

What It Means to be a Marine

Ask a Marine what's so special about the Marines and the answer would be "esprit de corps," an unhelpful French phrase that means exactly what it looks like - the spirit of the Corps. But what is that spirit? And where does it come from?

The Marine Corps is the only branch of the U. S. Armed Forces that recruits people specifically to fight. The Army emphasizes personal development (an Army of One), the Navy promises fun (let the journey begin), the Air Force offers security (it's a great way of life). Missing from all the advertisements is the hard fact that a soldier's life is to suffer and perhaps to die for his people and take lives at the risk of his/her own. Even the thematic music of the services reflects this evasion. The Army's Caisson Song describes a pleasant country outing; over hill and dale, lacking only a picnic basket. Anchors Aweigh, the Navy's celebration of the joys of sailing, could have been penned by Jimmy Buffet. The Air Force song is a lyric poem of blue skies and engine thrust. All is joyful, and invigorating, and safe. There are no land mines in the dales, nor snipers behind the hills, no submarines or cruise missiles threaten the ocean jaunt, no bandits are lurking in the wild blue yonder.

The Marines' Hymn, by contrast, is all combat: "We fight our Country's battles," "First to fight for right and freedom," "We have fought in every clime and place where we could take a gun," "In many a strife we have fought for life and never lost our nerve."

The choice is made clear. You may join the Army to go to adventure training, or join the Navy to go to Bangkok, or join the Air Force to go to computer school.

You join the Marine Corps to go to War! But the mere act of signing the enlistment contract confers no status in the Corps. The Army recruit is told from his first minute in uniform that "You're in the Army now, soldier." The Navy and Air Force enlistees are sailors or airmen as soon as they get off the bus at the training center. The new arrival at Marine Corps boot camp is called a recruit, or worse (a lot worse), but never a MARINE. Not yet, maybe never. He or she must earn the right to claim the title of UNITED STATES MARINE, and failure returns you to civilian life without hesitation or ceremony.

Recruit Platoon 2210 at San Diego, California trained from October through December of 1968. In Viet Nam the Marines were taking two hundred casualties a week and the major rainy season and Operation Meade River had not even begun. (Note: Per 8th & I Marine Lt. Col. James Burke, MCI Co. and H & S Co., 1975-1979 / USMC 1968-1992, Operation Meade River began at 0400, 20 November 1968; seven Marine battalions jumped off in the attack in the largest heliborne assault of the war.) Yet Drill Instructors had no qualms about winnowing out almost a quarter of their 112 recruits, graduating only 81. Note that this was post-enlistment attrition. Every one of those 31 who were dropped had been passed by the recruiters as fit for service. But they failed the test of Marine Corps Boot Camp! Not necessarily for physical reasons. At least two were outstanding high school athletes for whom the calisthenics and running were child's play. The cause of their failure was not in the biceps nor the legs, but in the spirit. They had lacked the will to endure the mental and emotional strain so they would not be Marines. Heavy commitments and high casualties notwithstanding, the Corps reserves the right to pick and choose whether you are seeing a truck driver, a computer programmer or a machine gunner or a cook or a baker.

The Marine is amorphous, even anonymous, by conscious design. The Marine is a Marine. Every Marine is a rifleman first and foremost, a Marine ... First, Last and Always! You may serve a four-year enlistment or even a twenty-plus-year career without seeing action, but if the word is given

you'll charge across that Wheatfield! Whether a Marine has been schooled in automated supply or automotive mechanics or aviation electronics or whatever is immaterial.

Those things are secondary - the Corps does them because it must. The modern battle requires the technical appliances and since the enemy has them, so do we. But no Marine boasts mastery of them. Our pride is in our marksmanship, our discipline, and our membership in a fraternity of courage and sacrifice. "For the honor of the fallen, for the glory of the dead," Edgar Guest wrote of Belleau Wood. "The living line of courage kept the faith and moved ahead."

They are all gone now, those Marines who made a French farmer's little Wheatfield into one of the most enduring of Marine Corps legends. Many of them did not survive the day and eight long decades have claimed the rest. But their actions are immortal. The Corps remembers them and honors what they did and so they live forever. Dan Daly's shouted challenge takes on its true meaning - if you lie in the trenches you may survive for now, but someday you may die and no one will care. If you charge the guns you may die in the next two minutes, but you will be one of the immortals.

All Marines die in either the red flash of battle or the white cold of the nursing home. In the vigor of youth or the infirmity of age all will eventually die, but the Marine Corps lives on. Every Marine who ever lived is living still, in the Marines who claim the title today.

It is that sense of belonging to something that will outlive our own mortality, which gives people a light to live by and a flame to mark their passing.

Passed on to a Marine from another Marine and to his friends!

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