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David J. Ulbrich, *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 285. ISBN 978-1-59114-903-3.

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In *Preparing for Victory*, David Ulbrich (US Army Engineer School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri) has written a most welcome, first book-length¹ life of Thomas Holcomb, seventeenth commandant of the US Marine Corps. Holcomb had a long and illustrious career, serving thirty-six years in the Corps before becoming commandant for over seven years. Prior to World War II, he shaped the dual mission of the modern Marine Corps: advanced base defense and amphibious assault operations. He also effectively publicized the value of the service to the nation, oversaw its unprecedented expansion in preparation for the war, and successfully led it during most of the conflict, implementing many of the capabilities he and other Marine Corps leaders had been developing for decades.

During the eighty-five months between December 1, 1936, and December 31, 1943, Commandant Thomas Holcomb supervised the transformation of the U.S. Marine Corps from a marginal service to become the nation's premier amphibious assault force. He participated in all aspects of this process, including administrative oversight, resource allocation, strategic planning, and public relations.... Stepping back and looking at his career, a historical perspective shows that Commandant Thomas Holcomb performed instrumental roles in mobilizing the Marines and preparing them to fight the Pacific War.... Holcomb proved himself to be integral in making the Marine Corps into a truly modern force that is unique in the world's military history. (187-90)

Most of the work focuses on Holcomb's service as commandant, during which he guided the extraordinary growth of the Marine Corps from a mere 17,234 marines to 385,000.

Holcomb served as commandant after John A. Lejeune and before Alexander A. Vandegrift, two icons of Marine Corps history.² Often credited with the Marine Corps's success during World War II, Vandegrift commanded the 1st Marine Division during the battle of Guadalcanal in 1942, then succeeded Holcomb as the eighteenth commandant between 1944 and 1947. Ulbrich rightly shifts the spotlight to Holcomb himself, comparing his "achievements and abilities" to those of such preeminent American military figures as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chester W. Nimitz, and George C. Marshall (1). He proves that Holcomb possessed unique capabilities necessary for modern warfare, including intellectual acumen, strategic vision, and managerial skills. Most importantly, he cultivated the nascent amphibious capabilities of the Marine Corps within existing national strategy.

To his credit, Ulbrich does not shy away from criticizing Holcomb, especially his social views. Though Holcomb ultimately obeyed orders to allow minorities and women into the Marine Corps, "as an unquestioning product of the Jim Crow era, [he] personally tried to ensure that selected minority groups would be

1. Ulbrich does cite valuable articles and book chapters on Holcomb's career: see, e.g., John W. Gordon, "Thomas Holcomb, 1936-1943," in *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Jack Shulimson (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2004) 253-81, and "General Thomas Holcomb and 'The Golden Age of Amphibious Warfare,'" *Delaware History* 21 (1985) 256-70.

2. For works on other notable Marine Corps leaders, see George B. Clark, *Hiram Iddings Bearss, U.S. Marine Corps: Biography of a World War I Hero* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005); Anne Cipriano Venzon, *From Whaleboats to Amphibious Warfare: Lt. Gen. "Howling Mad" Smith and the U.S. Marine Corps* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Jon T. Hoffman, *Chesty: The Story of Lieutenant General Lewis B. Puller, USMC* (NY: Random House, 2001); Dirk A. Ballendorf and Merrill L. Bartlett, *Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet, 1880-1923* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1997); Allan R. Millett, *In Many a Strife: General Gerald C. Thomas and the U.S. Marine Corps, 1917-1956* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1993); Merrill L. Bartlett, *Lejeune: A Marine's Life, 1867-1942* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 1991); John A. Lejeune, *Reminiscences of a Marine* (1930; rpt. Quantico: Marine Corps Assoc, 1990); Alexander A. Vandegrift and Robert B. Asprey, *Once a Marine* (NY: Norton, 1964).

barred from the Corps' ranks. The commandant believed these groups might lower the overall effectiveness of his service—which was composed mostly of Caucasian males" (117).³

Ulbrich utilizes an impressive array of sources to support the work. He delves deeply into primary materials from, for example, the Marine Corps University Archives Branch in Quantico, Virginia, and the National Archives and Records Administration facilities in Washington and College Park, Maryland. He also taps a vast collection of oral history interviews and transcriptions from senior officers, junior personnel, and family members familiar with Holcomb's life. These include Harold R. Stark (Chief of Naval Operations); Holcomb's aide-de-camp, Austin R. Brunelli; and his son, Franklin Holcomb. Ulbrich also uses papers and photographs donated by Holcomb's family to the Marine Corps Archives in 2006.

Ulbrich's research extends beyond biography and military history to such disciplines as leadership and organizational theory, and social and cultural history. For instance, he applies the work of political scientist Fred I. Greenstein, classical organizational theorists Max Weber and Chester Bernard, and sociologist Morris Janowitz to investigate exactly what made Holcomb such a brilliant leader.

Preparing for Victory comprises three main sections consisting of seven chapters. Ulbrich first details Holcomb's impressive thirty-six-year Marine Corps career before he became commandant. He served with the Legation Guard in Beijing and, during World War I, commanded the 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment in France at such storied battles as Belleau Wood, Château-Thierry, and Soissons. He was awarded the Navy Cross, the Silver Star, the Purple Heart, and (twice) the French Croix de Guerre. After the war, he served in various important posts, gaining indispensable organizational skills at Marine Headquarters in Washington. Each of these tours of duty prepared him to succeed later as commandant.

Ulbrich next analyzes Holcomb's prewar experiences as commandant. During the interwar period, the Marine Corps faced significant challenges, both internal and external. Budget cuts were the norm and manpower was sparse: "New York City's Police Department contained more personnel than did the tiny Marine Corps" (38). President Roosevelt selected Holcomb over eight more senior Marine officers to become commandant.

Holcomb overcame some initial obstacles through his shrewd use of publicity. On 1 July 1941, he established the Marine Corps Division of Public Relations; this expanded, streamlined, and formalized the Corps's existing public relations capabilities to communicate more effectively to the nation both its mission and value. These measures also enhanced the Corps's image among members of Congress and the Roosevelt administration. Holcomb graced the cover of *Time* magazine (11 November 1940); inside, a lengthy article, "Holcomb of the Marines," discussed many of the changes he had made as commandant.

Ulbrich next explores Holcomb's experiences as commandant during the first two years of World War II. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he had to adapt to a new role for himself as commandant and the Marine Corps as an organization. Mobilization was paramount. Between December 1941 and June 1942, the Corps grew to an unprecedented size. Holcomb now had to implement the major changes in strategy, doctrine, training, force structure, and equipment that he had initiated in peacetime. Guadalcanal (July 1942 to February 1943) was the "first big test" for Holcomb and the revamped Corps (129). Throughout, he worked closely with Vandegrift, the senior Marine commander in the field, even personally visiting the island on 21 October 1942. Ulbrich concludes with an account of Holcomb's preparation for the transition to a new commandant, who would assume the post following his retirement in December 1943.

The book's final chapter serves as epilogue: Ulbrich vividly recounts Holcomb's career after the Marine Corps, when he served in the diplomatic corps as US minister to the Union of South Africa (1944–48). He eventually retired from public service, spending time on his farm and caring for his wife Beatrice, who suffered from recurrent health problems.

3. On minorities and women in the Marine Corps, see Ronald K. Culp, *The First Black United States Marines: The Men of Montford Point, 1942–1946* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007); Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2007); Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall, *The First, the Few, the Forgotten: Navy and Marine Corps Women in World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2002); Peter A. Soderbergh, *Women Marines in the Korean War Era* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), and *Women Marines: The World War II Era* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992).

Ulbrich has written a compelling narrative, deftly capturing Holcomb's character and personality. For example, he describes his avid interest in competitive shooting—he was individual marksmanship world champion in 1902 and commanded the Marine Corps Rifle Team as a young officer. Ulbrich also illuminates how contacts and relationships early in Holcomb's career benefited him later. As a junior officer, he had worked closely with Franklin Roosevelt, George S. Patton, John A. Lejeune, and Earl H. "Pete" Ellis.

Ulbrich perceptively identifies his subject's strengths and weaknesses. He convincingly demonstrates his intuitive and prescient understanding of the need for better technology to accomplish the Marine Corps's dual mission. He was, for instance, a staunch proponent of Andrew Jackson Higgins's "Eureka" boat and Donald Roebling's "Alligator" amphibious tractor. "After Holcomb personally observed [the Alligator's] trials in 1938, he instantly grasped its great potential. 'My God, this is the future of the Marine Corps'" (55). On the other hand, Ulbrich criticizes Holcomb for occasionally being a "technological conservative" (97): for example, as a "marksmanship purist" (98), he resisted replacing the .30-caliber Model 1903 Springfield bolt-action rifle with the newer M1 Garand semiautomatic weapon.

Preparing for Victory fills a notable void in the existing literature on a pivotal figure in Marine Corps history. Holcomb was the first Marine promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, because of the rapid expansion of the Corps during his time as commandant. Over his extraordinary forty-three-year career, Thomas Holcomb personally transformed the Marine Corps into an essential, highly effective fighting force for the nation. This new biography ensures him his rightful place next to other prominent Marine Corps leaders.