, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
CMC Alfred M. Gray Jr. speaks to his troops prior to their departure for the Middle East in support of Operation Desert Shield, 7 December 1990, at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, NC.



Photo by R. F. Ellano, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr., CMC, speaking to troops in the field at Las Flores, Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, CA, 14 July 1987.

to reap a “peace dividend” and thereby cut defense costs and even force structure that was no longer necessary in the new world order. Gray, however, vigorously resisted the proposed cuts and instead saw these immediate post–Cold War years as an opportunity to reinforce professional military education (PME) so that the Corps would be ready for the next war—one that the widely read Gray knew would soon come. Moreover, he continued to emphasize maneuver warfare as being the most flexible and effective warfighting doctrine in an increasingly uncertain world. Gray created and organized the Marine Corps University, binding together within a common framework a wide variety of Marine Corps schools at Quantico. He also did something unique among the Joint Chiefs of Staff and that was to create a Commandant’s Professional Reading List that varied for all ranks from private to general. It was not long before all the other chiefs created reading lists for their own Services. But the most important thing that Gray did in his first years as Commandant was to publish *Warfighting*, Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 (FMFM-1). This book, shockingly concise in scope, nicely captured exactly what Gray thought about warfighting and his own personal philosophy on maneuver warfare. Furthermore, he was adamant that this information literally become part of wider Marine Corps culture and that every officer and senior staff noncommissioned officer know, understand, and apply its concepts. Gray extended recruit training at both Marine Corps recruit depots. He established the School of Infantry as follow-on training for newly minted Marines. Gray strongly believed that all enlisted Marines, regardless of their eventual MOS, should be “capable of effectively serving in a rifle squad.”²⁴ In sum, Gray was constantly working on ways for all his Marines to improve their warrior ethos.

Gray’s doctrinal changes, emphasis on PME, and imbuing every Marine with a warrior outlook came along just in time. In August 1990, after years of causing problems in the Persian Gulf region, Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi Army attacked and occupied the oil-rich

nation of Kuwait. In addition to the brutality with which Hussein and his forces conducted their occupation of Kuwait, his actions also threatened peaceful access to energy for nearly the entire world. Consequently, President George H. W. Bush ordered an immediate military response, and it was not long before nearly two-thirds of the Marine Corps was in northern Saudi Arabia or embarked on board nearby amphibious shipping in preparation for what became Operation Desert Storm—the mission of the allied Coalition forces to ultimately eject Hussein’s occupying forces from all of Kuwait. In fact, Desert Storm would be the “largest single combat operation in Marine Corps history,” involving more than 93,000 Marines in all. As things turned out, while the operation and mission ended rather quickly (only 100 hours of total ground combat operations), it was impossible for the action-oriented Gray to sit still in Washington, DC, for very long. Making frequent trips to the Gulf (some believed too frequent), Gray famously remarked that “we now have four kinds of Marines: those in the Gulf, those going to the Gulf, those who want to go to the Gulf, and those who don’t want to go to the Gulf but are going anyway.”²⁵ Moreover, the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions, along with their associated Marine Aircraft Wings and logistical support, had performed magnificently throughout Desert Shield/Desert Storm and this was in no small measure due to Gray’s emphasis on maneuver warfare throughout the 1980s.

On 30 June 1991, at the traditional Commandant’s change of command ceremony at Marine Barracks, Washington, DC, General Alfred M. Gray retired after nearly 41 years of continuous service in the Marine Corps. In retirement, Gray was frequently consulted by every Commandant who followed in his trace. Moreover, the “impact of his ideas and programs remain vibrant” to this day. Gray also remained dedicated to Marine Corps PME. The Corps named its Quantico-based research center after him while he was still alive—an honor that is rarely accorded to anyone. Gray never spoke about it with anyone, but just as he

²⁴ Al Gray, as quoted in Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 303.

²⁵ Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret), *A Fellowship of Valor: The Battle History of the United States Marines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 372.

did for the wounded returning from Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983, he continued to see “his” wounded Marines returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, in recent years, and he often extended a comforting hand to those who had lost loved ones in the service of their country. It was clear that true retirement never suited Gray. He continued his Marine Corps-related activities by serving on a number of Marine-focused nonprofit organizations and was “an early sponsor in the Wounded Warrior Project [and formerly] Chairman of the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund.” Ever interested in education, Gray sat on a number of university boards and remained connected with Marine Corps University and lectured to more than 450 Marines on his warfighting philosophy as late as 2017.²⁶ He was also a mainstay at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, an Arlington, Virginia-based think tank focused on national security affairs.

In his prize-winning book, *The Right Stuff*, author Thomas Wolfe wrote about the extraordinary careers of those early test pilots who formed the nucleus of NASA’s Project Mercury astronaut program and who regularly risked their lives to prove the doctrinal concept that manned space flight was possible. Wolfe noted that these men had a

righteous quality. There was, instead, a seemingly infinite series of tests. A career in flying was like climbing one of those ancient Babylonian pyramids made up of a dizzy progression of steps and ledges, a ziggurat, a pyramid extraordinarily high and steep; and the idea was to prove at every foot of the way up that pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had the right stuff and could move higher and higher and even—God willing, one day—that you might



Photo by Sgt C. R. Stout, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr., CMC, speaks to the troops at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Japan, 30 September 1987.

be able to join the special few at the very top, that elite who had the capacity to bring tears to men’s eyes, the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself.²⁷

In similar ways for the Marine Corps, General Gray was the epitome of a dynamic and unique Marine officer who possessed the “right stuff” too. He was dedicated to duty, intelligent, thoughtful, generous, cantankerous (when he needed to be), and always had a weather eye on the general welfare of his Marines in both peacetime and war. We shall not see his like again.

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²⁶ Turley, *The Journey of a Warrior*, 461–62.

²⁷ Thomas Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 17–18.



Photo by Cpl Jones, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
CMC Alfred M. Gray Jr. talks to a private during a visit to Parris Island, SC, 26 February 1988.



Photo by Sgt C. R. Stout, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr., CMC, observes a live fire demonstration at Camp Hansen, Japan, 30 September 1987.



Photo by SSgt R. L. Jaggard, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
CMC Alfred M. Gray speaks to a group of Marines during his visit to Camp Hansen, Japan, 11 February 1989.



Photo by Cpl J. D. Gonzales, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
LtGen Alfred M. Gray Jr., commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic, shown entering the Marine field compound accompanied by unidentified officers during Exercise Cold Winter '87 in Norway on 1 March 1987.



Photo by MSgt Don Wetterman, RG 330 Records of the Secretary of Defense, Combined Military Service Digital Photographic Files, 1982–2007, NARA
CMC Alfred M. Gray Jr. greets a Marine during the welcome home celebration in New York honoring the men and women who served in Desert Storm, 10 June 1991.



Photo by Robert A. Kocher, MCU Press
Retired CMC Gen Alfred M. Gray Jr. photographed in his home office during an interview with Marine Corps History Division's then-director, Charles P. Neimeyer, in 2014.