

A Small Town Boy Makes Good

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The life of the first and only United States Marine Corps officer ever to command a field army began in the humblest of places: Clay County. Roy Stanley Geiger was born on January 25, 1885, in Middleburg, Florida. The son of Marion Francis Geiger and Josephine (Prevatt) Geiger and the sixth of seven children, he was raised on a farm in Middleburg where the First Baptist Church of Middleburg now stands near the intersection of Blanding Boulevard and County Road 218. As a result of his humble background, the young Geiger learned to persevere, knowing hard work was required to achieve greatness.

At the ripe old age of thirteen, when most children today are mainly concerned about making it through junior high school, Geiger got his first job at the Western Union Telegram in Middleburg. At age fifteen he attended the Florida State Normal School, an institution of higher learning located in the small town of DeFuniak Springs, Florida. After graduating with a teaching degree, he served as the principal of Palatka Junior High School in 1905. He then proceeded to Stetson University, earning his law degree in 1907. Geiger briefly opened a law practice in Green Cove Springs, but closed it shortly thereafter, believing it distasteful to represent people he knew were guilty. At age twenty-two, Geiger made the life-altering decision to enlist in the Marine Corps on November 2, 1907, embarking on the path toward becoming one of the most memorable and remarkable soldiers the United States has ever seen.

Roy Geiger fought in both World Wars, earning various awards and accolades. In order to expand his military knowledge and hone his skills, Geiger attended seven colleges of higher military learning from 1908-1941, so that by the time World War II had ended, he'd gone all the way from an enlisted man to the rank of General. The critical role of the Marine Corps is to conduct amphibious operations and expeditionary warfare, so Marine Corps commanders have control over naval landing forces, not field armies. However Geiger, who became known as "Rugged Roy", had a broader outlook and strived to achieve success in all areas of warfare. Prior to WWI, he completed an aviation course in Pensacola, Florida, making him just the fifth Marine ever to earn aviation wings. He commanded Airplane Squadron 2 over France during the "Great War", earning the Navy Cross. By the time WWII began, Geiger was a well-rounded commander destined for greatness.

The date was April 1945. The stage was Okinawa, a small island just to the South of the Japanese mainland. The United States, pursuing its policy of "island hopping" in the Pacific Ocean, reached the Japanese doorstep by launching the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific theater of the war against the island of Okinawa. By May 1945, the battle was merely a month old, yet already characterized by unparalleled brutality and savagery. The battle is known as the "typhoon of steel" in reference to the hailstorm of bullets coupled with the brutal hand-to-hand, inch-by-inch fighting. The battle proved to be a slaughter with more than 135,000 casualties overall, as well as more than 149,000 civilian deaths. In the midst of this hellish scene was Roy Geiger, the farm boy from Middleburg who rose to become commander of the III Amphibious Corps invading Okinawa. Geiger's Corps fell under the command of the 10th Army, which was headed by Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., a Kentucky native. Buckner was the son of Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner, who had surrendered Fort Donelson to Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War.

Toward the waning days of the battle, on June 18, 1945, tragedy occurred as Lt. General Buckner was struck in the chest by an enemy artillery shell, killing him instantly. Geiger immediately assumed supreme command of the 10th Army, until he was relieved by General Joseph Stilwell, who was born in Palatka. Geiger's brief, five-day tenure as general of the 10th Army at Okinawa was truly historic. He remains to this day the only Marine Corps officer to ever command a field army.

The story of General Roy Geiger's rise to success surprises many because of his humble background. But, you may refute this sentiment by remembering this indisputable fact: *you don't have to be born into greatness in order to achieve greatness*. In fact, history demonstrates that often quite the contrary is true. The struggles and humility of small town life can produce a work ethic that propels people to unimaginable heights. For example, I am and always will be extremely proud to come from the small town of Green Cove Springs. I may not have been blessed with wealth or possessions, but you don't need these things to be successful. You do need a strong work ethic and a craving for success - Roy Geiger's story is testament to that. Growing up, I heard people constantly complain about the small towns of Clay County and express their desire to leave at the earliest opportunity, but I scoffed at that notion. There are opportunities for success all around us, we just have to be willing to seek them out. There are multiple examples beyond that of General Geiger that come to mind when thinking about Clay County residents who rose to greatness - artist Augusta Savage, musician Ronnie Van Zant, NFL football player Cliff Avril, Jacksonville Mayor Lenny Curry and Olympic gold medal swimmer Caeleb Dressel, to name more than a few. Rather than being ashamed of a small town beginning, be proud of it, knowing it shaped who you are and can lead you to greatness down the road. I encourage you to celebrate historic, hometown role models such as General Roy Geiger. Let's see them as inspirations for our own future aspirations.



The future General Roy Geiger as a Marine Corps pilot, WWI.



An early photo of General Geiger