MARINES OVER THE WESTERN FRONT.
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The 1st Marine Aviation Force overcame interservice and logisticobstacles to fly combat missions during World War I. In the process, it established a tradition of excellence for future Leatherneck aviators.

In January 1917, four months before the United States entered World War I, Marine aviation consisted of just five officers and 18 enlisted men. Most were in a detachment assigned to the Advanced Base Force at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. On 26 February, First Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham received orders at the yard to form a Marine aviation company.[1]

Atlanta-born Cunningham had served in a volunteer infantry regiment during the Spanish-American War. He returned from Cuba, was mustered out, and for the next ten years sold real estate. In 1909, at age 27, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. After two years of routine service ashore and afloat, he was promoted to first lieutenant and assigned to the Advanced Base Force. Intrigued by the possibilities of flight, he rented, at $25 a month, a pusher-type "aeroplane." Cunningham thrashed about on an open field at the navy yard but could not get "Noisy Nan," as he called the mechanical dodo bird, off the ground.

On 22 May 1912, he reported to the U.S. Naval Aviation Camp at Annapolis. In August he received orders to the Burgess Company at Marblehead, Massachusetts, which had airplanes and civilian instructors for flight training. After two hours and 40 minutes of instruction, Cunningham took off in a hydroplane, circled the bay several times, and came down in a safe water landing, becoming the Marine Corps' first aviator. (Marines celebrate the day he reported to the Naval Aviation Camp as the birthday of Marine Corps aviation.) Between October 1912 and July 1913, Cunningham managed to make almost 400 flights in the first Wright aircraft purchased by the Navy, the B-1 seaplane, or "Bat Boat."

The fliers at the Navy's Annapolis camp, including Cunningham, went to the annual fleet maneuvers in the Caribbean in January 1913. More than 150 Navy and Marine Corps officers, including Lieutenant Colonel John A. Lejeune, were taken aloft in orientation flights from Guantanamo, Cuba.[2]

The aviation detachment with the Advanced Base Force, however, missed its first chance at expeditionary duty during the Veracruz, Mexico, landing in April 1914 because

it had not yet discovered a way to get its two aircraft, both seaplanes, to the objective area in flying condition.

At San Diego in 1916, Cunningham, for the first time, flew in a cockpit instead of on an open-air seat in front of the wings of a pusher. Off Pensacola on 8 November of the same year, he was hurled aloft in a Curtiss AB-2 seaplane by a catapult on the stern of the armored cruiser North Carolina (ACR-12), possibly the first such catapult shot. The plane flipped over and plunged into the Cult of Mexico, and Cunningham was fished out of the water with an injured back that troubled him for the rest of his life.

By the summer of 1917 and with America at war, Cunningham found himself straddling two missions. Originally, the Philadelphia Advanced Base Force's Aviation Company, redesignated as the Marine Aeronautic Company, was to train in seaplanes for antisubmarine patrols. But now Major General Commandant George Baenett had secured approval for the creation of a Marine squadron to provide reconnaissance and artillery spotting for the Marine brigade that was about to be organized in France. By 14 October, the loosely knit assemblage had split into the two planned aviation units. The 1st Aeronautic Company would continue to train in seaplanes for the antisubmarine missions (it was eventually transferred to the Azores). The 1st Aviation Squadron, meanwhile, would prepare to support the brigade in France.

Under an agreement reached between Captain Cunningham and Colonel Henry H. "Hap" Arnold of the Army Signal Corps, the 1st Aviation Squadron was to train at Hazlehurst (later known as Roosevelt) Field at Mineola, Long Island, New York. Then it was to move to the Army's advanced school of flying at Houston, Texas. Cunningham told Barnett that after this, "The Squadron will â€¦ he ready for service in France and the Army will completely equip it with the same technical equipment furnished their squadrons."[1]

Captain Cunningham himself left for France in November to pin down a definite mission for the Marine Corps squadron intended for Europe. Once there, he visited French and British air bases and flight schools and managed to fly on several missions over the German lines. Relations with the U.S. Army, however, were less cordial. Cunningham tried to extract a promise that the Marine squadron would he attached to the Marine brigade, hut the Army aviation authorities "stated candidly that if the [Marine] squadron got to France it would he used to furnish personnel to run one of their training fields, but that this was as near the front as it would ever get."[4]

Cunningham turned to the Navy. During conferences with U.S. Navy officers at Dunkirk, France, and with officers of the British destroyer patrol, he perceived a need for Jay bombers to fly patrols over Belgium's English Channel coast and to attack German submarine pens at Zeebrugge, Bruges, and Ostend, Belgium. On his return to the United States, Cunningham presented to the General Board of the Navy his plan for a land-based force of Navy and Marine planes for use against the U-boat bases. The Board approved the formation of a Northern Bombing Group to include a Marine element. While the Navy aviators would fly Italian-built Caproni bombers, the Marines

were to fly De Havilland DH-4 bombers. On 11 March 1918, Cunningham received orders to organize and take command of the 1st Marine Aviation Force, consisting of four squadrons, to be formed at Miami, Florida.

In short order, a British officer, sent to Miami to appraise the squadrons, cheerfully announced the Marine units fit for combat. At least one Leatherneck flier disagreed. Said First Lieutenant Ford Rogers: "We had flown nothing but Jennies [Curtiss JNs]. We got one DH-4 and nil of us got one flightâ€¦"[5]

Captain Cunningham and his first three squadrons landed at Brest on 30 July 1918, expecting that their aircraft and equipment would be waiting when they arrived. They were not, and no one at Brest seemed to care much. No arrangements had been made to move the squadrons to their intended airfield near Calais, 400 miles away, so Cunningham persuaded the French to give him a train for the two-day trip.

On arriving at Calais, his Marines were temporarily billeted in a British rest camp while work began on the airfield sites. Squadrons A and B were to go to Oye, a town between Calais and Dunkirk. Squadron C was to go to La Fresne, 7.5 miles southwest of Calais. Both fields were behind the British sector of the Western Front. The selected sites were essentially flat fields planted in sugar beets, which yielded to Marines with spades. The British provided portable canvas-and-wood hangars.

Before leaving for France, Cunningham had arranged for the delivery from the Army of 72 two-seater DH-4s. These bombers arrived in crates at the Navy supply base in southwestern France at the end of July, but the first aircraft did not reach Cunningham until 7 September. Even so, the planes did not arrive in proper numbers; most had erroneously been shipped to England. Cunningham, however, struck a bargain with the British, who had an excess number of DH-9A airframes but no engines. Conversely, the Americans had a surplus of Liberty engines but few airframes to house them. Cunningham's deal was that for every three Liberty engines delivered to the British, they would deliver to the Marines one completely equipped DH9A bomber.[6]

By now, the mission of the 1st Marine Aviation Force had changed. The Germans had abandoned their submarine bases along and near the Channel coast. The Marines' new mission would be the general support of the British and Belgian â€" and sometimes the French â€" armies.

Knowing the Royal Air Force had more planes than pilots, Cunningham arranged for his idle aviators to fly with RAF Squadrons 217 and 218, which were equipped with both DH-4s and DH-9s. The Marine pilots rotated through the British squadrons so that each would go on at least three raids. Karl Day, a future lieutenant general, remembered that in the "V" flight formations the newcomer was always the last plane on the right: "If shot down it didn't disturb the formation."[7]

On 28 September, First Lieutenant Everett S. Brewer and Gunnery Sergeant Harry B.

Wersheiner, flying with Squadron 218, got the Marines' first aerial kill, during a dogfight over Courtemarke, Belgium. Both Marines were badly wounded in the fracas. On 2 and 3 October, Marines flying with Squadron 218 carried out the Corps' first aerial resupply mission. Two planes flew through heavy German fire to deliver 2,600 pounds of food and stores to an isolated French regiment near Stadenburg.

Squadron D arrived at La Fresne on 5 October with 42 officers and 183 enlisted men, bringing the strength of the 1st Marine Aviation Force up to 149 officers and 842 men. To conform to the Northern Bombing Group's nomenclature, Squadrons A, B, C, and D became Squadrons 7, 8, 9, and 10.

On 8 October, Squadron 9 took off on a raid. Second Lieutenant Ralph Talbot had "the fastest ship in the squadron," and was given the job of protecting the rear of the flight as it returned from the bombing. The next day, he wrote to his fiancÃ©e:

This week has been one of intense activity, especially for me for I got my first Hun yesterday. We were ten miles inside the lines when four Fokker triplanes and five Fokker biplanes attacked us. One Hun climbed up and put a bullet into the gas tank six inches over my head, and another bullet cut the shoulder of my uniform but never touched me, and he put four into my tail before I could swing around. Then a second later my own tracers entered his machine and he began to tremble and fell over on his back and down in a spin. We had six machines in our flight and one of the boys was knocked off. The fight took place at 14,000 feet.[8]

Talbot played a part in another, bigger raid two days later. Captain Robert S. Lytle, commanding officer of Squadron 9, took out five DH-4s and three DH-9As to strike the German' held railroad yards at Thielt, Belgium. They dropped a ton of bombs. On the way home, 12 German fighters â€" eight Fokker D-VIIs and four Pfalz D-IIIs â€" jumped Lytle's eight DC Havillands. In the melee, the Germans singled out the DH-4 flown by Talbot with Corporal Robert G. Robinson in the hack seat. Captain Lytle's engine failed as be tried to come to Talbot's aid. Robinson brought down one attacking plane with his twin Lewis guns. Two others closed in from below. Robinson took a bullet in his elbow, but clearing a jammed gun with his one good hand, he continued to fire until he was hit twice more. With Robinson unconscious in the back seat, Talbot whipped his DH-4 around and got a second German with his front guns. He then for his damaged plane into a long dive, clearing the German lines at 50 feet and coming in safely at a Belgian airfield. Robinson was taken to a field hospital, and the surgeon general of the Belgian Army operated on his arm and saved it.

Lytle, meanwhile, came down without power and made a dead-stick landing in front of the Belgian lines, and he and his observer scrambled to safety. That night, under cover of darkness, a Marine working party dismantled his plane and brought it hack in through the lines.

On 25 October, Talbot tested a new plane, with Squadron 9 Second Lieutenant Colgate Harden in the hack seat as observer. The engine failed, and the plane crashed. Harden, who had not fastened his seat belt, was thrown clear, hut Talbot burned to death. He had been writing war poems with a vague idea of publishing them after the war. Most had no titles, hut one was titled "The Circus":

Under the main top
Spreading wide,
Under the panelled, vaulty Mue,
Against some filmy heap I swoop.
I glide!
Doingâ€¦â€¦â€¦
Doing what my heart forbears to do.
Tenor of the bugle,
Shrilling high.
Warning siren! â€" Like a violin!
An Lindernote that stirs!-Mitrailleuse!
Tattingâ€¦â€¦â€¦.
Tatting for the concert to begin.
Our circus whips and reels about
The sky!
Fantastic some, â€" some bizarre!
Cheers and urgings reach us from afar
Cheers!
Cheers for the superman.
The Nation's aviator.
We are the star performers!
Buffoons!
Who swing from bar to bar with ease.
Ignoring Life, ignoring Death
For honors
Beneath the Big Top
On the Big Trapeze.[9]

Talbot and Robinson earned Medals of Honor. Badly smashed up, with a fractured vertebrae, a crushed face, and temporary paralysis, Darden was hospitalized for a year. Afterward he married Irene DuPont, served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, a term as governor of Virginia, and stints as chancellor of the College of William and Mary and president of the University of Virginia.[10]

In all, the tour Marine squadrons carried out 14 bombing raids, always flying without fighter escort. They had several more fights with German planes. During one, on 22 October, the plane flown by Second Lieutenant Harvey G. Norman, with Second Lieutenant Caleb W. Taylor as his observer, was shot down, killing both Norman and

Taylor, in what was the first Marine aircraft lost to enemy action.

By the time of the armistice, 11 November, with the pluses of additional acquisitions and the minuses of operational losses, Cunningham's four squadrons totaled 20 DH-9As and 16 DH-4s â€" about half of the 1st Marine Aviation Force's planned strength. Nevertheless, during the war's final months, the squadrons had managed to fly 57 missions â€" 43 with the British and 14 on their own. The Marines calculated they dropped 15,140 pounds of bombs while with the British and 18,792 pounds by themselves, and they counted four confirmed kills of German fighters and eight "probables." Four Marine aviation force pilots were killed and one pilot and two gunners wounded. For the Leathernecks, the influenza epidemic, which for a while in October virtually halted operations, was deadlier than battle, claiming the lives of four officers and 21 enlisted men. In December 1918, having established the foundation for Marine combat aviation during its short, heated aerial campaign, the 1st Marine Aviation Force sailed for home.

PHOTO (COLOR): De Havilland bombers of Captain Robert Lytle's Squadron 9, 1st Marine Aviation Force, wreck the German-held railroad yards at Thielt, Belgium, in a painting by james Butcher. During the 10 October 1918 raid, eight squadron planes dropped a ton of bombs, precipatating a dogfight with 12 German fighters.

PHOTO (COLOR): First Lieutenant Alfred Cunningham sits at the controls of a Curtiss pusher plane at Pensacola in 1915. Considered the father of Marine Corps aviation, Cunningham, as a major, commanded the 1st Aviation Force in France.

PHOTO (COLOR): The emblem of the 1st Marine Aviation Force was based on the already-famous eagle, globe, and anchor, but with the cocarde, or rondel, for U.S. aircraft substituting fur the globe.

PHOTO (COLOR): Ground crewman service three Marine DH-4s at an airfield in Europe in 1918. Five of the "Liberty planes," so named because of their engines, participated in the 10 October Thielt raid.

PHOTO (COLOR): The Marine force flew two variants of the De Havilland two-seat light bomber: the British-built DH-9A (above) and the American-made DH-4. Both use the celebrated U.S. 400-horsepower Liberty engine.

References:
??? Unless otherwise cired. must of the material in this article can he found in Marine Corps Aviation. The Early Years, 1912-1940 by LCol Edward C. Johnson, Graham A. Cosmas, ed. (Washington. DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1977). Compatable content tan be found in Peter B. Mersley's U.S. Marine Corps Aviation: 1912 10 the Present (Annapolis, MD: Nautical & Aviation Publishing 1983) and Robert Shrrod's History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II (Washington, PC: Combat Forces Press, 1952). Cited personal papers, oral histories, and other referenced files previously located in

the Marine Corps Historical Center (MCHC) in the Washington Navy Yard are now housed in the Gray Research Center (CRC) at Quantico, VA. Specific citations follow.

1 Johnson, Manne Corps Aviation. The Early Years, 10.

2 Apparently, LCol Lejuene was not much impressed. He does not mention the flight, nor does he even mention Lt Cunnigham by name, in his Reminiscences of a Marine.

3 Cpt Cunningham ltr to MGen Barnett, MSgt Roger Emmons papers, GRC, as quoted in Johnson, Marine Corps Aviation: The Early Years, 15.

4 Maj Cunningham, "Value of Aviation in the Marine Corps," Marine Corps Gazette, Sept 1920 as quoted in Johnson, Marine Corps Aviation: The Early Years, 15. 5 BGen Ford Rogers oral history. GRC, 33.

6 The American-made OH-4 and British-made PH-9A were not greatly different. Roth were single-engine, two-seat biplanes, with the superb 12-cylinder, 400-horsepower Liberty engine. With some modifications, the DH-4 remained in the Marine Corps inventory until 1930.

7 LGen Karl Day oral history, GRC, p, 26.

8 Ralph Talbot personal papers. P.C. 410, GRC.

9 Ralph Talbot personal papers, PC. 410, GRC.

10 BiO file, Colgate W. Darden Jr., GRC.

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