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MARINE CORPS LORE

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MARINE CORPS LORE

Part I. CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Marine customs are simply desirable courses of action sanctioned by tradition and usage. In the Marine Corps, practically every custom has grown out of the manner in which Marines of the past conducted themselves. Many Marine customs have been incorporated into regulations in order to standardize conduct throughout the Corps, but some of them cannot be found in written directives. Knowing and observing these customs, both written and unwritten, is important to each Marine because it keeps him mindful of the heritage and traditions of his Corps, and of his duty to uphold them. In addition, it makes him feel that he is a part of the team and helps to create the strong bond of loyalty between him and all other Marines that has become a distinguishing mark of the Corps.

Marine Corps Birthday

One of the most famous Marine customs is the observance of the Marine Corps Birthday. Since 1921 the birthday of the Marine Corps has been officially celebrated each year on 10 November, since it was on this date in 1775 that Continental Congress resolved, "That two Battalions of Marines be raised...." Over the years the Marine Corps Birthday has been celebrated in a wide variety of ways, depending on the location and circumstances of the Marine units. The celebration involves the

reading of an excerpt from the Marine Corps Manual and a birthday message from the Commandant; the cutting of a birthday cake by the commanding officer; and the presentation of the first and second pieces of cake to the oldest and youngest Marines present. Recently, the ceremony for the observance of the Marine Corps Birthday by large posts and stations has been incorporated into written directives.

Nautical Terms

Many of the Marine Corps customs are derived from the many years of service afloat. Even ashore Marines customarily use nautical terms. Floors are "decks," walls are "bulkheads," ceilings, "overheads," corridors, "passageways." The order "Gangway!" is used to clear the way for an officer ashore, just as it is afloat. Among other terms in common usage are: "two-block" - to tighten or center (as a necktie); "square-away" - to correctly arrange articles or to take in hand and direct an individual;" "head" - a bathroom; "scuttlebut" - a drinking fountain, also an unconfirmed rumor.

In the Marine Corps, the nautical expression "Aye, Aye, Sir" is used when acknowledging a verbal order. "Yes, Sir" and "No, Sir" are used in answer to direct questions. "Aye, Aye, Sir" is not used in answer to questions as this expression is reserved solely for acknowledgement of orders.

Reporting Your Post

A custom which affects the guard is the manner in which a sentry reports his post to the officer of the day, or to the officers and noncommissioned officers of the guard. The customary procedure is for the sentry to salute or come to present arms and say, "Sir, Private _____ reports Post Number ____ all secure. Post and orders remain the same. Nothing unusual to report." This custom has almost universal use throughout the Marine Corps. It is a convenient, useful form, and thus it has been preserved by custom, and passed on by word of mouth.

Salutes

Some of the most important customs of all are those of military courtesy. In the Marine Corps, courtesy is an expression of respect for the authority possessed by an individual, as well as a demonstration of respect for the Corps as a whole. Through the use of the various forms of military courtesy a Marine says, in effect, "As brothers in arms and fellow Marines, I consider you worthy of my respect." When used in this manner, military courtesy assumes one of its most important roles; it is an expression of the respect a Marine has for other Marines and for himself. Of all the forms of military courtesy, the various salutes are probably the most important. They are certainly the most obvious and frequently used. Saluting is the traditional form of greeting

between men of the profession of arms and it is an honored tradition of military organization throughout the world.

Certain features of saluting in the Marine Corps carry Marine Corps custom specifically. For example: Marine Corps usage has it that a greeting be exchanged when saluting a person. When saluting an officer, the Marine might say, "Good Morning, Sir," or "Good Evening, Sir," as appropriate. The officer in returning the salute would say, "Good Morning, Sergeant (Private, Corporal, Lieutenant, as appropriate.)"

Marines in civilian clothes and wearing a hat conform to the rules for saluting in uniform for exchange of personal courtesies. When a Marine recognizes another Marine, they normally exchange greetings whether or not either or both are in civilian clothes (this custom is not observed by Women Marines). If one or both of these Marines were an officer, the hand salute accompanied by the verbal greeting is proper. During the playing of the National Anthem, at morning and evening colors, and at funerals, if in civilian dress, Marines uncover and hold the hat over the left breast at such times as those in uniform salute.

Miscellaneous

There are many other customs which have significance in the life of a Marine. A few of the notable ones are listed here.

Boarding a small boat or entering a car. When boarding a small boat or entering a car, juniors enter first and take up the seats or the space beginning forward, leaving the most desirable seat for the senior. Seniors enter last and leave first.

Marines' Hymn. Whenever the Marines' Hymn is played or sung, all Marines rise to their feet and remain standing during the rendition of the music.

Serenading the Commandant. Commencing with the last New Year's Day of the Civil War, on the morning of 1 January of each year the Marine Band serenades the Commandant of the Marine Corps at his quarters and received hot buttered rum and breakfast in return.

Wetting Down Parties. Whenever an officer is promoted, he customarily holds a "wetting-down party." At this time the new commission is said to be "wet down." When several officers are promoted at the same time, they frequently have a single wetting-down party.

Wishes of Commanding Officer. When the commanding officer of a Marines says, "I wish" or "I desire," these expressions have the force of a direct order and should be acted upon as if he had given a direct order.

"Looking Out for Your Men"

One feature which has made the Marine Corps such a respected organization is the custom of Marine leaders looking

Part II. MARINE CORPS LEGENDS

A legend may be defined as a shining truth that cannot always pass the test of strict factual accuracy. The legend i poetry; the fact is prose, and very dull prose it sometimes is

Here are presented some legends that have been often told Many of these do not meet even the minimum standards of fact; some have been definitely disproved. Yet the factual background, either true or false, does not detract from the story. These legends may be classed in Marine terminology as "sea stories" and they are presented as such.

Origin of the Nickname "Leathernecks" for the Marines

It is questionable whether the origin of the term "Leathe neck" can be accepted as a legitimate member of the family of legends. More like a tradition, it is. For there can be no doubt of the origin, considering that U. S. Marines of three generations wore leather collars. It is as obvious as the nickname "Red" for a recruit with carrot-colored hair and freckles.

Now accepted by Webster as a synonym for Marine, the term "Leatherneck" was derived from a leather stock once worn aroun the neck by both American and British Marines--and soldiers also. Beginning in 1798, "one stock of black leather and clasp" was issued to each U. S. Marine annually.

This stiff leather collar, fastened by two buckles at the back, measured nearly three and a half inches high, and

was practical only for full-dress wear. It could hardly be worn in battle as it prevented the neck movement necessary for sighting along a barrel. It supposedly improved military bearing, by forcing the chin high, although General George F. Elliott, recalling its use after the Civil War, said it made the wearers appear "like geese looking for rain."

The stock was dropped as an article of Marine uniform in 1872, after surviving through the uniform changes of 1833, 1839, and 1859. But by then it was a part of American vocabulary, a word preserved, like so many words, beyond its original meaning.

"Retreat, Hell! We just got here."

Fighting spirit and determination against heavy odds is a sound tradition in the Marine Corps and nowhere is there a more graphic illustration than an incident which occurred in World War I. Legendary or true, it personifies the aggressive attitude of Marines.

The occasion was the third great German breakthrough of 1918, when the 4th Marine Brigade and its parent 2d Infantry Division were thrown in to help stem the tide in the Belleau wood sector. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, had just arrived at its position when an automobile skidded to a stop and a French officer dashed out and approached the commanding officer. He explained that a general retreat was in progress and that orders were for the Marines to withdraw. The Marine officer exclaimed in amazement, "Retreat Hell! We just got here."

And the Marines proceeded to prove their point. The battalion deployed and took up firing positions. As the Germans approached, they came under rifle fire which was accurate at ranges beyond their comprehension. Not in vain had the Marine Corps long stressed in its training the sound principles of marksmanship. The deadly fire took the heart out of the German troops and the attack was stopped.

"Send us more Japs."

Many, many more instances of the fighting spirit of Marines could be cited but one story in particular attracts the attention. When the Japanese initiated the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, they did not neglect the tiny island of Wake which served as an outpost for Hawaii. Their plans had been for a speedy seizure of this objective; however, the Marine garrison thwarted their initial attempts. Late in December, the enemy returned with an even more powerful armada. Attack after attack was mounted against the heroic defenders. All Marine planes were shot down, casualties mounted, the situation was becoming desperate. However, communications were still maintained with Pearl Harbor. A relief expedition was mounted but the remnants of the Navy were so pitifully weak that the mission was cancelled at the last minute. Finally, Pearl Harbor queried Wake "Is there anything that we can provide?" In one of the last messages from the doomed island came back "Send us more Japs!"

"Come on, you s__ o_ b____s, do you want to live forever?"

Marine Corps legend has it that this saying originated during World War I in France. During the violent fighting in Belleau Wood, Sergeant Dan Daly's platoon, part of the 6th Marines, was pinned down by intense enemy fire. The gallant Daly, already possessor of two Congressional Medals of Honor (one for heroism during the China Relief Expedition in 1900 and the other received during the Haitian Campaign of 1915), raged up and down the line trying to get his troops moving. Finally, the story goes, he yelled "Come on, you s__ o_ b____s, do you want to live forever?," as he leaped out of the trench, and led his men in the attack.

Why Marines were called "Devil Dogs"

In the Belleau Wood fighting in 1918, the Germans received a thorough indoctrination in the fighting ability of Marines which they could have used to forewarn their axis partner, Japan, in 1941. Fighting through supposedly impenetrable woods and capturing supposedly untakeable terrain, the men of the 4th Marine Brigade struck terror in the hearts of the Germans. The persistent attacks delivered with unbelievable courage soon had the Germans referring to Marines as the "Teufelhunden" meaning "fierce fighting dogs of legendary origin" or as popularly translated "Devil Dogs."

Why didn't the British burn the Commandant's Quarters?

Marine Barracks, Washington (commonly known to Marines as "8th and Eye") is located in Southeast Washington on a quadrangle of land situated between 8th and 9th Streets and "G" and "I" Streets. Within the confines of Marine Barracks stands the Commandant's House, the official residence of all but the first two Commandants who have headed the Marine Corps during its long history.

The Commandant's House is supposed to be the oldest public building in continuous use in the Nation's Capital. It owes its claim as the oldest building to the fact that the British failed to destroy it during their raid on Washington in August 1814. They burned the Capitol, the White House, and most of the other public buildings in retaliation for a similar American raid on Toronto the previous summer. This rather conspicuous omission gave rise to speculation which later attained the status of legend.

The favorite theory for this fact is that the magnificent stand of the Marines during the fighting at Bladensburg so impressed General Ross that he ordered the House and Barracks left untouched as a gesture of soldierly respect.

Buried Treasure at Eighth and Eye

In August 1814, as the British Army approached Washington, two sergeants of the detachment at Marine Headquarters (then located at the Marine Barracks) were, so the story goes, charged

with the safety of a chest containing a considerable amount of Marine Corps funds. The Marines were supposed to have buried the chest on the grounds of the barracks or to have hidden it within the walls of the Commandant's House. They then rejoined their comrades on the battlefield of Bladensburg where they were killed in the fighting, taking the secret of the money's location with them to the grave.

In another version of this story, the two NCO's were killed in a rugged floor-to-floor defense of the Commandant's House when the British invaders reached Washington. Treasure seekers still eye the walled barracks and hoary house with longing, for the money has never been found and may still be, as legend has it, waiting for the persistent hunter.

Archibald Henderson Willed the Commandant's Quarters to His Heirs.

When Archibald Henderson, the Fifth Commandant and the Third Commandant to live in the House, died in 1859 at the age of 75, the Commandant's House had been his home for 38 years. According to the legend he lived there so long that he forgot it was government quarters and attempted to will it to his heirs.

The imperious old man was perfectly capable of doing such a thing. He was the public servant of a Republic, but he spoke with the tongue of an emperor. During his 38 years as Commandant, he outlasted nine presidents, several of whom were known to quail before his flashing eye. Even Andrew

Jackson, when he tried to abolish the Marine Corps, came off second-best in a legislative duel with Henderson. Old Hickory limped away, dripping sawdust from every wound, while the Congress doubled the Marine strength and appropriations.

Archibald Henderson takes the Marine Corps to War

During Archibald Henderson's long tenure as Commandant, the Marine Corps activities covered the globe. Many legends have originated about the colorful Henderson's activities in that era. One of these dealt with his expedition against the Indians.

In 1836, the Creek and Seminole Indian tribes in Georgia and Florida were waging war against the United States. The U. S. Army had its hands full. The Fifth Commandant of the Marine Corps offered the services of a regiment of Marines for duty with the Army. Henderson placed himself in command and, taking virtually the entire available strength of the Corps, left for the extended campaign after tacking a terse message on his office door which read:

"Have gone to Florida to fight Indians.
Will be back when war is over,
A. Henderson
Col. Commandant"

Why Marines wear Red Stripes on their Trousers

Many legends persist as to the uniform of the Marine Corps and the origin of certain traditional aspects. One frequent question raised is "Why do Marine officers and NCOs have red stripes on the blue uniform trousers?" According to legend this commemorates the courage and tenacious fighting of the men who battled before Chapultapec in the Mexican War and whose exploits added the phrase "From the Halls of Montezuma..." to the Marine Hymn. The red stripe on the trousers of all Marine officers and NCOs is said to symbolize the blood shed by these Marines of another century.

Lucy Brewer

No compilation of legends would be complete without mention of Lucy Brewer. A farm girl from Massachusetts, Lucy Brewer was the legendary first woman Marine. The War of 1812 was raging when Lucy arrived at Boston. Friendless in the strange city, she met a woman who seemed eager to take a stranger into her home. Lucy was surprised that one woman could have so many daughters, but she soon discovered that home was just a house.

Unsuited to a life of sin, Lucy fled her benefactress, donned men's clothing, and found refuge in the Marine Corps. No one discovered she was a woman, and as a member of the Constitution's Marine guard, she saw action in some of the bloodiest sea fights of the war.

Her exploits came to light when she published an autobiographical account of her experiences. She described her heroism in the major battles of the Constitution with such details as manning the fighting tops as a marksman, taking toll of the British with musket fire. True or not, the story of Lucy Brewer makes a wonderful addition to the colorful legends about the Marine Corps.

Origin of Marine Corps Hymn

According to legend, the first verse of the Marine Corps Hymn was written by a Marine veteran of the Mexican War and sung to a folk tune heard in Mexico. The words "From the Shores of Tripoli to the Halls of the Montezumas" appeared on Marine Corps standards shortly after the war, but the author reversed them with poetic license. The Civil War then gave new popularity to the Hymn.

In 1878 a member of the Marine Band reported that his wife remembered the melody as a folk song heard during her childhood in Spain. John Philip Sousa, long a leader of the Marine Band, identified the tune as a song in Jacques Offenbach's comic opera, Genevieve de Brabant, first performed in Paris in 1859. It is known, however, that Offenbach liked to use Spanish folk music as a basis for his melodies.

A variety of verses were added to the first one through the years--each Marine campaign inspiring new ones. But by 1890 the first verse, at least, had become standard. The words

remained settled until 1919 when the Commandant approved a revision of the last four lines, which were previously as follows:

Admiration of the Nation
We're the finest ever seen,
And we glory in the title of
United States Marine.

In 1942, by way of tribute to Marine aviation the line "On the land as on the sea" was changed to "In the air, on land, and sea."

"Tell It to the Marines"

This legend goes back to the London of 1664, when Charles II was King of England. A ship's master, returned from a long cruise, told him a sea story he couldn't believe.

"Fish that fly like birds?" the Merry Monarch exclaimed. "I have my doubts!"

"Nay, sire, it is true," said Sir William Killigren, colonel of the new British Marine regiment raised that year. "I have myself seen flying fish many a time in southern waters. I vouch for the truth of this strange tale, your Majesty."

The King thought it over. At last he turned to Samuel Pepys, the Secretary of the Admiralty.

"Mr. Pepys," he said, "no class of our subjects hath such knowledge of odd things on land and sea as our Marines. Hereafter, when we hear a yarn that lacketh likelihood, we will tell it to the Marines. If they believe it, then we shall know it is true."

Conclusion

The preface to Part II stated that legends provide the poetry which adds so much to the lore of the Corps. You are not asked to believe the legends that you have read; but if you don't, try "telling it to the Marines."