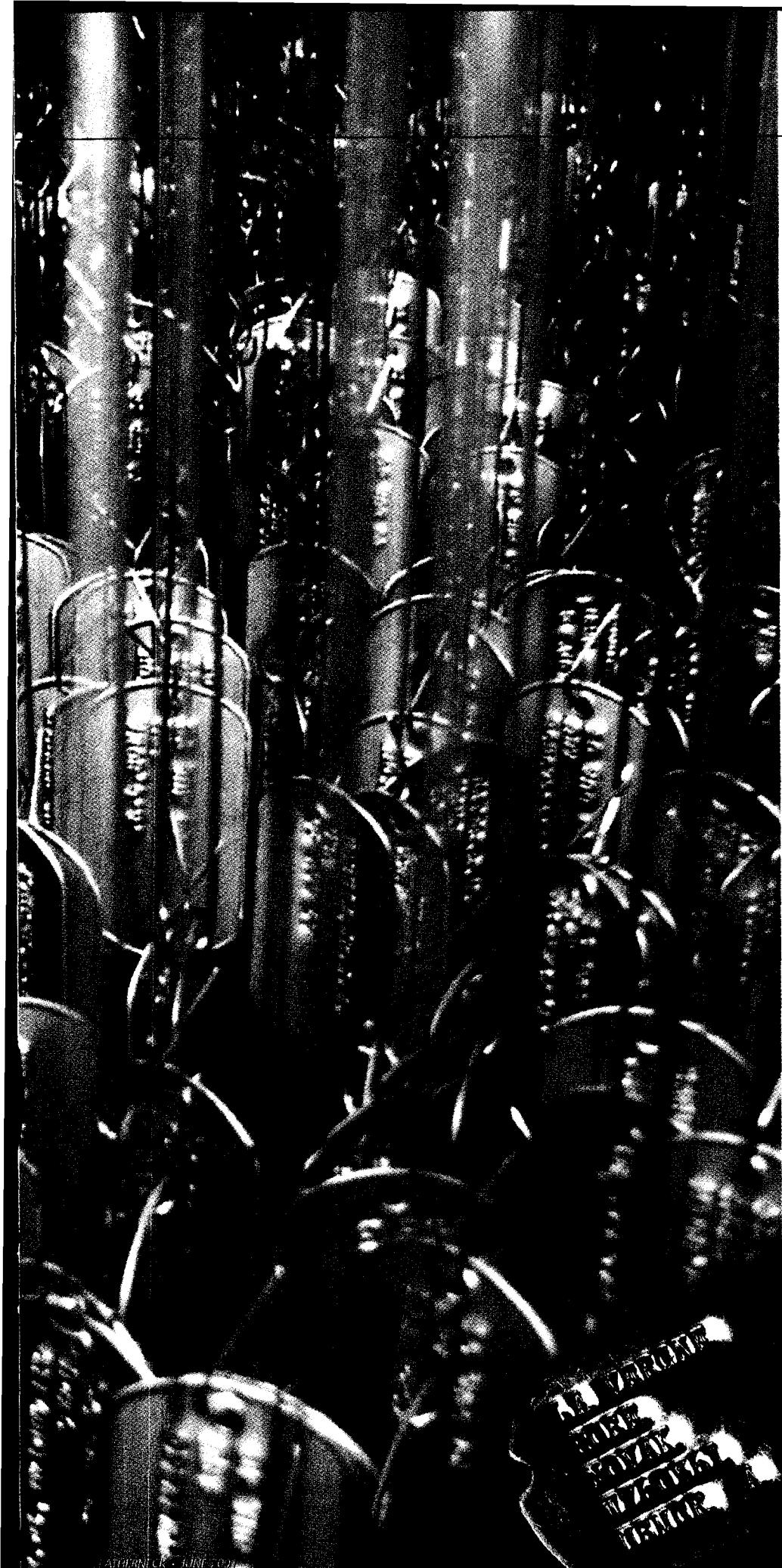


# We're Talkin' DOG TAGS

This display of dog tags, photographed by John Kovaka, is located at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, Chicago. The notched tag on the right was issued to woman Marine LaVergne R. Novak in 1943.



Story by R. R. Keene  
Dog tag photos by Nancy Hoffman

**M**ilitary identification or "dog" tags are small icons of Americana we all learned to recognize during the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

The 2-inch by 1 1/4-inch rounded, Monel metal tags were no less a symbol of America's soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines than khakis, helmets and John Wayne. We went to the movies where 35 mm heroes, bigger than life, rattled their dog tags in love scenes prior to going off to battle. In silver screen firefights, we noted, ever so observantly, how the tags flew with an added flash of bravado as Hollywood Marines charged and slew sinister enemies on some tropical isle.

When our uncles or older brothers went away to serve their time, we accepted the fact of their service to country only when they came home on leave, we witnessed them shaving over the sink and saw their dog tags embossed with their names.

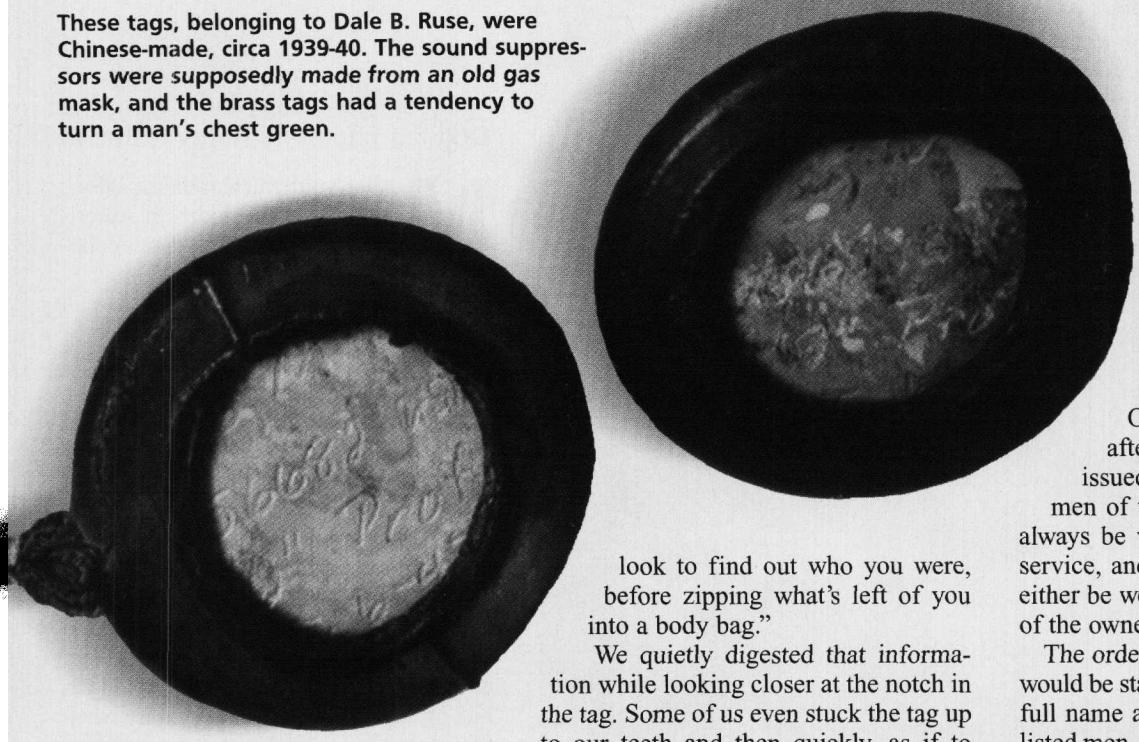
It was heady stuff to us, and we couldn't wait until we wore our own tags on a beaded chain.

Eventually, our turn did come. When it did, like everything else in the Corps, it wasn't just a matter of wearing those tags. The Marine Corps had a proper way to wear them: one on the larger chain and one on a small chain with rubber silencers or sound suppressors. We secretly enjoyed the silenced dog tags. It made us look and feel tactical.

Our friend in the company office made us a few extra tags that we gave, in an effort to be gallant, to girls as a token that our intentions were honorable and that we were as sincere as 17- or 18-year-old Marines can be in our devotion to them.

Our first sergeant, who knew everything going on in the minds of young Marines, took a dim view of giving away

These tags, belonging to Dale B. Ruse, were Chinese-made, circa 1939-40. The sound suppressors were supposedly made from an old gas mask, and the brass tags had a tendency to turn a man's chest green.



government property and ensured that we were required to produce our dog tags when in pay line, during personnel inspections and "junk-on-the-bunk" displays.

We countered by giving our friend in the company office beer for more tags. The first sergeant countered by giving our friend in the company office extra police duty.

We all ended up in Vietnam where all things, even dog tags, lost their charm and wearing them became serious preparation for a possibility no Marine wanted to think about: death or maiming. At one point we even put a dog tag in the laces of our left boot.

"You don't know why there's a notch in your dog tag?" sneered one of our saltier compatriots who gave us the look of someone resigned to being alone and adrift in a sea of stupidity. "'Cause when you buy the farm, they will jam one of those tags up between your front incisor teeth, and that's the first place they will

look to find out who you were, before zipping what's left of you into a body bag."

We quietly digested that information while looking closer at the notch in the tag. Some of us even stuck the tag up to our teeth and then quickly, as if to ward off some horrible premonition, pulled the tag away.

Of course, everyone who had ever served before us knew and understood our concerns. Nobody likes the idea of "Unknown" being etched on a headstone, particularly one's own.

War is a messy business, and identifying casualties has always been a problem. The first example of identification tags being used by military men in America was during the War Between the States, where both sides privately purchased or made half-dollar-size tags that included the name, company and unit. The oldest known tag was made in 1861 and has Union General George B. McClellan stamped on the obverse side.

Smaller but similar tags, made for those willing to pay, have been preserved from the Spanish-American War. It wasn't until Dec. 20, 1906, however, that Army general order #204 authorized identification tags.

Nearly 11 years later the Navy would

authorize ID tags, but only after the Quartermaster, Marine Corps started issuing them as part of individual field kits and ordered them to be suspended from the neck under clothing. Marine Corps order #32, dated Oct. 6, 1916, stated: "Hereafter identification tags will be issued to all officers and enlisted men of the Marine Corps. They will always be worn when engaged in field service, and at all other times they will either be worn, or kept in the possession of the owner."

The order went on to specify that tags would be stamped as follows: "Officers—full name and rank at date of issue; enlisted men—full name and date of enlistment in the Marine Corps."

Company clerks literally hammered out the details. Accordingly, the quartermaster issued blank tags with stamps and small hammers with which the clerks hand-stamped the information around the edge of the tags. It proved to be none too soon.

The Great War devastated Europe, and the Americans—whose ranks of military swelled to more than 4½ million men in 1917—started going "Over There" as part of the American Expeditionary Force.

The military and, in particular, the AEF to which the Marines had been assigned, grew so quickly that the Army started issuing serial numbers to keep track of everybody. General order #10 of the Sixth Marine Regiment, dated Feb. 15, 1918, stated, "The numbers assigned to all men present will be stamped on identification tags."

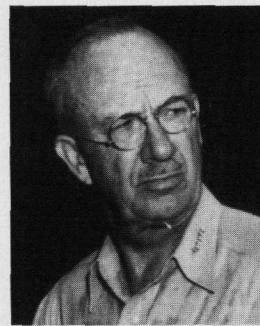
The Marine quartermaster began issuing two aluminum tags to be "habitually worn by all officers and enlisted men,



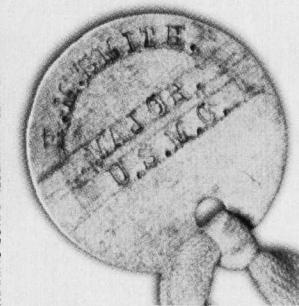
LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO



Two-time winner of the Medal of Honor, SgtMaj Dan Daly's WW I tags are part of the Marine Corps Museum's collection at Quantico, Va.



MARINE CORPS RESEARCH CENTER



This dog tag for Lieutenant General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith shows the move toward stamping information across the tag.

## To Order

# LEATHERNECK

I wish to become a member of the Marine Corps Association and receive *LEATHERNECK* magazine.

### MEMBERSHIP ELIGIBILITY

Membership in the Marine Corps Association is open to all active-duty, Reserve, retired, and honorably discharged Marines or members of our sister services who are serving with or have served with Marine Corps units.

### SUBSCRIPTION RATES\*

(Includes membership dues of \$4 per year)

#### Officers

- 1 year \$23
- 2 years \$42

#### Enlisted

- 1 year \$17
- 2 years \$30

I am not eligible for membership, but I wish to subscribe to *LEATHERNECK* magazine.

### NON-MEMBER RATES\*

- 1 year \$23
- 2 years \$42

\*Add \$16 per year for foreign postage to all above rates (other than APO/FPO addresses).

- Check/money order enclosed
- MasterCard  VISA
- AmEx  Discover

Bank Charge Card No. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date Card Expires \_\_\_\_\_

Social Security Number \_\_\_\_\_

Rank/Title \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

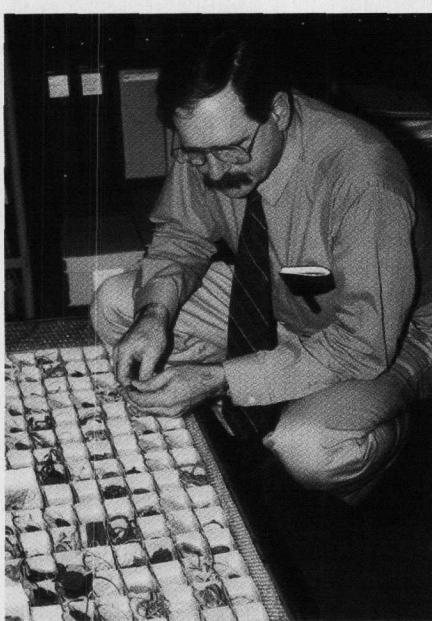
State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP Code \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to:

Marine Corps Association  
Box 1775, Quantico, VA 22134  
or call toll-free (866) 622-1775  
Web site: [www.mca-marines.org](http://www.mca-marines.org)  
e-mail: [subscribe@mca-marines.org](mailto:subscribe@mca-marines.org)

- Send me an MCA brochure with details concerning membership and services to members.

B



NANCY LEE WHITE/HOFFMAN

Curator Ken Smith-Christmas keeps a collection of dog tags from Marines, famous and not so famous, at the Marine Corps Museum Research Facility.

and also by civilians attached to the American Expeditionary Force ... both tags will be stamped with the name, rank, company and regiment or corps to which the wearer belongs, and the second tag will be worn suspended by a cord one inch long from the bottom of the first tag." The purpose, bluntly stated, was to allow one tag to be buried with the body and the second tag to be placed with the record of burial that included the cause and date of death.

Some Marines were also issued Navy tags. Initially, some of the oval tags were made of brass that tarnished easily and had a tendency to turn a man's chest green. Others were made of aluminum. Tags made of Monel metal (a patented alloy of nickel and copper, melded with small amounts of iron and manganese) proved

more resistant to corrosion. They were also unique. Written in cursive rather than stamped and etched in printer's ink, one side bore the Marine's name, initials, date of enlistment and date of birth or, as in the case of officers, name, rank and date of appointment. The bottom of the tag also bore the letters "U.S.M.C." The reverse side was marked by an imprint of the right index finger. (Fingerprinting for identification had only recently taken hold.)

The process of personalizing the Navy tag seems somewhat complicated, but is worth noting. After the writing and fingerprint were in place, powdered asphaltum was sprinkled over both sides of the tag and allowed to mix with the printer's ink. The excess was blown away. The tag was then heated until the writing and the ridges of the fingerprint became hard. It was then dipped into a solution of nitric acid and allowed to set for about one hour, thus letting the acid eat the metal not covered by the hardened ink. When removed from the solution and cleaned, the writing and fingerprint were raised on the tag.

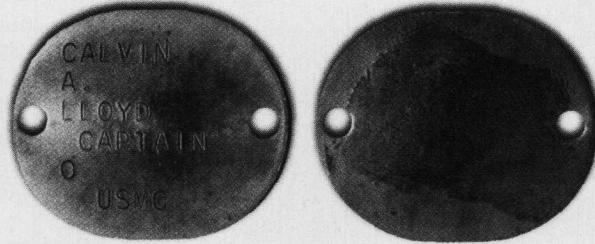
Sailors and Marines would continue using the tags until the start of World War II. Although the shape and information on dog tags have changed, tags made of Monel metal are still being issued.

When the Armistice was signed, the dog tags fell into disuse and the Corps, for the most part, ordered that the Army aluminum tags be used "until the present supply is exhausted."

Apparently, the Marines had a large inventory of "doggie" dog tags. The Marine Corps Manual of 1921 stated: "The Secretary of the Navy has authorized the use of the Marine Corps identification tag until the exhaustion of the present supply, after which the tag prescribed in the Navy Regulations will be used."



MARINE CORPS RESEARCH CENTER



One of the Corps' most distinguished shooting legends, Major Calvin A. Lloyd, had Navy-style dog tags with a thumbprint when he was a captain.



MARINE CORPS RESEARCH CENTER



Wendell C. Neville commanded the Fifth Marine Regiment at Belleau Wood and later became the 14th Commandant of the Marine Corps.

In 1940 another great war was on the horizon. The Marine Corps Manual, Section 1, Article 58, was updated to state that tags were to be used "in the event of war or national emergency and at other times when directed by competent authority."

Tags were still to be "suspended from the neck by a cord or thong passed through a small hole in the tag, the second tag to be suspended from the first one by a short piece of string or tape." Marines were told the tags were to be considered part of the uniform and when not worn as directed "they were to be habitually kept in the possession of the owner" and regularly inspected.

By then the information required was machine-stamped onto oval-shaped Monel disks. Article 58 required that the disks display

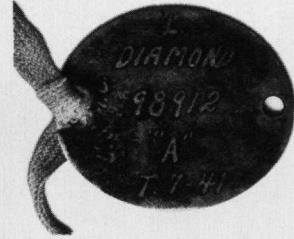
the following vital statistics: "(a) Name (b) Officer's rank or man's service number. Approximately three spaces to the right of rank or service number, indicate religion by 'P' 'C' or 'H' for Protestant, Catholic or Hebrew. [There was also an 'M' for Muslim.] If no religion is indicated this space will be left blank. (c) Type of blood; and if the man has received tetanus toxoid, the letter 'T' with the date (T-8/40) to so indicate. (d) At one end of the tag the letters 'USMC' or 'USMCR,' as may be appropriate."

The order further directed that tags would be stamped and issued at the recruit depots or stamped and issued at posts and stations to which men were transferred. The Corps in its benevolence issued the first two free but made it a point to state, "Issues made to replace those lost will be checked against the man's pay account."

It was also about this time that notched rectangular tags started appearing. How the story about the notch going between the teeth got started is unknown, but it spread and is even depicted in a movie about soldiers fighting in the Pacific. Although looking back we can't recall ever witnessing



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO



Master Gunnery Sergeant Leland "Lou" Diamond, a colorful legend, enlisted in 1917. The dog tag above was issued to him prior to Guadalcanal.

anyone following this procedure, we believed it. But when we were young Marines in Vietnam, we believed almost anything until the real horror of combat caught up with us. Then we stopped believing in almost everything. We found out, much later, when it no longer mattered, that the notch was to hold the tag in the embossing machine while the information was stamped. Further, only one of the two tags had a notch, since the machine stamped them both at the same time with the front one holding the rear one in place.

As time went by, the string and leather thongs were replaced with two beaded chains made of metal, one 25 inches and the other about 2 1/2 inches. To keep everything from rattling, covers, silencers or sound suppressors could be purchased, although adhesive tape worked best.

Improvements to the embossing machine made the notches obsolete. The tags themselves were no longer required to be Monel, but rather made of "corrosion-resisting material." However, the inventory was large enough that Monel tags were and are still issued. The information packed onto the five lines on a dog tag changed only a little. Tags bore the surname followed by initials, service number (on Jan. 1, 1972, Social Security numbers became service numbers), blood type, "USMC" and "S," "M" or "L" for gas mask size. One's religion was likely to be spelled out or listed as "No Preference." The tetanus inoculation and date were dropped.

Today, dog tags are not only being modernized to keep up with the 21st century but are also going high-tech. The tags of the future will be worth a lot

Despite regulations, there was not a real pattern to dog tags. The tag belonging to R. H. Schneider (left) was made in 1942 from the canopy of a Japanese Zero fighter. The uniquely shaped tag at right was issued in 1942 and belonged to Frederick J. La Malfa.

more than the old 15 cents worth of metal that dangled around a leatherneck.

While the tags are still in the experimental and test stages, Marines more than likely will still be issued two. One will be the familiar metal tag, but the second will be made of tough plastic with a microchip, which will house digitized medical information. Project Metropolis, an operational exercise using leathernecks of the I Marine Expeditionary Force, was coordinated by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, Quantico, Va., and a research team from the Naval Aerospace Medical Research Laboratory.

In the exercise, Marines and a research team field-tested the Tactical Medical Coordination System, a prototype for casualty location and evacuation that has been three years in development. TacMedCS uses radio frequency technology, electronics and global-positioning systems to pinpoint a wounded Marine wearing the tag no matter where he is on the battlefield.

The tags also contain and transmit a Marine's medical information and help in the medical evacuation process.

TacMedCS coordinators say it works like "a Federal Express for casualties." They say future conflicts may not have a large medical presence ashore. The focus now is evacuation of the wounded to medical facilities on ships.

Project Metropolis exercises in November of last year and in February of this year saw 300 tags go to Marines in the field, where TacMedCS coordinators



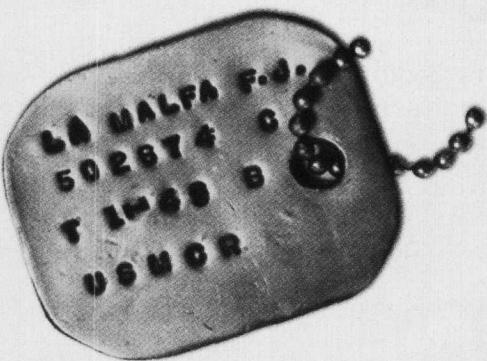
**Tags of the future may allow corpsmen to scan a Marine (above) from several feet away, read his medical past and enter the type of treatment received on the battlefield. Tags may resemble the one at right and contain a microchip. (Photos by Nathan W. McConaughay)**

were able to track simulated battle casualties and beam vital information to medical control centers a long way from the hostilities.

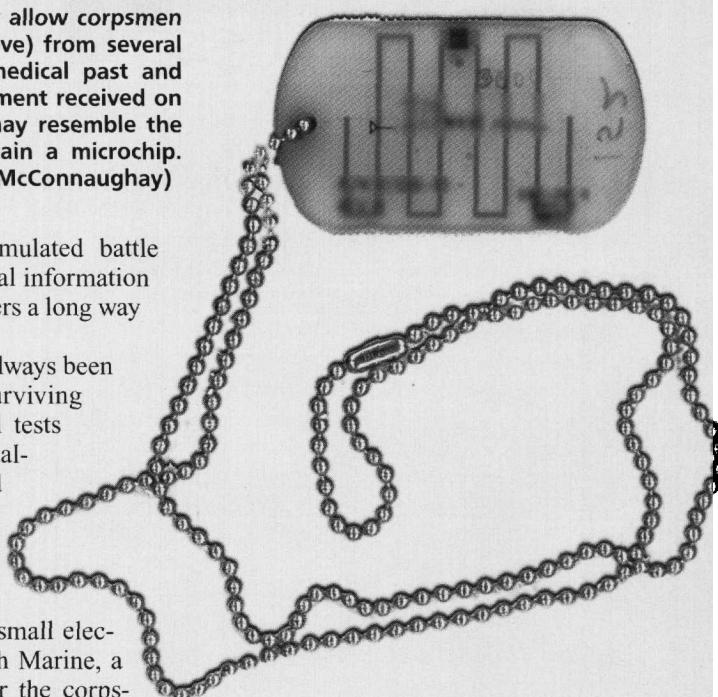
Immediate care has always been considered key to surviving combat wounds. Initial tests demonstrated that casualties could be provided definitive care sooner. TacMedCS assists in getting this definitive care by using three components: the small electronic tag worn by each Marine, a palm-size computer for the corpsman and a medical display system at the medical control centers.

Each individual plastic tag has an imbedded computer chip containing personal identification and medical and treatment details. The tag also contains standard information: name, rank, Social Security number, organization and location.

The medical information can include vital information entered by a corpsman on the scene, such as injury type, coma score, treatment, triage and blood type. The palm-size computer allows the corpsman to read and program information from a tag read through clothing from up to 4 feet away in less than one second. The corpsman can almost simultaneously send that information to medical centers.



LEATHERNECK • JUNE 2001



According to officials of the Navy Bureau of Medicine's Research and Development Division, "The benefit to the Marine Corps is twofold. First, Marines and corpsmen can find and move casualties into the medical system faster. Second, the medical personnel can provide an electronic treatment record that can be made available to a variety of medical experts for better diagnosis and improved casualty management."

Military identification tags have come a long way from the metal dog tags with a leather thong worn by leathernecks in France. "What's next," we might ask, "digital smart ID cards?" Yep, they're here!

