



President's Message

Richard B. Rothwell



At its January meeting your board of directors voted in favor of an exciting new project for CPHS. Your society has partnered with

author Robin Hutton and artist Jocelyn Russell to bring a larger than life monument of the warhorse Reckless to Camp Pendleton. Reckless was a small Mongolian mare purchased in 1952 in Korea by Lieutenant Erick Pederson, leader of the 5th Marine Regiment recoilless rifle platoon. In Marine jargon recoilless rifles were known as "reckless rifles," hence her name.

Marines trained Reckless to carry 75mm ammunition and supplies to frontline firing positions. She learned quickly and often completed her mission without a handler. A strong, mutual bond formed. It was no longer just a horse and Marines; the platoon accepted her as one of their own. The small mare became Private Reckless.



In March 1953 the 5th Marines were engaged in a particularly violent struggle known as the Battle for Outpost Vegas. During one day of that engagement Reckless made 51 trips from the ammunition supply point to the frontline positions, most of them on her own.

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Pendleton Trained Marine in WWII

In 1942, as the military services rapidly expanded from 1.8 million to over 12 million men and women in uniform in 1945, the Marine Corps searched for a West Coast base to support the war in the Pacific.

In that same year, the government paid \$4.2 million for the 200 square miles encompassing Camp Pendleton. During World War II, thousands of Marines trained and deployed through Pendleton as part of the onslaught of fighting in the Pacific.

One of those Marines was Corporal Robert L. Williams, a teenager who fought at Roi-Namur and Saipan before being wounded twice. The following is a summary of a recorded interview with Cpl. Williams provided to the Camp Pendleton Historical Society by his daughter, Pam Rose. The interview, about his wartime experiences, was recorded just a few years ago by the Veterans' Breakfast Club of Pittsburgh.

While Cpl. Williams' story is unique, his experiences are representative of the members of the Greatest Generation who left their youth and their legacy in Southern California.

On December 7, 1941, Bob Williams was a 17-year-old high school senior, working that Sunday in a confectionery store in Redding, Pennsylvania. Like many others', his first thought when he learned of the Japanese attack was, "Where is Pearl Harbor?"

Unable to enlist at 17 without his parents' permission, he was forced to wait until he completed high school, in May 1942.

When asked what he remembered about Parris Island (PI), South Carolina, and recruit training in June 1942, he had vivid recollections of yelling drill instructors, slogging through sand with heavy gear, drenching 120-degree heat and humidity, and swarming clouds of mosquitoes.

Recruits from Bob's platoon woke him in the middle of one night because he was gasping for air. Billeted in tents and without mosquito netting, Bob had pulled what was now a sweat-drenched sheet over his body for protection against the biting insects. The sheet had become so soaked that he could barely breathe. He and many others spent the rest of the night in the showers seeking relief. Days later the supply system and massive World War II construction program caught up. Bob's platoon moved from tents to real barracks, and they received mosquito netting.

Eight recruits died from the heat at PI. Training was halted until heat conditions improved. Many of the Marines eventually had orders to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, as units were being formed from whole cloth.



Bob Williams in bootcamp at P.I. Note the bolt action Springfield rifles still in service in the early years of WWII.

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Ultimately shipping out to Camp Pendleton, Bob's 1st Separate Company was re-designated Company A, 1st Battalion, 24th Marine Regiment. The regiment was just being formed to become the 4th Marine Division, along with the 25th and 26th Regiments.

At the end of 1943, those units boarded ship as part of the landing force assigned to take Roi-Namur in the Marshall Islands. It was one of many battle sites unknown to Americans until the war awakened the sleeping nation.

Card games among the Marines relieved the boredom of shipboard routine. For Bob, it was bridge. He later quipped that while most would use the common phrase "a lot of water under the bridge," he and his bridge partners would say that they had a lot of bridge over the water.

Roi-Namur, an island of less than one square mile in the Kwajalein atoll, was the 4th Marine Division target in the battle of Kwajalein. The battle raged from the end of January until early February 1944. In the end, only 51 of the more than 3,500 Japanese defenders were still alive.

The Japanese were experts in constructing mutually supporting fortified positions, so Marine units formed assault squads, whose mission was to attack and eliminate the bunkers one by one. Each squad had a bazooka group, flames and demolitions. Bob's assault group employed bangalore torpedoes, satchel charges and beehive rounds, in addition to their normal rifles and pistols.

Bob's graphic descriptions of the chaos and confusion of amphibious operations, the SNAFUs (Situation Normal, All Fouled Up), are engrossing. During the initial assault, his Higgins boat was very nearly taken out before reaching the beach when a telephone pole size log somersaulted over their craft, landing only a few feet behind them. Later he learned that Marine engineers on the island had blown an enemy blockhouse filled with aerial torpedoes, causing the unexpected hazardous debris. It went downhill from there.

The near miss so unnerved the craft's coxswain that he put the ramp down and told the Marines they were at the beach. Thinking they were in a few inches of water, they stepped off into waist high seawater that threw them off balance, and many went under, only to bounce back up and wade to the shore.

Failing to find their company, the assault squad fell in behind one of the Marine tanks and moved inland through heavy palm groves and sandy terrain. In a surprise ambush, a lone Japanese soldier jumped on the leading tank and dropped a hand grenade into a hatch that had been inadvertently left open. Of the four-man crew, one was killed instantly, two were unhurt and one - the tank commander - was critically burned. The assault squad Marines grabbed the tank commander by his arms and legs to medevac him. As Bob held onto an arm, the skin slid off in his hands. The severely injured Marine did not live.

Fighting continued for several days. At one point Bob was returning fire from a sniper when his weapon jammed. Jumping in a foxhole to seek cover and fix his rifle, he looked up to see four Japanese soldiers sitting, dead, each with his rifle in his mouth. To Bob, they looked like dolls that had been hit on the head with a hammer.

As the battle came to an end, Bob realized how cheap life can be: Life is special, and then it's not; you could be talking to someone one minute and five minutes later, he is dead.

Saipan was next in the island hopping campaign. Company A was part of the reserve and landed in the afternoon. Although the beach had been cleared and the company was able to land on the pier, the fighting was far from over. Heavy and accurate Japanese artillery fire caused the Marines to dig in each night. From the volume and accuracy of the rounds, it was apparent that a spotter was in the Marine rear area. When Bob was digging his hole, he unearthed communications wire and cut it. That was the last they experienced any accurate artillery fire.

On July 4, 1944, while clearing buildings in a small town, Bob got hit in the right hand with fragmentation, but he refused to be medevaced. Three days later, he was again wounded during the final Japanese assault. An enemy grenade landed next to his leg, and he dove for a bomb crater to avoid the blast. He didn't realize he had been hit until he tried to use his arm and it just flopped around. He was placed in a jeep under another Marine who was severely wounded and continued to bleed on Bob.

The wounded were evacuated to New Caledonia by ship. During the transit, a doctor and Bob shared a moment on deck leaning against the railing to get some fresh air, when the doctor noticed Bob's hand turning black. The doc was appalled. This was the first doctor that Williams had seen since being wounded. On the deck, the doctor reset his arm so it could start the healing process.

Sixteen of the evacuees eventually died and were buried at sea during the transit. Bob was medically discharged.

Robert L. Williams was 17 when he enlisted. He turned 18 at Camp Lejeune and 19 at Camp Pendleton. By the age of 20, and within ten months of leaving the States, he had fought in two major Pacific campaigns, been medically evacuated, and returned to Pennsylvania. During his out-processing, he was notified he had orders to OCS but did not go because of his wounds. He would have been a brand new shavetail for the invasion of Iwo Jima.

After discharge, Bob became a self-employed painter and paperhanger. He put two daughters through college and paid for two big weddings.

Our sincere thanks go to Pam Rose for providing this transcript of the Bob Williams interview.

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She carried over 300 rounds, more than 9,000 lbs, across 35 miles of rice paddies and steep mountain trails to her fellow Marines. After offloading her supplies, she carried the wounded back to the aid station. Reckless was wounded twice, but never faltered. If there had been a strong bond between two and four legged Marines before, it was cemented forever by her heroic actions that day. In recognition of her bravery she was promoted meritoriously to corporal.

When the 5th Marines returned to Camp Pendleton in 1954, Reckless came with them. She lived the remainder of her days at the Camp Pendleton stables. Over the years she had three foals: Dauntless, Fearless, and Chesty. In 1957 General Randolph McCall Pate, Commandant of the Marine Corps, awarded her a final promotion to staff sergeant (E-6). Although she was never again asked to risk her life under fire, she played a central role in regimental ceremonies. After her death Reckless was buried at the Base stables with full military honors.

It will cost \$125,000 to prepare, ship, and install a bronze monument to Reckless aboard Camp Pendleton. When in place, it will look very much like one installed at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in July 2013. CPHS will assist with the fundraising and will match all money raised, up to \$30,000, with funds already in our accounts. Soon we will send information on how you can help make this project successful. I hope that you will join the cause. Remember that with CPHS's matching promise, each dollar contributed becomes two dollars!



Mark September 13 on your calendars and plan to attend our annual fundraiser. We will hold it at the Las Flores Adobe this year. All profits will go to the Reckless Monument Fund.

I thank you again for your continued support and look forward to reporting to you in our next newsletter.

Richard B. Rothwell

Event Alert

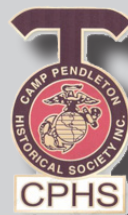
Battle Colors Ceremony
at School of Infantry,
Thursday, March 13, at 3:30 pm.
Please see flyer from
Jerry Polyascko for details.



www.camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org

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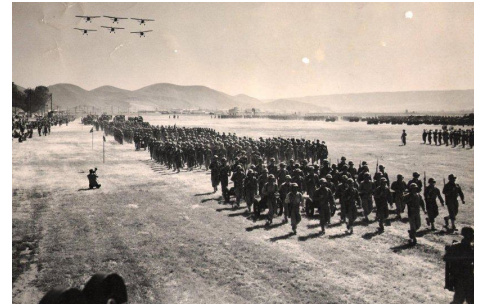
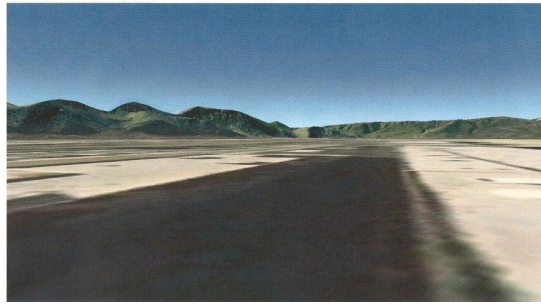
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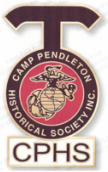
Parade Mystery Unraveled

CPHS member Wanda Prosser responded to the parade mystery in last quarter's *Groundbreaker* by sending us the truly remarkable image shown right, next to the original parade photo. About this image Wanda says, "This is a



picture from Google Earth which I think answers the question of where the mystery parade took place. It is just southwest of the Ranch House where the airfield is. Google Earth can't drive the streets on Pendleton, but they can take an aerial shot. When you bring the aerial shot down to ground level, it smears all of the buildings, airstrip, helos, etc., leaving the dark and sandy look. Notice the background hills and compare with the photo in the newsletter and see what you think." Indeed, the skylines in both the original picture and the Google Earth image appear identical, leaving little doubt that the parade took place where the airfield is now located.

Other aspects of the parade mystery were addressed in a letter to the editor from the photo's original owner, Lt.Col. Jim Hitz, USMC (Ret.), who was in that parade. The event was called a Combat Review, and the unit on parade, in his words, was "pretty much the whole damn 1st Mar Div," although greatly attenuated by drawdowns following WWII and before Korea. The wheeled objects were M4 Hand Carts, designed primarily for carrying the M1917A1 Heavy Machine Gun. The aircraft were OEs from VMO-6, whom Lt.Col. Hitz describes as "our stalwart companions in the days of the Brigade in Korea as well as in peacetime CampPen."



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