

In the Words of Fenwicke (Fen) Holmes WWII Marine Corps

interviewed by Dave Sargent

The first “Holmes” came from York, England in 1628 and settled in Bedford, New York. Five generations later, because of the Revolutionary War, many New Yorkers who were identified as Loyal to the King were exiled to Nova Scotia in 1783. Fen’s great-grandfather was one of those exiles. Fen’s grandfather was born in New Brunswick, Canada, but crossed to Maine where he met his wife. Fen’s parents were both born in Maine and graduated from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

Fen’s father, Jerome, went to Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. Upon graduation he married Fen’s mother, Jennie Edwards. They immediately set out in 1913 for the life of Congregational missionaries in Japan where they served for 10 years with one year sabbatical in 1920. Fen’s older brother was born in Tokyo in 1915. Fen was born in Kobe in 1918. In 1923 the family moved to the missionary compound in Claremont, California, but Fen’s father stayed behind where he experienced the great Kanto Plain earthquake. It was 6 weeks after the quake before he was known to have survived because the undersea cables between Japan and the US were interrupted by the quake.

Fen’s father acted as Western Secretary of the American Board of Missions, in San Francisco and the family settled in Mill Valley for 3 years. Then the family moved to Santa Rosa for 3 years where Fen’s dad was a pastor of the Santa Rosa Congregational Church. In 1930 he was called by the Hawaiian Board of Missions and served as a missionary – pastor in Waialua (Oahu) for 6 years and on Maui for 3 more. Fen attended high school on Oahu and then spent 2 more years at the University of Hawaii. The family moved to Southern California where he graduated from UCLA in 1941 with a degree in philosophy after studying under Bertrand Russell. Fen lettered in swimming and water polo at both universities.

In his last semester at UCLA Fen took a voluntary English course and found himself, because of the alphabetical seating, to be sitting next to a co-ed whose last name was Hoon. Fen and Bette Hoon became engaged while Fen was on home leave from Quantico in October 1941.

Soon after graduation from UCLA, Fen had gone to Quantico, VA, as a PFC, to take the Officer Candidates’ class. After 4 months, with 300 candidates from a class of 400, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve. His Commission came 5 weeks before Pearl Harbor at which time he was enrolled in the Reserve Officers Class. He had applied for a regular commission however he told the higher-ups that he intended to be married. At that time the regular officers had to serve 2 years before they could get married, hence Fen’s reserve commission.

It was a year and a half before Fen’s regular commission caught up with him, at which time he was on Guadalcanal in the thick of WWII in the Pacific. Almost in the same mail he received a nasty summons from his draft board threatening him with all sorts of dire results if he did not report immediately. However, Fen preferred the nightly bombardment to submitting to the draft board’s threats.

Fortuitously, the Marine Corps had ordered Fen to the Los Angeles area as a recruiting officer at the Southern California colleges to find more fodder for the Officer Candidates’ training. This made marriage possible and convenient and he and Bette were married in West Los Angeles on March 24th 1942 with Fen’s dad, Rev. Jerome Holmes, officiating.

After Recruiting Duty was complete, Fen reported to Camp Elliot, near San Diego, where the 9th Marine Regiment of the 3rd Marine Division was being formed. In the fall of 1942 the regiment marched for 3 days up Highway 395 to Camp Pendleton, an old Spanish grant province of 461 square miles, with lots of room for maneuvers.

Fen was the Machine Gun Officer of the 1st Battalion 9th Marines. But he held various other special titles such as Ship's Quartermaster (combat loading of troop transports) and as the Regimental Rubber Boat Officer (training all hands in amphibious landing from the rubber boats).

In February of 1943 the 9th Regiment embarked for Auckland, New Zealand where they trained and were held in readiness to back up the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal. Five months later the division deployed to Guadalcanal, but the ground fighting was over. They did get occasional bombing raids at night, but these were inconsequential.

There is an axiom in the Marine Corps: "Never Volunteer". However, in September 1943, on Guadalcanal, Fen violated that principal and volunteered to form a Depot Company and go to the central Solomon Islands and help establish a forward supply depot to supply the forthcoming landings. Men were drawn from other parts of the 3rd Division and Depot Company "A" was born on the 19th of September. It was formed, equipped, had a practice firing of weapons, held a practice landing, embarked on the USS Crosby (a converted WWI destroyer) and landed on the island of Vella Lavella on the 23rd of September.

Fen quickly realized that the Navy had landed the unit on the wrong beach. Using the photomontage "Map", he found that they were only 2 or 3 miles away from the right beach, and after a quick march before nightfall, they were, as preplanned, bivouacked on the Juno River. Since units of the 8th New Zealand Brigade had previously secured the island, there was no enemy ground action.

The plan was to establish a forward depot to support the pending invasion of Bougainville. Along with Fen's company, another depot company had been deployed, with various "Sea Bee" (Navy construction) units to follow later. Scheduled were weekly convoys of LVT's loaded with food, rations, and ammunition. But the Japanese failed to cooperate, and greeted each convoy with dive-bombers from nearby Kolombangara. The first convoy was attacked and several ships were hit. Most particularly, LST 448 was hit on the beach with heavy casualties to crew and passengers including elements of the 1st Marine Corps Parachute Regiment.

Fen's company was at the beach. One contingent helped to bring wounded to an improvised aid station. Others manned hoses and attempted to fight the flames. Amid the chaos, the smallest Lieutenant Colonel Fen had ever seen, Victor "The Brute" Krulak, arrived in his jeep. "Who's in charge here?" "Just me" Fen replied. The Colonel ordered "Get these trucks out of here, get the men out of here, the Japanese will be back, the Japanese will be back!" Then he was gone.

Fen went about seeing to the evacuation of the wounded and continuing to fight the fire on the burning LST. The Colonel was right. The Japanese did come back and dropped bombs on the LST. Fortunately, there were no further casualties, but the fight to save the ship was abandoned.

Fen's medical corpsmen told him that a paratroop officer, O'Brian was too badly wounded to be evacuated by truck to the hospital over the rutted dirt road. So Fen set out to obtain an LCT to effect the evacuation. Another LST had been hovering in the water about a quarter of a mile away, but communications were difficult. Attempts to wig-wag signals back and forth failed, so Fen decided to swim out for help. He stripped down to his shorts and swam through the proverbial "shark-infested water". At the boarding ceremony, he introduced himself as "Captain

Holmes”, shorts and all, and demanded an LCT (The term ‘Captain” is a very evocative title in the Navy, as it represents 4 stripes versus the 2 bars of a lower-ranking Marine Captain. Of course, you can’t tell a Marine from Navy man in his shorts)!

Fen got his LCT from the skipper of the LST, who was a mere Navy Lieutenant. The injured Marine paratroop officer was evacuated successfully. Later, Fen and five of his men were awarded the Navy Marine Corps Medal for their part in this action. The Navy Marine Corps Medal is awarded for non-combat-related deeds and the review commission decided that, since a Depot Company was a “supply” outfit that it would be an appropriate medal. Years later, in a review of wartime medals in the Navy Department it was determined that the LST episode was performed in actual combat with real bombs and bullets and that the medals should be upgraded to a Silver Star, even though the participants were “mere supply people”.

When Depot Company “A” was placed in reserve in the Shortland Islands as part of Branch 3, 4th Base Depot, Fen visited the 3rd Marine Division on Guadalcanal to request a transfer back to the 9th Marines as had been promised earlier. Unfortunately, the division had just promoted a lot of new Captains and there was no going back to line duty for Fen.

So Fen returned to the Shortland Islands and Branch 3, 4th Base Depot and was soon to embark for Bougainville where the company occupied the 28-acre island in Empress Augusta Bay, a few hundred yards off shore from the main island. The usual dive-bombers contested their landing on Bougainville and the unit experienced some casualties. Here they were able to establish a supply depot of rations, drummed fuel, ammo and miscellaneous supplies. The air at night always had one or more “Betty” bombers, which found Purata Island a very convenient target.

On Christmas Eve, for example, a lone bomber crisscrossed above the island for hours before releasing about a thousand 5-pound bombs, each of which had Ten-Cent Store sirens attached to their tails. Fen and his exec officer, Lt. Cookie, occupied the same slit trench, helmet to helmet. Hearing the grating of helmets, Fen said: “Cookie, you’re not scared are you?”

“No Captain,” he replied, “Just quivering with patriotism, and I’ve just decided that when the next war comes along, I want to be where the bombs are the thickest. That would be the Naval Ammunition Depot, Crane, Indiana.”

Early in 1944, the company was relieved and returned to the Shortland Islands. Taking stock of the 135 marines that started out for Vella LaVella in September, our ration strength was down to 100. A few were killed or wounded. Some were evacuated for sickness or “combat fatigue”.

Branch 3, 4th Base Depot, had grown and was preparing to support the invasion of Guam, for which exercise it was re-designated the Fifth Field Depot. Units were reshuffled and Fen became the Depot Adjutant.

The Depot embarked for the landing on Guam, which was to involve one Marine Division, a Marine Brigade and an Arms Division. The expedition was delayed for 30 days because of a major ammunition explosion at Pearl Harbor. The invasion fleet was anchored at Eniwitok Island for an extra month under the tropic sun. The landing for the liberation of Guam came on July 21, 1944. Elements of the Depot were ashore on D-Day, but Fen didn’t get ashore until D+10. There were no Adjutants in the first wave.

The Fifth Field Depot was to remain on Guam until the end of the war. On Guam, they provided rations to the whole island, maintained 2 ammunition depots, and provided signal supplies, motor transport, ordinance supply and repair and other logistic duties.

Shortly after the landing, Fen was made the Depot Supply Officer and presided over the largest overseas supply operation in Marine Corps history. A few months before the war was ended, Fen was promoted to Major.

After the atom bomb was dropped, they waited for the Japanese reaction. When the radio reported that Hirohito had accepted unconditional surrender, Fen went to the Commanding Officer's hut, saying, "Colonel, the war is over!" Colonel Inman was an old, hardbitten, experienced Quartermaster. He growled, "Cancel all backorders!"

When Fen got home via Kwajalein, Johnson Island, Hawaii, and San Francisco, he had been overseas for 34 months. After the war, he spent six months as Camp Fire Marshall at Camp Pendleton, then to Headquarters, US Marine Corps for three years, then to the Marine Corps Depot of Supplies at 100 Harrison Street in San Francisco. During his three-year tour in San Francisco, Fen bought a house in San Carlos and commuted to work by train.

After his tour in San Francisco, Fen was assigned to the Army Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, finishing in the top 10% of his class. It is ironic that this tour coincided with the Korean War so that Fen did not participate in that combat.

From there he was assigned to the Marine Corps Supply Schools in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. During that three-year tour, he served as Director of Instruction and, later, Commanding Officer. During that period, he was promoted to full Colonel.

It was then off to Hawaii for two years as Assistant Force Supply Officer, then back to Headquarters, US Marine Corps as Materials Management Officer. During that tour he headed the task group that converted the Marine Corps supply system from punch cards to computers. This was the most difficult assignment because computers at that time had only 20 minutes mean-time-between-failures. Also, the only available card readers could only read 10 cards per minute. Obviously, with some 300,000 line items of inventory stored at seven major locations, with these primitive capabilities, that was a monumental task. It was successful, but there was no Legion of Merit waiting at the end of the trail.

Fen was then assigned to the 3rd Marine Division on Okinawa as Commanding Officer, 3rd Service Battalion. Later, he was appointed as Comptroller of the 3rd Marine Division, the first officer to hold that position in any Marine Corps tactical unit.

After a year on Okinawa, Fen was assigned to the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, in Hawaii, where he served as Force Supply Officer for two years. Along with the original of his 2nd Lieutenant's Commission (signed by Admiral James Forrestal) he holds a Certificate of Retirement (signed by General James Jones, Commandant of the Marine Corps) stating "Brigadier General Fenwicke W. Holmes, having served faithfully and honorably, was retired from the United States Marine Corps on the first day of August, 1964."

After his retirement from the Marines, Fen moved back to San Francisco to use his skills at Del Monte Corporation. He started as a Systems Analyst and soon was made Director of Information Services with worldwide systems, computers, and telecommunications responsibilities. At one time, this involved 32 computer installations worldwide.

He was heavily involved with the Grocery Manufacturers of America in the development and promulgation of the Universal Product Code, the bar code you see on every grocery product in your store. This was an exciting undertaking and the universal adoption of UPC indicated the success of the effort.

Fen retired from Del Monte in 1983 after 19 years of service.

Fen's wife Bette, from Rochelle, Illinois majored in accounting at UCLA, and was a CPA. Although raised as a Congregationalist, Fen and Bette started attending Campbell United Methodist Church after their son, Brian, and daughter-in-law, Jolynda, had spent time searching for a church with an outstanding musical program. Fen and Bette joined and Fen spent many years singing in the Choir.