

"Mississippi No More"

Drill Instructor School, MCRD San Diego

*"I wanna be a drill instructor.
I want to cut off all of my hair.
I wanna be a drill instructor,
I'm gonna earn that Smokey Bear."*

—Cadence at Drill Instructor School

By R. R. Keene

Tradition, discipline and the spirit of innumerable young men manifests itself in cadence that echoes across the massive grinder, off the distinctive amber arcade with its sculpted Marine Corps emblem, ramparts, court-yards and Spanish-style barracks picketed by tall palm trees.

The cadence emanates from the rank and file within platoons—the collective voices of young men learning to march as one, to respond instantly, to believe in themselves, in their Corps and in their drill instructors. It has been so at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego since 1923 and still is so today for the more than 21,000 recruits who, annually, earn the title Marine at MCRD San Diego.

If you listen and believe, you can hear the cadence of generations—San Diego recruits such as William J. Bordelon, Eugene A. Obregon, Dale M. Hansen, Louis

J. Hauge and Jimmie E. Howard. Hear the voices of Harlon Block and Ira Hayes and the pitched responses of men you've served with in war and in garrison. You may even discern a much younger you sounding off: "Aye, aye, sir!"

Over them all, there are the command voices—those voices so distinct that each recruit instantly remembers and recognizes, even though there are dozens of similar mentors all barking orders at the same time—the sound of drill instructors. Decades later Marines still hear their cadence in their sleep and will remember their drill instructors until the day they die.

Drill instructors—icons of discipline, paragons of U.S. Marine bearing, men who measure up to bigger-than-life personas—also are made at the recruit depots.

For the most part they were, before checking in at Drill Instructor School, ordinary Marines who possess an extra adrenaline shot of "gung-ho" in their brain housing group. "One hundred percent of our students are volunteers," said Gunnery Sergeant Allen W. Mullis, who has been the school's chief instructor for two years. "I think that in the back of their minds every Marine wants to be a drill instructor. But wanting to be a drill instructor

and being one are two completely different things."

He's not talking about DI caricatures such as "Gunny" Carter of "Gomer Pyle, USMC" or even GySgt R. Lee Ermey of "The Boys in Company C." This is for keeps—no celluloid "retakes" unless one considers the numbing role of close order drill.

"We're looking for a Marine that is mature," stated Mullis. "Drill instructors are charged with the welfare, health and discipline of Marine recruits. He has to be able to make these young men into Marines. It is his sole mission. The stress can be hard on them."

Mullis knows. He's a 1996 graduate of MCRD Parris Island, S.C., who during his 2000-04 tour as a DI at San Diego gained the knowledge, experience and savvy to be hand-selected on his second 36-month tour by the Recruit Training Regiment (RTR) commanding officer as chief instructor. Mullis looks the part—physically fit, big arms, muscular neck and broad shoulders and razor-creased utilities with the senior drill instructor's service, or "fair leather belt," and the "Smokey Bear" campaign hat or "hat."

The "hat" is actually modeled after an old Army felt field hat that the Marines borrowed during the Spanish-American War of 1898. They liked it and made it standard issue headgear until World War II when the felt became critical war material. Even then, members of the Marine Corps rifle and pistol teams wore the hat during shooting competitions.

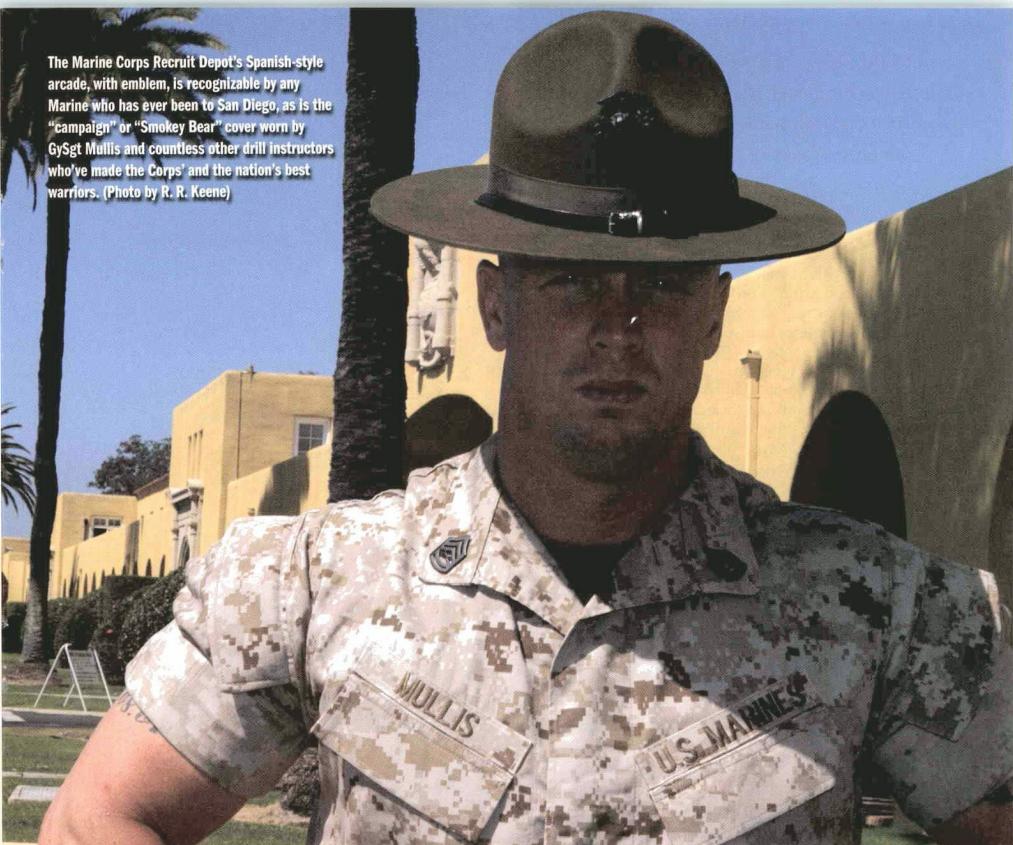
In 1956, the Parris Island Ribbon Creek incident, which resulted in the court-martial of a drill instructor after six members of his platoon drowned, led to changes in recruit training. The number of drill instructors assigned to each platoon was expanded to three, rather than two, and the role of the drill instructor was restructured to emphasize leadership by example, persuasion and psychology in the process of recruit training.

The "hat" was re-introduced as a distinctive symbol of office, in part to recognize a new norm of professionalism and special importance of the drill instructor billet, and in part to signify a break between the "old" era of recruit training and the "new." Worn properly with flat black



San Diego Drill Instructor School's chief instructor, GySgt Allen W. Mullis, has been turning out drill instructors for two years and is a prior San Diego "hat" himself. The school turns out 65 to 95 drill instructors in each of the four classes a year.

The Marine Corps Recruit Depot's Spanish-style arcade, with emblem, is recognizable by any Marine who has ever been to San Diego, as is the "campaign" or "Smokey Bear" cover worn by GySgt Mullis and countless other drill instructors who've made the Corps' and the nation's best warriors. (Photo by R. R. Keene)



emblem, it has powerful influence on recruits and is coveted by those privileged to wear it. Nobody ever wears it to go fishing.

However, GySgt Mullis cautioned, "The campaign cover doesn't make a drill instructor. I should be able to don my garrison cover and get the same results."

Mullis believes, "It is self-confidence. With Drill Instructor School students, we try to build their self-confidence."

Humility is not a touted Marine trait. But neither is bravado confused with self-confidence.

"We get some who come to the school thinking they are hot crap," explained Mullis. "But when they come with a bunch of similarly minded Marines who are serious about being drill instructors, it is a reality check, a gut shot, 'Ooh, I'm not as good as I thought I was.'"

Nonetheless, they are damn good Marines or they wouldn't be there. They've been screened by their unit commanders

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whose checklist states, among other items, they are medically qualified, physically fit, financially responsible, stable and have family stability, and have "presence of mind" a block in Section B of the old fitness report. It takes on special meaning at Drill Instructor School.

According to Mullis, "Marines being considered for drill instructor duty should possess a calm demeanor during stressful situations." Although not a showstopper for the school, "a Marine who has exhibited an explosive personality or is known to 'fly off the handle' is not normally the

Marine for drill instructor duty."

The school is first and foremost a leadership school that focuses on positive, concerned and ethical leadership. The course itself is not easy. The Marine Corps knows there's too much riding on the results.

There are 10 handpicked senior drill instructors teaching their alchemy to 65 to 95 candidates during four crammed 11½-week classes each year.

The school expects every drill instructor student to complete every task they will in turn demand of their recruits.

The training day actually begins around 0500 Marine Corps time and can go to 1930 or even longer.

Mullis said, "The course consists of everything from leadership classes all the way to close order drill, physical fitness, the techniques of military instruction, general military subjects, marksmanship, basic warrior training and standard operating procedures." Throw in advanced first aid and CPR, swim qualification instructor

Endurance is what lets the drill instructors leave recruits gasping for breath with their tongues dragging.

classes, general orders, history and traditions, and soon it adds up.

Things start coming as second nature—such as learning effective time management, studying for exams, rehearsing the drill movements and learning drill commands verbatim, preparing uniforms and all the while making time for intense physical training. Physical training, or “PT,” as a unit is conducted in two-hour sessions at least three times a week, in addition to warming up, stretching and calisthenics.

Physical training tones future drill instructors for the Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test, which consists of pull-ups, abdominal crunches and a three-mile timed run. Drill instructors routinely are required to spend 20 hours a day, or more, on their feet, marching or running. The Marine Corps has two speeds: running and running faster. Both take endurance. Track workouts, formation and fartlek runs develop the older drill instructors so they can keep up with young jocks just out of high school. Endurance is what lets the drill instructors leave recruits gasping for breath with their tongues dragging.

Throughout the DI training course, every student is continuously evaluated, corrected and mentored. Attention to detail, no matter how small, is almost a fetish. The proper placement of a finger is measured to within a quarter inch of its required location along trouser seams, as is the angle of the M16 during the manual of



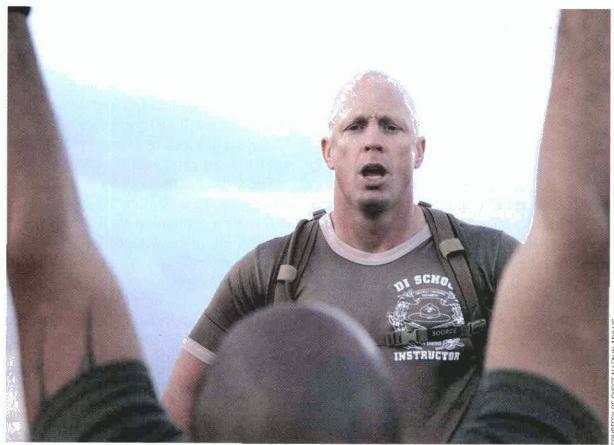
Above: The recruits in this platoon are learning to respond immediately to their drill instructors. They will learn to recognize their drill instructors' voices among countless others and hear their cadence forever in their sleep. (Photo by R. R. Keene)

Left: The school emphasizes physical training. Gunnery Sergeant Mullis says future drill instructors must do everything that they will demand of their recruits.

arms. Also closely measured are the 40 inches between ranks, the 30-inch step and progress toward developing a command voice, where consonants are sharp and cut short, and vowels are prolonged.

“Close order drill, it is very important,” said Mullis. “It is the foundation of the Marine Corps. It instills instant obedience to orders. That’s important in combat.”

The school’s taskmasters do not let up. Perfection in close order drill can be frustratingly elusive, but it must be mastered, for there are written examinations and



COURTESY OF GUNNERY SERGEANT MULLIS



practical applications in other important subjects and uniform inspections—scheduled, unscheduled and continuous.

"With drill instructors it is like a competition," Mullis said, smiling. "Who looks best in uniform? Who is more physically fit? We are always trying to outdo each other, and we teach that in Drill Instructor School. We try and teach them to go above and beyond the bare necessities. We try to lead by example, set a good impression and always do the right thing."

It is about the Marine Corps' image presented to recruits and to the nation. The drill instructor is expected to present the tanned image of stern taskmaster, skilled leader with high standards and integrity under the rigid brim of his "hat."

Sergeant Scott C. Chromy is now a "hat" in RTR's 1st Battalion. The veteran of seven years graduated first in his class.

"I wanted to leave my impression on future Marines. I figured this is the best

way to do that. I think you change their lives. I want to influence as many recruits as possible to carry on the tradition—keep the Marine Corps going.

"The school was challenging ... the quick, very fast pace. Everything was so compact. You had to prioritize, manage your time and be organized. They took us out of our comfort zone." Pausing, he said, "All my classmates chose to come here; they volunteered and are very competitive."

GySgt Adam L. Blake was his class commander. A veteran of 11 years, he's been trying to get on the drill field for about three years, becoming eligible after completing his deployments. "I wanted to do the same things my drill instructors did, but I also realized that here is the future of the Marine Corps," Blake said.

"Time management and prioritizing tasks was difficult. Physical fitness was the other big piece. We were running and moving and constantly going. It isn't just

running on the PT field. It is the long hours. It all kind of ties into physical fitness and being mentally, as well as physically, strong."

Sgt Chromy said, "Close order drill took a lot of learning in a short period of time. We put in a lot of hours out there on the parade deck."

"I thought the SOP instruction was well given. The instructor gave real life examples of what the recruits would do or act like. This is what will happen and here's what you need to do in accordance with the SOP." It's all going to really apply.

Standard operating procedure: The SOP manual is the definitive authority on how to train Marine recruits, and it is the bible for drill instructors at San Diego and Parry Island.

Mullis said, "To be a drill instructor you need to take a common sense approach to drill instructor duty, as you would in life. If you do that, you're going to be fine."



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Above: There's training right up to hours before graduating from Drill Instructor School. Sgt Scott C. Chromy carries the school guidon during the final run of his class. Sgt Chromy, a veteran of seven years in the Corps, graduated first in his class.

Right: GySgt Adam L. Blake waited three years to get to the drill field. With 11 years service, he was the class president. He said it was worth the wait because, "I realized that here is the future of the Marine Corps."

The SOP is there to ensure it. The drill instructors are watched. Mullis explained, "They cannot physically abuse any recruit. They understand that. We also do a [recruit] series commander's course, and the series commanders understand that rule."

It is important to note that both recruit depots, San Diego and Parris Island, have their own drill instructor schools, but the schools and recruit training regiments' training syllabus at both depots mirror each other. It is vital that basic trained Marines seamlessly integrate into the operating forces or supporting establishment with the same indoctrination, knowledge and esprit de corps.

Mullis said, "There's a way you train



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recruits and there's a way you train Marines. Different mission concepts, two different leadership styles."

Nonetheless, he stated: "Leadership qualities are essentially the same. What I tell you as a student, what I tell you as a recruit, is what I would tell anybody."

The Marine Corps is more a vocation than a job. It is a calling, and Marines such as Mullis and his students come as close to being acolytes of the profession of arms as seminarians.

"Why would a Marine want to go on the drill field rather than Marine security guard duty or be a recruiter? Because we make Marines!"

—GySgt Allen W. Mullis

"I do it because I like doing it," Mullis said. "It is something I can look back on that I accomplished."

"All I can do is help shape them. Open their eyes and teach them to do the right thing when they go across the street and pick up their own recruit platoons."

"Being a drill instructor is kind of like a father figure."

"I like being able to help a kid that's had a rough life. I think about 50 percent of the people in the Marine Corps had a rough life. You got young kids with no direction. Some are confused, some have been abused, and some have even been arrested and have minor police records. The Marines may not be giving them a second chance exactly, but it pushes them in the right direction in life—'do this. This is what you can accomplish. This is what I've done with my life.'

"You definitely have to believe in the Marine Corps' core values: honor, courage and commitment. As soon as those recruits come on the footprints, honor, courage, commitment is ingrained in them."

"Why would a Marine want to go on the drill field rather than Marine security guard duty or be a recruiter? Because we make Marines! That's the bottom line."

"From the time you pick those kids up all the way until the time they graduate. Seeing that transformation from a young, snot-nosed punk into a grown man, a Marine, there's no comparison in the world."

"You can't even explain the feeling you get. When I was a senior drill instructor, just standing out in front of my platoons, I used to get chills hearing moms and dads clapping and seeing them crying because their son is a Marine. There's nothing like it in the Corps."

Beyond the grinder in the training areas, platoons of young recruits, soon to be America's fighting men, run in a tight formation responding easily to the slightly hoarse, but confident cadence from a drill instructor in boots an' 'utes who really isn't that much older than they are.

*"I had a girl in a Mississippi town.
Marine Corps livin' got her down.
She said, 'It's either me or the Corps.'
Now, I don't go to Mississippi no more."*

