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Once a Legend: "Red Mike" Edson of the Marine Raiders

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Helen Clark, is now the leader of the Opposition in the New Zealand Parliament.

Upon reading this excellent history, I was struck by how the New Zealand body politic has changed so fundamentally its stance on security policy in such a short period of time. Until the definitive history is written on this radical change in national attitudes, we can be content with this splendid work to appreciate how far New Zealand policy has strayed—or, depending upon one's perspective, evolved—from its historical roots.

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Hoffman, Jon T. *Once a Legend: "Red Mike" Edson of the Marine Raiders.* Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1994. 434pp. $24.95

Merritt Austin Edson was a little guy, and like a lot of Marines he was wiry—five foot seven and 140 pounds when in fighting trim. In his foreword General Walter Boomer, the Marine leader in Desert Storm, writes that Edson "didn't fit the Hollywood image of a Marine." Jon T. Hoffman says that only Edson's eyes exposed his willingness to die and to have those who fought with him die. One combat correspondent called his eyes "as purposeful as a killer's and as unemotional as a shark's."

Edson became one of the most versatile and respected Marines of his time: he was among the best combat leaders and most effective staff officers, an expert tactician, and also an artilleryman, a naval aviator, and a preeminent competitive marksman. Hoffman tells all this with candor (though he is a bit prudish about Edson's rambling personal life). This thorough and readable biography covers not only Edson's career but also the evolution of the Marine Corps over thirty crucial years; it won the 1994 Marine Corps Historical Foundation's Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Award.

Edson won his first Navy Cross in 1928 commanding the Coco River patrols in Nicaragua. For months, he and a few Marines chased Augusto Sandino, the nationalist guerrilla whom the Marines insisted on calling a bandit. They never did catch him, but Captain Edson's jungle patrols stretched every man's strength and endurance; they advanced a notch the "science" of fighting "small wars." Edson rewrote the manual for counter-guerrilla operations in the 1930s, and he could well have contributed to the Marine's work in Vietnam had he lived that long.

Six months before the United States entered World War II, Lieutenant Colonel Edson was selected to command 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and to convert it into that radical innovation, the 1st Raider Battalion. Eight months after Pearl Harbor, Colonel Edson led that battalion in the amphibious assault on Tulagi, across Ironbottom Sound from Guadalcanal. It was there that he won his second Navy Cross. However, he became a legend when he received the Medal of Honor for his defense of the vital ridge behind Henderson Field in an epic night of fighting. In that battle, Hoffman says, Edson "was the catalyst of victory"; for every move the Japanese attempted, he had the right answer, and he "never took cover."

There were bullet holes through his shirt. The hill became known as "Edson's Ridge."

Edson was helping forge the controversial Marine faith that bulling ahead for quick victory minimizes casualties. He repeatedly told Marines hesitant to move forward, "You've got to take a chance on getting hurt." One of the most daring combat leaders of World War II, he never received a Purple Heart.

At Tarawa, Edson, now the 2nd Marine Division's chief of staff, took command of the growing forces ashore for twenty hours, after Colonel David M. Shoup had endured the first thirty-six hours at his command post on Red Beach. Before the landing, Edson had urged seizing other islands of the atoll as artillery bases. He was turned down, and the Marines took unprecedented casualties in the surf and on the beaches. The 2nd Marine Division next assaulted Saipan and Tinian to create airfields from which the Army Air Forces could bombard Japan directly. Now a brigadier general, Edson was named chief of staff, Fleet Marine Force Pacific, the Corps' theater headquarters for the final campaigns of the war. There he took a jealous interest in protecting the Corps from encroachments by the Navy, especially after Admiral Chester W. Nimitz supported the refusal by the Army-led force on Okinawa to land Marines behind the Japanese lines. But Edson would be denied his two greatest ambitions: to command a Marine division in combat and to wear the two stars of a major general.

At the beginning of 1946 he was back in Washington, fighting the Navy and Marine Corps battle against the unification of the military services. He was the senior Marine on the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations and "the primary point of contact between the Marine Corps and the Navy." Edson and the antiunification "termites" won their share of battles, in good part because of Red Mike's personal courage. He went far beyond what Nimitz (now the CNO) or General Alexander A. Vandegrift, the Commandant, were willing to risk to make the case to Congress, the press, and the public. His most persistent argument was that a centralized military command—German style—would end up with an undemocratic nation—German style.

Hoffman writes clearly about that complex and bitter political battle over roles and missions. When President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947, General Edson felt his official part was finished. Six days later, he retired. But to this day, the battle of roles and missions continues.

Edson missed the Korean War and became the first director of the Vermont state police and then the executive director of the National Rifle Association. In August 1955, when he was 58, he turned on the ignition of his car in his garage—and killed himself. But as Jon Hoffman makes clear, he was one of the bravest and the best of the few good men.

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Author of
The U.S. Marine Corps Story

Ambrose, Stephen E. *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World*