
Notes and Comments

First Landing on Guam: The Difficulties of a Naval Aviator during the Invasion¹



Toby Terrar

Abstract

This note describes the rivalry, including unfriendly “friendly fire” between the Navy and Marine Corps, that manifested itself during the landing of the first American airplane on Guam after the recapture of the island from the Japanese in World War II. Ed Terrar, a naval pilot, was the first to land his plane on Guam on 30 July 1944, an honor the Marines had planned to claim. The article also relates the amiable resolution of the Navy-Marine conflict years later.

The difficulties presented by the Japanese against the Americans in taking Guam in July 1944 are legendary. Some 1,400 Marines and 10,000 Japanese gave their lives during the battle for the island. I would like to discuss a less legendary difficulty encountered by my dad, Navy Lieutenant (j.g.) Ed Terrar

1. This account is taken from Toby and Ed Terrar’s *God, Country and Self-Interest: A Social History of the World War II Rank and File* (Silver Spring, Md.: CWPublisher, <http://www.angelfire.com/un/cwp>, 2004), chap. 11.

Toby Terrar is the son of World War II naval aviator Ed Terrar. He joined his father and his mother, Hazel (1914–2005), who was a Navy nurse at the Marine Corps Dispensary in El Centro, California, during the war, in publishing an account of the war. Not bearing much resemblance to Tom Brokaw’s version, it is titled *God, Country and Self-Interest: A Social History of the World War II Rank and File* (Silver Spring, Md.: CWPublisher, <http://www.angelfire.com/un/cwp>, 2004).

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Ed Terrar, Bill Gentry, Dutch Schoonmaker, and Bucky Wills were welcomed after their plane landed on the Orote peninsula airfield in Guam, 30 July 1944. Their Navy plane was the first to land on Guam after the return of U.S. forces to the island. (Marine Corps photograph)

(1920–2004). In 1944 he was a twenty-four-year-old aviator of a torpedo bomber (TBF) aboard the carrier *Chenango*. Ten years later, when I was ten years old, he brought home O. R. Lodge's book, *The Recapture of Guam*. I was a poor reader, and World War II was ancient history, but in the book was a picture that meant something to my father.² It showed a plane sitting on a dirt runway with people around it, who were too small to identify. My dad said that the people were he and his crew and that their plane was the first to land on Guam after its recapture by the Americans.

Fifty years later, while helping my father attend his annual *Chenango* reunion in Pensacola, Florida, I learned more about the war, including his Guam landing on 30 July 1944 and the difficulties of being a combat aviator. One of these was "friendly fire." But the friendly fire was not as friendly as one usually thinks. I will explain.

There was a large press corps on Guam. This caused rivalry between the Army Air Forces, Marines, and Navy as to which service would obtain the publicity for, among other things, being the first to put a plane down on the island. At the time of Ed's landing on that hot afternoon, the Army Air Forces brass and their public relations officers had an observation plane from Saipan headed for the media

2. O. R. Lodge, *The Recapture of Guam* (Washington: Historical Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, 1954). The HyperWar Foundation has put Lodge's book, including the picture, online at <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-M-Guam/USMC-M-Guam-4.html>.

event on Guam. Likewise, Marine Observation Squadron 1 (VMO-1), which was embarked on a small carrier, had one of its planes headed for a landing. The Navy’s triumph was due to the alertness of the area’s air marshal, who was Navy.

Ed Terrar was working as a spotter that afternoon under the air marshal’s guidance. This involved flying as low as twenty-five feet above the tree tops to draw enemy fire. The location of the fire was then radioed to the Marines on the ground, who were mopping up. When the air marshal, code-named Congo, heard that the Army and Marines were on the way, he told my dad, who was not initially aware of the significance of the event, to come down and “test” the adequacy of the runway.

As described in the *New York Times*, the TBF, its engine roaring, came in from east to west with left-hand turns and hit hard several times in order to size up the hardness of the field and determine the location of the craters. It then made its second approach with wheels and flaps down, landed fast in case it had to throttle up, and rolled up to a stop at the end of the 2,000-foot strip.³

A Marine Corps history focused on the continuing Japanese hostility as the plane set down:

The word passed quickly. In a few minutes the strip was lined with curious spectators. But as Navy Lieutenant (jg) Edward F. Terrar, Coffeyville, Kansas zoomed the field, the sharp whine of bullets cut the air overhead, and the onlookers scrambled for cover without thought of dignity. Unmindful of the commotion on the ground, the Navy pilot dropped his flaps, cut his throttle and came on. His wheels touched lightly once, bounced harder a second time, and as the plane leaped on the third impact, he opened the gun and roared back into the air for a second try.⁴

In the Marine Corps account, after the test run,

the Marines on the ground weighed curiosity against prudence. But even the sniper was caught up in the drama of the situation. As suddenly as they had begun, the shots ceased. The TBF settled in again, but this time it greased the runway all the way, and pulled up to an easy stop as Marines swarmed around on every side. The time was exactly five o’clock; American aviation was on Guam.⁵

3. “Guam Being Made into U.S. Base,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1944, 3.

4. George W. Garand and Truman R. Strobridge, *History of United States Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, vol. 4, *Western Pacific Operation* (Washington: Historical Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, 1971), 426. In addition to emphasizing the ongoing conflict, the Marine account gives a graphic description of the carnage:

Sniper fire cracked . . . and the Marine reception committee lay pinned to the deck at the moment the Grumman torpedo bomber began its cautious approach toward the former Jap airbase. Halfway down the strip, mangled and charred Jap bodies lay in grotesque mounds before a fallen redoubt of concrete. The stench of 3,000 other dead Japs was over the scorched peninsula . . . a bullet-riddled wind sock flapped wearily in the hot breeze from across Apra Harbor. The noise of battle from the smoky mountain sides beyond the harbor rode on the same wind.

5. *Ibid.*

After landing Ed saw people coming and cut the engine. He told the crew to jump out for a few minutes and have a stretch. Dirty, shirtless, suntanned Marines ran up to the plane. The first question they asked was "Do you have any beer?" Shortly after, journalists and a small official welcoming party headed by Marine Colonel Peter P. Shrider came up to the plane. As reported in the newspaper, my dad's one statement of the day was that he had a wife and a month-old son back home. A week later he wrote home, "It was just a coincidence that I happened to get to do it—just luck of course. There wasn't anything to it—but it was somewhat of an honor. There were a lot of cameras & reporters around when I landed."

Because so many Marines lost their lives, and several won the Congressional Medal of Honor, during the clearing of the Orote peninsula, the Marines believed they deserved the glory. This was the source of Ed's difficulty. As he took off after the brief ceremony, he came under ground fire from the disgruntled Marines. The TBF was an easy target but there were no hits. The Marines were not trying very hard, but they did express their disappointment.

Thirty-three years later in 1977, the Marines' disappointment had mellowed. They commemorated the landing and Ed's participation. While Ed welcomed the attention, it probably had more to do with the job he then had than with history. He was chief of staff to San Diego's longtime U.S. Congressman, Bob Wilson (1916–99). Wilson was the senior minority (Republican) leader on the Armed Services Committee. The development and procurement of cruise missiles was being considered.⁶ Wilson was a conservative, and cruise missiles such as the Tomahawk cost one-tenth as much as piloted craft. General Dynamics Corporation, which was working on the missile, was in Wilson's district. Whether or not he believed it, Ed heckled the carrier brass with the opinion that missiles did a better job than piloted craft and that carriers were expendable. Coming from a carrier aviator, this was heresy.

Marine aviation maintained that both missiles and piloted craft were necessary. In maintaining this position before Congress, they were up to the task. The "Congressional Marines," which was an organization composed of Congressmen who had served in the Corps, led the defense. They gave Wilson, who was a former World War II Army private, a lieutenant colonel's commission in the Marine Corps reserves. This turned him into a "Congressional Marine" and included an impressive uniform, periodic scuba diving "duties," and meals at the home of the commandant that were better than Army rations. Needless to say, none of this was necessary. For military and electoral reasons, Wilson supported both missiles and piloted craft from the start. His district had a large Marine constituency. He had always voted on their side from his first day on the committee in 1953.⁷

The Marine activities in 1977 focused not only on the Congressman, but also on his chief of staff. At the time that Wilson was enjoying his promotion in rank,

6. Kenneth Werrell, "The Weapon the Military Did Not Want: The Modern Strategic Cruise Missile," *Journal of Military History*, vol. 53 (1989), pp. 421-435.

7. As Bob Wilson put in it his autobiography, *Confessions of a Kinetic Congressman* (San Diego, Calif.: San Diego State University Foundation, 1996), 232:

the Congressional Marines held an awards ceremony commemorating the Guam landing. Ed was presented a plaque. They wanted to fly him and my mother first class to Guam for the occasion, but my mother had no interest and my dad had seen enough of that place during the war. Afterward, in a letter to Joe Bartlett, who headed the ceremony at the Capitol, Ed both thanked him and apologized for upstaging the Marines in 1944, while also noting the not so friendly fire:

Dear Joe,

Thank you so much for your generous efforts to afford me recognition this A.M. I'm deeply appreciative.

Frankly, I hadn't realized the pique of the Marines at my having landed at Guam ahead of a Marine—by way of explanation I should explain that I was told by the Air Marshall [*sic*] of the area that it was an Army Air Corps observation plane from Saipan headed for Orote. You should know also that Fly One (i.e. the catapult) on the carrier with the M.C. squadron was a classmate of mine. Lastly, I've been under the impression, these many years, that the gunfire directed at my plane on departure from Orote was from laggard Nips. I now realize that it must have been errant Marines.⁸

Anyway, thanks. Semper Fidelis.

Ed Terrar 11-4-77

Joe Bartlett, Room H-220

Capitol

Inside Mail!

My title of Representative meant I was to represent that particular small segment of the country where I was from. Being a member of the House for a military district got me on the Armed Services Committee. I represented that interest. That's why I was there for twenty-eight years. If I had been primarily interested in other issues rather than the military issues, they would have found somebody else who would have fought for their interests the way I did. I helped San Diego grow from a military standpoint. That was my platform going into the House and is something I continued to do as a lobbyist after I retired from Congress.

There is another irony connected with the Guam landing. Despite the reports in the New York Times and other national media the next day, and the telegrams of congratulation sent to Ed and his crew by President Franklin Roosevelt, Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz and other luminaries, and the later honors on Capitol Hill, neither the Navy or Marines were the first to land on Guam. If the account by H. I. Shaw, et al is accurate, an Army liaison aircraft landed on an improvised airstrip earlier in the afternoon of July 30. Like the tree that falls in the woods, but makes no noise because no one is there to hear it, the Army landing did not happen because the media was not there to record it. See H. I. Shaw, Jr., B. C. Nalty and E. T. Turnbladh, *History of United States Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, vol. 3, *Central Pacific Drive* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O, 1958-1971), p. 525.

8. Garand and Strobbridge, *Western Pacific Operation*, 426-27. While acknowledging the Marines' disappointment at being upstaged, one Marine history understandably attributed the sniper firing only to the Japanese. As their history put it: "Three minutes after landing, heavy sniper fire forced the torpedo bomber to take off." The same account states that "minutes later, without major fanfare, a 'grasshopper' of VMO-1, piloted by the squadron commander, Major Gordon W. Heritage, landed on the airstrip as previously scheduled." No one was firing at him!

An irony was that aboard the TBF for the Guam landing, along with radio-man Bill Gentry and turret gunner Dutch Schoonmaker, was Marine spotter Captain V. T. "Bucky" Wills. He logged seventy hours of flight time with Ed that month, cramped in the single-engine plane, directing ground fire. The target of the Marine's friendly fire included one of their own.