The Marine Corps has forged a winning team with its air power and ground forces.

One hundred years ago, Orville and Wilbur Wright took turns guiding their wood and fabric Flyer over the dunes of Kitty Hawk, N.C. Just over five years later, the Navy had made up its mind to acquire flying machines. Unfortunately, the then-Secretary of the Navy stated, “The department does not consider that the development of the aeroplane has progressed sufficiently at this time for use in the Navy.”

The Navy persisted, and by 1912 had four aviators on its rolls. Aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss was training pilots and developing flying boats in San Diego. Daring pilots were making carrier landings and take-offs and learning to drop bombs on ships and trenches.

On May 22, 1912, Marine Corps 1st Lt. Alfred A. Cunningham reported for flight training. He soloed after only two hours and 40 minutes of instruction (in a Wright Bros. Model B-1), and became Naval Aviator No. 5. In his honor, May 22 has become the official “date of birth” of Marine Corps aviation.

When the United States joined World War I in 1917, the Marines Corps had just five aviators and 30 enlisted men, including Cunningham. At war’s end, Marine aviation included 282 officers and 2,180 enlisted men. Marine aviators won two Medals of Honor during World War I.

Marines learned close ground support while fighting rebels in Nicaragua, again earning awards for bravery, including the Medal of Honor for close air support.

The sudden immersion of the United States in World War II found the Marines on the front lines, defending Wake Island against a better-equipped, more-experienced Japanese force. Marine aviators led the attack in the famous Battle of Midway, an American victory despite high losses to pilots and aircraft. Marines ended World War II with 125 aces and eight Medals of Honor. The Marines’ F4-U Corsair had become famous as a symbol of Marine Corps ground support and air superiority in the Pacific.

The Marines continued their close relationship of air and ground forces in Korea, deploying jet aircraft and helicopters for the first time while still making excellent use of the legendary Corsair. The introduction of helicopters in combat increased mobility in rugged terrain and, combined with field hospitals, greatly reduced the number of combat deaths in the field.

The 1960s found Marines fighting communism in the swamps and jungles of Vietnam while at the same time pioneering America’s entry into space. The first U.S. combat troops brought into this Southeast Asian conflict, American Marines landed at Da Nang in 1965, supported by F-4B Phantom IIs and A-4D Skyhawks. From Hue to Chu Lai to Khe Sanh, Marines on the ground depended on their “Flying Leathernecks.” And in 1962, Marine Corps Col. John Glenn became the first American astronaut to orbit the earth, a voyage lasting less than five hours. (In 1998, Glenn returned to space as the oldest American to do so, with 144 orbits over nine days).

Marines have deployed to many exotic locations, from operations in Grenada and Panama to the protection of American Embassies under attack around the world, before being called upon in Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, and, most recently, Operation Iraqi Freedom.

These operations were supported by USMC F/A-18 Hornets (refueled in flight by the Marine Corps’ own KC-130J tankers), AV-8B Harriers, and squadrons of rotary-wing aircraft (including the CH-46, CH-53E, UH-1N and AH-1W).

As America moves into the 21st century, newer, more modern technology is moving into the air, with the tilt-wing MV-22 Osprey and F-35 Joint Strike Fighter soon to join Marine air units. But, certainly, one thing that will never change is the United States Marine Corps partnership between those on the ground and those in the sky.