

# REFLECTIONS ON THE CORPS

## What Is It That Makes Marines?

by Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

*Marine human material was not one whit better than that of the human society from which it came. But it had been hammered into form in a different forge, hardened with a different fire. The Marines were the closest thing to legions the nation had. They would follow their colors from the shores of home to the seacoast of Bohemia, and fight well either place. . . . a Marine Corps officer was still an officer, and a sergeant behaved the way good sergeants had behaved since the time of Caesar, expecting no nonsense, allowing none. And Marine leaders had never lost sight of their primary—their only—mission, which was to fight.*

*—Marines in 1950 as described in  
T. R. Fehrenbach's This Kind of War*

From the American Revolution through victory in the Cold War, Marines have fought in all of our Nation's wars. From our first raid in the Bahamas in 1776 to "first to fight" at Belleau Wood, from Trenton to Chosin to Khe Sanh to the deserts of Southwest Asia, Marines have shown the courage, discipline, and initiative needed to triumph again and again. This ability comes from within and is the product of many different and diverse influences. It is not something you can touch, or measure, or even explain. It is a mystique, a spirit—the spirit of the Corps.

Ultimately, this spirit depends not on my words, or any Commandant's words, or upon some prescription, but on the labor and dedication of those who serve in the Corps. The spirit of the Corps is far removed from the panache of the sunset and evening parades and the governance of Headquarters in Washington. Rather, it is measured in the price thousands of other Marines have paid to make the splendid celebrations of our Corps a meaningful part of our legacy. It is this spirit that forms the character of our Corps. It is the foundation of our cohesion and combat effectiveness, and it is what gives Marines that swagger, confidence, and hardness necessary for victory.

The Nation has a Marine Corps for many reasons. First and foremost is to

fight. From that duty, everything else flows. If it doesn't, it is meaningless. There is no recipe or formula that adequately defines our institutional spirit or ethos. But it is implicitly understood that it consists of many diverse parts, each contributing in its own way to our heritage. Some have said it derives from discipline, valor, and esprit de corps. Others point to pride, loyalty, and faithfulness. Still others identify traditions, honor, and the relationship between officers and Marines. No matter, the ideas are representative of the kinds of traits that define our Corps—the shared adversity and horror of war, the close proximity and the experience with death, the need to place every sacrifice within meaningful context.

That is why the legion analogy is so appropriate for the Corps. Marines, far flung, performing dangerous—sometimes apparently meaningless and often overlooked—missions can find solace in their sacrifices for the band of brothers we call the Corps.

Of all of these, perhaps the most enduring traits have been two: first, and most important, the unique quality of the Corps' most elementary ingredient—the U.S. Marine and the special bond felt for fellow Marines, his Corps, and his Nation; and second, his maritime character and the Corps' close relationship with the Navy.

## The U.S. Marine

The individual Marine is the bedrock upon which the Corps' spirit is built. From the first day of recruit training, to their first assignments, to their first celebration of the Marine Corps Birthday, each Marine is imbued with an understanding of the deeds of his predecessors. Recruit training, both officer and enlisted, has long been "the genesis of the enduring sense of brotherhood that characterizes the Corps." New recruits are told the day they enter recruit training, that, as one Marine leader put it, "A Marine believes in his God, in his Country, in his Corps, in his buddies, and in himself."

Marines are a product of this personal conviction. They have an innate sense of service, honor, discipline, and superb training. The Corps' history is full of countless tales of individual courage—Butler, Puller, Wilson, Basileone, Glenn—that exhibit the indomitable spirit of Marines. And behind that spirit, as John W. Thomason said:

... are old battles, long forgotten, that secured our nation—Brandywine and Trenton and Yorktown, San Jacinto and Chapultepec, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, Antietam, El Caney; scores of skirmishes, far off, such as Marines have nearly every year . . . traditions of things endured and things accomplished, such as regiments hand down forever; and the faith of men and love of women; and that abstract thing called patriotism. . . . "

The spirit of the past continues today as new heroes step forward to take their place in the pantheon. It lives on in such phrases as "Semper Fidelis," "uncommon valor," "every Marine is a rifleman," and "first to fight." These characteristics of esprit, aggressiveness, and simple courage are the essence of our Corps.

Col Robert D. Heinl, Jr., said:

Trained men who will stand and fight are never obsolete. It was not the Bowman, but the long bow, not the cavalryman, but the horse, which vanished from the scene. Men—the man, the individual who is the Marine Corps symbol and stock-in-trade—constitute the one element which never changes.

Today's Marines, as they have always done, carry on that tradition. They are the one element that never changes.

## Maritime Character

Unique among soldiers of the world, Marines are accustomed to service

both ashore and afloat. The Marine Corps' "maritime character" has shaped the Corps since its inception. In 1775, Congress resolved that two battalions of Marines be raised " . . . such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage at sea, when required." Col Commandant John Harris, the sixth Commandant of Marines said, "We are of the Navy; are governed by Naval Regulations on shore and afloat. . . . "

The historic partnership and mutual dependence between the Navy and the Marine Corps is a heritage that continues today. The anchor in our emblem symbolizes that the individual Marine remains a maritime soldier—a *soldier of the sea*. Marine officers are *naval* officers. Our aviators are *naval* aviators. We are members of the Department of the Navy and have been since 1834; although as early as 1798, the Secretary of the Navy noted that the Corps' missions were of an *amphibious nature*.

Though early Marines served primarily aboard ships as part of the ship's company, they always had a secondary role to serve as expeditionary forces, whenever or wherever needed. Marine Capt Samuel Nicholas' amphibious expedition to New Providence Island in the Bahamas in 1776 and Marine Lt Presley O'Bannon's 1804 landing in Tripoli were the precursors to the role Marines played in World War II, in Lebanon in 1958, in Cuba in 1965, in Vietnam, in Lebanon again in the early 1980s, in Grenada, and more recently in Southwest Asia.

Today, Marines continue to serve afloat as part of naval security forces. When not training in the United

States for expeditionary duty, they continue to serve in far-off foreign lands protecting our embassies and other U.S. interests abroad. Today, more than 22,000 Marines, deployed on every ocean and on every continent except Antarctica, continue to earn, through action, the globe in their emblem. We can never sever the ties that bind us to our Corps' expeditionary and quick-response traditions. In all that we do and say, we must continue the close ties between our Corps and the Navy.

It is this continuity of the spirit, purpose, and tradition, these many and intangible forces, that support Marines as they go into harm's way. Our institution is what it is because of this foundation—no more and no less.

As LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret), wrote in his book *First to Fight*:

... the U.S. Marine Corps has evolved its mystical appeal slowly, through an unusual combination of circumstance, good fortune, and, most of all, conviction in the hearts of resolute men. It is a combination that has both strengthened and brought glory to the United States. Although the Corps contains its share of visible individuals, its triumphs, in an aberration of history, are triumphs of the institution itself and not the attainments of individual Marines. We remember that Marlborough defeated the French, that Togo defeated the Russians, that Scipio defeated Carthage. But we remember it was the Marines who won at Belleau Wood, the Marines who won at Guadalcanal, the Marines who led the way at Inchon. And that is exactly the way the Corps' heroes—big and small—would have it, for the Corps is less of the flesh than of the spirit. usMC



*A short time before noon on Sunday 3 March 1776, 230 Marines and 50 seamen under the command of Marine Capt Samuel Nicholas splashed ashore at New Providence Island in the Bahamas. This painting by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR(Ret), recreates the exact moment the first Continental Marine stepped on enemy soil.*