

## **Marine Corps Aviation Centennial**

On May 22, 1912, First Lieutenant Alfred Austell Cunningham reported to Annapolis, Maryland for “duty in connection with aviation,” marking the official birth of Marine Corps aviation. The actual first flight has a definite New England connection. In August of 1912, Cunningham flew solo in a modified Wright Brothers’ Model B seaplane at the Burgess Company, Marblehead, Massachusetts. Cunningham was later designated Marine Corps Aviator number 1 and Naval Aviator number 5. Of the first 50 Naval Aviators, 5 were Marines. These 5 pioneers, Cunningham, Bernard Smith, William McIlvain, Francis Evans and Roy Geiger made significant contributions to military aviation through World War II.

Former Senator, Astronaut and legendary Marine aviator John Glenn has described the story of how Marine aviation came into being, slowly grew, and reached maturity as a “saga” that starts with the vision of one man, Cunningham. (Summary in attached quote graphic.) Cunningham was but the first of a long line of pioneers who envisioned an aviation force dedicated to the support of the Marine on the ground. He and the other pioneers foresaw, although they would not have put it in these terms, the inherent power of a military force of all combined arms. It is this attribute of Marine aviation that makes it unique and makes its evolution a saga.

Cunningham and his peers organized, trained, and equipped, largely on their own initiative, a four- squadron force and deployed it to France in the latter stages of World War I. They struggled to keep Marine aviation viable during the austere inter-war years, then led the expansion from a handful of squadrons to over one hundred during World War II.

Other notable Marine aviators including Christian Schlit, Joseph Foss, Marion Carl, Keith McCutcheon, “Pappy” Boyington, Frank Petersen, John Glenn, Ted Williams and countless others have further enhanced the Marine Corps aviation reputation. Marine aviators managed the transition from the old propeller driven aircraft of World War I to a technologically sophisticated force of jet-powered aircraft and helicopters.

From New Hampshire have come leading Marine aviators whose skill and courage have been vital in wartime and peacetime. Such an exemplary aviator was Colonel Louis L. Frank of North Woodstock. Colonel Frank served as a Marine aviator for twenty years from his UNH graduation in 1939 until his retirement in 1959. His duty included three combat tours, two in World War II flying the F4U Corsair and the PB4Y-1 Liberator, and one in the Korean conflict flying jet fighters. Colonel Frank earned five Air Medals and twice was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his combat flying as a pilot for Marine Photo Squadron 144 over the Solomon, Gilbert, and Marshall Islands in the Pacific. He

received the Chinese Order of the Cloud and Banner for humanitarian aid in China following World War II. Colonel Frank died December 8, 2011, at age 94.

The United States Marine Corps is the one military service with a completely integrated aviation component, capable of deploying with its ground combat units. This model was first developed when Marines deployed to Nicaragua in the 1920s. The close air support concept has been further developed and used in combat ever since. The use of aviation assets to provide close support to ground forces has become a governing philosophy in the Marine Corps, forging an unbreakable bond between Marine pilots and their fellow Marines on the ground. At times the Marine Corps has championed the development of specific aircraft for this purpose, such as the OV-10 Bronco, AV-8 Harrier and MV-22 Osprey.

Whether you are a Marine or not, the story of Marine Corps aviation is both fascinating and informative – and a tribute to the ability of determined men to shape events.

The Spring lecture program at the National Air and Space Museum includes presentations by General James Amos, the first aviator to become Commandant of the Marine Corps, retired Astronaut and Marine Corps General Charles Bolden, NASA Administrator, and former Senator and Astronaut John Glenn. The Marine Corps Aviation Association is planning a commemoration of Cunningham's first flight in August at Marblehead.

This summer, the Aviation Museum of New Hampshire plans to have special displays in honor of the Marine Corps aviation 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. New Hampshire Marine aviators from various eras and communities will conduct displays and presentations at the Museum over the weekend of July 13 through 15. On August 11, the family of Colonel Louis L. Frank has arranged to have a vintage F4U Corsair flown to the Manchester Airport to be on display at the Museum in his memory. The Museum is exploring the possibility of visits by other Marine Corps aircraft during the summer.

*“It is fully realized that  
the only excuse for aviation  
in any service is its usefulness in  
assisting the troops on the ground  
to successfully carry out  
their operations.”*

Major Alfred A. Cunningham  
September 1920

1912  2012  
**100 Years of  
Marine Corps Aviation:**