



TALES OF THE DEPOT: SMEDLEY BUTLER AND THE GARDEN CLUB

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Smedley Butler is a Marine Corps Icon, the consummate warrior, recipient of two separate awards of the Medal of Honor and well as the Brevet Medal – a rough Medal of Honor equivalent award given before Navy and Marine Officers were eligible for the Medal of Honor. His name evokes combat leadership, expeditionary operations from China to Mexico to the Caribbean, an exacting and uncompromising commitment to integrity and high standard – it doesn't naturally bring to mind landscaping and the San Diego Garden Club.

But allies they were. When Butler took command of Marine Base, San Diego, now MCRD, in Feb of 1926 the base was a collection of roughly 30 Mission Revival Style

buildings on what was still generally bare ground – fill dredged from San Diego bay. The fill, mainly silt, was loose and light once dry creating a dusty and unhealthy environment for the Marines. Landscaping had begun under General Pendleton, but there was still a lot to do. Butler, with his characteristic energy, directed an extensive campaign of beautification. Speaking to the

San Diego Garden Club in July of 1926 he described the efforts underway. General Butler said that when complete, planned for March, 1927, 50,000 plants, 1500 trees and over a million square feet of lawn would have been planted. All primary roads were to be lined with grass and trees, planted 10 feet in from the roads, 30 feet apart.

To make all of this happen top soil needed to be imported to cover the alkaline fill. The General estimated that 75,000 cubic yards of top soil would be used. The Marine Corps gathered most of this soil from an area referred to as Green's Farms – part of the Camp Elliot complex, now S. Miramar. While CG of MCB Quantico in 1921 Butler had directed construction of a now historic amphitheater as a football stadium, using his Marines as the labor force – one has to assume the same held true in San Diego. When the top soil effort was hampered by lack of adequate transport the General even convinced a Movie Company, filming aboard the base, to donate a trucks – some accounts say it was a power shovel (excavator) - when they finished filming. By 1930 San Diego Magazine was writing of how 'the very unattractive site of swamp and marsh lands has been transformed into a place of striking beauty'.

To deal with the dust and blowing sand, expeditions were sent to local beach areas to collect cuttings of ice plant and other succulents for planting throughout the base. These cutting, along with seedling and saplings were nurtured in a lath house (plant nursery) which still exists as bldg. 359, in the Landscaping Contractor's area west of Gate 2. And finally, he encouraged groups, such as the American War Mothers, later the Gold Star Mothers, the Garden Club, and local fraternal and patriotic groups to plant remembrance trees aboard the base. The American War Mothers gardens outside building 14 are a surviving example.

The crowning glory to General Butler's vision has to be what is now referred to as Butler Gardens – the extensive lush gardens directly behind the Commanding General's Quarters. Starting with a clean slate, these gardens were

intended to function as reception spaces - an outdoor intension of Quarters 1. Using plants and materials donated, some brought back by Marines from their world-wide travels, and some collected locally (some it is suggested – collected from the City Gardens and Park, now Balboa Park) the gardens became an extensive botanical collection, including a number of rare specimens. Laid out under General Butler's directions, carefully developed and expanded by master gardeners as well as a long succession of Commanding Generals and their families the gardens certainly meet General Butler's intent that they be a showcase for the Marine Corps in San Diego – the 'Jewel in MCRD's Crown'.

The scenic beauty of MCRD's grounds has gladdened the hearts of many who have served here as well as hundreds of thousands of visitors, but I think both Generals Pendleton and Butler would be most pleased by the impact of this beautiful place on those who have become Marines on this historic base.