

CAN YOU HACK IT?

Corps Attracts Recruits Who Want No Shortcuts

Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of Marine Corps Recruiting Command

Marine Corps recruiting has found its niche in today's material society by selling intangibles.

The Corps seems to have tapped into a desire in many of America's youth to belong to something more than a job that produces a pay check, and it has paid off. As of February leatherneck recruiters have met or exceeded their enlistment goals for 44 consecutive months and expect to continue finding all the qualified applicants they need.

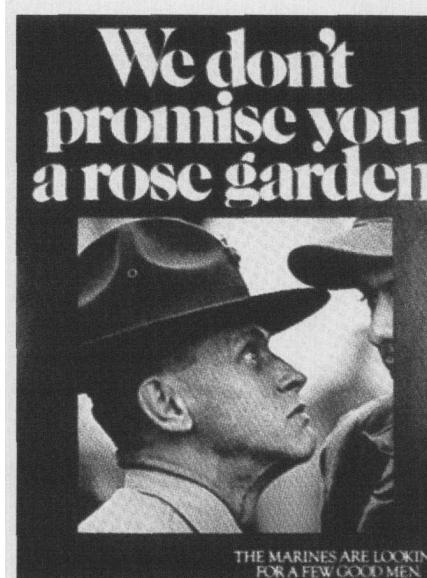
In a time when the Corps' sister services, having fallen short of their recruiting goals, are discussing lowering their enlistment requirements, taking more non-high school graduates, and, as in the Navy's case, considered offering the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal to any sailor who could persuade four civilians to enlist, the Corps' 2,650 recruiters are beating the bushes an average 60 hours a week to find men and women who want no favors or shortcuts, but rather an opportunity to serve as Marines.

All this during a time when those who've been on recruiting duty say canvassing for qualified recruits should be at its most difficult. Unemployment is at its lowest in decades. Job openings are plentiful. The economy is doing exceptionally well. And, polls seem to suggest that such material things are all that matter to Americans. This is also at a time when some say that the military's standards, particularly those of the Marine Corps, are too high.

It has caused many in the media to ask why the Marines are doing so well. At a quick glance, the tendency is to point to the Corps' small size and say the Marines do not need as many people as the other services. True, part of the reason for the Corps' four-year recruiting success is that the Marines, smallest of the major services with 172,000 leathernecks, do not need as many recruits as does, say the Army who has 480,000 soldiers.

It is also true that the Corps has a higher rate of retention than the other services. A General Accounting Office report states that since 1993, first-term enlistment attrition rates have dropped to 33 percent in the Marines while the other services' rates have risen.

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Challenging young men and women to join the Corps is a time-tested approach Marines still use.

"We've really never changed our recruiting approach. We are still offering young men and women only the chance to be Marines."

—GySgt Cynthia Atwood

But many military pundits think there's more to it than that. As a result nobody seems really sure why the Marines are making their recruiting mission—except the Marines. Gunnery Sergeant Cynthia Atwood, a 20-year veteran and Public Affairs chief for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Quantico, Va., has rattled off statistics and offered insight on recruiting policy to numerous reporters, journalists and columnists.

Atwood points out that the Corps needs to recruit approximately 40,000 new enlistees (of whom 4 percent are

women) for a total of 7 percent of those recruited servicewide each year. To accomplish this, the Corps, as it has almost since its inception 223 years ago when legend says recruiting was done out of a Philadelphia tavern, offers little more than a challenge to all comers.

"We've really never changed our recruiting approach," Atwood said. "We are still offering young men and women only the chance to be Marines."

She explained that the Corps' recruiters do not bait potential applicants with offers of bonuses, college education and schools that teach high-tech skills. In reality all the services, including the Marines, offer those incentives, but the leatherneck recruiters put them on the table only after a potential applicant makes a physical and mental commitment to becoming a Marine.

"We are not casting a broad net. We have a target," she said.

That target is primarily the 17- to 24-year-old high school graduates of America, who have no criminal record or record of drug use and no physical disability or chronic illness. "We are looking for young men and women who want to belong to something bigger than themselves."

The Marines believe there are enough of those individuals out there to meet their recruiting goals. Atwood points to a 1998 Department of Defense Youth Attitude Tracking Study that noted America's youth still see the Marines as the toughest of the armed services.

"The Marine Corps also conducted their own target survey and asked what kids today are looking for," Atwood said. "We found they want to be led and have the opportunity to lead. They want something that gives them a sense of accomplishment and accountability and a chance to be successful."

Members of the "baby boom generation" may find that hard to believe, but Atwood is quick to point out that baby boomers are now too old to enlist. "We're past members of Generation X and are targeting the generation coming behind them."

If initial studies of America's youth are to be believed, indications are that they are less materially minded than their parents and are looking for a moral

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compass. What members of all generations believe is that it can be found in the Marine Corps.

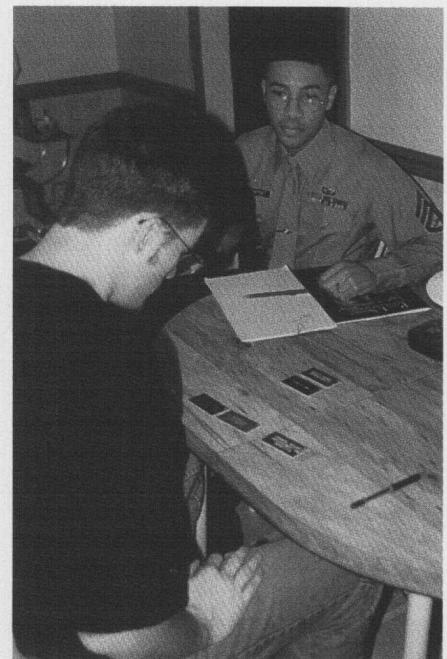
The studies cite a range of reasons that include the Corps' reputation of being tough and disciplined but also a trusted institution which instills patriotism and professionalism. It is a reputation that the Corps has carefully cultivated, vigorously protected and guarded by refusing to compromise what it considers to be core values: honor, courage and commitment. Honesty also rates high, and Marines have never shied away from telling potential applicants that theirs is an organization whose primary mission is to win the nation's wars. One of its slogans in the 1970s, "Nobody likes to fight, but somebody has to know how," left little doubt that in the Marine Corps there's a very good possibility that you may put your life on the line.

This approach to recruiting has not always been popular with the other services which have a requirement for many more recruits, especially since the draft ended 25 years ago. Some services have reached for bonuses, guarantees, schools and plush assignments to meet quotas. When the draft ended, the Corps also experimented by advertising benefits rather than a challenge. It soon found that while incentives made for easier recruiting, they made the maintenance of discipline more difficult, for recruits too often had little motivation beyond collecting the incentives they'd been promised.

The Marines not too subtly voiced their disdain for such recruiting practices. After the Army came out with a hip ad campaign telling youngsters "We want to join you," Marines, through their advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, answered with an ad that stated, "We're not joining anybody." Though the ad was quickly ordered pulled by the Department of Defense, the Corps had made its point and went back to its time-tested approach stating, "If anybody could be a Marine, we wouldn't be the Marine Corps," and more succinctly, "We don't promise you a rose garden."

Over the years the Corps' unique style of recruiting gained supporters. Probably the most recent ones were 11 private citizens of a DOD-appointed independent panel chaired by former Senator Nancy Kassenbaum Baker who drafted the 1997 "Report of the Federal Advisory Committee on Gender-Integrated Training and Related Issues," also known as the Kassenbaum Baker Report. As a result of some sexual misconduct in the Army, the committee was to assess current training programs of the services and determine how to best train a gender-integrated, all-volunteer force to ensure that it is disciplined, effective and ready.

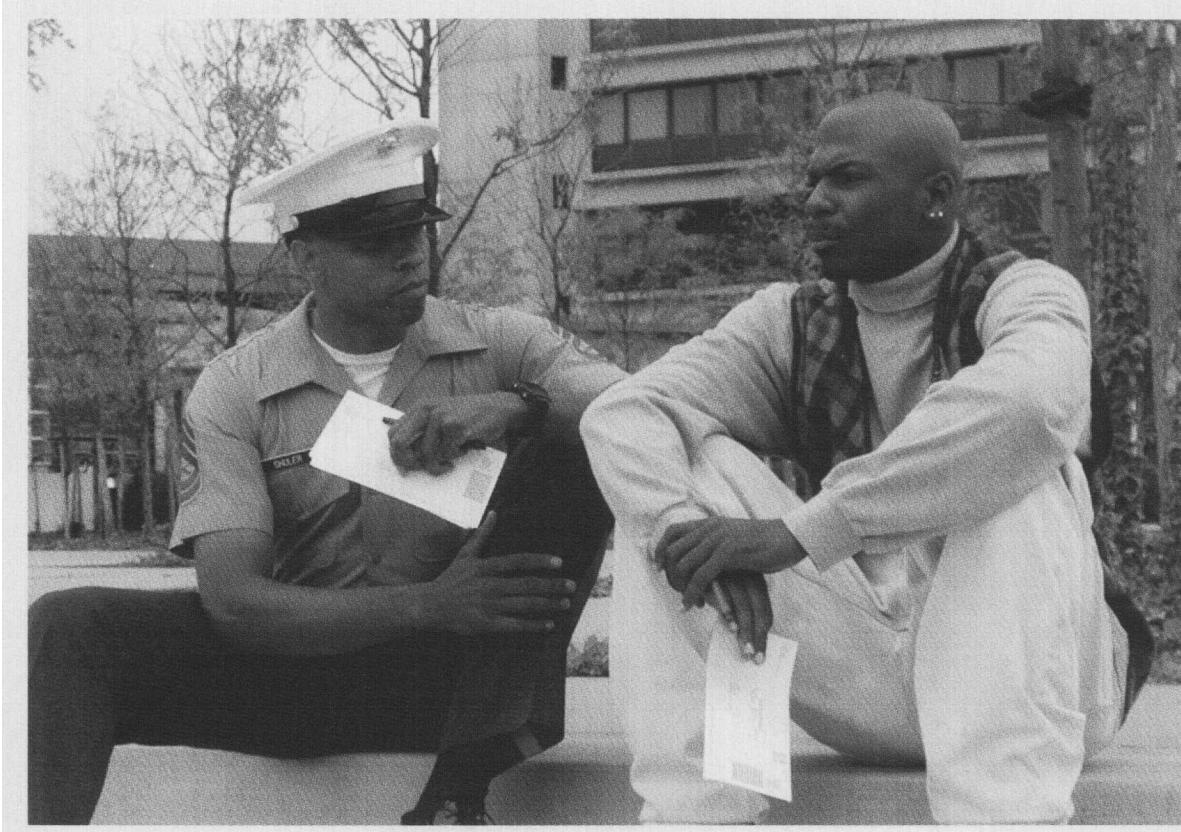
In addition to recommending the services follow the Marine Corps' lead and return to separate recruit training for women and men, the panel also recommended that U.S. military recruiting policy "decrease emphasis on monetary



Recruiter SSgt Fontendt, 4th Marine Corps District, explained how the Corps helps Marines achieve their goals.

incentives in advertising and public relations campaigns and emphasize more motivational themes of challenge and patriotism."

The committee found that the Army, Navy and, to a lesser extent, the Air Force had adopted recruitment strategies that emphasized cash bonuses, money for college, tuition loan repayments and skills training. The panel reached pretty much the same conclusions that the



Recruiter GySgt Mark Shuler of RS, New York talked to a student at Nassau Community College in Garden City about opportunities in the Corps.

Corps had after its brief experiment with offering such recruiting incentives.

Interestingly, the panel found, with the exception of the Marines, that military recruits said basic training was not hard enough or as much of a challenge as they had hoped it would be. On the other hand, the Corps, already considered the most difficult of boot camps, a year earlier had extended the length of recruit training and added a 54-hour test of willpower, endurance, skill and teamwork called "The Crucible."

Looking back, it is not surprising that the Marines were the only service to concur with the Kassenbaum Baker Report. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles C. Krulak, said, "Recruiting is the future of the Marine Corps. Our ability to conduct non-prior service recruiting directly affects our readiness for combat."

He further said that the "Corps has, since the late 1970s, embraced a marketing strategy that strongly emphasizes the theme of the smart, physically fit, tough warrior. The purpose is to establish a relationship between the prospect's needs and the intangible benefits the Marine Corps offers and expects—honor, courage and commitment.

"We portray the individual Marine and the Corps as something special and



SSgt David A. Schrum, the pool specialist at RS, Dallas, briefed five enlisted men in the Delayed Entry Program of what's required of them prior to reporting to recruit training.

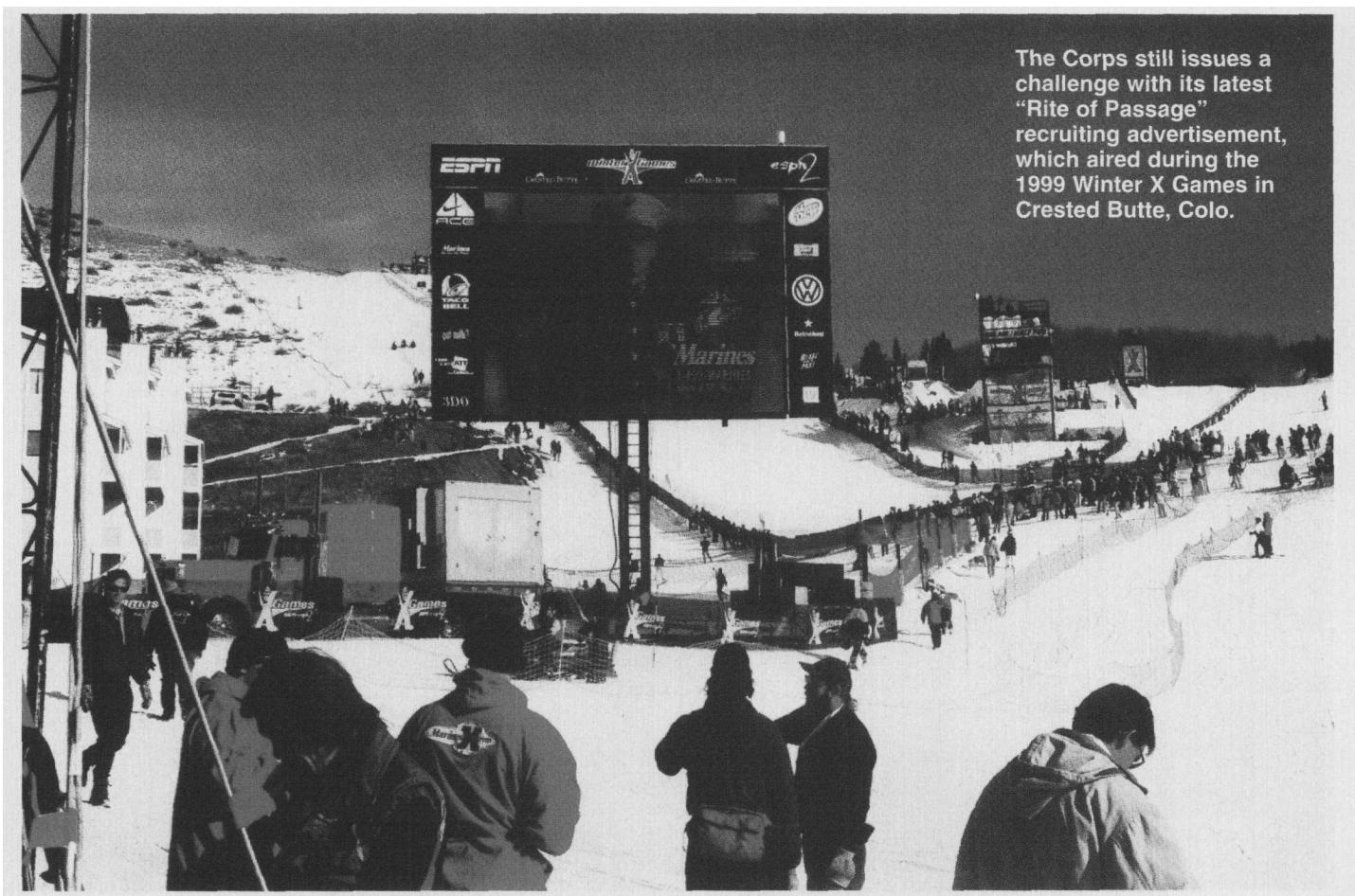
Sgt Chad E. McMeen

seek to reinforce those qualities that constitute 'what a Marine is made of.' The cornerstones of the strategy are honesty and integrity, an appeal to the 'intangibles' of Marine Corps service—mental and physical challenges, leadership skills, self-discipline, and the concept of a tough and smart Corps consisting of men and women of character."

In the nearly two years since the Kassenbaum Baker Panel Response, volumes have been written in the media and by writers lauding the potential benefits offered to young men and women who enter the Corps. Georgia Governor Zell

Miller, a former Marine, wrote "Corps Values: Everything You Need to Know I Learned in the Marines."

Two former Marines, Dan Garrison and Rod Walsh, wrote "Semper Fi: Business Leadership the Marine Corps Way," and military journalist Tom Ricks of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote a best-seller titled "Making the Corps" which examines the Corps' unique role in today's permissive society. Business magazines such as *Inc.* touted "Corps Values" as the lead article in the April 1998 edition and called the Corps "the best management-training program in



The Corps still issues a challenge with its latest "Rite of Passage" recruiting advertisement, which aired during the 1999 Winter X Games in Crested Butte, Colo.

America." Robert Maginnis, a military analyst at the Family Research Council, told *The Washington Times*, "For people who are serious about a career in the armed forces, there's only one choice today and that is the Marine Corps."

While few of today's youth entering or even thinking of joining the Marine Corps have read those books or articles, many of their teachers, future employers and parents probably have. The Corps has long been a service that relies heavily on successful alumni and positive word of mouth to sell its image. Further, some experts say educators, future employers and especially parents long for an institution that teaches discipline and dedication, and they say that America's youth pay more attention to their elders' advice than they often are given credit for. More and more adults are saying they believe the Corps is that institution.

"We are the highest-priced item on the market today," Atwood said. "You can buy a Mercedes for \$40,000. But you can't buy your way into the Marine Corps. You have to earn it."

First Lieutenant Jeff Sammons, another spokesman for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, recently told Rowan Scarborough of *The Washington Times*: "The kids are committing to the Marine Corps because the kids are getting this personal development.... The Marine Corps is the Cadillac of the military services. We require more of them."

In today's job market, it is no easier getting into the Marine Corps than any of the other services. And, in some ways the Corps has raised the bar for its own recruiters.

"The Marines have a higher standard than DOD," Atwood said. While the Army is starting to look at enlisting more non-high school graduates, the Corps sees a high school diploma as a character indicator which tells them that the person is, at the very least, capable of completing one of the first major challenges in life.

Atwood continued: "The DOD goal for military enlistments is for 90 percent of recruits to have high school diplomas. The Marine Corps set a goal of 95 percent. In Fiscal Year 98, 96.5 percent of our enlistees were high school graduates."

But that's not all they want.

"DOD set a goal to enlist 60 percent of those applicants who score in the upper mental half of the Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery test, which is the standard determining test for entry into the military. The Corps' goal is 63 percent. We achieved 64.6 percent in FY98.

"That is why in recruiting terms, we

see the all-volunteer force as a myth," Atwood explained. "Fewer than 10 percent of those who join actually walk into recruiting stations without having been called on by a recruiter, met a recruiter at a major event, received a piece of Marine Corps direct mail or had any other prior recruiting contact, and say they want to be Marines."

In order to do this, the Marines are looking for a few good men and women to serve as recruiters. It is no easy job, but it is a top priority in the Corps, and they send only their best to such duty.

"The Commandant has stated that he is the senior recruiter and has, since 1996, personally approved every hand-selected commander of the Corps' 48 recruiting stations," Atwood said. The enlisted recruiters are also carefully screened and selected.

The Recruiting Command is co-located with the Corps' Manpower Department and every career Marine eligible for orders is also screened for recruiting duty. "They look for mature, stable men and women, with proven track records," Atwood said. "We don't want to set anybody up to fail. We want to select them at a good time in their careers and give them the tools to be good recruiters."

Most succeed because "Marines are dedicated to doing the mission," Atwood said. "A 1998 DOD survey found that Marine recruiters were averaging 60 hours a week canvassing their areas for eligible recruits."

The Corps obviously believes that it is worth the hours. The recruiters, being Marines, believe there is nothing in the world better than being a Marine. They believe they are selling more than a job. They are selling strong values and a sense of belonging to an elite organization by essentially saying that in the Corps you don't get anything until you earn it.

A recent Senate Budget Committee staff report stated: "In 1998 the retention of both first- and second-term enlistees and of career personnel was on the increase in the Marines. Is it possible that factors other than money help to explain the hemorrhage of military personnel? One study suggested that those other factors were loss of job satisfaction, micro-management from senior officers and a general lack of confidence in leadership.

Marines tactfully avoid such speculation. "We have a mission," Atwood said. "And we're dedicated to doing it."

MILITARY HISTORICAL TOURS

For Veterans, Friends and Historians

24 May - 1 June

WWI-USMC Battlefields

Paris, Belleau Wood, Bouresches, Lucy le Bocage, Soissons, Blanc Mont, Essen Hook, St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne

Northern I Corps and DMZ

8-16 June; 26 Aug - 3 Sept.

Hue, Quang Tri, Dong Ha, Rte 9, Con Thien, Leatherneck Square, Khe Sanh

15-23 June Viet Nam

Southern I Corps-Air/Ground

LtGen "Bill" Maloney, USMC

CO, VMO-6, 66-67 & MAG-36, 72-73

12-23 July I Corps

1/9 Viet Nam Reunion

Roger Liggon

1/9 Network Founder/President

17-24 July - London

Korean War Veterans Intl. Reunion
Memorial Services, Parades and Banquets

23-30 July - Ireland

Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Wexford,
Killarney, Limerick, Galway

23-30 July - Paris

Paris, the Louvre, Notre Dame,
Versailles, Giverny - Monet's Home and
Garden and much more.

29 July-9 August VN I Corps

Col John Ripley, USMC

CO, L/3/3 & Advisor, VN Marines

2-10 Sept. Southern I Corps

Col Roger Barnard, USMC

CO, 3/7 1967-68

Danang, Hue, An Hoa, Arizona
Territory, Charlie Ridge, Go Noi Island,
Liberty Bridge, Antenna Valley, Que Son

11-16 September

55th Anniversary - Peleliu

General "Ray" Davis, USMC-MOH

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Colonel "Joe" Alexander, USMC

Noted Historian, Author - *Storm Landings*

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