

Marines in World War II Commemorative Series

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Marine Detachment:
American Embassy,
London, England

A DIFFERENT WAR: Marines in Europe and North Africa **by Lieutenant Colonel Harry W. Edwards, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)**

Assignment to London

It is interesting to note that, when the 1st Provisional Brigade went ashore at Reykjavik, Iceland, it was met on the dock by Major Walter I. Jordan and members of his 12th Provisional Marine Company. These 11 Marines were survivors of the torpedoing and sinking of the Dutch transport, SS *Maasdam*, by a German submarine 300 miles south of Iceland on 26 June. They were rescued and taken to Iceland on the SS *Randa*. The men had formed an advance detail of Major Jordan's unit, en route from the Marine Barracks in Washington for assignment in London. Reembarked on the SS *Volendam*, they finally reached London on 15 July, there to join forces with 48 other Marines, including three officers, Captain John B. Hill and First Lieutenants Roy J. Batterton, Jr., and Joseph L. Atkins. These three officers had been embarked on another Dutch transport, the SS *Indraporia*, which made the crossing without mishap. The 59-man organization was designated the Marine Detachment, American Embassy. A second echelon arrived about six months later.

The table of organization for this detachment had been prepared in London sometime earlier by Major John C. McQueen, at the request of Admiral Robert L. Ghormley, Assistant Chief of Naval Operations, who was in England at the time.



A Marine duty NCO checks in visitors to the American Embassy in London, while other Marines stand guard at the entrance and the check-in point.

Photo courtesy of Col Roy J. Batterton, USMC (Ret)

Major McQueen had been sent to London in the prewar period in 1940. He traveled in civilian clothes on a ship, *Duchess of Richmond*, and arrived in London during a German air raid. After reporting to the American Embassy, he went to Inveraray, Scotland, to observe the training of Royal Marines and especially to study the landing craft in use by the British. Marine Major Arthur T. Mason accompanied McQueen on this visit. Mason benefited from these contacts in his subsequent duty assignment to the combined operations section on the staff of the Supreme Commander Southeast Asia, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten.

While McQueen was in London, he was concerned about the lack of security at the American Embassy at 1 Grosvenor Square and made some comments to that effect. The American Ambassador, John Winant, was so impressed that he gave McQueen the job of embassy security officer.



London Marines also served as fire wardens during the Nazi air raids on the city, and were prepared to put out fires on the roof of their detachment quarters in Grosvenor Square in 1942. They were to remain here for the rest of the war. *Photo courtesy of Col Roy J. Batteredon, USMC (Ret)*

Before leaving to return to Washington, he was entrusted with a classified

instrument to be delivered to the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). He had some anxious moments en route home through the Azores, since it was considered to be a den of spies at that time. Upon arrival in New York, he was met, unexpectedly, by strangers in civilian clothes. He thought surely they were out to waylay him, only to learn that they were ONI security men. He was relieved when he delivered his precious cargo to Washington: a top-secret radar device invented by the British and specifications for its manufacture. It was greatly superior to equipment then in development in the United States.

McQueen was but one of a succession of Marine officers ordered to London during this period before the war and continuing throughout the war. Most of them held the title of "assistant naval attache" (ANA) or "special naval observer" (SNO). The ANA designation enabled one to travel on a diplomatic passport and to enjoy many of its privileges, including immunity from arrest in the host country. An attache was a member not only of the official staff of the American Ambassador to Great Britain, but also of the diplomatic corps, composed of all of the foreign governmental representatives resident in London. An attache also could be accredited to the London embassy while being designated as ANA in other countries. This was the case with several Marine officers, who were accredited to London and assigned to Cairo and other capitals.

Once established in London, the Marine Detachment, American Embassy, under command of Major Walter I. Jordan, with Captain John B. Hill as executive officer, became the official reporting echelon for nearly all Marine personnel serving in Europe and Africa, including those on temporary duty and those attached to the OSS. The detachment was billeted at 20 Grosvenor Square, which was known at that time as the American Embassy Annex.

Major Jordan and Captain Hill both held the title of ANA and their duties took them to various parts of the United Kingdom as Special Naval Observers (SNOs). Jordan was the only detachment commander to carry this added title. None of the three officers who succeeded him in the post — Captain Thomas J. Myers, First Lieutenant Alan Doubleday, and Captain Harry W. Edwards — were so designated.

Initially, the detachment roster showed a strength of four officers and 55 enlisted men. Since this was the first embassy detachment in London for the Marine Corps, the enlisted personnel were selected with emphasis on intelligence and military bearing; many of them had previously served in the 1939 World's Fair Detachment in New York. When the second echelon of the 12th Provisional Marine Company arrived in December 1941 with 2 more officers and 62 enlisted Marines, the strength swelled to 123. The two additional officers were Captain Walter Layer and First Lieutenant Thomas J. Myers.



Maj John C. McQueen was ordered to England in 1940 to observe the training of Royal Marines

Before departure from America, all members of the detachment were outfitted with a complete civilian wardrobe, purchased from the Hecht Company in Washington, D.C., with a government clothing allowance. It was U.S. policy, prior to the declaration of war, to have military personnel travel in civilian clothes when en route to countries which were at war.

and to study the types of British landing craft. While in London, he was appointed Embassy security officer by Ambassador Winant. Department of Defense (USMC) A49691

The mission of the London detachment was to provide security for the American Embassy and to furnish escorts for State Department couriers. Sergeant John H. Allen, Jr., was assigned duty as orderly to the American Ambassador. The unit's billet on Grosvenor Square was close to the American Embassy, a very prestigious address in peacetime, but a tempting target in wartime. The Marines established their own mess, appointed an air raid precaution officer and, with the arrival of Harley-Davidson motorcycles equipped with sidecars, operated a courier service between the Embassy and various governmental staff offices in London. Warrant Officer George V. Clark organized the service, modeled after one that he operated in Shanghai, China, for the 4th Marines during 1937-1939.

As with all services, the immediate prewar era was a period of rapid expansion for the Marine Corps. Marine aviation, which would grow from 240 pilots in 1940 to 10,000 in 1944, focused much of its attention on the Royal Air Force (RAF), whose effective air defense in the Battle of Britain (1940) was one of the greatest military victories of all time. It had severely reduced the strength and combat efficiency of the *Luftwaffe*, the German air force, saved the beleaguered survivors of Dunkirk, and protected England from invasion. Many Marine aviators visited England and Egypt during this time, and what they learned from the RAF would have a profound effect upon the development of tactics and techniques employed by the Marine air arm during World War II.



LtCol Jordan fostered good relations with the Allied services in England, and especially with the Royal Marines. A rifle match was held jointly with them at Portsmouth in 1942. According to the scoreboard, the Royal Marines won.

Photo courtesy of Col Roy J. Batterton, USMC (Ret)

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