

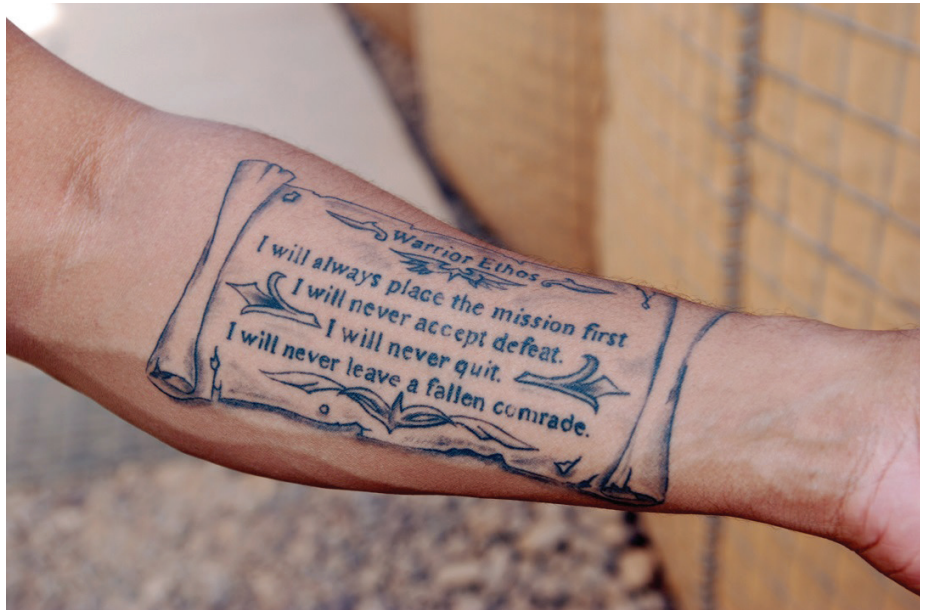
A History of Ink

Tattoos don't define the person
by SSgt Christopher E. Jennings

The standard practice of warriors tattooing themselves dates back more than 12,000 years. The warrior cultures that have preceded us have oftentimes tattooed themselves as a way to define them as a warrior for life. The implications of these markings had significant cultural importance and equated to status. For example, in the 1700s, at the pinnacle of the British Navy's power, sailors often tattooed themselves to denote honor and prestige of having served in Her Majesty's service. The Dayak warriors from Borneo would receive hand tattoos after they had taken the head of one of their enemies in fierce battle. The nomadic tribes of the Viking warriors would tattoo themselves to identify amongst their kinsmen that they were indeed warriors of different skill levels. Celtic warriors were adorned with Woad tattoos as well as ink along meridian lines in the belief that it would enhance their performance in battle.

Looking to more modern times, the special operations warrior deems it a rite of passage and a badge of honor to have the SEAL Trident or the Special Forces Badge tattooed upon himself. This serves to identify him as an elite warrior, much like the ancient warriors did. These warriors are often seen as the best that our nation has to offer, and yet we critique them based on the body art they choose to display as a symbol of pride.

Maori warriors tattoo themselves as an intimidation factor. This fierce persona that is presented is meant to deter aggression from opponents and ultimately instills a hostile, yet loyal esprit de corps in the warriors. Ancient Greeks and Romans would regularly tattoo their slaves to identify ownership. As an end result, these tattoos served



The tattoo policy often prevents the advancement of a warrior. (Photo by SSgt Stephanie van Geete.)

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to unite the slaves in their rebellion of oppression and tyranny and formed a visible bond amongst the men and women who bore them as they won their freedom from the empire.

Tattoos are so widely accepted in society that it is more commonplace to encounter a person that has at least one example of body art than it is to encounter someone who does not. Most modern tattoos are received not just as an expression of individualism but also as a way to tell a story of a significant event in one's life. They often serve as solemn reminders of troubled pasts and

a way forward. Tattoos are not the enemy that our Congress and senior leadership make them out to be. Tattoos are often just an outward projection designed to complement an individual's personality.

When I first enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, it was commonplace to encounter a senior enlisted individual who was heavily inked. In talking to the Marine, I would learn about the deployments that he had been on and the exciting experiences that he had. I would learn of adversity in his career and life. I remember the very first Gun-

nery Sergeant I met after joining the fleet, who was covered to the extreme limits of his limbs in tattoos. Each one told a story. One arm told the story of how his high school sweetheart, later his wife, had died while giving birth to his only son. Another tattoo was dedicated to the memory of his father, who had served in Vietnam and who had died during the battle of La Drang. Another served to remind him of his DUI and the repercussions that drinking and driving can have on one's life and career.

Tattoos today do not define the person. Just because a Marine has a full sleeve tattoo does not mean that he is lacking discipline. I can tell you from experience that making the decision to mark yourself permanently requires a lot of self-discipline. Each of my tattoos tells a significant story about my life. I have some dedicated to my children, so that no matter where I go in this world, they will forever be on my mind. I have some dedicated to my service and others dedicated to my weaknesses. These serve to remind me each and every day that I can persevere and overcome my shortcomings.

There are doctors, lawyers, and business executives adorned with tattoos, and they are some of the most respected members of our society. Politicians have tattoos. Does that mean that any of them are lacking in discipline?

The Marine Corps presently prohibits and greatly scrutinizes tattoos for certain billet assignments. I was denied becoming a recruiter because someone in my chain of command deemed that my tattoos, though completely hidden beneath my uniform, were detrimental to the image of the Corps. How can expressions of my life be detrimental to my character? This mentality of judging a book by its cover has to come to an abrupt halt in the Corps! Instead of trying to eliminate tattoos in the ranks, why don't we focus more on the advancement of technical proficiency? We should focus on improving the effectiveness of our units in the wake of the current reduction of forces.

Is it really a showstopper for a duly qualified Marine to be tattooed and then denied assignment to a certain billet just because he or she may display



Is this expression of pride detrimental to the Marine's character? (Photo by Sgt Paula M. Fitzgerald.)

some body art? This is ludicrous! We are an institution composed of volunteers from within our society. At what point will we learn to accept that a rough outward appearance does not denote the morals or character of the person?

I will agree that tattoos in the Marine Corps should be outlined and governed strictly, but the prohibition of an individual's desire to have full sleeves is a violation of the principles of freedom of speech and expression as granted by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. This is the same Constitution that we are sworn to defend against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I can agree that content be governed; I agree that head, neck, hands, etc. tattoos should be prohibited. But a Marine should not be immediately cast as a "problem child" just because he has tattoos. If society accepts tattoos, why can't we? Why can't we as an institution look beyond the ink and instead focus on the warrior?

The current tattoo policy is a blanket doctrine that is often misused to prevent the professional advancement of a warrior. I have encountered Marines who were denied admission to a Professional Military Education course because they had undocumented tat-

toos and also because they were deemed excessive. I have witnessed Marines denied a Special Duty Assignment for the size and location of tattoos, while others are granted these assignments despite having excessive tattoos. The system is broken and should be thoroughly reviewed, if not revoked outright. I have seen the best of the best in certain MOSs denied the opportunity to become a warrant officer because of a tattoo that is visible in PT gear. How is this strengthening the fabric of our Corps? Oftentimes, these exemplary Marines become so disgruntled that they choose instead to exit active service and leave the occupational field, depriving the Corps of leadership and experience, all because the Marine is not afforded the chance to progress based on a few tattoos.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The Marines I have seen around the world have the cleanest bodies, the filthiest minds, the highest morale, and the lowest morals of any group of animals I have ever seen. Thank God for the United States Marine Corps!" Even the former First Lady recognized that the Marines are an elite organization that, despite our transgressions, are faithful in our service. *"Marines have the clean-*

est bodies” can easily be translated in respect to the physical fitness that we as Marines place so much emphasis on. We are taught to eat right and exercise in order to maintain our fierce persona to the enemies of our country, to be able to exemplify the ability to fight in any clime or place.

As written, the present policy on tattoos within the United States Marine Corps is segregationist in nature and prohibits some of the finest leaders from bettering the institution. The individual Marine is our greatest asset, as he or she will strengthen the fabric of the Corps based on the pride of belonging to a fierce warrior culture.

Having a tattoo does not define the person in a manner of speaking. It does further enhance and define the person’s personality, as we are often prone in today’s society to internalize our problems; tattoos serve to project our emotions and experiences outward. Is the Marine Corps so unwilling to enforce good order and discipline as well as tough training in the face of political pressure that they succumb to the ever more soft and entitled society?

Charles Caleb Colton can be credited as saying, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” Most tattoos are obtained as a form of imitation. As a warrior culture, we are imitating the warriors of old through the art and practice of tattooing. Just as we have modeled the modern military after those tactics and strategies of these ancient warriors, we are also modeling ourselves after these same warriors through self-expression to denote that we are warriors. Just because a tattoo may not be military related, it is still a form of morale within our ranks.

Morale has dropped in the wake of the current tattoo policy. Marines feel that they are being further micromanaged, and it is depressing to be told what you may or may not do to your body. We allow repetitive assignments to the body composition program as well as to the military appearance program. Neither of these programs is effective in the intended sense, as Marines regularly slip through the cracks with no punitive action for failure to comply with prescribed standards. Why this is

treated so much more differently than tattoos? It makes no sense.

My proposal on the tattoo policy is simple in theory. I propose a change to the current policy that falls more in line with the policies of old. Tattoos should be restricted in terms of content and location. There should be prohibitions on neck, head, and hand tattoos. Ring tattoos should be limited to one per hand. The mindset that having a full or half sleeve is indicative of a breakdown in good order and discipline is counterproductive. Instead, we should be looking more at the physical attributes of the Marines along with the “whole Marine concept” that we so readily inspect. Just because a Marine wears visible tattoos on his arms or legs does not mean that Marine is a troublemaker. Tattoos are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Having survived more than twelve millennia, they are a staple in the societies of the world.

Instead of mandating restrictive measures and punishments along with the demonization of tattoos, why doesn’t the senior leadership educate the Corps on the health risks associated with tattoos? I feel that safety concerns on sanitation should take precedence over ending a Marine’s career because he or she got a tattoo while on liberty, and now it is not properly documented. This practice is asinine.

Let us focus more on policies that will make our Corps more effective in the face of budget cuts, sequestration, reduction of forces, and an unstable political environment. Tattoos are a part of our heritage and a tradition that should not be forced into extinction because a few of our senior leaders oppose them.



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