Every Marine a Rifleman

by Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

There is a monument to the Marine Corps in Belleau Wood. " . . . It is dominated by the muscular back of a man, shown in strong relief. Cast in a creamy bronze, the figure moves away from the viewer, from right to left. From what can be seen of the face comes an impression not of an individual personality but of implacable will. He wears the kettle helmet of World War One. In his strong hands he holds an Enfield rifle with bayonet fixed."

—*From* A Country Made by War
by Geoffrey Perret

In all the long history of the Corps, the distinguishing feature of its service—that special quality that defies precise definition—has been the individual Marine; whose "implacable will" and indomitable spirit have animated the Corps from Bladensburg to Kuwait City. Central to the ethos, the very self-perception of the Corps, is the premise that every Marine is a fighter—every Marine a rifleman.

There is both a practical and moral dimension to this credo. The force structure of the Corps reflects its central purpose: amphibious, expeditionary warfare. Its combined arms structure is balanced and flexible. And because of its expeditionary nature, it is also austere. This austerity places a premium on the role of every Marine. There are no "rear area" Marines, and no one is very far from the fighting during expeditionary operations. The success of each of these operations is dependent upon the speed with which Marines can build up combat power ashore. Marines fighting with the maneuver elements are backed up by fellow Marines who labor unceasingly to support the mission by building logistics bases, running truck convoys, distributing supplies, and performing myriad other duties associated with expeditionary warfare.

Regardless of their primary specialties, these Marines are prepared to fight as infantry to defend their positions and their vital efforts. In an emergency, all Marines can take their places in the line, patrol, or participate in a counterattack. That's nothing new. The first Marine officer to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II was a Marine fighter pilot. His aircraft destroyed after 22 days of heroic defense of Wake Island, he died leading a platoon of ground defense force Marines. Indeed, the perception that every Marine is a rifleman is pervasive; civilians constantly evidence surprise on learning that there are any specialties in the Corps other than the infantry. This perception is part of what makes the Corps the Corps—every Marine a rifleman.

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But there is a moral dimension to this aspect of the Marine Corps, which transcends the issue of occupational specialties. There is almost nothing more precious to a Marine than his fellow Marine. This traditional bond flows from the combat training that all Marines, officer and enlisted, receive, and the shared danger and adversity inherent in expeditionary operations.

From the earliest landings of the Corps, Marines have fought from the sea, with the water to their backs, and nowhere to go but forward. It was at such places as *Guadalcanal, Tarawa,* and Inchon where the fighting, often desperate, usually bloody, demanded that *every* Marine fight; there could be no other way. The bond that grows among warriors who, together, experience great danger or share in the cru-

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cible of war is difficult to distill, hard to describe. It is the steel cable that binds every Marine, one to another, and all Marines to the Corps. That every Marine is a fighter is more than a capability, it is an attitude, a standard of excellence as much as anything else—every Marine a rifleman.

The cohesion among Marines is not a function of a particular unit within the Corps, rather it is a function of the Corps itself. When a Marine reports to a unit, he may be unknown personally, but he is a known quantity professionally. Regardless of anything else known about him, his leaders know he has been trained as a rifleman and bears, consequently, that indelible stamp of "Marine."

Nowhere is the effect of this cohesion more evident than when Marines are exposed to danger or to war. Their fellow Marines, remote from the action, are usually uneasy. Marines are going in harm's way, and they can't be with them in their moment of danger. This attitude is born of the self-confidence that every Marine can fight, that every Marine can contribute to the mission, and that every Marine is duty bound to share in the danger and the risk of every other Marine in the Corps.

The sense that every Marine is a rifleman is at the heart of the ethos of the Corps. This unspoken feeling among Marines is more than tradition, more than the cut of the uniform. It is the shared experience of danger, violence, and the proximity of death—that which Oliver Wendell Holmes called the "touch of fire." Through all these things, for all Marines, there is a constant, a sea anchor—every Marine a rifleman.

As the shadows lengthen in Belleau Wood, the image of the Marine seems to come to life, to move resolutely forward into the face of withering German fire. He embodies the spirit of the thousands of Marines, past and present, who have given their all for Country and Corps. But he also stands for the thousands of Marines yet to come, on whom this Nation will depend for its security and to carry its flag in every clime and place. And in him, and them, there is the certainty that their sense of duty and honor will be strengthened by the assurance that every Marine is first and foremost a rifleman. USMC

The Aisne-Marne World War I Cemetery and Memorial, Belleau Wood, France.