

John Archer Lejeune

The greatest Leatherneck of them all

by 2ndLt Drew T. Dziwulski

LtGen John A. Lejeune is worthy of the title “The Greatest Leatherneck” because of his successful career as a Marine Corps officer, including his time as the thirteenth Commandant of the United States Marine Corps. He valiantly commanded the 2d Division of Marines in World War I, became the first commander of the Marine Corps Barracks in Quantico, VA, and was the first Marine to achieve the rank of lieutenant general. Lejeune cultivated the strategies of World War II; he defended the Marine Corps when many people wanted it dissolved. His exemplary leadership set the high standard for all Marines today.

Born on 10 January 1867 on his father’s cotton plantation in Louisiana,

he learned nationalism and dedication to country from his father, Ovide Lejeune. The senior Lejeune had served the Confederacy during the Civil War but recognized the need for union.¹

Growing up in the south during the Reconstruction era proved difficult because of the struggling post-Civil War economy.² Lejeune attended Louisiana State University, a military preparatory school, as a young adult. When costs became too strenuous on his family’s financial situation, he applied and received an appointment to the United States Naval Academy.³ He succeeded academically and physically but did not follow the rules set forth by his superiors. Though he ranked near the top in almost every category, he held nearly the most demerits.⁴

However, Lejeune created his own legacy through his actions. He earned his fame through hard work and exemplary leadership, which showed at a young age on the USS *Vandalia*. During his first cruise after graduation, his ship

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Midshipman Lejeune, USNA, 1888. (Photo US Naval Academy, 3696, 1888.)

ran aground during a hurricane off the coast of Samoa. Fifty-two officers and men lost their lives during the terrible storm.⁵

Lejeune’s conduct during the storm earned him the highest praise. The *Vandalia*’s executive officer wrote to the admiral commanding the Pacific station extolling Lejeune’s coolness and zeal during the storm.⁶

The Navy wished to retain its promising new officer, but Lejeune had other plans. Upon his return from Samoa, “Lejeune selected the Marine Corps instead of the Navy proper for his future career.”⁷ In hindsight, Lejeune made the

correct decision, becoming arguably the greatest Marine Corps officer of all time.

Lejeune’s contributions in many different areas throughout his career also make a strong case for this assertion. Early after his transfer to the Corps, he rose quickly through the ranks. His first major contribution as a Marine came in Panama, where he “attracted national attention by commanding the battalion of [M]arines that kept order ... during that country’s rebellion from Colombia.”⁸ He secured the situation in the revolting country in order for Americans to properly build and maintain the Canal, which proved to be an important connector for shipping commerce and for America’s two-ocean Navy. This canal had such an immediate impact on the United States that “of all the episodes in which General Lejeune has had a directing hand, the one that may be the greatest historical significance relates to Panama.”⁹

Lejeune also led during the Banana Wars and the pacification of Mexico at Veracruz.¹⁰ He commanded the Marines during the first week of occupation at Veracruz and ensured success of the landings.¹¹ Lejeune quickly became known for remaining calm in battle and leading with a level head.

Lejeune’s actions in France placed him among the country’s elite leaders. His greatest combat leadership came along the western front of France during World War I when he took over command of the 2d Division in France, leading the Corps in the Saint-Mihiel, Blanc Mont Ridge, and Meuse-Argonne offenses.¹² He led his division into battle and became the first U.S. Marine to command a division in combat. The allied forces won with minimal casualties, and these battles proved vital to the victory over the Triple Alliance forces. Lejeune’s



Gen Lejeune and members of his staff. (File photo.)

valiant leadership of the 2d Division earned his place in American war history as he became the first Marine officer to lead an Army unit.¹³ “For his services he received the Distinguished Service Medal, the Badge of the Legion of France, and the Croix de Guerre.”¹⁴ His unparalleled leadership vaulted him into the highest echelon of Marine officers.

After the war ended, Lejeune continued to serve and lead our Nation’s military men with the highest skill. He took over the new Marine Barracks at Quantico, VA, and saw many opportunities for training reform, noting that “the Marine Corps affords the young man a fine opportunity for travel, a variety of experience and adventure. It also must be an agency of education and improvement.”¹⁵ He believed in the education of Marines, not just the physical training that they were receiving. His influential thinking on training and development would be one of his major influences on the Corps during his time as Commandant.

Gen Lejeune became the thirteenth Commandant of the Marine Corps on

20 June 1920 and further reinforced the argument for his placement among the pantheon of American heroes.¹⁶

Lejeune’s professional performance, enhanced by genuine humility and a brain like a faultless machine, brought him more and more to the notice of his seniors, a fact shown by his frequent trips to Washington for duty on special boards.¹⁷

During his time as Commandant, he pushed reformation of training and developed new strategies for amphibious landings, which proved successful in all phases of World War II.¹⁸

Lejeune was convinced that military personnel needed more education. At the enlisted level, he believed the men to be bored and over trained to the point of disinterest in their military profession.¹⁹ He later wrote, “It became my mission to rebuild the structure of the Corps and prepare it to meet effectively any emergencies which might thereafter confront it.”²⁰ His main goal of this restructuring became the education of the Corps; “more important than military training is practical military education. The adoption of this precept

brought about renewed training activity everywhere.”²¹

He established schools that gave serious study to the unpleasant task of war, modernized the Corps and replaced the traditional role of Marines as the “colonial infantry” in favor of amphibious capability, which proved vital in World War II against Japan.²²

He worked to improve the Corps’ training programs and procedures during peacetime through his experience and knowledge of leading Marines in battle.

Lejeune served as Commandant for eight years—a significant milestone. Yet he had a change of heart when he decided that he would not accept a third term as Commandant. Instead, he would become the President of the Virginia Military Institute from 1929–1937.²³ This unexpected move shows his dedication to lead and create positive change wherever he served.

He led VMI until five years before his death on 20 November 1942.²⁴ He was remembered by his 39 dedicated years of service to the Marine Corps and

advanced to the rank of Lieutenant General April 14, 1941, under an act of Congress providing for the advancement of retired officers who had been specially commended for performance of duty in combat.²⁵

This made him the first Marine to ever reach the rank of lieutenant general.

Gen Lejeune's achievements place him among the greatest American military leaders. Gen Lejeune served his country by securing American control of the Panama Canal and Veracruz, leading the 2d Division to victory three times in World War I, and becoming the first executive of the Quantico Barracks. He served the Corps by defending it from the threat of dissolution after World War I and by instituting reforms during his time in Quantico and as Commandant that improved the training and education Marines and officers. Lejeune created his legacy as one of the most famous Commandants

in the history of the Marine Corps and rightfully deserves the title "The Greatest Leatherneck."

Notes

1. Joe A. Simon, "The Life and Times of General John Archer Lejeune," *Louisiana History*, (Online: January 1972), available at <http://www.jstor.org>.
2. Merrill L. Bartlett, "Lejeune as a Midshipman," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 1982).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. A.H. Ulm, "Lejeune, Composite of All 'Devil Dogs,'" *The New York Times*, (New York, NY: 15 February 1925).
6. "Lejeune as a Midshipman."

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 16. "Lejeune Made Head of Marine Corps," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY: 20 June 1920).
 17. Robert B. Asprey, "John A. Lejeune: True Soldier," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 1962).
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 23. "Lejeune to Succeed Cocke as V.M.I. Head; Marine Corps to Give Him Leave of Absence," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY: 22 March 1929).
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 25. Ibid.



MajGen John A. Lejeune, CMC, 1920-29. (Photo by DOD, (Marine Corps), 308342.)



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