



Gen Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith

# The Legacy of HOLLAND M. SMITH

By Cpl Kyle Daly

*Editor's note: The following article is the first-place winner of the 2018 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners and honorable mention entrants.*

Holland Smith couldn't sleep.

Aboard a naval vessel somewhere in the central Pacific, the 61-year-old Marine again found it difficult to rest. For the second night in a row, the weight of a great task disturbed his slumber.

It was Nov. 20, 1943.

More than 400 miles south of the vessel, Smith's men—his Marines—occupied a sliver of beach on the island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll. Throughout that day, they had suffered heavy casualties in what would become one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific campaign. More than 800 Marines would be killed in action. Others would die of wounds or go missing.

"Casualties were so high that a man could hardly walk on the narrow beach without stepping on a body," a historian later wrote.

Smith wouldn't know the true nature of the devastation until four days later. The Nov. 20 assault—part of Operation Galvanic—involved simultaneous attacks on Japanese positions in the Gilbert Islands. Smith was aboard USS *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), where Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner—the officer in charge of Galvanic's amphibious landings—had insisted he remain. *Pennsylvania* was near the island of Makin, the site of another amphibious assault being conducted by

Army troops. Turner wouldn't let Smith leave until Makin was secure.

Smith, understandably, grew impatient.

Throughout the day, Smith was receiving brief messages from Tarawa. The senior Marine, who was in charge of the operation's landing forces, had received a request to use the last reserve troops for Tarawa. It was not a good sign.

"I had had no sleep the night before, and after committing our last reserve to the battle of Tarawa, sleep again was out of the question," he'd later write in his memoir.

It was now evening, and Smith, an

Marines crowded together in a Higgins boat headed toward Tarawa in November 1943.



USMC

old man with gray hair and a potbelly, was alone in his cabin. During the war, the general, wearing his steel-rimmed glasses, would read his Bible each night. The Alabaman had received the Bible from his mother long ago, when he first joined the Corps.

“It was a great spiritual relaxation: an answer to the day’s problems,” he wrote.

It’s unclear whether Smith received any answer to the major problems he faced on the evening of Nov. 20. What is clear is that Tarawa—an operation he would later call a “mistake”—was an apex in the

old man’s long career. After years spent developing the Marine Corps’ amphibious doctrine, Tarawa was the first time his ideas were put into practice. That practice was carried out by the V Amphibious Corps, made up of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. August 2018 marked the 75th anniversary of V Amphibious Corps’ formation.

In the midst of the bloody battles fought in November 1943, another conflict began to brew. This was a confrontation between Holland Smith and Army commander, Major General Ralph Smith, the man in

charge of the Makin assault. The Army’s slow approach of taking Makin—which held Smith back from being with his Marines on Tarawa—was criticized by the old Marine. A year later, Holland Smith would relieve Ralph Smith of his duties during the Battle of Saipan in the Marianas. This confrontation would, unfortunately, leave an unpleasant mark on the general’s military career. Historians recognize Smith for his contribution to the U.S. military’s success in the Pacific, but the Marine was never able to escape the controversy surrounding the firing of

MG Smith. Holland Smith is called the father of modern U.S. amphibious warfare, but he is perhaps more known as the poster child of inter-service rivalry during the Pacific War.

During the war, much friction existed between the services—the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

U.S. Army GEN Douglas MacArthur even wrote in a letter, “Of all the faulty decisions of the war, perhaps the most unexplainable one was the failure to unify the command in the Pacific, [which] ... resulted in divided effort; the waste, diffusion, and duplication of force; and the consequent extension of the war with added casualties and cost.”

The controversy surrounding Holland Smith’s firing of Ralph Smith was only exacerbated by both the U.S. media and Holland Smith’s 1949 memoir, “Coral and Brass.” In his memoir, Smith criticized other services for their views of Marines.

Historian Sharon Tosi Lacey, author of the book “Pacific Blitzkrieg: World War II in the Central Pacific,” told *Leatherneck* magazine in an email interview that Holland Smith’s book “took aim at everyone who ever crossed him or his beloved Marines.

“His version of events was so twisted that, after reviewing a draft of the book, Marine Commandant Clifton Cates, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, and Secretary of the Navy John Sullivan urged him not to publish it,” Lacey said.

Lacey, chief historian for the U.S. Census Bureau, added that she thinks Smith’s book even impacted the role Marines played in high command positions of future wars.

Another historian, Anne Cipriano Venzon, wrote that Smith “effectively eliminated himself from the ranks of the legendary leaders of World War II” with the way he treated other people. She explains this in her 2003 book “From Whaleboats to Amphibious Warfare: Lt. Gen. Howling Mad Smith and the U.S. Marine Corps.”

“A man may earn a reputation for excellence, even brilliance in battle, but his relationships with people add the polish to that reputation that pushes him onto the level of greatness,” Venzon wrote.

For those who wish to scrape the surface of history, it’s easy to view Smith through the lens of his nickname: “Howlin’ Mad.” It’s a nickname that perfectly fits a man who would fire a fellow general during battle. The name turns Smith into a caricature—a battle-hardened Marine who speaks his mind without any regard for the consequences of his statements.

In some respects, this was Holland “Howlin’ Mad” Smith. He could be the



MG Ralph Smith, USA

caricature that was presented in the press. But like an iceberg, the public only saw what rose up out of the water. According to some historians, much more was hidden beneath the surface.

Harold Goldberg, a history professor at the University of the South in Tennessee and the author of “D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan,” said generals and admirals are multifaceted people, and Holland Smith was no different.

“He’s a difficult person to characterize briefly because he’s a complex [individual],” Goldberg said in an interview with *Leatherneck* magazine.

Goldberg said Smith certainly deserves credit for his contribution to the military’s success in the Pacific, especially as a key innovator of modern amphibious warfare.

Smith, who Goldberg described as an “old school Marine” clearly loved his Marines, he said.

But the friction he created with other services didn’t help his reputation, Goldberg said. Readers of Smith’s memoir “come away with an individual who is not appreciative ... of what the other services are contributing.”

“That’s not how you create a legacy,” he said.

### Joining the Corps

Smith was born on April 22, 1882, in Hatchechubbee, Ala., and grew up in an upper middle-class household. His family’s financially secure life was provided through Smith’s father, John V. Smith. The elder Smith was a successful lawyer who became deeply involved in politics.

Smith’s father would later push his son to follow in his footsteps as a lawyer, but the younger Smith, even at an early age, showed signs of pursuing another calling. These signs included buying books about his heroes—Andrew Jackson and Napoleon—and keeping them hidden from his parents, two people who still felt the sting of America’s Civil War.

Smith attended the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, which later became Auburn University. Pushed by his father, he then secured a degree from the University of Alabama Law School in Tuscaloosa and worked at his father’s law firm following graduation.

It was a career he was forced into, not one he chose willingly.

“Acquaintances always introduced me as John Smith’s son and this made me



LtGen Holland M. Smith tours the area near the Saipan airport in August 1944.



Several LVTs and a Japanese landing craft are seen on the northwestern end of Betio Island, Tarawa, along with coast defense guns in November 1943.

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realize that as long as I practiced law, I would be only John Smith's son," he wrote in his memoir. "Like most young men, I had independent ambitions and they were far removed from the musty labyrinths of law."

After losing what appeared to be an open-and-shut assault case, Smith vowed never to enter the courtroom again. His eyes instead focused on a military career.

Smith had already joined the Army National Guard following college and achieved the rank of first sergeant. Now, he hoped to enter the regular Army.

The young man—only in his early 20s—took a trip to Washington, D.C., to meet with Colonel Ariosto A. Wiley, an Alabama congressman with a military background. His mission was to secure a commission; however, after Smith and the congressman visited the War Department, they both learned there were no current openings for Army officers.

Wiley suggested another option: How about the Marines?

"I know it sounds odd today but I answered, 'What are the Marines?'" Smith wrote in his memoir. "Honestly, I didn't know."

Wiley gave the young man a rundown of the Marine Corps—both its history and purpose—and convinced Smith that he belonged in the Corps.

Smith wrote that the proudest day of

his life was in February 1903 when he successfully passed his examinations to become a Marine Corps officer. This set in motion a life that would take the young man on adventures across the world.

Smith wrote he was given the nickname "Howlin' Mad" while serving in the Philippines, his first duty station. The name was coined after an exhausting march through the jungle with the men under him in full gear. With almost 100 men on the march, Smith set out to break the record of the Marine captain who'd previously commanded his company. Venzon, the author of "From Whaleboats to Amphibious Warfare," wrote that the men marched the 28 miles in 6 hours and 10 minutes, breaking the captain's record by nearly two hours.

Referring to the nickname that was bestowed upon him, Smith wrote matter-of-factly: "I suppose I did use tempestuous language to keep the men moving because I was determined to break the record."

**The Father of Modern Amphibious Warfare**

In the coming years, Smith's career would take him to Nicaragua; Washington, D.C.; California; the Philippines; and China. He started a family when he married Ada Wilkinson of Phoenixville, Pa., a girl he met at a dinner party in Annapolis soon after he joined the Corps. But his

great love, it could be argued, was the Corps.

He led Marines in combat in 1916 when the war minister of the Dominican Republic attempted to seize power.

Within a year, Smith would see another warzone—this time, in France. At the Battle of Belleau Wood during the first world war, Smith served as a liaison officer, charged with keeping communication lines open. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre for his service.

In 1920, he was one of two Marines who received orders to attend the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., an institution that Smith described as a "laboratory of germinating ideas" on war. It was here that Smith presented ideas he had been contemplating for some time.

"The point at issue, which I introduced into all discussions, was the employment of Marines in an amphibious form of warfare," Smith wrote.

His concepts were outside the norm and went against naval doctrine of that time period, according to Smith.

In his memoir, Smith explained his ideas as such: Marines would be used during an amphibious assault with support from both warships and airpower.

One argument against his ideas, Smith wrote, was that warships could not put up an effective fight against powerful coastal artillery.

“The original Navy reaction was that such a proposal was impracticable,” he wrote. “Warships would be required to carry two types of ammunition: high explosive for land bombardment and armor-piercing for action with an enemy fleet. Such a double load would tax magazine capacity.”

Another argument was against Marines themselves—a branch that those in the Navy called a “secondary force,” according to Smith.

Smith argued not only for the use of Marines during an amphibious assault—because they were better trained at land warfare than Sailors—but also that Marines, not naval officers, should command operations once on shore.

“The principle of Marine participation on equal terms had never been recognized before,” Smith wrote. “Most naval officers were incapable of envisioning a large Marine force operation without naval guidance.”

This idea of allowing Marines to run the show following a beach assault had never been proposed, according to Smith.

Passages such as these in his memoir are prime examples of the general’s contentious relationship with other services.

In 1932, years after attending the war college, Smith realized one piece of equipment was essential for Marines to properly secure a beachhead. During an inter-service exercise in Hawaii, Marines attempted to assault a beach riding in regular boats. According to Smith, the

boats were ineffective at crossing reefs, getting through the surf and landing a large number of men at one time.

The solution was provided by a boat manufacturer from New Orleans, Andrew Higgins.

Higgins designed and manufactured crafts that could navigate the shallow waters of the Mississippi River and shorelines of the Gulf Coast. (*Editor’s note: For more on the Higgins boat, see “Gallipoli? Where’s That?” Parts I and II in the October and November 2016 issues.*) They could also run up onto a shoreline and back off easily. After the military saw potential in amphibious assaults, a ramp was added to the boat and the rest was history.

Smith said the boat “did more to help win the war in the Pacific than any other single piece of equipment.”

With it, Smith’s full vision of a Marine-led amphibious assault could be realized.

### Battle of Saipan

In a letter he wrote to his family back home in Nebraska, Army Tech Sergeant Harold Moss described the horror he witnessed on the beaches of Saipan in the summer of 1944. Moss, whose letters were published online years later by his daughter, wrote that he wasn’t part of the first wave of troops that hit the beach. But when he did go ashore, the sight was disturbing.

“The scenes of battle were everywhere, the effect of the naval shells, the [Japanese]

own mortar fire on our troops and many bodies lying around, in all positions and all stages of decomposition,” Moss wrote. “Sights that you hope you will never see again. Along the beach, in and out of the water, were wrecked tanks, alligator debris and a thousand things necessary to the campaign. The smell was terrible and the dust from tanks and vehicles was so thick you could hardly breathe.”

So began the weeks-long effort to secure the island of Saipan in the Marianas. Saipan was one of three islands designated for capture as part of Operation Forager—the two other being Guam and Tinian. Smith was to be in charge of all troops—both Marines and Army—during the ground phase of the battle.

It had been seven months since Tarawa. The Gilbert Islands were about 2,000 miles southeast of their position. This joint force of Marines, soldiers and Sailors were fighting in new waters.

It was during this battle that another historic fight—often dubbed “Smith versus Smith”—took place.

Goldberg, the author of “D-Day in the Pacific: The Battle of Saipan,” told *Leatherneck* magazine that he believes there are several facets to the confrontation that ultimately led to Howlin’ Mad dismissing Ralph Smith from his command. One way Goldberg would characterize the conflict is a contrast between someone who attempted to control the situation by sticking to his battle script and timetable versus someone who wanted to study the situation by walking the terrain with his troops and then revise the plan where necessary.

“Holland Smith envisioned a three-day battle. When the battle did not play out the way he had imagined, he lost his temper,” Goldberg said. The battle ended up lasting three weeks.

“He looked for someone to blame ... he wasn’t going to blame his own plan so he placed the blame on the Army general. The real problem was that the Japanese refused to surrender according to Holland Smith’s schedule.”

Goldberg added, “Let’s remember that no battle in the Pacific was easy or went according to plan. Perhaps Holland Smith should have read [19th-century military theorists Carl Von] Clausewitz: ‘Everything in war is very simple. But the simplest thing is difficult.’ ”

In the weeks leading up to the battle, soldiers and Marines trained in Hawaii. Though, as noted in Goldberg’s book, the two services did not train together.

“During the ensuing battle it became clear that Marines and soldiers, employing different battle tactics, had not carefully coordinated their views of how the battle



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**LtGen Holland M. Smith, left, and ADM Raymond A. Spruance discuss the tactical situation during a lunch meeting at division headquarters on Saipan, Mariana Islands in July 1944.**



**LtGen Holland M. Smith, left, aboard USS Rocky Mount (AGC-3) at H-hour on D-day off Saipan, June 15, 1944.**

might proceed,” Goldberg wrote in his book. “It was evident that the Marines and the Army approached the coming events from different perspectives, and this discrepancy led to an eventual clash between the service commanders during the battle.”

The invasion of the 12-mile-long island began on June 15, 1944. By the second day, with casualties already high and Marine reserves already deployed, Holland

Smith called on the Army’s 27th Division, commanded by Major General Ralph Smith, to close a gap between two Marine divisions as part of an attack on an airfield.

After securing the airfield, the Divisions pushed to the northeast to capture Mount Tapotchau, a 1,555-foot peak on the center of the island. The attack began June 22. Venzon wrote that problems began when units within the 27th “failed to move out on time,” with some departing “between

55 minutes and two hours late.” They were further slowed down by rough terrain, which was made up of wooded hills and caves that the Japanese took full advantage of, according to Venzon.

Goldberg wrote that the slow progress of the Army division created a U-shape in the lines.

In his memoir, Smith wrote that he was reluctant to use the 27th after its past performances, including the fight at Makin in the Gilbert Islands.

When the 27th continued to make slow gains, Holland Smith decided to relieve the Army commander, replacing him with Major General Sanderford Jarman.

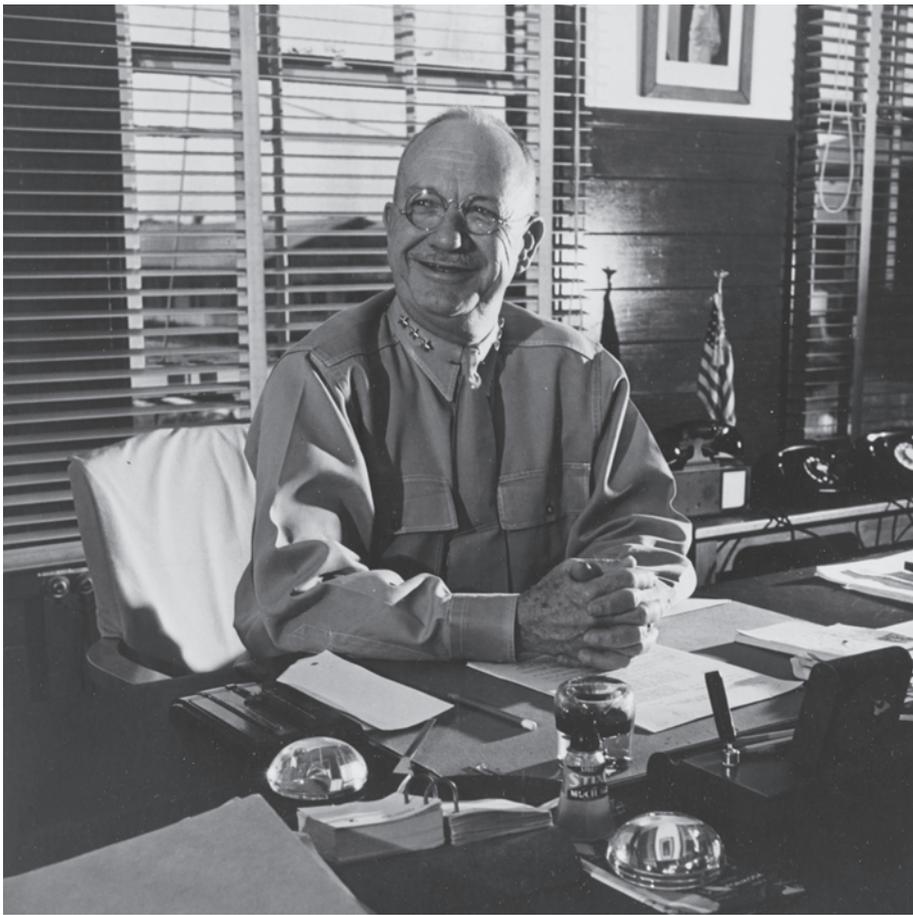
As Holland Smith describes in his memoir, when Admiral Raymond Spruance, overall commander of the operation, asked the Marine what should be done about the sagging lines, Howlin’ Mad replied, “Ralph Smith has shown that he lacks aggressive spirit, and his division is slowing down our advance. He should be relieved.”

Holland Smith also claimed that the 27th’s “failure to perform endangered American lives,” according to Venzon.

Goldberg, in his book, offered two



**Marines from the first wave hug the beach on Saipan and prepare to move inland on D-day, June 15, 1944. Note the burning LVT in the background.**



**LtGen Smith is photographed in a genial mood at his desk on April 30, 1945.**

opposing views from different historians on the firing of Ralph Smith. One historian, Goldberg wrote, judged the men of the 27th harshly, saying “there was some justification for Holland Smith’s lack of confidence in the leadership of the regiment” as “the attack of the infantry companies was frequently uncoordinated; units repeatedly withdrew from advanced positions to their previous nights’ bivouacs; they repeatedly yielded ground they had gained.” Another person, the official historian of the 27th Division who was among the troops on Saipan, defended the division by pointing to the rough terrain and the number of enemy, saying, “these figures clearly refute the charge made against the battalion by one news magazine that it had failed dismally against a ‘handful’ of Japanese.”

An all-Army board of inquiry that investigated the matter would agree that the Marine general had the authority to relieve Ralph Smith, but that Holland Smith was not fully informed about conditions on the ground and that the firing “was not justified by the facts.”

Lacey, author of “Pacific Blitzkrieg” told *Leatherneck* in an email that she thinks Howlin’ Mad’s dislike of Ralph Smith and the 27th “colored his decision and made him view everything related to the 27th with a negative lens.”

Holland Smith had held this view of the 27th since Operation Galvanic in the Gilbert Islands.

“I think he was just looking for an opportunity to fire Ralph Smith, and Ralph Smith gave him one,” she said. “I’m not sure it was a firing offense, given the situation on the ground, but as the ground forces commander, that was Holland Smith’s prerogative and decision to make.”

Lacey also added that, in her opinion, had Ralph Smith stood up to Holland, the Marine “would have backed down and maybe even given him some (grudging) respect.”

“Holland was a bit of a bully when it came to his Marines and I don’t think he respected Ralph in part for not being the same about his soldiers,” Lacey said. “In Holland’s defense though, Ralph probably should have replaced his commanders before leaving Hawaii.”

According to Venzon, MajGen Jarman, the Army commander who replaced Ralph Smith, found problems with the unit itself. Jarman ended up relieving one of its commanders, Colonel Russell G. Ayers.

Whatever the truth may be about the Army’s performance, Holland Smith had Ralph Smith removed from the battlefield.

Venzon wrote that Smith knew his decision would “have grave and far-reaching consequences,” but he did it because

“he believed it was the right thing to do.”

News of the firing made it into the media with Holland Smith being quoted in a September *Time* magazine article explaining that “circumstances forced [him]” to relieve MG Ralph Smith.

According to Ralph Smith’s obituary in *The Washington Post* in 1998, each side of the issue was supported by a large media empire, with the Hearst newspapers backing the Army and criticizing the Marine Corps’ high-casualty tactics and *Time* backing the Navy and Marines.

Lacey said that after the Army board of inquiry released its findings, relations were so strained between the services that those in high command “basically ordered a ‘cease fire’ to their respective services.”

“However, the battle raged on for a few months via the press (the Hearst publications favored the Army; journalist Robert Sherrod who wrote for *Time* and *Life* favored the Marines), but eventually the furor died down as events in Europe and the Pacific became more important,” Lacey said.

Ralph Smith, she said, never spoke publicly of the issue.

After Operation Forager, Holland Smith became commander of the new Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, effectively ending his command of V Amphibious Corps. He would go on to command expeditionary troops at Iwo Jima, the last battlefield he would ever see.

Smith retired from the military in May 1946 at age 64 and lived in southern California for 20 years until his death in 1967.

Lacey said in an email that since the Pacific theater of WW II was essentially the birthplace of joint modern operations, how the services handle issues like the Smith-versus-Smith episode “was critical to building trust.”

“I think that had Holland Smith not published “Coral and Brass” right before war broke out in Korea, we would have seen Marines serving at higher levels of command much earlier that Iraq and Afghanistan,” she said. “It serves as a reminder of the importance of understanding your sister services’ cultures, that personalities are important in matters of command, and that the press has inordinate power in shaping and promoting a preferred narrative.”

*Author’s bio: Cpl Daly is a Southern California native who joined the Marine Corps after working as an editor and reporter for various publications, including the Pacific Daily News in Guam. He is currently stationed in Okinawa, Japan.*

