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General Smedley Darlington Butler: The Letters of a Leatherneck, 1898-1931

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Major General Smedley Darlington Butler needs no introduction to naval historians. Answering the call to the colors in the Spanish-American War, he served in forest green until his loud mouth and penchant for the hyperbole drove him into retirement in 1931. In that time, Butler amassed more days of overseas campaigning than the majority of his contemporaries, and he certainly earned more than his share of tropical sweat stains and powder burns on his uniforms in the process. But along the way, during which he earned two Medals of Honor, General Butler became disenfranchised from his beloved Leathernecks when the Marine Corps discarded colonial infantry duties as its *raison d'être* and moved to embrace a mission of amphibious assault in support of the fleet.

Complete collections of the correspondence of prominent Marines of this era are almost nonexistent. Few officers bothered to save letters until they became famous. In other instances, manuscript collections that should have been fairly whole bear evidence of tampering, as family members removed materials that appeared to tarnish an officer's professional image. Butler's letters home, often written by candlelight after a grueling forced march through the jungles, offer perhaps the only complete firsthand account of an officer's

professional life during these halcyon times. The letters are maintained by General Butler's son, Tom, in the family home in Newton, Pennsylvania, and access to them has been permitted to serious students of naval history. Through a process of selection, editing, and annotation, Venzon presents the irrepressible Butler in the general's own words. Like Hans Schmidt in his contentious biography of Butler, *Maverick Marine: General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History* (Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1987), the editor of this volume has attempted to portray General Butler as the pinnacle of military professionalism and the harbinger of a new style of leadership for the Marine Corps of the interwar era.

On the selection of letters in this finely crafted volume, students of naval history could hardly reach any conclusion other than that of either Venzon or Schmidt. Yet, the inclusion of additional correspondence which reveals a darker side of Butler might dissuade such an observation. Correspondence from Butler or about him found in the manuscript collections of his contemporaries or superiors suggests a fawning careerist, a habitual and pathetic complainer, and an officer quickly bored by the usual round of duties, who was too eager to opt for a new assignment. To attempt to come to grips with the mercurial Butler through this edition of his papers requires that the reader have a substantial knowledge about the Marine Corps, especially given the

brevity of the footnotes and the paucity of the explanatory passages accompanying the letters. Even though such additional and revealing correspondence may not have found a space in this volume, an editor, a stream-of-consciousness historian, has a professional obligation to draw the reader's attention to such materials—however disparaging they might be.

An underlying current of contention, often painful, that existed throughout Butler's career is touched upon in this volume. Between 1883 and 1897, all of the Corps' new second lieutenants came from among the graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy. However, from 1898 until the World War One era, successive commandants of the Marine Corps took their new officers, like Butler, directly from civil life. As the early Annapolitans came to dominate the Marine Corps, Butler and his peers grew increasingly critical, as a result of the apparent bias shown to their better-educated contemporaries with regard to promotions and assignments. Butler complained bitterly to his father, who sat on the powerful House Naval Affairs Committee, but to little avail until 1920, when Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels sacked the sitting commandant and replaced him with John A. Lejeune. In a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt (not included or cited in this volume), the wily Daniels revealed that he intended for Butler to succeed Lejeune; but three successive Republican administrations put the scheme asunder.

The editor includes correspondence relative to Butler's failed attempt to gain the Corps' highest post in 1930. By then, Butler had simply angered too many important officials within the Department of the Navy and the Hoover administration. In an appointment that outraged both Butler and his supporters, the mild-mannered and undistinguished Ben H. Fuller received the nod—apparently because he had a diploma from the Naval Academy. However, Butler never knew that Secretary of the Navy Charles Francis Adams and President Herbert Hoover had selected as second choice Logan Feland, who, like Butler, had been commissioned directly from civil life.

Readers of Marine Corps history will find Venzon's volume useful and interesting, but I suggest that they buttress their reading with more balanced histories of the era to help understand the role that the Corps' *enfant terrible* played. Allan R. Millett's *Semper Fidelis: The History of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Macmillan, 1980) and Jack Shulimson's dissertation, "The Marine Corps' Search for a Mission, 1880–1898" (Univ. of Maryland, 1992 and Univ. Press of Kansas, October, 1993), are indispensable.

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