



Hugh O'Brian

DI, Actor, Humanitarian— He Followed His Own Path

Story by R. R. Keene · Photos courtesy of Hugh O'Brian

"I do not believe that we are all born equal. Created equal in the eyes of God, yes. But I do believe all men and women, if given the opportunity and encouragement to recognize their potential, regardless of background, have the freedom to choose in our world."

—Sgt Hugh C. "O'Brian" Krampe, USMC

The title "Marine" leads those who've earned it down unique paths. It leads some to be leaders in politics, star athletes, barons of business or luminaries in vocations that seemingly have little in common with service to one's country as a Marine.

While such individuals may have attained their status without ever hefting a rifle, standing a watch or blacking their emblems, most will say being a Marine helped in ways they never envisioned when they piled off the bus and onto those yellow footprints at a recruit depot.

Hugh C. Krampe is such a Marine. He was 17 years old in 1943 when he met his drill instructors at San Diego, and although they never asked, he quickly surmised his drill instructors would not have been impressed that he was the son of a "World War I horse Marine, who in 1943 was a captain with 9th Infantry Battalion, United States Marine Corps Reserve in Chicago." Nor would the DIs care that Krampe had learned "The Marines' Hymn" before learning the National Anthem. He was learning that in the Corps it is not who you are, what you knew before, who your parents are or even where you come from that matters. It is what you do when given a command, fix a bayonet to a rifle or send rounds downrange from 500 yards.

Krampe did have a few things going for him. He was a lean, handsome, athletic lad, having lettered in four sports. Considered bright, he spent a few semesters at Kemper Military Academy in

Booneville, Mo., which had instilled some martial discipline. He answered up when spoken to and listened and learned.

He marched well, wore his uniform properly, mastered his M1 rifle and shot expert on the range at Camp Matthews. He proved to be more than a cut above the average recruit. His drill instructors were reasonably impressed. They made him "honor graduate" and volunteered him for duty as a drill instructor.

Krampe was 18 years old, a private first class and on the grinder, counting cadence for his own platoon of recruits. Years later he would often say with pride, "I took four platoons through boot. Three were honor platoons."

PFC Krampe had done well thus far in the Corps. There was, however, a war still going on, and he asked to be assigned to a line company. His orders read Company B, 5th Tank Battalion, 28th Marine Regiment, Fifth Marine Division. When he checked in, the unit was seriously preparing for combat they knew was coming. The only question was where.

"It was Iwo Jima," said Krampe. Realizing his youth and inexperience, he tried hard to prove himself and, hopefully, not "get my butt blown away."

Krampe speculates that the needs of the Corps may have saved his life. He'll never know for sure.

"My commanding officer called me in and said they needed someone from the Fifth Division to take a fleet appointment to the Naval Academy. 'You are it.' This was about four weeks before 5th Tank Battalion shipped out."

He was sent to the Naval Academy Preparatory School, Bainbridge, Md., to

O'Brian was PFC Krampe when he and fellow Marine PFC Joe Smith struck a combative pose for the camera at Camp Pendleton, Calif. It wasn't much later that PFC Smith and other members of 5th Tanks left for Iwo Jima and O'Brian received orders to the Naval Academy Prep School, which O'Brian says probably saved his life.



study for entrance examinations to the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.

He studied hard, but when the exam results were posted, he came up one-tenth of a point shy in algebra. It might as well have been a hundred points. The Naval Academy turned down his admission. So much for a career as a Marine officer. His scores were good enough, however, to get him into Yale to study law.

By then the war was over anyway. Krampe, like many before him, had finished his four-year tour in the Corps and now looked forward to starting his life as a civilian. He brought with him certain traits that the Corps had improved upon or instilled, not the least of which were "patience and tenacity."

It was May 1947 when he turned up in Los Angeles for the summer to earn money for a car to drive back to Yale. He had the self-confidence to meet and impress two young starlets: Ruth Roman, whom many considered the most beautiful of women (and whom Krampe would appear with in 1965 in the movie "Love Has Many Faces"), and Linda Christian, a sensuous actress, who in a few months, would marry megastar and Marine veteran Tyrone Power.

The women introduced him to a "little theater" group. Again, confidence polished as Marine and drill instructor played a role in helping Krampe in his acting roles. Although acting was something he enjoyed, he felt the experience might be helpful in a law career. In the meantime, he worked part-time as a landscaper, salesman and trash collector.

His acting break came almost like the plot of a "B" movie. He worked minor roles until one day the leading man became ill: Krampe stepped in, all eyes were on him, and voilà (more or less), Hugh O'Brian was created.

It wasn't long before Hugh Krampe, aka Hugh O'Brian, inked a contract with Universal Studios. He'd matured in the Corps and been around enough to learn that "all fame is fleeting." Consequently, he hedged his bets on stardom by earning 17 credits at Los Angeles City College while making five motion pictures.

Now, there are Marines in every clime and place reading this and saying, "Who is Hugh Krampe/O'Brian?" They are to be forgiven, for they are so boot that they still have their original seabag issue.

"Older" leathernecks know that before Kurt Russell played him in his most excellent 1993 film "Tombstone" and before Kevin Costner's insipid performance in 1994, Hugh O'Brian was Wyatt Earp.

It was 1954 and he was the "much discussed talent" chosen to portray the leg-



By the mid-1950s, Hugh O'Brian was doing well. He'd left the Corps and landed the lead in the TV series "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp." However, he believed there was more to life, and it took a meeting with Dr. Albert Schweitzer to inspire O'Brian.

endary lawman of the old West weekly on television. His trademarks of a black, flat-brimmed Stetson, faro dealer's vest and 16-inch Buntline Special revolver debuted in 1955 in the first adult Western.

Called "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp," the show ran on ABC in the 8:30 to 9 p.m. slot for six years in 226 episodes. Everybody enjoyed the plots, everybody knew the props, and everybody liked the fact that the TV Wyatt Earp shot but never killed anyone, even in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. It was a hit with well-done stories that O'Brian could be proud of. Consequently, the role of Wyatt Earp would always be synonymous with the actor Hugh O'Brian.

However, O'Brian wanted to be more and is far more than just an actor. He told *Leatherneck* in a 1983 interview: "My father was a strong disciplinarian, which I'm grateful for. It prepared me for a lot of hard-nosed people I'd sooner or later come in contact with." More importantly, O'Brian said: "He taught me

that you can change things and don't have to accept mediocrity or less than the best from anyone, including yourself."

Marine, actor and humanitarian are not necessarily an oxymoronic combination. The latter are just other paths where being a Marine can lead. The humanitarian path took O'Brian to Africa, where in 1958 he spent nine inspirational days with Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Albert Schweitzer. O'Brian volunteered to make baby cribs, passed out medicine to lepers and did any odd jobs just to meet and possibly learn from the then-83-year-old doctor.

They discussed world affairs, and Schweitzer told O'Brian he believed the one country in the world that could bring about peace was the United States.

"He said the United States must take a leadership role, or we are a lost civilization, and the most important thing in education is to teach young people to think for themselves," said O'Brian. Finally the doctor looked directly at him and



Students and enablers at the HOBY World Leadership Congress of 2005 took a group photo at the nation's Capitol. In the 48 years since O'Brian founded the organization, more than 367,000 high school sophomores have become alumni.

asked: "What are you going to do with this?"

It was then that O'Brian realized he needed to make more of his life. He reasoned that he could start by founding the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership programs or HOBY.

"I didn't want to be a glorified volunteer patting people on the back," he said. He wanted to be involved hands-on in his efforts: lead by example, lead from the front, motivate.

As with any idea, it pays to start small. He called a few local high schools and called in some favors with a few of California's more prominent and successful leaders.

It was a simple idea really. Take youth while still impressionable but at an age where they start "to think for themselves." More specifically, he wanted to motivate and empower them to make a positive difference within our society, "through understanding and action based on effective and compassionate leadership."

"Get them when they are 15- to 16-year-old high school sophomores," said O'Brian. His format is simple too: bring a select group of those with demonstrated leadership abilities together with distin-

guished leaders in business, education, government and the professions and let them interact for three to four days of educational seminars at no cost to the students or their parents.

"I based the foundation on the Marine Corps. I divided it into four sections, like a platoon, and further split them into three groups, like squads. That way we can split our ... fire teams into any formation.

"We have rigid rules and regulations the students have to follow. It is not as tough as Marine Corps boot camp, but we do have bed checks, and we tell them up front what we expect. For many, it is the first time they have been away from home. I have never been embarrassed by these 10th graders.

"We don't teach these young leaders *what* to think, but rather *how* to think. It is the opportunity to exchange ideas with top leaders of today."

The HOBY message caught on. Today more than 11,000 students selected to represent as many public and private high schools attend HOBY Leadership Development Seminars each spring and get a realistic glimpse of what makes America's incentive system work. HOBY Seminars take place in all 50 states as

well as in Bolivia, Canada, China, Israel, Iraq, Korea, Mexico and Taiwan.

O'Brian has had a variety of successful individuals volunteer to sit down, talk with and field questions from young people, such as former President Gerald R. Ford, boxing legend Muhammad Ali, columnist Ann Landers and Dallas Cowboy quarterback Roger Staubach to name only a few. Volunteers run the seminars—those men and women who are on the firing line in business, education, government and the professions. At 81, O'Brian still donates approximately 70 hours a week because: "It is something I believe in and something which has touched a lot of lives."

Volunteers include countless others from across the country who are successful, but perhaps less famous, such as the bellboy who worked at Chicago's Hilton Hotel. He was in his 70s and talked to young people about the joy of his job and how important it is to accept the importance of your job, whatever your level, and why he didn't want to retire.

By all accounts, HOBY works and has become an effective tool in helping youngsters grasp the importance of thinking for one's self and more importantly

learning that helping others is a trait that carries one into a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Since its founding 48 years ago, the organization sends nomination material to all public and private high schools in America each September. More than 367,000 students have attended the educational seminars. All 10th graders are eligible and encouraged to apply. School officials and students can apply and obtain more information by e-mailing hoby@hoby.org, or calling (310) 474-4370, fax: (310) 475-5426, or writing HOBY at 10880 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 410, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

O'Brian proudly boasts: "My first 15-year-olds are now in their 60s!" He says 100 percent of the 10th graders involved graduate from high school, 99 percent continue on to college, 76 percent earn college degrees, 58 percent earn advanced degrees and more than 85 percent become civic leaders.

HOBY alumnus and actor James Van Der Beek, whose movies include "The Plague" and "Sex, Power, Love and Politics," said: "One of the best things that [HOBY] does is it labels every student who attends a HOBY seminar a leader, whether they've ever considered themselves one before or not."

Another alumnus, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, who also volunteers at HOBY seminars, said: "Attending the [HOBY] seminar in 1971 was a genuine turning point in my life. I forged friendships that have continued for years, and the impact of HOBY is a large part of why I am governor of my state today."

HOBY seminars have been endorsed by Presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, as well as President

Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan; former Vice President Al Gore; Senators Elizabeth Dole and Hillary Rodham Clinton; former Secretaries of State Dr. Henry Kissinger and General Colin L. Powell; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine General Peter Pace (whose aide-de-camp is Navy Commander Wayne Baze, a HOBY alumnus), former President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev; retired CBS journalist Walter Cronkite; former Lockheed Martin Corporation Chief Executive Officer and Chairman Norman R. Augustine; Dr. Malcolm Gillis, president of Rice University, Houston; and J. Williard Marriott Jr., chairman and CEO of Marriott International Inc.

Hugh O'Brian has brought Hugh Krampe, the former Marine drill instructor, eight honorary doctorates and a list of humanitarian awards longer than the rows of hash marks he'd have worn had he stayed Marine.

He says it's not about the accolades. "I receive more than 5,000 letters a year from our HOBY alumni. I read every one and write back. You couldn't give me a million dollars for one of their letters. I am the wealthiest man in the world!"

Becoming a Marine leads those who've earned the title down unique paths, most of them positive. While such individuals may have attained their status without ever hefting a rifle, standing a watch or blacking their emblems, most will say being a Marine helped in ways they never envisioned when they piled off the bus and onto those yellow footprints at a recruit depot. Hugh Krampe took the good things the Corps taught him and passed them along to help others.



In 2004, Halliburton Energy Services sponsored the attendance of five Iraqi students and three Iraqi enablers at the HOBY World Leadership Congress. The topic, "What Democracy Means to Me," took on a special meaning. In the photo at left, Hugh O'Brian poses with the Iraqi delegation. Later, Zahra'a Nima Taher (right with yellow shirt and scarf), a member of the Ministry of Education Coalition Provisional Authority Baghdad, was kidnapped and murdered.

