

SEMPER FALLACIOUS



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE ROSENTHAL (1945)

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

You know who he is by his anonymity. He has stared at you from magazine ads, billboards and uncountable Hollywood movies. Usually a grim and virile youth, he might be attired in a uniform of stiff dress-blues with a round-billed hat white as purity, or he might be clothed in knife-sharp starched green or camouflaged fatigues, his skull encased in a clean steel camouflage-patterned bowl. He is, of course, always standing tall and proud.

You generally do not see him without his legs or arms. You do not usually see his headless body a smoking bloody hunk of raw meat draped with the confetti of his intestines. You do not see the pain, the anguish, the fear or despair indelibly scrawled across his wide-eyed horrified face.

He is a U.S. Marine, and he is 19 years old, and this year he is also 226 years old. His uniforms and his weapons have changed in the two centuries since the first Marines were recruited as rebels and traitors in a Boston tavern, but he hasn't. He is the thrusting spear of America's wars, and like a spear, once thrown he is often not retrieved.

His birthday is November 10, the day before Veterans Day (once known as Armistice Day), and of course it is wildly celebrated. Messages lauding the "great glory of the Corps" flash across the country; parties and ceremonies are held on almost every USMC base in the world and in almost every city in the nation. He begins the new century/millennium awaiting a new war of probable semi-perpetual psychoneuroses.

The USMC celebrated its bicentennial the year the Vietnam War was lost, a year before the USA's own bicentennial. Birthday parties for the Corps were held all over the world; one of those parties was at the Portland Hilton Hotel.

That was in 1975, the year that North Vietnamese soldiers marched into Saigon and put an end to the interminable Vietnam War. Ten years earlier, in the spring of 1965, Marines landed at Da Nang, the first sizable American force in the rapidly escalating war, and spent most of the next decade up around the Demilitarized Zone that separated the two Vietnams. They fought hard bloody battles against Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army regiments. Their final appearance in Vietnam was guarding the Saigon embassy while American and Vietnamese fled in helicopters from the victorious soldiers of Hanoi. First in. Last out.

Defeat was not in the lexicon of the several hundred Marines and former Marines who gathered at the Portland Hilton, yet it was palpable in its unspoken presence. For a few brief moments, before they went below to the ballroom, the uniformed Marines gave the hotel lobby a resemblance to an American embassy. Most of them were in their dress-blues, their chests resplendent with colorful medals and ribbons from a dozen wars and decades of peacetime service. There was enough tin on their shirts to build one of their beloved amphibious landing craft, but as impressive as they were, the rainbows of honors bestowed upon them by their own peers did not erase the grim fact that they and their Corps were celebrating a 200th anniversary with the first defeat in their history.

But the Marine Corps was not defeated. Ask a Marine. It was the policy, not the Corps. The Marines had fought as hard as they ever had. They took the most casualties and, percentage wise, received the most medals. "These kids are better than we were," an old First Sergeant said in Vietnam back in 1966 before the spearhead blunted, twenty-three years after he had waded through bullets and bodies of dead Marines in the lagoon at Tarawa.

Semper Fidelis. The Old Faithful clung to their Gung Ho. They drank whiskey and talked about wars. They stood to attention when the Colors passed them in review, carried smartly by young reservists dressed in Revolutionary era uniforms. The Marine Corps Hymn blared from a loudspeaker. Glory and Sacrifice were the themes of the evening.

Old Asia hands, most of them. From Tsien Tsien to Chu Lai, they represented America's expanding and contracting dreams of Pacific empire. The final, most expendable extensions of foreign policy. Some of them had fought the Japanese. Some had survived the stalemate against North Koreans and Chinese. A few had been in Vietnam, anachronisms of limited war, a term seldom used before an atomic bomb fell on a Japanese city.

A brigadier general was guest of honor, and when he got up to speak he virtually ignored the war just lost. He instead eulogized the old "glories" of USMC history and praised the Corps for "restoring faith in our flag and country."

Something else about Vietnam was also missing at the Hilton Birthday Ball. The young Marines who survived it. The older career men who had passed through the war at one time or another were in abundance, as was a significant number of officers. But the young 'grunt', the enlisted rifleman who bore most of its burdens and sorrows, who fought its battles --- he wasn't present or accounted for. A scattering of new enlistees who had become Marines since Vietnam were in attendance, closing ranks around a generation and a war that, with the exception of a few of the younger officers, especially fliers (and a couple of ex-junior/grade sergeants), was as absent as if it never existed, or at the very least had simply disappeared.

"There are no ex-Marines here," the general said. "There is no such thing as an ex-Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine!"

And President Gerald Ford (himself a World War 2 Navy officer), in a message sent to all Marine stations that year and read aloud at the Hilton, praised the Marine Corps as a "fighting force that has commanded history's respect and America's pride."

Pride's corpse was resplendent at the Hilton that night, quite evident among the celebrants as a mauled feeling shared by those who had been to Vietnam and those who hadn't, of honorable men used badly in a dishonorable cause, and the weary attempt to reinstate some life into the vanquished ethos came out hollow.

From a small Pennsylvania tavern --- Tunn's Tavern --- to the Hilton Hotel in 200 years. From revolutionary Patriots to corporate Tories, the history of the Marine Corps is a mirror of America's diverging and contradictory view of itself. Created as a skeleton force of dissidents to help combat the largest empire in the world, the Corps like the Nation, born of revolution, has become the world's fiercest counter-revolutionary force. The Marine Corps, never known for its modesty, has the self-assurance to call itself "The Greatest Fighting Machine on Earth."

A machine it is. Each man, and more recently each woman, is reduced to the lowest common denominator of their former selves. They are simply obliterated, made a common mush, then collectively rebuilt in the image of the Corps, "reduced to a specific function, a fer-de-lance or a B-52 or a chunk of obsidian that's been worked over and smashed around until it takes on the form of a weapon," Anthony Edge worth, who had been with Marines in Vietnam, wrote for Esquire magazine.

This process begins in Boot Camp. The ripping away of the psyche and its identity is calculatingly and efficiently brutal, and though Marine Drill Instructors are no longer allowed to physically harm their helpless recruits --- the scandal surrounding the deaths of seven recruits in a Parris Island swamp in 1956 brought this about --- covertly they still do, with gloves or administered where no marks are left of a beating.

The process of tearing down and rebuilding works remarkably well, to such an extent that a punned recruit stoically --- and even proudly --- accepts and endures whatever punishment is handed him. The regimen is so strict and harsh that these former individuals desperately strive and exhaust their strengths for the privilege of being nothing more than anonymous cogs in a "green machine."

"The flaws in Marine Corps masculinity stem not from the values constituting the myth but from the ones that are discarded," William Hart, an ex-Marine turned news reporter wrote in an article, *'Manly to the Corps'*. "In order to gain membership in the brotherhood, the recruit must banish the impulse to question its totalitarian regimen. To achieve the identity of a Marine he must disown his individuality. He obtains manhood at the price of freedom."

Many lose more than their freedom. A large number of young men --- and probably young women whose training is somewhat less rigorous because they do not yet go into combat --- are psychologically damaged, often permanently. The credo is to break them in training instead of having them break in combat. For what they do, given the conditions of 20th century warfare that American life does little to prepare them for, there is a savage logic to that purpose. No responsibility, however, is

extended toward those who are unable to resist the attempt to break them; the victims are left to blame themselves for their ruined lives, and the fact they were washed out is generally held against them. The convoluted logic that surrounds warmaking and the fitness of those who make war is seldom questioned. The harsh process of Marine training is accepted as a necessary ritual to ensure survival for those who make it through, giving them a chance to endure and live a little longer amidst horror.

History does respect such elite military organizations as the Marines make themselves out to be. A serious review of Marine Corps history would produce any number of murderous frenzies whose only recommendation might be the general courage of the Marines caught in an irreversible nightmare. It is this courage and the barrels of blood spilled that fires the spirit of most militarists and presumes a doomed view of humanity. However, the average Marine is not a follower of Bushido, and the adolescent stirrings of lean and mean martial glory soon wear off for most of them, if not in training or through the cynical compromises made for survival within the military system, certainly in the blood and terror of combat. He is the skeptical and often horrified footnote to a mutant history that perpetuates more of him (and, more than ever, her) to fill the rank and file. Anthony Edgeworth quoted a Marine in an Esquire article: "I swear to God, they make you feel you're not really a Marine until you've been killed in action."

Ex-Marine Hart wrote that, in its extreme, the image of the Marine Corps reflects "if crudely, an awareness that the central issue of a man's life is his death."

As for America's pride, self-delusion is the leitmotif of the Marine Corps, and that pride too is a delusion, more complicated because, in the final analysis, underneath the myth and the machismo, who truthfully feels proud to be a murderous pawn?

Novelist Anton Myrer, a Marine veteran of World War II, wrote that he "knew at last, beyond the shadow of a doubt, all it was to be an infantryman: defenseless, pitiable and alone; armed with nothing but one's own flesh and blood."

The U.S. Marine met his match with the North Vietnamese soldier and the irregular Viet Cong guerrilla. Military strategists planning newer wars in the peculiar manner they have of reaching into the past to envision the future will decide that the North Vietnamese produced a superior soldier than did the U.S. Marine Corps. That fact is undoubtedly a reason that of all the American armed forces, loosened up in the face of public demand, the Marine Corps tightens up, strengthens its discipline and toughens its training.

U.S. Marines have been primarily responsible for policing American overseas interests since the late 19th century, landing in Japan, China, Formosa, Korea and Vietnam long before 1900. In just the three years between 1897 and 1900 Marines intervened in Haiti at least eight times, and a dozen times in Nicaragua.

A special case is Haiti, where the USMC attempted to impose corporate "democracy" in 1915, though it is difficult to see how it can be forced on a society and remain democratic. The USMC imposed martial law and controlled Haitian towns, schools and political offices while suppressing opposition parties and the press. Taking over the economy and instituting a corvée system of slave labor to build roads without pay, the USMC also established a military caste, which subsequently ruled Haiti after the Marines left in 1934.

So now we have the Marine, the Spartan ideal, the loyal Samurai, celebrating his 226th birthday, his finger again on the trigger, poised on the brink of yet another war, waiting to attack or defend, about to be hurled once more into the pitiless crucible of combat. Most of his wars have been sundered by the merciless glare of history to be not at all great crusades for civilization or God, but instead petty and oppressive struggles for eminent domain. Justification might be made for the Marine Corps' costly role in the two World Wars, if one overlooks the incredible blunders that led to those wars: the time softened names of death; Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Okinawa --- the arguments about Korea (Inchon, 'The Frozen Chosin') are bitter and polarized, never at rest. But no other purpose than naked power is responsible for the Philippines campaign at the beginning of the 20th century; the same held true for the 'Banana Wars' in Central America and the Caribbean (Haiti, Nicaragua) during the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, and for the invasions of Grenada and Panama in the 1980s. The USMC was part of the massive military coalition that fought the first of what may be a series of oil wars (extending beyond a war against terrorism just beginning) for control of the Middle East pipelines, this inaugural war against former Cold War ally Iraq in 1990-91, a preview of a part of the world the Corps might be bitterly acquainted with in future years.

The USMC calls itself *America's 911 Force* in this new century/millennium, and in response to the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States it is forming a new anti-terrorism brigade for "homeland defense" that is preparing "to go to war in American cities" to combat terrorism. The brigade will consist of a security battalion as well as nuclear/biological-chemical response units. At present the 'Posse-Comitatus Law' prohibits the U.S. military to be involved in domestic law enforcement, but members of Congress plan to sponsor a bill to repeal it to meet what they say is the new contingency of safeguarding the country against terrorism. The result will be elite Marine 'SWAT' teams, a recurring nightmare of our forebears who wished to curb the insatiable tyrannies of militarists.

The pride to sustain itself must be internalized, become one of profession instead of cause or ideals. The argument thus constructed is one of stoicism in the face of adversity, the bright jewel of courage for its own sake, never presuming to question how wasted the finest qualities of humanity are when put to the purpose of war.

"...cry out to the mourners," Kurt Tucholsky wrote at the end of the butchery known as World War I: "He died for nothing, for madness, for nothing, for nothing, for nothing..."

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