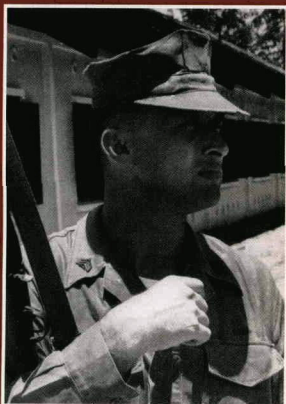


“BALLAD OF THE GREEN BERETS”? THE CORPS HAD “THE MARINE’S”

By R. R. Keene



*On the shores of many foreign lands,
 afar across the sea.*

*The Marines have always won their
 fame against the enemy.*

*They have always won their battles and
 they never have turned back.*

*Those mighty gallant men with their ri-
 fles and their packs.*

—“The Marine’s Ballad” sung by SSgt Bob Lay

In 1966, Staff Sergeant Bob Lay was a gung-ho leatherneck on Inspector-Instructor duty in Omaha, Neb., who, since his school days in southeast Kansas, could pick a guitar. When he was off duty, he played with a small country band at honky-tonks and clubs around eastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

That also was about the time an Army Special Forces staff sergeant named Barry Sadler came out with a hit that topped the “Billboard” charts for five weeks: “The Ballad of the Green Berets.” Bob Lay, then a 13-year veteran of the Corps, heard the song incessantly on every jukebox everywhere and says he remembers thinking: “Man, the Marine Corps needs a song.”

So he wrote one. In fact, he wrote two: “The Marine’s Ballad” and “Make a Marine.” The former is about the 1965 Marine landing in Vietnam and the latter, a short ditty about how boys become men.

“Service Records,” an obscure label, put both on a 45-rpm disc. Neither became chart busters, but as with many things about the Marine Corps, they struck

Sgt Lay, with his M14 rifle, was with Sub Unit 2, Marine Air Base Squadron 16 at Da Nang Air Base in 1964 as part of Operation Shufly.

Before signing a contract with Service Records, Bob Lay had his tunes on a few 45-rpm records made in Omaha. The label "B.G. L." stood for Bob G. Lay.



SPREAD PHOTO BY JASON MANNING

BALLAD"

a chord with leathernecks at various installations—especially in Japan, Okinawa and Vietnam. They became among those little-known leatherneck collectible artifacts Marines like to drop into their mental footlockers. A Marine at the air station in Iwakuni, Japan, recalls taking a liking to "The Marine's Ballad." It reminded him of Johnny Horton's 1960 hit "Sink the Bismarck." A Marine at Chu Lai, South Vietnam, who punched up "Make a Marine" on the jukebox at the enlisted club, was surprised so many Marines knew the words.

Bob Lay was surprised that the records had worked their way to Western Pacific duty stations, much less that people remembered the words to the songs. He had written them between tours to Vietnam. He'd been in the Corps since 1953. He'd often played his guitar during off-duty



COURTESY OF 1STSGT BOB LAY (USMC (RET))

hours and sometimes appeared on TV and entertained at service clubs.

His first Vietnam tour was during Operation Shufly in 1964 with Marine Air Base Squadron 16 at Da Nang. Even there he managed, with a few fellow musicians from the Air Force, to play at the joint-service "Take Ten Club" in Da Nang. But

GySgt Lay posed with his Gibson guitar while stationed at MCAS El Toro in 1971. The photo was taken in conjunction with the Armed Forces Music Festival at Camp Pendleton. Marines loved his song "The Marine's Ballad."



COURTESY OF LESTOLD BOB LAY (USMC 987)

GySgt Lay graduated from Recruiters School in 1971 at MCRD Parris Island, S.C. He was first in his class.

it was in Omaha where, with a bit of reciprocity toward Barry Sadler's "green beanie" hit, he worked out and jotted down verses to his songs, and then set them to music.

"'The Marine's Ballad' had the same tune as 'Sink the Bismarck,'" he said. "In fact, when I got ready to release it commercially, I contacted one of the executives of 'Crazy Cajun,' publishers of 'Sink the Bismarck,' and asked permission to put my song to the tune of 'Sink the Bismarck.' He said it sounded like a good idea because 'Sink the Bismarck' wasn't making any money [at that point]. That's why under the credits, you see my name with Johnny Horton and Tillman Franks."

The songs were released

again in 1973 and 1983 and played primarily on the airwaves of country radio stations and on jukeboxes with listening audiences at Marine Corps installations.

Lay recalled that early in 1971, when he was stationed at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, Calif., he "entered a worldwide armed forces talent contest. Bristol-Myers/Monarch Corporation sponsored this whole thing. They held 14 talent shows at military bases all around the world.

"I was selected to represent the Marine Corps on the West Coast show. The talent contest was held in the base theatre at [Marine Corps Base] Camp Pendleton [California]. The theatre was packed. There were platoons of Marines in [utilities] sitting in the back of the theatre. There were huge television cameras and lights facing the stage. I sang my 'Marine's Ballad' and played my own guitar, in uniform of course. I received a huge response, especially from all those Marines in the back. Just based on the response of the audience, I thought for sure I had won. That wasn't the case. I came in third. But the experience is a long-lasting good memory."

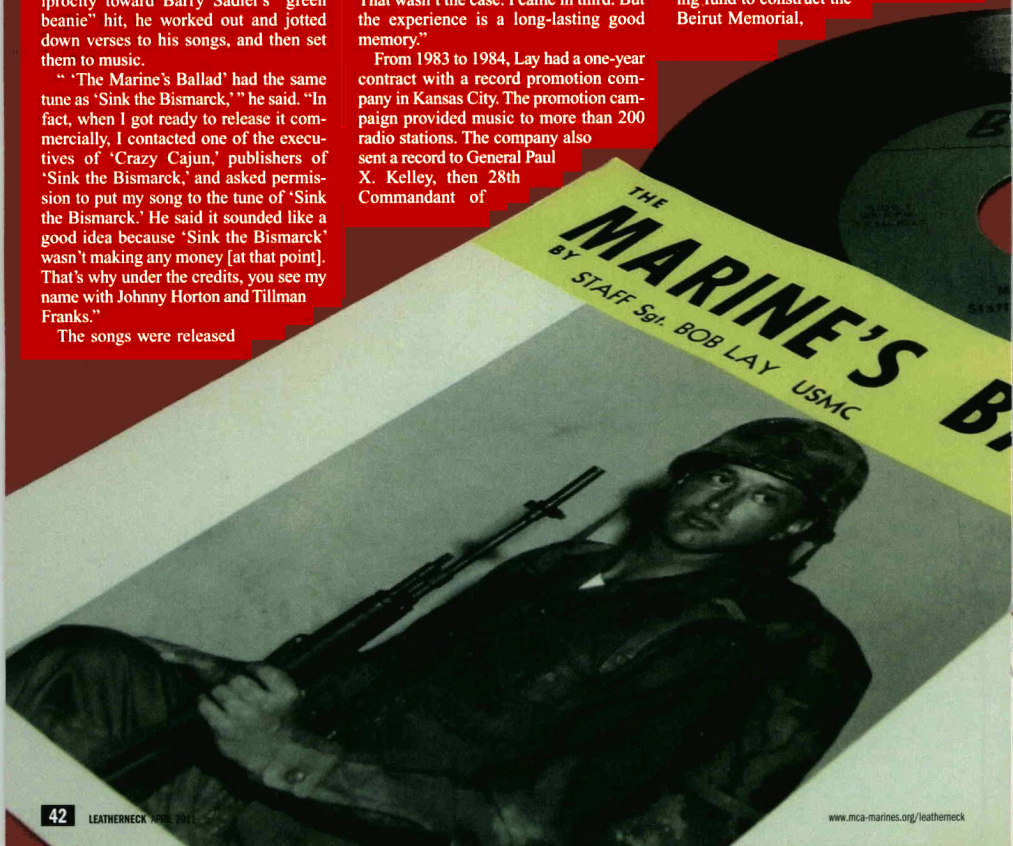
From 1983 to 1984, Lay had a one-year contract with a record promotion company in Kansas City. The promotion campaign provided music to more than 200 radio stations. The company also sent a record to General Paul X. Kelley, then 28th Commandant of

the Marine Corps, who responded positively in a letter to Lay that said, "I think you have a hit there."

The songs received radio play, but no long-term contracts. There was, however, according to Lay, one particular event in 1983 in rural Kansas. Lay, a retired first sergeant, was assistant director of the Kansas Human Rights Commission when he received a phone call from Jacksonville, N.C. The caller was Johnny West, a disc jockey and music director of a radio station there, and a retired Marine.

"He said he was playing my songs over the air that reached all the Camp Lejeune area, and every time he played my songs, all the station phone lines would light up with people asking about them. He wanted to do a live interview over the phone right then. We did it and it turned out well.

"But the most interesting thing he told me was that the music store in Jacksonville was selling the records and donating the proceeds from their sales to the building fund to construct the Beirut Memorial,



dedicated to the 241 Americans [of whom 220 were Marines] who perished there. I thought that was great."

Recently a German company, Bear Family Records, www.bear-family.de, came out with a 13-CD collection of Vietnam-era music titled "Next Stop Is Vietnam." Lay's song, "The Marine's Ballad," is on CD 2 (song 14). The collection comes with a 300-page book. He said he finds it ironic that the book includes a page about "me and my song, opposite of a picture and page about Barry Sadler." Lay said he takes a certain "pride in having [his] song included in the collection of songs that defined the Vietnam era."

In a different century and a different era, what drew *Leatherneck* magazine's attention to Bob Lay and his songs was his letter which anchored the November 2010 *Leatherneck* feature: "Born on Our Birthday." A staff member remembered that 1stSgt Lay was probably the same Marine who wrote those songs about the Corps in the 1960s. It fortuitously pro-



The All-Marine Lay family gathered in October 1989 to attend son Quentin's graduation from recruit training at MCRD San Diego. From left: Former Sgt Mark Lay; Delores Lay; 1stSgt Bob Lay, USMC (Ret); PFC Quentin Lay; GySgt Bob Lay Jr.; Dwight Lay, high school freshman and future Honorary Marine; and former Sgt Valerie (Lay) Martin.

vided an answer to the often-unanswerable question of what ever became of...? In this particular case it was, "Whatever became of that staff sergeant who sang those leatherneck songs in the 1960s about our Corps?"

He did well.

He "went out on 20," went to college and earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, worked 20 years for the Kansas Human Rights Commission and settled with his family in Hillsboro, Ore.

In reading a letter from Lay, you realize that, yes, he wrote a couple of gung-ho tunes, put two tours in Vietnam but, most importantly, built and raised a family that exemplifies the things good he derived from the Corps and is a positive lesson we can all learn from.

He is the father of four Marines: "Our oldest son, Bob Lay Jr., served 22 years and retired as a master sergeant. Bob

married a Marine who also retired as a master sergeant.

"Our son Sergeant Mark Lay served more than four years.

"Our daughter, Sgt Valerie Martin, ... served nearly four years. She also married a Marine. Our son Lance Corporal Quentin B. Lay served four years as an artilleryman."

The Lays' youngest son, Dwight, was permanently paralyzed in an automobile accident; however, his "unwavering courage and dedication" led to him being named an "Honorary Marine" in 1993.

"[My wife] Delores and I can truly and proudly claim to be an all-Marine family ... bonded together by not only our love for each other, but our love for America and our way of life, and the spirit of the Corps, which we share with all Marines."

His song "Make a Marine" seems to say it all:

Oh, you take a little boy, and you make him a man.

And you take that man, and you make a Marine.

Author's note: First Sgt Lay is looking for yet another release of his songs on a CD in the near future.



Leatherneck—On the Web

Hear Bob Lay's songs at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/marines-ballad and www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/make-a-marine. More songs about our Corps and songs by artists who served in the Corps can be heard in our newest feature: "Master Guns" Playlist" at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/corps-songs