

# Marines' Memorial Club

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This nostalgic painting of the Marines' Memorial building and Sutter Street is an accurate portrayal of the area near the club. (Illustration courtesy of Marines' Memorial Club)

# Marines' Memorial Club

Story by R. R. Keene

If there's a place where being a Marine is always fashionably "in," it is at 609 Sutter St. in San Francisco.

Whether in gabardine blue blouse with ribbons, three-piece suit and a "retired Marine" lapel pin or jeans, knit shirt with "Leatherneck" baseball cap, Marines are all welcome when they cross the threshold of the beaux arts-style building known as the Marines' Memorial Club.

Set near Nob Hill, in the heart of a city that never stops reaching skyward, the Marines' Memorial Club, one of San Francisco's protected landmarks, is like the Corps itself in that it is a unique hybrid, gilded in splendid military tapestry and rich in history and tradition.

Most find it a worthwhile visit if only because the familiar and revered eagle, globe and anchor is present practically everywhere.

The club has, in little more than half a century, become the West Coast keep for the Corps. It protects, maintains and personifies nostalgic trappings on which Marines, especially older ones, thrive. The club is simply "the place to go" when in San Francisco.

Visitors can enjoy everything from viewing Medals of Honor, which belong to and were worn by Corps legends such as Master Gunnery Sergeant Dan Dailey, Major General Smedley D. Butler and Major Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, to a hearty breakfast of SOS ("something on a shingle," also known as creamed beef on toast). While SOS may never be considered "chic," it rivals anything dished up at the finishing schools of the Corps known as recruit depots.

Indeed, at the Marines' Memorial Club, everything is done in style.

The wrought-iron gate, bright work, barrel-vaulted lobby and arched overheads with chandeliers provide a setting reminiscent of the gun decks of the frigate navy or Marine Barracks, 8th & I, in Washington, D.C. Full-length historical display cases, trimmed in polished mahogany, line the lobby, serving as side boys welcoming guests.

It is here that leatherneck salts of all generations and those associated with the Corps, by virtue of having served in the U.S. and allied armed forces, gather to remember, relive and retell their sea stories. The topside vista from the 12th story dining room and cocktail lounge is conducive to this, especially in the evenings. The 180-degree panorama of San



Former leatherneck artillery officer Harry Reiter, CEO of Marines' Memorial Club, has a policy to "modernize and upgrade, all the time." Consequently, the club has 80,000 to 90,000 visitors a year.

Francisco's most noted landmarks bask in a sun setting over the world's largest ocean. The pyramid-shaped Trans America Building and the Sir Francis Drake Hotel frame the view of barges, tankers, freighters and an occasional warship headed across the bay, dotted with small white sails and a brisk froth of white caps. All are en route to faraway places Marines know well.

The panorama is best viewed with friends over an apéritif followed by dinner.

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Evening dining at the club is an epicurean delight that rivals anything offered in a city known to revel in such pleasures.

Most Marines are at least familiar with San Francisco, having passed through on their way to even more exotic climes and places. Some were fortunate to have been stationed at now closed bases such as

Alameda or Mare and Treasure islands.

San Francisco today is still a pleasure: a wonderful mixture and melting pot of cultures. People come from a variety of places and are energetic, full of optimism and hope. In addition to its beauty and culture, San Francisco is also a city of contradictions.

It was almost Saint Patrick's Day, and the taxi driver, a Palestinian, made small talk during the \$28 ride from the airport to the club. He rambled on happily and incessantly about everything from ending all wars to pointing out that the hills in the city were so steep that he was required to have the brakes of his cab checked once a month. His soliloquy was interrupted by a passing parade of approximately 2,800 "Irish" who, for the most part, bore a remarkable resemblance to Asians wearing shamrocks.

Another contradiction involves the smoking law. Smoking is not allowed in any public place. Thus, many pubs have become the tobacco equivalent of speakeasies. The publican of a local establishment near the club offered a glass of ice to serve as an ash tray and explained that, "Smoking is a \$70 fine, but our police have more important things to do. You will have to put them out if anyone complains."

There was a pause, silence and then everybody lit up. Cigar aficionados agreed that, like alcohol in the 1920s, stogies simply tasted better in a speakeasy.

Even more of a contradiction was the

**Visitors enjoy elegant ballrooms, a first-class theater and spacious rooms at the Marines' Memorial Club.**

small group protesting both a one-time amphibious training landing by Marines and sailors, scheduled at nearby Alameda, and an Urban Warrior exercise, to take place in the bay area.

"We don't want our young people learning how to kill," said one woman, explaining that San Francisco is divorcing itself from its military past. This may be true, but the city apparently hasn't divorced itself from its 1960s self-indulgence. That evening, a television newsman reported 450 pounds of cocaine had been seized over the weekend. He further stated that San Francisco Hospital had the highest cocaine overdose admission rate (primarily young people) in the area. But, there were no protesters outside the hospital.

Back in the Marines' Memorial Club, some of Urban Warrior's leatherneck participants, in camouflage utility uniforms, entered the lobby, grabbed their security-encoded room key cards and headed to showers and a change to civvies. The 74-year-old, 12-story structure offers 137 guest rooms and suites. The rooms are clean, spacious and equal to or better than any of San Francisco's best hotels and cost, on the average, 40 percent less. Charges for active-duty military are pro-rated. Rooms for privates to sergeants range from \$40 to \$55 a night, depending on the number of beds and location of the room. Those no longer on active duty pay \$75 or more. Luxurious one-of-a-kind suites range from \$125 to \$245 per night. All rooms offer color television, courtesy coffee, housekeeping services, mail and message delivery, room service and earthquake instructions.

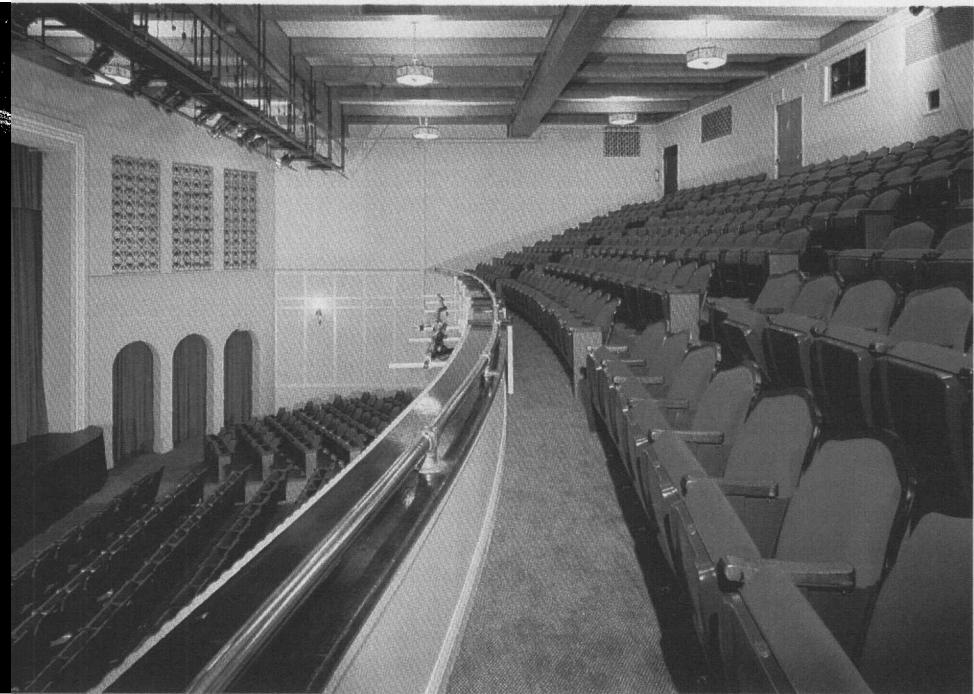
The Marine guests, in order to satisfy their need for a daily workout, may take a quick run up the city's hills or to Union Square, only a few blocks away. The health club and swimming pool were recently renovated and reopened in July. The health club offers the latest in exercise equipment, which can be capped with a power swim.

And, while San Francisco has many places that must be visited, the best place to start is within the Marines' Memorial Club. There is, of course, a gift shop and a concierge. The concierge can assist with dining recommendations and reservations, special arrangements and planning city-wide excursions. Marines' Memorial Club has its own first-class theater, not usual for most clubs and hotels. The billing heralded a comedy, "Red, White and Tuna," which opened March 17. The the-

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ater has become a premier San Francisco venue, featuring a full slate of nationally touring professional productions.

For those who at times prefer a more contemplative atmosphere, the Major General E. O. Ames Library, with its polished granite fireplace, contains an excellent selection of military literature.

The historical remnants of the Corps' past conflicts and valor are present, largely in part through the efforts of historical curator Dixon L. Poole, a former Marine who has a mighty appreciation of the Corps' history.

The individual who puts the Marines' Memorial Club all together, day in and day out, catering to the wishes of 80,000 to 90,000 guests a year, is Harry Reiter, a former leatherneck artillery officer who served in the late 1950s and 1960s. For the past eight years, he has been the president and chief executive officer of the Marines' Memorial Club. Somewhere in-between he earned a degree in hotel management and found his way back to the Corps.

He's done well with his policy of "modernize and upgrade, all the time."

Like any wise CEO, Reiter knows his success is due, in no small part, to those who work for him. Reiter singled out Hiram Martinez, a bellman for two years and one of the first persons visitors meet. To discerning guests, first impressions are very important. If Martinez looks and acts like a Marine, it is because he left the Corps as a sergeant in 1995. He's a veteran of the Gulf War and Marine Security Guard duty in El Salvador and Portugal.

Reiter said some of his staff have been with the club for more than 30 years. "We do well because we have a great staff and a good work environment. They are 'gung ho' and work like military people, and they like military people."

"The staff remember the guests, and the guests remember the staff."

This attitude is reflected in the number of return visitors and increased club membership.

Remember, the Marines' Memorial is a membership club. In 1946, the founders recognized three components needed to form a living memorial: historical, financial and emotional. Their original charter requested that the club establish a museum to serve as a tribute to Marine Corps heroes. Around this, they devised their framework for the club to survive in perpetuity. The founders made provisions for the club to respond to business cycles and changing economic and social trends.

The club relies on members and friends to donate collections of records, trophies and historical objects. The response over the years has been so enthusiastic that it takes several hours to browse among the



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**The entrance to the club and bellman Hiram Martinez provide first impressions of elegance and efficiency.**



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**—Harry Reiter  
CEO, Marines' Memorial Club**

keepsakes and displays, which are changed regularly.

Just as important as the historical aspect is membership in the club, which is now open to all branches of the armed forces. There are four types of member-

ship: regular, associate Marine, associate (Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and allied forces) and honorary. Active-duty members of the United States Armed Forces and current members of the Marine Corps Reserve receive club privileges. Today, the Marines' Memorial Club has a membership roster of 18,000.

Annual dues range from \$50 for retired Marines and widows of retired Marines to \$60 for associate members. Special categories of life and perpetual memberships include extended club privileges and display plaques.

Membership is certainly not expensive and is worth the cost. Those who join receive a quarterly newsletter, can accrue points for free night stays and join a frequent flyer mileage program. There are guest cards for spouses and children over 21 years of age available at membership rates. Some members just completed a week in Paris as part of a club-sponsored group tour. An added benefit is that one becomes eligible for further membership in the Provident Central Credit Union. Members also participate in the Marines' Memorial Scholarship Program, which, this year, will award 18 college scholarships to members' dependents, active-duty enlisted Marine dependents, dependent children of Marines killed in action, Marine reservists and their dependents and dependents of Marine Corps recruiters.

Probably the best thing about signing on with the Marines' Memorial Club is being able to attend the club-sponsored special events, such as dinners, dances, holiday champagne brunches, New Year's Eve celebrations and Marine Corps Birthday Balls, held in the Commandant's Room, Regimental Room or Crystal Ballroom. Members can use their frequent flyer miles to attend these types of events.

Besides, it gives one another good reason to visit San Francisco, tour the wharf, get a little eyeball liberty, listen to musicians, watch mimes and critique the artists and then save taxi fares by taking a \$2 ride back in the trolley cable car, which lets riders off only a block from the Marines' Memorial Club.

"Hey, don't stand back there!" yelled the cable car driver from New York, admonishing passengers preparing to get off. "You! I'm not talking outta my ear! We got too much beef back there already!"

"Are you talkin' to me?" asked one passenger, who could have been the driver's New York cousin. As the trolley pulled away the driver yelled, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may have to go to Oakland!" Everyone laughed and waved. San Francisco really is a great town.