



Earl Ellis, c. 1918. Earl H. "Pete" Ellis Collection, COLL/3246, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia.

Marines with Marine Training: Pete Ellis and the Transformation of the Marine Corps

by Andrew Soneson

Outside Pratt, Kansas, and a small band of old-breed Marine officers, Earl “Pete” Hancock Ellis would have remained an obscure footnote in Marine Corps lore if not for Pearl Harbor and the subsequent American assault across the Pacific. By America’s entry into World War II, almost twenty years had elapsed since Ellis’s failed intelligence mission, causing his memory to fade even from the pages of local newspapers. Then, in 1946, John Zimmerman’s *Saturday Evening Post* article “The Marines’ First Spy” introduced Ellis to the greater public, still struggling to comprehend the merciless crucible experienced in the Pacific Theater. Unfortunately, this article contributed more to the increasing mystique surrounding his death than to his rightful place in Marine Corps history.¹ Zimmerman’s article played well to an American public still sensitive to Japanese treachery; however, like many others, he focused too heavily on Ellis’s covert (albeit sloppy) reconnaissance mission and mysterious death in the Caroline Islands in 1923. As we consider Ellis’s life during this centennial anniversary of his passing, the true measure of his historical significance rests on his role in focusing Marines on a mission that would win the war against Japan and secure the future of the Marine Corps as an organization.

This article revises and expands recent interpretations of Lieutenant Colonel Ellis’s contribution to Marine Corps doctrine.² Through pressure from the General Board of the U.S. Navy and his Marine Corps superiors, Ellis helped focus Marines on a specific and necessary mission amid congressional skepticism for funding the Corps. Ellis’s paper “Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia” is remembered primarily for predicting a war between the United States and Japan and advocating that the Marine Corps execute an amphibious assault on the Japanese-held islands in the Pacific. Even today, he receives accolades for his audacious plans to bring American naval might to bear on Japanese waters. A recent analysis remarked, “Ellis recognized the need for offensive amphibious operations to support naval and air operations in a time when they were considered impossible. . . . Ellis ascertained, decades before most, the imperatives of

Andrew Soneson is a former counterintelligence and human source intelligence officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. He earned his MA in history from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and currently teaches history at Springfield Platteview Community Schools in Nebraska.

1. John Zimmerman, “The Marines’ First Spy,” *Saturday Evening Post*, November 1946, 19, 97–99.

2. Historical scholarship on Ellis is divided into two schools. The first period of historiography approached Ellis as the martyr and prophet of amphibious warfare legend. *Secret Mission* by Ellis Zacharias, *Soldiers of the Sea* by Robert Heintz, *Hazard: Marines on Mission* by Marc Parrott, and *The Marine Corps Story* by Robert Moskin hinted at or outright accused the Japanese of murdering Ellis. However, beginning in the 1980s, the second period of historiography focused less on Japanese duplicity and more on Ellis’s self-inflicted alcoholism as the cause of his demise. Dirk Ballendorf and Merrill Bartlett’s *Pete Ellis*, Allan Millett’s *Semper Fidelis*, and Victor Krulak’s *First to Fight* highlight this trend. Ballendorf and Bartlett’s *Pete Ellis* should be viewed as the definitive biography on Ellis, including details of his doomed espionage mission and alcohol-fueled demise. Throughout the entirety of Ellis’s historiography, his contributions to Marine Corps doctrine and development are addressed, but too often they are exaggerated to the point of presenting Ellis as the lone voice arguing for the Marines’ development of amphibious assault doctrine.

warfare in and across the Pacific Ocean.”³

Pete Ellis’s strategic foresight, ambition, and dedication to improving the Marine Corps are indisputable. However, it is crucial to examine his views alongside those of other influential Marines as well as the influence exerted by his superiors. In their totality, Ellis’s contributions to war planning underscore his aspiration to leverage Marine capabilities to solve an identified war problem. After the events of World War II unfolded, interest in Ellis increased because of his apparent foresightedness in helping craft the Marine mission into an approach that helped win the war. Unfortunately, the notion of Ellis creating the Marine amphibious assault mission in the face of hostile disbelief has been misunderstood. This article presents evidence of supportive and assertive higher-level pressure for that very mission that guided Ellis in his pursuit.

The trailblazing spirit Ellis demonstrated in the twentieth century came as little surprise to his contemporaries in Pratt County. Earl Hancock Ellis was born the third child to Augustus and Catherine (Axline) on December 19, 1880, in Iuka, Kansas. Ellis’s grandfathers, Rev. Andrew Axline and J. W. Ellis, had settled Iuka in 1877 as part of a small group of homesteaders from Iowa. At the time of Earl Ellis’s birth, Iuka’s burgeoning streets contained a bank, grocery, drug store, medical office, newspaper, and two blacksmith shops. Axline, who served as a political and religious leader, constructed the Iuka House Hotel, which quickly became the town’s central meeting place.⁴

The promise of better farming conditions enticed Augustus and Catherine Ellis to pack their wagon once again and travel to modern-day Colfax, Washington, in 1882. Unfortunately, the Ellis family encountered agricultural difficulties further west, became frustrated with the conditions there, and moved back to a farmstead between Iuka and

3. B. A. Friedman, *21st Century Ellis: Operational Art and Strategic Prophecy for the Modern Era* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 86.

4. J. Rufus Gray, *Pioneer Saints and Sinners: Pratt County from Its Beginnings to 1900* (Pratt, KS: The Printing Press, 1968), 44–46.

Pratt in 1887. That same year, Pratt High School opened its doors to its first class, but educational opportunities were the exception rather than the rule. Despite Pratt’s population exceeding 1,200 residents in 1900, only three students, including Ellis, graduated from Pratt High School that spring.⁵

Sparse as educational success was for most, Ellis seized on this foundation to learn, especially by reading whatever he could get his hands on. During his senior year, he was elected vice president of the school’s literary society, which offered the chance to study art and culture, debate current events, and participate in book studies.⁶ When he graduated, a local newspaper described him as “one of the brightest young men who has ever graduated from the Pratt high schools, and we expect to hear from him later.”⁷ Even though Ellis’s inquisitive mind and ambition had outgrown Pratt, hear from him they would. Over the following two decades, brief updates in Pratt newspapers continued to chronicle Ellis’s achievements across the globe.

It is unclear what caused Ellis to initially enlist in the Marine Corps following high school, but the lure of adventure and stories of Marine exploits in Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War surely played a role.⁸ Ellis departed from Pratt on August 27, 1900, from the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad station and enlisted in the Marine Corps at a Chicago recruiting station seven days later.⁹ His academic prowess and character, highly praised in Pratt newspapers, must have impressed his superiors; within fifteen months of enlisting, he earned an officer’s commission. Upon learning of the promotion, Department of Justice official and Pratt native

5. Dirk Ballendorf and Merrill Bartlett, *Pete Ellis: Amphibious Warfare Prophet, 1880–1923* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 16–17; “Local Briefs,” *Pratt Republican*, April 26, 1900.

6. “School Notes,” *Pratt Union*, October 12, 1899; Gray, *Pioneer Saints and Sinners*, 144.

7. “Notes,” *Pratt Union*, May 10, 1900.

8. Ballendorf and Bartlett, *Pete Ellis*, 17, 20.

9. Earl Ellis, “The Journal of Earl Ellis: August 31, 1900–September 13, 1900,” folder 15, box 4, COLL/3246, Earl H. Ellis Collection, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia, 2 (hereafter COLL/3246).

John Q. Thompson wrote from Washington that Ellis “has developed into a man of fine physique and . . . our fondest hopes for the great success of this young man will be realized.”¹⁰ On that December day, as the commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC), Col. Charles Heywood, signed Ellis’s commission, he could not have foreseen the immense success and influence young Lieutenant Ellis would have on the Corps’s development of doctrine and its ultimate survival. Subsequently, Ellis’s career presented numerous opportunities to serve with prominent Marine officers and hone his skills as a mission planner and evaluator of terrain and enemy defenses.

Over the next two decades, Ellis held various staff positions under four future commandants: William Biddle, George Barnett, John A. Lejeune, and Wendell Neville. In 1911, he was among the few Marines who attended and graduated from the U.S. Naval War College (NWC). It was during this time that he learned the details of the General Board’s War Plan Orange for potential war with Japan.¹¹ Initial war planning began during the Japanese war scare of 1906–1908. The roots of this scare can be traced to numerous factors, including Japan’s military defeat of Russia, anti-Japanese legislation, widely circulated jingoist newspapers, and mass societal paranoia and racism.¹² Ellis’s time at the NWC propelled him to spend much of the next decade developing theories about the Marine Corps’s role in advanced base operations as part of this planning.

Beginning in 1921, Ellis focused exclusively on planning amphibious operations against the emerging foe.¹³ His paper “Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia” became the official, secret Marine “Operation Plan 712” for war against

Japan. Of the potential enemy, Ellis accurately stated, “Japan is a world power and her army and Navy will doubtless be up to date as to training and material. Considering our consistent policy of non-aggression she will probably initiate the war.”¹⁴ However, the origin of this planning did not develop independently with Ellis. For over a decade, concerns about Japan attacking U.S. interests in the Pacific fueled Navy planning to develop Plan Orange. After completing this paper, Ellis departed on an ill-fated covert mission to refine his plans in the Japanese-held Marshall and Caroline Islands. Unfortunately, when Japanese authorities reported the death of R. H. Ellis of the Hughes Trading Company in May 1923 to the State Department, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps quickly limited their connection to the incident to prevent greater embarrassment stemming from the poorly executed espionage mission.¹⁵

Except for his family, hometown, and a small circle of Marine visionaries, the memory of Ellis faded even as his plans helped transform the Corps to confront an emerging threat in the Pacific. In 2004, Ellis’s cremated remains were exhumed from Greenlawn Cemetery in Pratt and reinterred at Arlington National Cemetery.¹⁶ Additionally, the Pratt Veterans of Foreign Wars post that bore his name no longer stands to greet travelers along U.S. Highway 400. Three miles north of Pratt, along windswept U.S. Highway 281, stands the B-29 All Veterans Memorial Complex. Near the base of the memorial’s flagpole, a concrete-and-granite plaque commemorates a “20th Century Legend and Outstanding Patriot,” one of the few remaining reminders that a native son once contributed to American victory in the Pacific through his prophecy of Japanese aggression and

10. “Climbing the Ladder,” *Pratt Union*, December 12, 1901.

11. Ballendorf and Bartlett, *Pete Ellis*, 53.

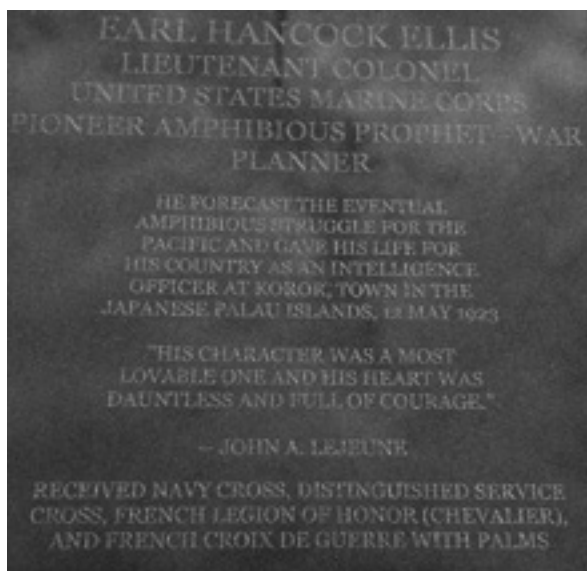
12. Masuda Hajimu, “Rumors of War: Immigration Disputes and the Social Construction of American-Japanese Relations, 1905–1913,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 1 (2009): 35.

13. CMC to Ellis, “Orders to Temporary Duty,” April 2, 1921, Ellis Official Military Personnel Files, National Personnel Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration, Saint Louis, Missouri (hereafter Ellis File).

14. Earl Ellis, “Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia, Operation Plan 712J,” approved on July 23, 1921, folder 20, box 3, COLL./3246, 11 (hereafter “Advanced Base Operations”).

15. CMC to Secretary of the Navy, “Request to Leave the Continental Limits of the United States,” May 4, 1921, Ellis File; Chief Special Agent of Washington, DC, to Secretary of State, May 21, 1923, Ellis File.

16. B-29 Museum Media, “LtCol Earl H. Ellis USMC Funeral, 17 November 2004,” YouTube, April 12, 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=N5sxb6jUFls](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5sxb6jUFls).



B-29 All Veterans Memorial Plaque for Pete Ellis. Photograph courtesy of the author.

America’s need for an amphibious force capable of seizing islands in the Pacific. Much of Ellis’s status as a prophet is owed to his predictions and recommendations in “Advanced Base Operations.”

Long before Ellis wrote of Japan’s potential aggression, *Harper’s Weekly* stoked readers’ fears with exaggerated prospects of a possible Japanese invasion of California. The jingoistic writer Homer Lea, more than a decade before Ellis, had predicted war with Japan in his eight-part series “The Valor of Ignorance.” Following Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905, Lea contended that Japan had no political or military restraints on expansion aside from American possessions in the Pacific. He argued that America’s most plausible scenario for war lay in Japan’s continued ambitions for expansion. Lea emphasized the significance not of naval warships but of naval transports, asserting that Japanese strength and American weakness in amphibious shipping jeopardized America’s Pacific territories. Furthermore, he theorized that Japan could land two hundred thousand troops along the West Coast in a single landing.¹⁷ Many of Lea’s claims seem

17. Homer Lea, “The Valor of Ignorance: The Vulnerability of the United States to Armed Invasion,” *Harper’s Weekly*, September 18, 1909, 7, 27; Homer Lea, “The Valor of Ignorance: The Vulnerability of the United States to Armed Invasion,” *Harper’s Weekly*, October 2, 1909, 15.

absurd in hindsight; however, they underscored the growing angst surrounding the security of America’s possessions in the Pacific.

The Navy was much less concerned with Japan landing forces in California. However, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) had been aware of Japan’s covetous eyes on the Philippines since the early 1900s. Beginning in 1905, the ONI vastly expanded its network of military attachés in Asia, driven by the belief that Japan was the most likely U.S. adversary in the Pacific.¹⁸ ONI observers noted that the prominent Japanese strategist Admiral Sato Tetsutaro advocated that Japanese naval planning center around the United States as Japan’s “hypothetical enemy.”¹⁹ By this point, U.S. war planners had initiated planning in response to escalating tensions provoked by anti-Japanese immigration legislation. In October 1906, Admiral George Dewey informed President Theodore Roosevelt that the General Board had prepared Plan Orange as a contingency.²⁰

This was where Lieutenant Ellis entered the series of events that would shape his and the Marine Corps’s future. Ellis first deployed overseas from 1902 to 1904 as part of the marine detachment charged with pacifying the Philippine Insurrection, which coincided with the end of the Spanish-American War. In November 1907, he again received orders to the Philippines and reported to Marine brigade commander (and future CMC) Colonel William Biddle at his Manila headquarters. Biddle ordered Ellis to Subic Bay, where he eventually served directly under then Major Lejeune.²¹ During his three-year overseas tour, Ellis had a chance to forge close relationships and prove his worth to two of the most influential Marines of the early 1900s.

Throughout his deployments to the Philippines, Ellis gained insight into Japan’s increasing power

18. Eric Setzekorn, “Open Source Information and the Office of Naval Intelligence in Japan, 1905–1920,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 27, no. 2 (March 2014): 369–70.

19. *Ibid.*, 372–73.

20. Edward Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 21–22.

21. Ballendorf and Bartlett, *Pete Ellis*, 43–44.

in the region. His initial encounter with the Japanese military occurred while he was part of an American naval delegation visiting Chinese Empress Dowager Cixi in 1903. While in Peking, he observed the Japanese army and called them “magnificent soldiers” and “the finest foreign troops in Peking.” Soon, his letters home to Pratt not only asked about Kansas wheat prospects but also spoke of the eye-opening Japanese victories in the Russo-Japanese War.²²

During his second Philippine deployment, Ellis also witnessed firsthand the Japanese War Scare of 1906–1908, an event that probably influenced Homer Lea’s aforementioned articles. Ellis appeared to downplay the significance of the “scare” in a letter to his father, referring to it as mere newspaper “rot.” Upon returning to the United States in 1911, Ellis secured a few weeks’ leave in Pratt to visit friends and family. During this visit, a local newspaper article reported with pride the confirmation of John Q. Thompson’s earlier expectations regarding Ellis’s potential, stating, “All of the old time friends of the Pratt County boy who has ‘made good’ in the government service and now wears with dignity and honor the title of Captain, are glad to welcome him home.”²³

Although his time overseas had earned him the admiration of his hometown, Ellis now encountered a pivotal moment in his career. Upon returning to Washington, Captain Ellis unsuccessfully applied for flight training. While his request failed, Ellis had sought to place himself at the forefront of military innovation. Despite the setback, this failure led to another promising opportunity. His meeting with now Maj. Gen. and CMC William Biddle concerning his training request prompted Biddle to recommend Ellis’s enrollment at the NWC. While Ellis was there, his professional writings demonstrated his commitment to tackling the

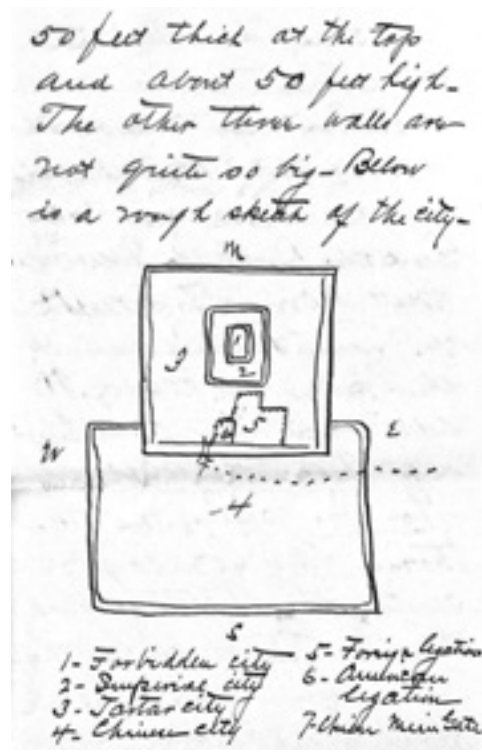


Diagram from Ellis’s time as part of the American naval delegation visiting Chinese Empress Dowager Cixi in 1903. Earl H. “Pete” Ellis Collection, Box 1, Folder 15, COLL/3246, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia.

problem of the Navy’s need for advanced coaling and logistics bases. While he was at the NWC in 1913, Ellis published the confidential four-part portfolio “Naval Bases.” The portfolio included sections on the location of naval bases, the denial of naval bases to the enemy, the security of advanced bases, and the advanced base force. That same year, Ellis delivered a lecture on these theories to a wider Navy audience in Norfolk, Virginia.²⁴

Ellis’s early writings exhibit the influence of his time spent at the NWC studying naval tactics and Admiral Mahan’s theories concerning sea power while discussing the war problems concerning Plan Orange. By 1911, collaborative efforts between

22. Earl Ellis to Catherine Ellis, June 17, 1903, folder 15, box 1, COLL/3246; Earl Ellis to Catherine Ellis, June 3, 1904, folder 16, box 1, COLL/3246.

23. Earl Ellis to A. W. Ellis, February 20, 1908, folder 16, box 1, COLL/3246; “Home from the Philippines,” *Pratt Republican*, March 16, 1911.

24. Ellis to CMC, “Requests Duty in Connection with Aviation,” May 22, 1911, Ellis File; Earl Ellis, “Naval Bases,” 1913, series 1, folder 11, box 79, Naval Historical Collection, RG-0008, Intelligence and Technical Archives, Naval Historical Center, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI (hereafter Naval Bases Portfolio). This portfolio should not be confused with Ellis’s later work “Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia.” However, it does represent his first professional writing on the subject. “Naval Yard News,” *Ledger-Dispatch* (Norfolk, VA), April 5, 1913.

the NWC and the General Board had refined Plan Orange. The plan incorporated a rapid naval advance to immediately recapture the Philippines (which the planners assumed would quickly fall to Japan) and engage the Japanese fleet in the Western Pacific.²⁵ As this strategy gained consensus across the two organizations, higher-level decisions prompted Ellis to address the problem from the Marine Corps's perspective.

Ellis's words echoed the revised Plan Orange by stating, almost verbatim, the need for "a rapid advance" to the Philippines. The objective was to quickly seize the required coaling station and move on to the primary target of the Japanese fleet without risking U.S. ships in a drawn-out amphibious operation. He emphasized this by stating, "Modern men are cheap and are replaceable in war; modern battleships are expensive and are not replaceable in war."²⁶ The first half of Ellis's portfolio repeated standard naval dogma, and it was not until his third paper of the portfolio, titled "The Security of Advanced Bases and Advanced Base Operations," that he proposed new Marine contributions to Project Orange planning.

In his third paper, Ellis broached the topic of the amphibious assault on and seizure of advanced naval bases. Ellis theorized that Japan would deny the United States access to advanced naval bases, thereby necessitating a force capable of conducting opposed landing operations. He then listed the advantages and disadvantages of various islands between the Philippines and Japan that Marines could seize for an advanced base. Ellis then outlined the three essential functions that he envisioned for the advanced base force: executing opposed amphibious landings, defending harbors, and "perform[ing] all operations with the greatest rapidity."²⁷

The fourth part of the "Naval Bases" portfolio, titled "The Advanced Base Force," likely had the most significant impact on future Marine operations

because it laid out a series of actions required before the Marine Corps could become the Navy's advanced base force. Most of his recommendations concerned placing Marine officers on all naval planning, operations, and intelligence boards.²⁸ However, two of Ellis's recommendations played a significant role in his later writings and his secret mission to the islands under the Japanese South Seas Mandate (also known as the Mandates).

One recommendation in the conclusion of "The Advanced Base Force" concerned the culture and indoctrination of Marines to the advanced base mission. Ellis proposed the formation of a Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) board to resolve debates regarding the Corps's primary mission. Furthermore, Ellis recommended that the board's findings "be diffused throughout the Marine Corps so that all may know the mission of the Corps, and thereby secure unity of thought and action in the preparation for its execution." Later confusion among Marine officers concerning their primary mission indicates that unifying around the advanced base mission was anything but a foregone conclusion. Ellis's other recommendation seemingly foretold his final mission and demise in Micronesia. He advised that "officers thoroughly conversant with the work to be performed by the Marine Corps make the necessary reconnaissances of probable theatres of operations."²⁹ When Ellis died on Koror Island, he exemplified this leadership and lived by the recommendations he had made a decade prior.

Before attributing excessive credit to Ellis for the development of an amphibious assault or advanced base mission in isolation, it is imperative to acknowledge prior visionaries and higher-level planners. In March 1911, two months before Ellis

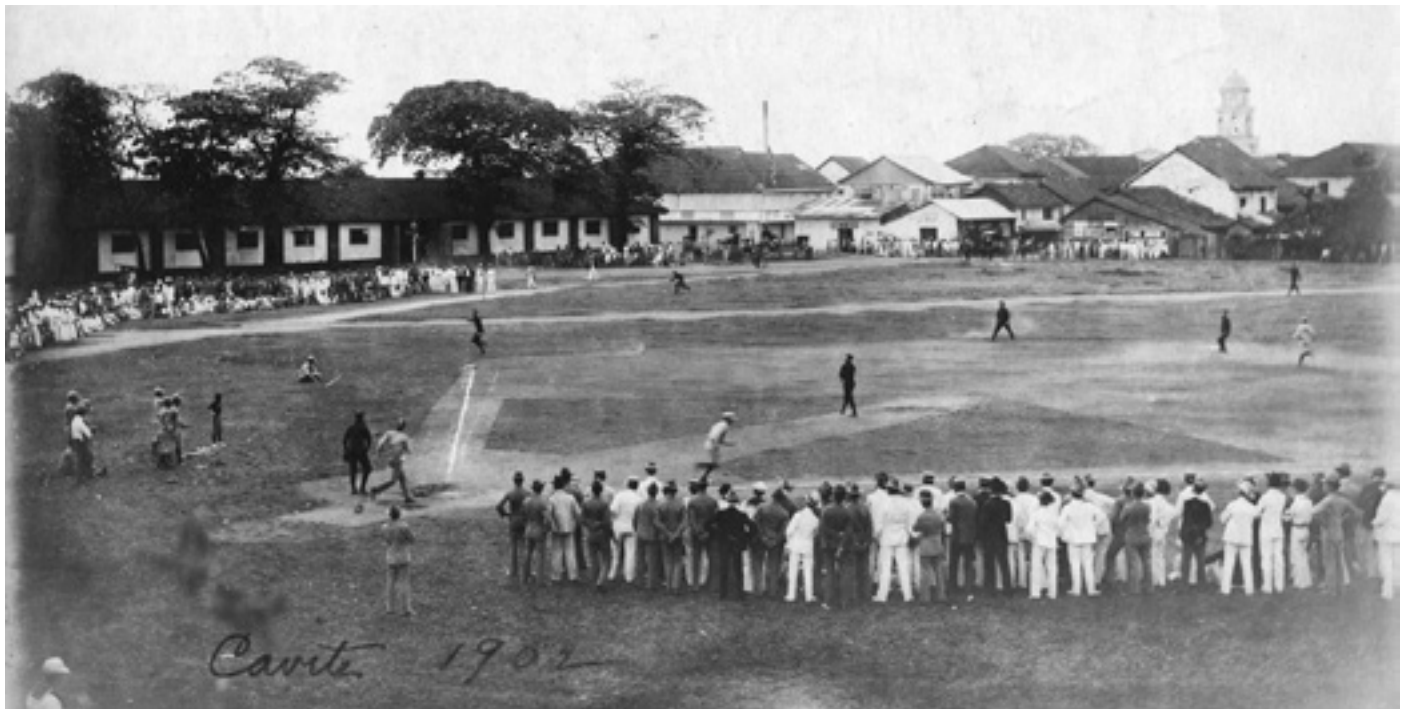
28. Earl Ellis, "The Advanced Base Force," Naval Bases Portfolio, 6. While it is not clear whether Ellis's recommendations concerning the placement of Marine officers on naval boards influenced the decision, Major General Barnett joined the General Board in June 1915, and he was joined on the board by Lt. Col. Dion Williams in November 1915. See General Board Memo, June 29, 1915, and November 5, 1915, Proceedings and Hearings of the General Board of the U.S. Navy, 1900-1950, roll 3, RG 64, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

29. Ellis, "The Advanced Base Force," 7.

25. Miller, *War Plan Orange*, 69-70.

26. Ellis, "Naval Bases," Naval Bases Portfolio, 19, 24.

27. Earl Ellis, "The Security of Advanced Bases and Advanced Base Operations," Naval Bases Portfolio, 6-7, 11.



Ellis managed the Marine baseball team while in Cavite, shown here playing a game in 1902. Earl H. "Pete" Ellis Collection, COLL/3246, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia.

reported to the NWC, another student, Maj. Henry C. Davis, penned an important founding document on Marine amphibious warfare. Davis's article stressed the need to establish an advance base school to develop and test the doctrine of seizing advanced bases. He even recommended that this training force embark with the Navy's winter fleet maneuvers to test this new mission. Davis asserted that, at the very least, Marines should be allowed to test the amphibious assault mission to assess its feasibility. He stated, "Only when we have tried and have seen the willing but ignorant application of force to the problem in peace time can we realize what the result will be in war."³⁰ Davis recognized that the chaos and stress of war was no time to begin mission planning around a doctrine that had not even been practiced in the calm of peace.

Six months later, Davis exhibited significantly more confidence in his writings concerning the advanced base mission and the Marine Corps's prospective role. Again, writing in *Naval Institute*

Proceedings, Davis focused on the mission and doctrine of the Marine Corps. He proclaimed that Marine officers must embrace their mission to be at the Navy's disposal for advanced base missions, citing the problem presented by a rising Japan in the East. He even quoted Homer Lea's "The Valor of Ignorance" to underscore his argument. This assertion was bold considering that Marines had never tested the mission as envisioned, and debates within the Corps regarding its proper role remained unsettled. Next, Davis explained the training for all Marine officers in the skills—infantry, artillery, and signals—needed to accomplish this mission. While Davis's writings did not establish Marine Corps doctrine, they revealed that some belief existed within Marine officer ranks that Marines should assume the advance base and possibly the amphibious assault mission, predating any publications on the topic by Ellis. The fact that *Proceedings* published Davis's views multiple times indicates that Marines filling the advanced base role was an acceptable proposition among

30. Henry Davis, "Advance Base Training," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 37, no. 1 (1911): 95–96, 99.

professional naval officers.³¹

Forty years after Ellis's death, an article in the *Courier Journal* continued the martyr legend, stating, "[Ellis] was a prophet without honor. In 1921—20 years before the fact—he predicted there would be a war between the United States and Japan. . . . Pete Ellis was damned as a warmonger."³² Yet, contrary to this legend, Ellis had not stood alone in recognizing the threat posed by Japan. Homer Lea's fearmongering, and intelligence collection by the ONI identified the growing threat years before Ellis did. The realization of general board planners and Marines such as Major Davis of the absence of a credible advanced base force highlighted that higher-level U.S. Department of War and Navy planners also comprehended the threat. Ellis enhanced his understanding of the Japanese threat during his tenure at NWC, where he learned about the initial war plans already in place.

When he graduated from the NWC in the fall of 1913, Ellis received orders to conduct a reconnaissance of naval facilities in Puerto Rico, focusing on a potential attack by a European power. Ellis's observations and recommendations in Puerto Rico garnered praise from the director of the ONI, who rated the report as "excellent."³³ Most likely due to this ONI rating, Ellis received orders to study the defensive plans of Guam.³⁴ He spent over a year assigned to Guam's military governor, assessing the island's defenses to test the feasibility of Guam serving as the advanced base in the Western Pacific. During his tour, Ellis compiled his

31. Henry Davis, "Some Notes on the Training of Marines for Advance Base Work," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 37, no. 3 (1911): 837. *Proceedings*, which has been a semiofficial conduit for discussing naval doctrine among naval officers since its founding, published two articles by Major Davis after 1911 concerning the advanced base mission: "Mobile Artillery in Advance Bases" in December 1912 and "Building Programs and Naval Bases" in March 1916.

32. Robert Pearman, "Mystery of a U.S. Spy Who Was 20 Years ahead of History," *Courier Journal* (Louisville, KY), November 20, 1962.

33. Eli Cole to Earl Ellis, "Orders to Culebra, P.H., on Reconnaissance Duty," October 29, 1913, Ellis File; Director of Naval Intelligence to Advanced Base School, "Report of Reconnaissance of Culebra Island," January 12, 1914, Ellis File.

34. Rear Admiral Fiske to CMC, "Memorandum for Aid Regarding Defense of Guam," January 23, 1914, Ellis File.

"Report of a Military Reconnaissance of the Island of Guam." This report was a masterful assessment of the defensive limitations of Guam and contained recommendations for necessary improvements. Although Guam's military governor, Capt. William Maxwell of the U.S. Navy, approved Ellis's findings, he did so with reservations. Likewise, Ellis did not mince words concerning the island's defensive preparations. His sarcastic introduction made this clear when he stated, "Reconnaissance was made as though Guam was ENEMY TERRITORY for the undersigned considers it as such until it is properly defended."³⁵

Throughout the report's seventy-seven pages, Ellis showcased an astute ability to evaluate the island's geography and potential enemy capabilities in attacking it. Ultimately, the report accomplished little because of limitations placed on defensive fortifications by the Washington Conference Treaty of 1922. Nevertheless, the report demonstrated Ellis's growing confidence as a military planner and his ability to foresee potential enemy operations. Additionally, Ellis spent significant time on the island with another amphibious operations visionary, the aforementioned Major Davis, who was stationed there.³⁶ Undoubtedly, the two NWC graduates and extensive writers on advanced base operations would have discussed the Marine Corps's mission and role in relation to the growing threat in the Pacific. It is worth noting that Davis is on record as one of the first Marine advocates for the advanced base mission, so he may have further influenced Ellis's thinking on the issue.

Ellis's report further solidified his reputation as a meticulous planner within influential Marine circles. Upon returning to the United States in 1915, Ellis received orders to serve as an aide-de-camp to

35. Earl Ellis, "Report of a Military Reconnaissance of the Island of Guam, 1914-1915," box 23, folder 9, series 1, RG-0008, Naval Historical Collection, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, 2.

36. "Treaty between the United States of America, the British Empire, France, Italy, and Japan, Signed at Washington 6 February 1922," *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: 1922*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1922), 252-53; Capt. William Maxwell to Earl Ellis, February 27, 1915, Ellis File.

CMC Major General Barnett.³⁷ This billet allowed Ellis to serve on numerous boards responsible for determining Marine armament and equipment procurement for future operations, including “advanced base material.”³⁸ Working directly under Barnett’s command, Ellis also reconnected with Brigadier General Lejeune, then serving as an assistant to Barnett at HQMC. Interestingly, Ellis’s tenure as Barnett’s aide-to-camp connected him with yet another future commandant, Thomas Holcomb, who also served as one of Barnett’s aides-de-camp. Holcomb considered Ellis one of his best friends.³⁹ During the 1930s, Holcomb expanded on Ellis’s advanced base theories, developing and testing the new Fleet Marine Force concept and the “Tentative Manual for Landing Operations.” These developments became instrumental for the Navy and Marines in their operations against Japan.⁴⁰

Then, in 1917, Ellis and the entire Marine Corps were swept up in the events of the Great War. World War I was a family affair for Major Ellis, as his mother, Catherine, sent three sons to fight alongside four Pratt-area cousins who also served.⁴¹ While Catherine Ellis was no stranger to the anxiety of having her son Earl stationed overseas, other families in Pratt were on edge, eagerly awaiting news from France. At times, the intensity was such that some families besieged the Pratt post office, anxiously hoping for any word from their loved ones.

Most men from Pratt likely served in the First Ammunition Train of the Kansas National Guard.

37. CMC to Earl Ellis, “Appointment as Aide-de-Camp,” February 10, 1916, Ellis File. With Barnett now serving on the General Board, service as his aide-de-camp probably allowed Ellis access to the upper echelons of naval war planning.

38. CMC to Earl Ellis, “Detail on Board for Advance Base Material,” September 5, 1916, Ellis File.

39. Merrill Bartlett, “John A. Lejeune,” in *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, ed. Allan Millett and Jack Shulimson (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 198; Ballendorf and Bartlett, *Pete Ellis*, 66; Thomas Holcomb to John Ellis, February 14, 1939, folder 25, box 1, COLL/80, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

40. John Gordon, “Thomas Holcomb,” in *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, 263–64.

41. “Axline and Ellis Family Patriotic—7 in the War,” *Hutchinson News*, May 1, 1918.

Many Kansas men joined National Guard units to avoid the draft while serving beside familiar faces and under the command of local officers if ordered to France. President Woodrow Wilson eventually drafted these units into federal service, and the “Pratt Boys” became part of the 117th Ammunition Train, a unit of the Forty-Second Infantry Division.⁴²

While Ellis did not receive orders to report to the American Expeditionary Forces until May 1918, he and the Marine Corps eventually found their reputations buoyed by their performance on the Western Front.⁴³ The Marines proved their worth by adapting to the mission of holding a portion of the trenches northeast of Paris. Ellis served as a regimental adjutant during combat operations along the front, and he received the Distinguished Service Medal and Navy Cross for his actions in planning brigade-level attacks and his heroism during the Battle of Saint-Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The “Pratt Boys” in the 117th Ammunition Train also took part in each of these actions as part of a separate Army unit.⁴⁴ Even though the Marines and Ellis performed admirably in France, World War I distracted the Corps from its future mission. Because of his duties in World War I, Ellis stopped working on the advanced base mission. Additionally, the Marines’ focus as an institution shifted to providing the nation with additional foot soldiers for infantry service in France.

Nevertheless, the General Board remained focused on the potential long-term Japanese threat. By October 1919, the board had yet again revised the strategy of Plan Orange to account for Japan’s recent

42. “Pratt Boys Land Safely,” *Hutchinson News*, December 13, 191; Jeffrey Patrick, “Suspense More Trying Than Death Itself: The Service and Disappearance of Sgt. Frank Orris Pierce in World War I,” *Kansas History* 44, no 2 (Summer 2021): 91–93; “The 42nd ‘Rainbow’ Division,” United States Veterans of the Great War, accessed January 6, 2024, www.vets.org/home/42nd-rainbow-division/.

43. CMC to Earl Ellis, “Orders to Foreign Expeditionary Shore Service,” May 22, 1918, Ellis File.

44. Bureau of Navigation to Brigadier General Wendell, “Medal Legislation and Award of Decoration,” 1 December 1919, and CMC to Earl Ellis, “Transmittal of Navy Cross and Citation,” November 11, 1920, Ellis File; “A Newsy Letter about the Ammunition Train,” *Pratt Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1918.



In the foreground, at the bottom of the stairs in civilian clothes, is Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy. John Lejeune stands directly to his right. Wendell Neville is third from the left. Earl Ellis is at the far left. Photograph probably taken in early 1919. Earl H. "Pete" Ellis Collection, COLL/3246, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia.

occupation of the former German islands in the Pacific. Consequently, holding the almost indefensible island of Guam was no longer deemed a prerequisite to defeating Japan. Ellis's previous work concerning Guam's defense became obsolete; however, the new strategy provided him with the opportunity for his finest hour. The initial phase of the revised Plan Orange called for a consolidation of naval and military forces in the Eastern Pacific. Next, the fleet would advance across the Central and Western Pacific by seizing and occupying the Japanese Mandates to recapture Guam, which planners assumed would fall to Japan in the war's opening phase. Finally, the plan called for using captured Japanese islands to support a blockade of Japan. Ironically, Japanese territorial gains from World War I now presented the United States with a more realistic opportunity to defeat it than the previous plan of attempting to hold

Guam.⁴⁵ The Marine Corps and Ellis soon received their part to play in this revised war plan.

The General Board's decision to revise Plan Orange and plan the seizure of the Japanese Mandates highlighted two wide gaps between American plans and capabilities. First, American intelligence required additional information concerning Japan's defensive strategy for the Mandates. The ONI began intelligence operations in the Mandates in 1915, but until 1922, it relied on debriefings from civilian businessmen, missionaries, and scientists who visited the islands. Approximately 25 percent of the debriefing reports indicated that Japan had begun fortifying the

45. William Braisted, *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1909–1922* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 472. Any lingering hope of holding Guam ended on December 22, 1921, when Japan and the United States agreed in principle to the nonfortification clause of the Washington Treaty. See John Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 27, 32.

islands, but these reports never provided definitive evidence. The effort to locate the elusive Japanese fortifications probably had more to do with future negotiations at the Washington Conference than operational planning. By 1922, the consensus in the Navy was that in the event of war, Japan would be able to fortify its islands before any U.S. forces could attack them.⁴⁶

The second and more critical gap revealed that the Navy lacked the operational ability to amphibiously assault and seize the islands. It lacked the equipment, training, and commitment to the mission. Nonetheless, forward-thinking figures within the Navy and Marines recognized the potential of achieving the advanced base mission through amphibious assault. A significant turning point came in January 1920 when the chief of naval operations (CNO), Adm. Robert Coontz, instructed Barnett that the revised Plan Orange should dictate future Marine Corps planning. Coontz ordered the Marine Corps to prepare an expeditionary force of eight thousand Marines available to sail in forty-eight hours to seize advanced bases in the Marshalls and Carolines.⁴⁷ However, the Marine Corps did not yet possess the capability to achieve this order. At this point, Ellis's views on the issue had not yet fully matured, and his professional writings during 1919 and 1920 do not even mention the advanced base mission.

In 1920, both Admiral Coontz and the ONI were already looking for solutions to the revisions to War Plan Orange. Office of Naval Operations planners Captain Yarnell, Commander Pye, and Lieutenant Commander Frost published a confidential ONI study addressing the need for advanced bases. This document, titled "The Conduct of an Oversea

Naval Campaign," outlined the need to seize and occupy advanced bases in a hypothetical conflict against an unnamed (but clearly Japanese) enemy. It stands to reason that Ellis would have used this study as the basis of his more detailed and Marine-specific "Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia" the following year. While the 1920 ONI study focused primarily on the more general naval aspects of the campaign, it foresaw the imperative of seizing advanced bases. Interestingly, the ONI paper discussed nearly equally either Marines or Army soldiers capturing these bases.⁴⁸

Maj. Gen. John Lejeune's appointment as CMC on July 1, 1920, marked a pivotal moment for the Marine Corps in embracing the amphibious assault mission. Throughout his career, Lejeune had been a forward-thinking officer focused on improving the Marine Corps. In 1911, he cofounded the Marine Corps Association, which, by 1916, had gathered enough money to publish the *Marine Corps Gazette*. The *Gazette* quickly became the semiofficial venue for Marine officers to discuss policy, strategy, tactics, and equipment.⁴⁹

Lejeune penned the *Gazette's* initial article, articulating his feelings about the Marines' proper mission in "The Mobile Defense of Advance Bases by the Marine Corps." This article focused heavily on the defensive nature of advanced base work, probably because Plan Orange at this point emphasized the necessity of defending Guam. Additionally, Japan did not yet have permanent possession of the German Mandates. Despite this defensive focus, Lejeune realized the need for offensive amphibious assault, stating, "The Marine Corps would be the first to set foot on hostile soil in order to seize, fortify, and hold a port from which, as a base, the Army would prosecute its campaign."⁵⁰ Lejeune clearly understood that the Marine Corps's future rested in its close relationship with the Navy

46. Dirk Ballendorf, "Secrets without Substance: U.S. Intelligence in the Japanese Mandates, 1915-1935," *Journal of Pacific History* 19, no. 2 (April 1984): 86. Ballendorf discounted the three reports discussing fortifications because they listed "no hard evidence" to support the claims. Earl Pomeroy, "American Policy Respecting the Marshalls, Carolines, and Marianas, 1898-1941," *Pacific Historical Review* 17, no. 1 (1948): 48-50; Richard Burns, "Inspection of the Mandates, 1919-1941," *Pacific Historical Review* 37, no. 4 (1968): 449.

47. Allan Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 320.

48. Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation*, 130-31; H. H. Frost, W. S. Pye, and H. E. Yarnell, "The Conduct of an Oversea Naval Campaign" (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, October 1920), 7-8.

49. Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 277.

50. John Lejeune, "The Mobile Defense of Advance Bases by the Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette* 1, no. 1 (1916): 2.

and the advanced base mission.

Before Lejeune's appointment, Ellis made one of his final visits to Pratt. The town, which had followed his exploits across the Pacific, Caribbean, and Europe, now invited him to participate in a dinner party to discuss the commercial future of Pratt. Despite Ellis being an infrequent visitor to Pratt over the previous twenty years, community leaders were eager to hear insights from the bright young man who now brought two decades of experience from around the world. The meeting was hosted by Homer E. Shrack, a prominent Pratt businessman, politician, and promotor. Ironically, some of Ellis's earliest letters home from the Philippines had referenced Homer Shrack. Ellis's older brother Ralph had secured the Populist (People's) Party nomination for superintendent of public instruction, and Ralph's opponent in the general election had been none other than Homer Shrack.⁵¹ In one letter to Ralph, Ellis had commented, "Shrack has certainly got the nerve to say you are not qualified. . . . Who does he think he is anyway?"⁵² Ultimately, Shrack won reelection and served in the position for many years. Now, Shrack invited Earl Ellis to address community leaders on Pratt's future. Ellis spoke at the meeting, urging Pratt to strive further to become the economic and cultural hub of all activities in the county.⁵³

As Ellis expressed optimism about Pratt's future, his next overseas assignment left him disillusioned with the mission his nation had assigned to the Marine Corps. Ellis served with the Second Marine Brigade, fighting antigovernment rebels in the Dominican Republic.⁵⁴ While in Santo Domingo, Ellis penned a highly influential *Gazette* article outlining basic counterinsurgency strategy. In one notable line, the reader can sense

the frustration of a Marine doing his nation's dirty work without the full support of politicians and civilians. Ellis wrote, "Yes, the Marines are down in jungleland, and they did kill a man in war, and a great many people did not know anything about it. This is most unfortunate, but—the Marines are only doing their job as ordered by the people of the United States."⁵⁵

On August 20, 1920, either due to his foresight that Marines should refocus on the advanced base mission or possibly out of frustration with the inglorious and nasty business of counterinsurgency in Santo Domingo, Ellis requested permission to conduct intelligence operations in South America and the Pacific. This request demonstrated his desire to play a more significant role in Marine operational planning. Although his superiors denied the request, it may have caught the new commandant's eye because Lejeune soon ordered Ellis back to HQMC.⁵⁶ During his brief time back in Washington, DC, Ellis composed his magnum opus—"Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia."

The most important page of this document is Lejeune's approval and signature, for without Lejeune's forethought, both in the advanced base mission and in recognizing Ellis's operational planning abilities, the document would never have been possible. Preceding "Advanced Base Operations," an anonymously authored introduction titled "War Portfolio—U.S. Marine Corps" brilliantly summarized the document's role in the Marine Corps's future. This introduction listed three purposes for the document. First, it established guidance that was immediately disseminated to Marines. As will be shown,

51. "Sample Ballot," *Pratt Union*, October 30, 1902.

52. Earl Ellis to Ralph Ellis, August 29, 1902, folder 6, box 1, COLL/3246.

53. "The Vote in Pratt County," *Pratt County Citizen*, November 11, 1902; Carol Bronson, "Shrack Family Pioneered Business in County," *Pratt Tribune*, March 18, 2011; "Gave Dinner Party: Twenty-Eight Pratt Boosters Take Dinner at Grier Hotel," *Pratt Republican*, March 18, 1920.

54. CMC to Earl Ellis, "Change of Station," April 17, 1920, Ellis File.

55. Earl Ellis, "Bush Brigades," *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 1 (1921): 15. Ellis's "Bush Brigades" is viewed as the forerunner to the Marine Corps's 1940 publication *Small Wars Manual*, which was so influential that it was still required reading by certain Marine units deploying overseas sixty years after its publication. Ellis's article may have originally been in response to congressional skepticism over Marine operations in the Caribbean, but Ellis applied many of the lessons he learned in the Philippines to this article as well.

56. Earl Ellis to CMC, "Request for Intelligence Duty in South America and in the Pacific Ocean," August 20, 1920, Ellis File; CMC to Earl Ellis, "Change of Station," November 1, 1920, Ellis File.

Marine officers were confused about the Corps's true purpose. Second, the plan called for a Marine Corps beyond its current authorized strength. At the moment, Marine leadership was fighting not only to increase the Corps's meager post-World War I size but also for its survival as an institution. Third, and most importantly, "Advanced Base Operations" would "serve as a guide for the coordination of all peace activities and training of the Marine Corps toward reaching and maintaining the prescribed conditions of readiness to execute [War Plan Orange]."⁵⁷ As the Marine Corps currently stood, even with a rapid wartime expansion, it did not possess the personnel, weapons, training, or coordination with the Navy to execute the proposed plans. This document served as a catalyst for further Marine integration into naval amphibious warfare training. Training aligned with Ellis's descriptions began with the Navy's 1924 winter maneuvers and continued to be improved until the war finally came in 1941. Ellis's greatest success was steering Marines toward the mission that would win the war against Japan.

After laying out the internal purpose of the document, its focus turned outward. In 1921, the congressionally authorized strength of the Marine Corps was twenty-seven thousand, but the actual strength by appropriation was only twenty thousand. In order to make war on Japan, Marines required an increase in both authorized and appropriated strength. The introduction stated, "No greater condition of readiness can be maintained until an increase in the strength of the Corps over that now appropriated for is authorized by the President."⁵⁸ This statement directly challenged the political chain of command to increase the size of the Corps to meet the potential Japanese threat.

Over the following seventy-eight pages, Ellis meticulously detailed the timelines of potential operations against Japan, the Marine training and equipment required to execute the mission, and the initial targets for seizure in the central Pacific. While

his plan's specifics have been extensively covered elsewhere, certain key points merit attention. From Ellis's opening line, his NWC training and Mahanian influences are evident, as they were throughout the Navy at the time. Ellis began, "In order to impose our will upon Japan, it will be necessary for us to project our fleet and land forces across the Pacific and wage war in Japanese waters."⁵⁹ He realized the overall objective and that seizing the Japanese Mandates was the only way to achieve it.

After establishing the parameters of the paper, Ellis implored Marines to understand that their participation in this mission was uncertain. Marine participation required both an increase in their numbers and proving their worth in advanced base operations.⁶⁰ This plea to Marines must have been directed outward as well because Lejeune was at this time defending the Marine Corps as an institution before Congress. Marines had to serve a purpose other than that of a second land army or colonial police force if they hoped to survive Republican budget cuts in Washington.

In anticipating potential hostilities, Ellis theorized that Japan would likely initiate the conflict because of its natural defensive position, the U.S. policy of nonaggression, and Japanese naval expansion. He expected Japan to fight a defensive war to lure the American fleet into a climactic battle on Japan's terms.⁶¹ Ellis viewed possible defensive fortification of the Mandates, which many believe led to his doomed intelligence mission, as inconsequential. He emphasized, "[Japan] will have ample time both before and after the beginning of hostilities to plan and

59. Miller, *War Plan Orange*, 15, 38; Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation*, 23–25; Ellis, "Advanced Base Operations," 1. There is debate among historians regarding the lasting influence of Admiral Mahan's concept of sea power, but Miller and Kuehn stressed Mahan's influence even after his passing.

60. *Ibid.*, 2. Ellis's probable study of Frost, Pye, and Yarnell's "The Conduct of an Oversea Naval Campaign" likely influenced this point.

61. *Ibid.*, 11; David Evans and Mark Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 201–204. Evans and Peattie describe the Japanese naval strategy in the 1920s as desiring a decisive defensive battle in the Western Pacific.

57. Ellis, "Advanced Base Operations," 1.

58. *Ibid.*, 3.

perfect any defenses they desire.”⁶² The specific intelligence collection requirements of Ellis’s later mission to the Mandates are lost to history, and it is possible that reconnaissance of fortifications was a secondary collection requirement. However, Ellis stressed in this paper that prior fortifications were inconsequential because Japan would have more than enough time to build them after the war began. This assertion proved true during World War II, as Japan did not seriously fortify some islands that gave Marines their highest casualties until later in the war.⁶³

Too often lost in Ellis’s predictions of how the war would progress is the message he sent to those both in and outside the Corps. In an inconspicuous paragraph on tactics, Ellis struck home with a powerful message about the difficulty of his proposed mission and the type of soldier required to accomplish it: “To effect a landing under the sea and shore conditions obtaining and in the face of enemy resistance requires careful training and preparation to say the least; and this along Marine lines. It is not enough that the troops be skilled infantry men or artillery men of high morale; they must be skilled water men and jungle men who know it can be done—Marines with Marine training.”⁶⁴

The tactics, equipment, and specific islands discussed throughout the rest of his work make for great discussion for Marines reminiscing about Ellis’s prophecy; however, this paragraph carried the most significant consequence. Strategists can never fully predict the course of future wars, and

Ellis had plenty of claims that failed to materialize, but it is difficult to deny that the Navy would require Marines with Marine training to win in the Pacific. Marines had to accept the amphibious assault mission as their guiding doctrine, and naval and political leadership had to accept the Marine Corps as necessary to defeat Japan to ensure the Corps’s survival as an institution.

When General Lejeune signed “Advanced Base Operations” and renamed it “Operational Plan 712,” he focused efforts within the Corps toward the amphibious assault mission. However, it is crucial to examine debates among Marine officers prior to 1921 to illustrate the confusion surrounding the Marines’ official role. In the June 1916 edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, Major John Russell composed the aptly titled “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine.” Russell later served as commandant from 1934–1936, advocating the creation of the previously mentioned Fleet Marine Force and “The Tentative Manual for Landing Operations.”⁶⁵ Twenty years before he became commandant, he sought to strike up a conversation to name an official general mission and doctrine for the Corps. In his 1916 article, Russell’s perception of the Marine Corps mission was a rather weak statement of subservience to the Navy. He wrote that the Marine Corps’s mission was “to co-operate with the Navy, in Peace and War, to the end that in the event of a war the Marine Corps could be of greatest value to the Navy.”⁶⁶ Russell concluded his plea by urging the Marine Corps to immediately act on determining its official doctrine.⁶⁷

Russell’s article must have been distributed to others before publishing because

62. Ellis, “Advanced Base Operations,” 12.

63. For example, General Kuribayashi did not receive orders to the Bonin Islands until June 1944, and he did not decide to make Iwo Jima his citadel until August. Kuribayashi had less than six months to assemble his force at Iwo Jima, plan his defense, and construct the defensive obstacles that would claim over twenty-six thousand American casualties. For additional information on Japanese fortifications of the Mandates, consult Thomas Wilds, “How Japan Fortified the Mandated Islands,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 81, no. 4 (1955): 401–407. Wilds described Japanese fortification on eight key Mandate islands as beginning primarily in 1940, with serious defensive fortifications not in place until 1944.

64. Ellis, “Advanced Base Operations,” 16.

65. Donald Bittner, “John H. Russell,” in *Commandants of the Marine Corps*, 240–44.

66. John Russell, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 1, no. 2 (1916): 112. When he wrote this article, Russell was working under Director of Naval Intelligence Capt. James H. Oliver in charge of creating a system of vetting, evaluating, and tasking possible intelligence sources for ONI. See Wyman Packard, *A Century of U.S. Naval Intelligence* (Washington, DC Office of Naval Intelligence and the Naval Historical Center, 1996), 41.

67. *Ibid.*, 121–22.



Fourth Brigade Command Staff, Germany, c. 1919. From left to right: Earl Ellis, Wendell Neville, unidentified individual, Claggett Wilson, and another unidentified individual. Earl H. "Pete" Ellis Collection, COLL/3246, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, Virginia.

"Discussion on a Plea for a Mission and Doctrine," authored by eight Navy and Marine officers, including Ellis, appeared in the same issue. However, these responses left greater confusion about the Corps's *raison d'être*. At this moment, Ellis perceived the Marine Corps's mission passed down from the General Board to the commandant as "help[ing] the Navy win" battles. He had not yet fully grasped the importance of the advanced base mission. Ellis acknowledged that Marine doctrine could be improved but that Marine abilities to quickly and efficiently accomplish whatever mission the Department of the Navy threw the Corps's way were a starting point.⁶⁸ This exchange among Marine officers in 1916 underscored the institutional confusion and highlighted the

necessity of focusing Marines on a general mission.

Three months later, Ellis and Captain Frank Evans attempted to clarify the situation concerning the ambivalent mission. Ellis appeared to backtrack from his earlier assertion that Marines had a well-defined mission. Now, he claimed that it did not matter whether Marine officers understood the organization's mission as long as they possessed the flexibility to execute any given mission.⁶⁹ It is unclear what changed Ellis's mind. It may have been the chaotic responses to Russell's original plea, or it may have been Ellis hedging the Corps's mission with the potential for it to join the fight in Europe. What remains evident, however, is that by the end of 1916, the Marines were still no closer to defining their permanent role within the

68. "Discussion on a Plea for a Mission and Doctrine," *Marine Corps Gazette* 1, no. 2 (1916): 197–201.

69. Earl Ellis and Frank Evans, "Continued Discussion on a Plea for a Mission and Doctrine," *Marine Corps Gazette* 1, no. 4 (1916): 403–404.

Department of the Navy. No article from the 1917 editions of the *Gazette* contained information about the mission or doctrine of the Corps, and it would take another catalyst to force Marines to define their mission.

The U.S. entry into World War I temporarily halted the debate over doctrine and mission, but it also allowed the Marine Corps to expand its meager ranks. In 1917, the authorized strength of the Marine Corps stood at 17,400. After it declared war on the Central Powers, Congress authorized an expansion to 30,000 enlisted Marines.⁷⁰ CMC Barnett testified before the House Naval Affairs Committee in January 1918 with the dual purpose of getting Marines into the fight and further expanding the Corps. Barnett pleaded, "I feel that we would all be neglecting the most solemn duty that has ever come to us if we did not use the resources of the Corps to their fullest."⁷¹ Barnett realized that the more he expanded the Corps in war, the more fat he could afford to trim in the inevitable postwar cuts. He requested a further expansion to almost 70,000 enlisted men, but Congress split the difference, agreeing to an increase to 50,000. At the war's conclusion, the committee again met to determine the Corps's permanent strength. Barnett proposed a permanent force of 33,000 enlisted (doubling the size of the prewar Corps). Congress decided that 26,294 Marines would have to suffice, but Barnett had accomplished his goal. The Marines stood to gain approximately 9,000 permanent enlisted men because they had participated in the war.⁷²

As the Marine Corps regrouped following World War I, it was increased in size but still no closer to coalescing around an organizational mission. A series of articles in the *Gazette* showed

that the Marines' understanding of the advanced base mission was incomplete. Even as late as the summer of 1920, the pages of the *Gazette* showed disunity among officers over the organization's purpose and mission.⁷³ If internal disputes over the Corps's mission were insufficient to spur action, congressional skepticism over Marine funding forced the Corps to unite.

When Major General Lejeune succeeded Barnett as CMC, he soon found himself defending the meager personnel increases Barnett had won the previous year. In early 1921, Lejeune defended the Corps from attacks by Patrick Kelley, the Republican chairman of the House Subcommittee on Naval Appropriations. Several exchanges between Lejeune and Kelley made it clear that the Corps was fighting for survival. In one exchange, Kelley questioned why the Marine Corps needed its 27,000 men. Lejeune responded that 27,400 men were the minimum required to accomplish the Marines' various duties. Kelley cut off Lejeune, stating, "Of course, that [number of Marines] is not an exact science."⁷⁴ Next, Kelley questioned the number of Marines in training and stationed in Quantico as a contingency force. This contingency force constituted one of the Corps's first specialized advanced base forces. Lejeune fired back that cutting the contingency force would cut the "heart of the Marine Corps." Almost belittling the commandant, Kelley responded, "Whether you had 6000, or 7000, or 8000, or 9000 [in the contingency force] would not make any difference to your organization." Kelley also pointed out that eliminating this force would save the government \$10 million, and the Army could easily fill the mission of the contingency force.⁷⁵

70. Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 287–88.

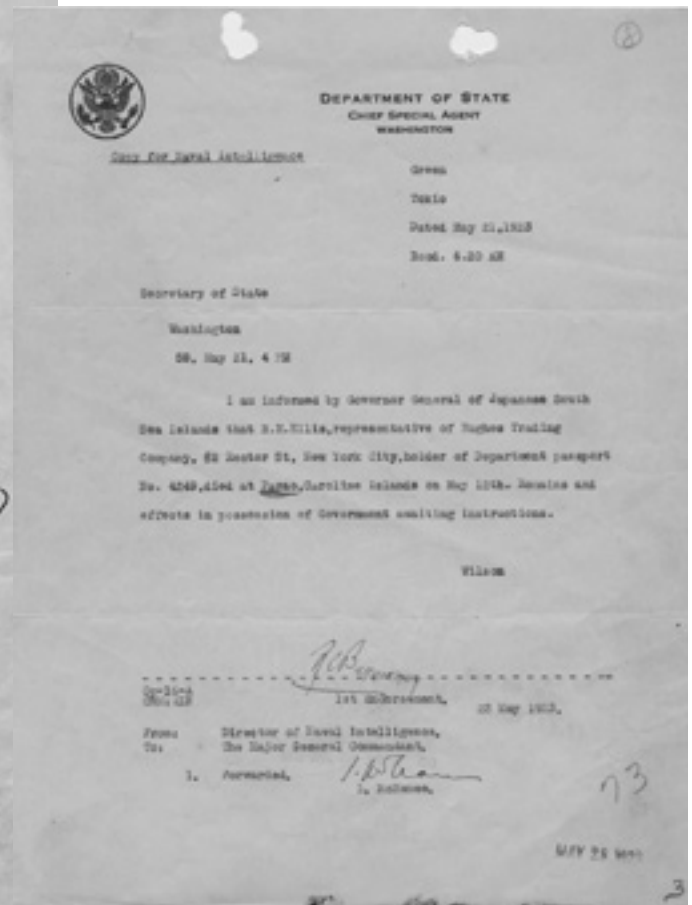
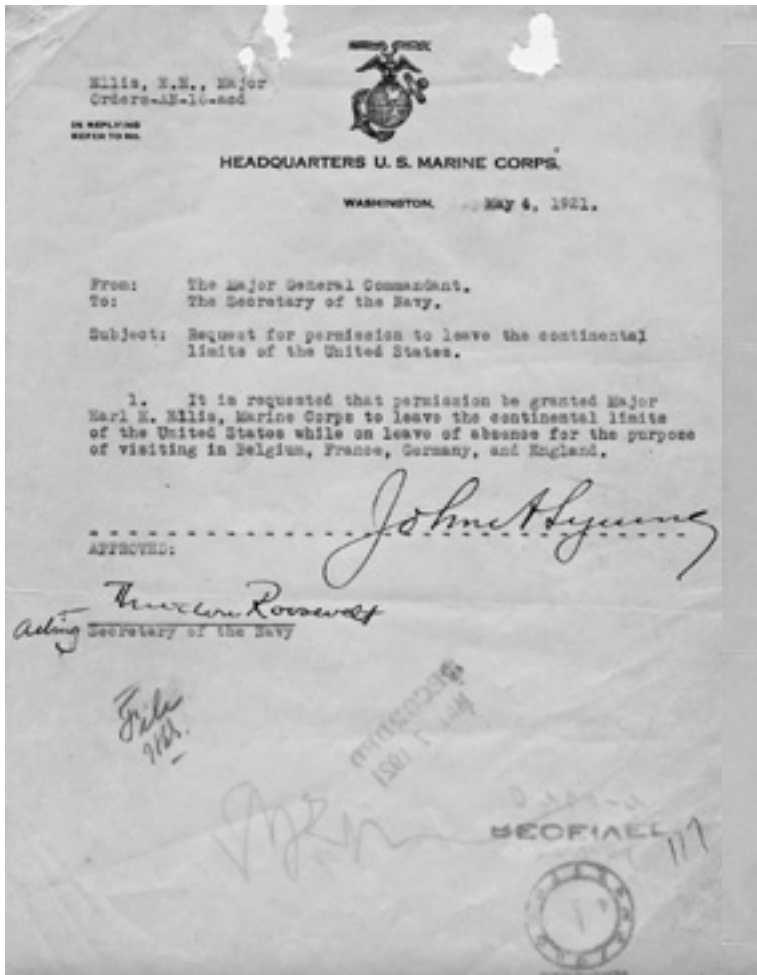
71. "Excerpts from the Statement of the Major General Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps, before the Committee on Naval Affairs of the House of Representatives on the Estimates for the Marine Corps on January 23, 1918," *Marine Corps Gazette* 3, no. 1 (1918): 68; Allan Millett, *In Many a Strife: General Gerald C. Thomas and the U.S. Marine Corps 1917–1956* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 11.

72. "Excerpts from the Statement," 70–73; "Proposed Legislation and Remarks There-on of the Sixty-Fifth Congress Concerning the Marine Corps: Extracts from the Congressional Record," *Marine Corps Gazette* 4, no. 1 (1919): 73–74.

73. Samuel Bogan, "Where Should Advanced Base Organizations Be Permanently Stationed?," *Marine Corps Gazette* 4, no. 2 (1919): 137; E. W. Sturdevant, "A System of Instructions for Officers of the Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette* 4, no. 3 (1919): 235–36; J. L. Underhill, "The Permanent Location of Marine Corps Advanced Base Organizations," *Marine Corps Gazette* 5, no. 2 (1920): 142–44.

74. "Extracts from Testimony of the Major General Commandant before the Subcommittee of House Committee on Appropriations on the Naval Appropriations Bill, 1922," *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 1 (1921): 93–95.

75. *Ibid.*, 98–101.



This memo (left) was Maj. Gen. Lejeune's request for Ellis to leave the U.S. to begin his espionage mission. Acting Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt Jr. signed it. This State Department memorandum (right) announced Ellis's death. Ellis Official Military Personnel Files, Folder 2, National Personnel Records Center, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC.

Lejeune left the committee hearing understanding the gravity of the situation. He signed Ellis's "Advanced Base Operations" on July 23, 1921, after requesting permission from Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt Jr. for Ellis to leave the country on his ill-fated intelligence-gathering mission.⁷⁶ After Lejeune approved "Advanced Base Operations," he worked to ensure that Marines understood and accepted the mission. One of his first steps was alleviating military and political fears that amphibious assaults were obsolete in the face of modern weapons, stemming

from the British disaster at Gallipoli during World War I. Lejeune likely influenced Col. Robert Dunlap to critique British landing operations in the September 1921 edition of the *Gazette*. Dunlap's article also showed how the Marines' specialized advanced base training and cooperation with the Navy mitigated the problems faced by the British. It is also noteworthy that following the approval of "Advanced Base Operations," the *Gazette* never published another article questioning the Marine Corps's mission. Following 1921, most articles concerning the Corps's mission either informed Marines about the mission or attempted to persuade non-Marines of the Corps's ability to

76. CMC to Secretary of the Navy, "Request for Permission to Leave the Continental Limits of the United States," May 4, 1921, Ellis File.

accomplish it.⁷⁷ Lejeune and the Corps had found a mission they believed in, that they had the potential to achieve, and that ensured their organization's survival.

Before the Navy and Marine Corps could execute Ellis's theories in war, they had to test their feasibility in training. Starting with its winter fleet maneuvers in 1924, the Navy began including a Marine component to seize and defend advanced naval bases.⁷⁸ After completing the first test of Ellis's mission at the winter maneuvers, Col. Dion Williams praised Marine abilities, stating, "The winter maneuvers of 1924 have been of inestimable value to the Marine Corps Expeditionary Force in preparation for that class of operations which it is certain to encounter in the fulfillment of its main mission in war."⁷⁹ Marine maneuvers with the Navy during the interwar period gave the U.S. military the training, equipment, and potential to project power into Japanese waters by seizing advanced naval bases. Only through two decades of development was this possible, and only through the Marine Corps first accepting the mission and proving its worth did it become a reality.

If the Marine Corps, under Lejeune's leadership and guidance, had not embraced the challenge of seizing advanced naval bases outlined by Pete Ellis, it is unlikely that the Navy would have been able to defeat Japan as quickly as it did. It is also likely that the Navy would have turned to the Army to execute its war plans and that the Marine Corps would have been significantly reduced or eliminated as a line item on a naval appropriations

77. Robert Dunlap, "Lessons for Marines from the Gallipoli Campaign," *Marine Corps Gazette* 6, no. 3 (1921): 237. For further information, consult the following *Gazette* articles: John Lejeune, "A Brief History of the U.S. Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette* 8, no. 1 (1923): 18–20; Rufus Lane, "The Mission and Doctrine of the Marine Corps," *Marine Corps Gazette* 8, no. 1 (1923): 1–13; John Lejeune, "The United States Marine Corps: By Major General John A Lejeune, Commandant U.S.M.C. Delivered at the Naval War College, Newport Rhode Island, December 14, 1923," *Marine Corps Gazette* 8, no. 4 (1923): 243–54.

78. "Marine Maneuvers with the Fleet," *Marine Corps Gazette* 8, no. 4 (1923): 241–42.

79. Dion Williams, "Winter Maneuvers with the Fleet," *Marine Corps Gazette* 9, no. 1 (1924): 25.

bill. Ellis's contributions focused Marine officers on a mission the Corps had to accept to remain a viable military organization.

On August 2, 1960, the *Emporia Gazette* published an article recounting the exploits of Kansas hero Earl Hancock Ellis. This article was a highly romanticized version of Ellis's final mission in the Caroline Islands. After accusing Japan of murdering Ellis, the author concocted a fanciful tale of Ellis's possible last moments, stating, "It is possible that his tiny sailboat carried one of the primitive radios of those times. Possibly before he died (however he died), he was able to get word back to Washington . . . the Japanese were building a gigantic naval base. If he did, it was information that would prove inestimably valuable to our Navy later on."⁸⁰ This falsehood played into the legend that developed around Ellis. Cloak-and-dagger stories of Japanese duplicity, illegal island fortifications, and exaggerations of his prophecy and development of amphibious warfare cloud the memory of Pete Ellis's true lasting impact.

While Ellis often received credit for developing the idea of seizing advanced bases from Japan, it was a concept already in development. "Advanced Base Operations" became a possibility in January 1920, when the CNO ordered Major General Barnett to make it the Corps's mission, not when Ellis actually typed the document.⁸¹ Additionally, when Major General Lejeune became commandant, he realized that the Corps's future rested with this mission, and he likely ordered Ellis to begin his research at HQMC. The most lasting and important legacy of "Advanced Base Operations" is how it transformed Marines' way of thinking about themselves as an organization. Muted after 1921 were debates over the Corps's mission or the search for justification of funding and personnel from Congress. This ended when the Navy and Marine Corps realized they needed Marines with Marine training to defeat Japan.

80. W. L. White, "Into the Black," *Emporia Gazette*, August 2, 1960.

81. Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 320.

Earl Hancock Ellis's status as a Marine Corps legend and patriot deserves additional appreciation and remembrance by the people of Kansas. An early Pratt County historian describing the first generation of homesteaders to the area stated, "On the foundation which had been laid by the first settlers and themselves during the hard years, these people framed and shaped the structure of the community which was to be built by those who followed for the next one hundred years."⁸² As a young Kansas boy, Pete Ellis rose from the

foundation of that first generation to the highest echelons of naval war planning thanks to the character and education instilled in him in Pratt, refined during his overseas deployments and time at the NWC, and cultivated through his connection to influential officers such as General Lejeune. As our collective memory of America's role in the great wars of the twentieth century begins to fade, the role Ellis played in that memory is worth remembrance and celebration by all Kansans.^[KH]

82. Gray, *Pioneer Saints and Sinners*, 162.