

1996

The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880-1898

J. Robert Moskin

Jack Shulimson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Moskin, J. Robert and Shulimson, Jack (1996) "The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880-1898," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 2 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss2/30>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Lambert, G.A.H. Gordon, and Correlli Barnett. This book is recommended as yet another beneficial addition to the literature.

EUGENE L. RASOR
Emory and Henry College
Emory, Virginia

Shulimson, Jack. *The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880-1898*.

Lawrence, Kans.: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1993. 274pp. \$35

A major turning point in U.S. Marine Corps history is dissected by Jack Shulimson, a veteran civilian historian at the Marine Corps Historical Center. In this study, which Shulimson originally prepared as a private piece of scholarship, he describes the Marine Corps' switch from supplying armed guards on wooden ships to projecting naval power from steel ships onto foreign shores.

However, to title the work a "search for a mission" is a bit off the mark. As Shulimson shows, the Marine leaders of the day cared most about preserving their status and pushing along their snail-like promotions. They feared, with good reason, that the Corps would be swallowed up by the Army or simply abolished. Such outside events as advancing naval technology and the United States becoming an imperial power forced the Corps to break out of its dead-end status and take the road leading to Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Inchon.

The author peers through his microscope at a small piece of historical time. After the Civil War, the newly in-

dustrialized and prosperous nation began expanding its interests abroad. The U.S. quickly needed a modern navy centered on armored battleships that could control the seas, and eventually an expeditionary and amphibious role for its Marines.

In 1880 the Corps had only two thousand men and seventy-five officers, but by 1899 it was authorized six thousand enlisted men and 201 line officers. In those two decades it also stretched to improve its quality, started the School of Application, welcomed graduates from the Naval Academy, began promoting officers by examination, and sent a few officers to the Naval War College, which had been established in 1884 and was becoming "the intellectual core of the New Navy."

It was around the turn of the century that professional standards became slowly but firmly rooted in the Corps' culture. Shulimson traces how the basis of the appointment of officers changed from political influence to "professionalism," even though the change-over would never be absolute. He does not neglect the minuscule for the important, however, detailing the background of each of the fifty-two Annapolis graduates who became Marine officers between 1880 and 1898. Also, his text is backed up by forty-four pages of source notes that give it a fine scholarly patina.

More importantly, Shulimson celebrates the Corps' arrival at their future role: the Spanish-American War provided the need, and new colonial possessions encouraged the United States to look outward. In 1900 the Navy General Board assigned the

150 Naval War College Review

Marine Corps the advanced-base mission—to defend and eventually seize advanced bases for the coal-driven, steel Navy.

Before that, certain junior naval officers, and some senior ones, wanted the Marines thrown off their new battleships. The officers regarded these “policemen” aboard their ship as an insult, a relic of the press gangs of the old sailing navy and an impediment to enlisting better sailors.

Shulimson writes, “While some naval progressives worked behind the scenes to remove Marine guard detachments from the new steel Navy, others in the Naval War College explored avenues of naval strategy that would obviously require landing forces, in all probability Marine landing forces.” Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan believed that the Marine Corps would be the “backbone of any force landing on the enemy’s coast.”

During the Spanish-American War, the Marines’ landings at Guantanamo and Cavite in 1898 heralded their new purpose, “to seize a base for the fleet.” However, the Navy could not take the cities of Santiago or Manila, because it had no force to hold them; the Army was not ready, it had its own agenda. The Navy suddenly realized it had to have men who could establish advanced bases and project its power ashore. Without them, it would be tied to the U.S. mainland; with them, it could leap across the oceans, and the United States could become a world power.

Nothing is ever neat and clean in history. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt continued to remove Marines from naval ships anyway. He too

wanted them to defend naval bases on foreign shores. However, the Marines were not ready for so swift a change-over. They struggled against and eventually defeated Roosevelt’s order.

But Roosevelt was right about the future. Six years later, the Corps had in place the 1st Advanced Base Brigade, and Colonel John Lejeune landed more Marines at Vera Cruz than had been in the entire Corps at the beginning of Shulimson’s story. And then on to Belleau Wood.

J. ROBERT MOSKIN
author of
The U.S. Marine Corps Story

Maihafer, Harry J. *Brave Decisions: Moral Courage from the Revolutionary War to Desert Storm*. New York: Brassey’s, 1995. 224pp. \$23.95

As promised by his provocative title, Harry Maihafer carries us through a series of fifteen vignettes in which an American leader faced a moral crossroads and chose the “harder right” rather than a safer path.

Most of the author’s selections of moral supermen are among our nation’s storied leaders—Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, John “Black Jack” Pershing, Douglas MacArthur, and Norman Schwarzkopf—which, if anything, is one of the book’s flaws. Of course, it is easier to sell books expanding upon the great captains rather than such relatively unknown moral leaders of our country as George Thomas of the Civil War, Earnest Harmon of World War II, or