

MARINES AT WORK

Those Goddamn Marines By Lt.Col. David W. Szelowski

I wonder how many times during Operation Iraqi Freedom that the phrase “Goddamn Marines” was uttered. Even in the best of times, Army and Air Force officers have been heard muttering some epithet about Marines, invoking either heaven or hell. Interesting enough we Marines find it all rather reassuring and, at times amusing.

Most of the time, Marines do not go out of our way to be obnoxious: we are just doing what Marines have done for over 200 years. A good example is the fact that Marines always raise the American flag over mountains or cities they have conquered. From Nassau in the Bahamas, to Mount Suribachi, to the City of Hue, to Kuwait City, to Baghdad, U.S. Marines have raised the Stars and Stripes; in the latter examples, much to the chagrin of higher headquarters. You don't get these kind of problems with the Army.

So what is it about the U.S. Marines that they stick U.S. flags on everything and do more with less, a less that is old or an Army hand-me-down? We call it Esprit de Corps, but it goes deeper than that. We learn and maintain myths of the past, which also means living up to those historical examples. Marine Corps boot camp is the longest of all the services; it is where we mold young men and women into the mythical image called a Marine. You can be in the Army, you can join the Air Force, but you become a Marine. All of the other uniformed services have a song; the U.S. Marines have a hymn. The basic pattern of the Marine Corps uniform comes from the late nineteenth century; our emblem “the Eagle, Globe and Anchor” has remained largely unchanged since 1868. The buttons on our dress blues, whites and greens date back to the founding of our Corps. The Marine Corps is the only service that requires its officers to carry a sword, whose pattern dates back to 1805. I think that the path of being a Marine was established long ago. On the 10th of November 1775, the Marine Corps was first established in a tavern. To this day, no matter where in the world, Marines celebrate the founding of our beloved Corps, much to the confusion of the other services.

A few years ago, a congresswoman from Colorado felt the Marine Corps was radical and extreme. She contended that the Marine Corps was not politically correct, nor did we seem to be part of the Department of Defense's transition to a “kindler and gentler” military. She was correct, and the Marine Corps took it as a compliment.

But the proof is in the doing, and during Iraqi Freedom the Marines demonstrated what Marines can do. I watched with some amusement as a reporter asked a young lance corporal about being in Iraq and being under rifle fire. “Love

it, sir!” was his response. The reporter was taken aback and asked “No, really.” The Marine then tried to explain that this is what he was trained to do, he looked forward to doing it and was now happy to be doing it. No doubt in boot camp he was told that he was “a minister of death praying for war.” Contrast that with the Army Apache pilots who said that if they had to take a life, they would do it reluctantly. You are either a warrior or not.

Marines are mission oriented. Live or die, the most important thing to a Marine is accomplishing the mission. Whether taking a bridge, river or town, accomplishing the mission is the holy grail of being a Marine. How the mission is accomplished is not so important, as it is expected of all Marines to accomplish the mission with the tools available. This is why we heard that Marines in one engagement were fighting with knives and bayonets. This was hardly high tech, but it was effective. These Marines now have bragging rights, for they have proven that they talk-the-talk and walk-the-walk. I doubt there is a single Marine who is not envious.

Marines are practical, as well. I enjoyed hearing two reporters interviewing each other; one embedded with the Army the other with the Marines. The reporter with the Army noted that the sandstorm had blown down many of the soldiers’ cots. The other reporter countered that the Marines did not have this problem because they slept on the ground. The Marine learns to live with what he can carry on his back. He expects to be moved about the battlefield via his two leather Cadillacs (boots). If he is lucky and gets to ride on an amtrack, so much the better, but is not expected. At the end of a mission, the priority for cleaning is weapon, then equipment and finally, body. When the other services talk about “quality of life,” they are referring to housing, clubs and food. Marines are talking about better weapons, equipment and training, winning the battle and coming home alive is considered “quality of life.”

All this translates into combat power. In comparison to the U.S. Army’s 3rd Infantry Division, the Marines of I Marine Expeditionary Force were lightly equipped. Yet, they battled through the heart of Iraq, fought to the center of Baghdad and then moved off to Tikrit, taking that city as well. The press was so enamored with the Marines that in the final days of the war they even credited the Marines with deeds actually accomplished by the Army. Little wonder we heard “Goddamn Marines!” so often.

So we need to give the Marines some slack when they do something politically incorrect, such as raising the flag or appearing insensitive when killing the enemy. In the field, they look sloppy compared to the Army, but are aggressive in the attack and generally unhappy in the defense. Marines take pride in their work, even when that work is war. We are just Marines and that is what we do.