



DON PERDUE

His peers call PBS anchor and Marine veteran Jim Lehrer the "dean of moderators." That credibility and his long-term commitment to the Corps earned him an invitation to be the keynote speaker at the November 2006 grand opening of the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Impartial, Fair and Objective Marine Veteran Jim Lehrer Has Become America's Most Respected Newsman

By Arthur P. Brill Jr.

In two hours, "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" will air on the Public Broadcasting Service before three million people. The anchor and executive editor, Jim Lehrer, has talked about his Marine Corps days for almost 90 minutes.

With his collar open and tie loosened, the calm, courteous manner seen on TV is exactly how he is. His Midwestern-Texas twang is spiced with salty language and Marine slang, and his sea stories are punctuated by robust laughter. Except for the gigantic bus signs in his office, the two Marines could have been huddled over beers at Camp Zukeran, Okinawa. Meanwhile in his outer office, two staffers need Lehrer's decision on the lat-

est crisis. Finally, they burst in. "All hell's breaking loose," he said with a smile.

"Jim enjoyed himself," said Roma Hare, Lehrer's longtime assistant, after the interview. "Otherwise, it wouldn't have lasted this long."

Although he hasn't worn a uniform in 48 years, Jim Lehrer has probably been the nation's most visible Marine during the past three decades. He also may be America's most respected newsman. Because he's trusted by both sides, Lehrer has moderated 10 presidential debates; each viewed by up to 80 million people.

"They used to call Walter Cronkite the most trusted man in America, but Jim has inherited that," said prominent broadcaster Robert MacNeil, who co-founded "The NewsHour" with Lehrer 31 years ago.

"The NewsHour" ranks first among all daily television news programs as the most credible and influential. Its ratings surpass such cable stalwarts as "The O'Reilly Factor," "Hardball With Chris Matthews," "Anderson Cooper 360," "Lou Dobbs Tonight," "The Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer" and "Scarborough Country." The program reaches America's "opinion leaders" five nights a week on more than 300 public broad-

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casting stations and U.S. troops overseas via American Forces Network.

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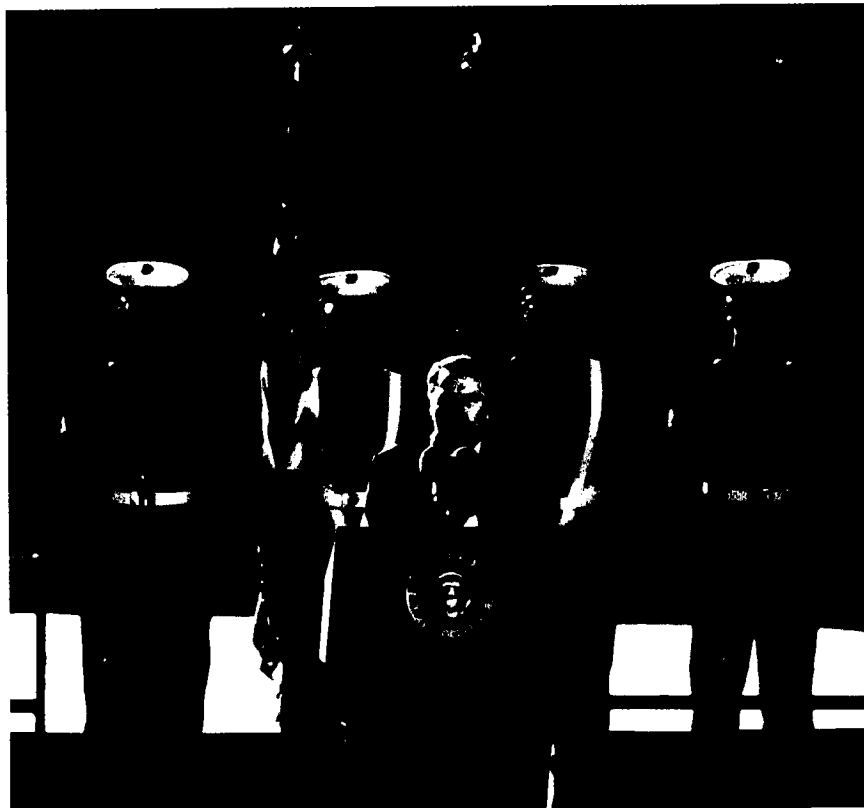
Lehrer didn't have much choice. His father, Harry Frederick "Fred" Lehrer, was a Marine infantry corporal in Haiti in the late 1920s. While stationed at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., under the legendary Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler, Corporal Lehrer met his wife, Lois, while she worked for the War Department in Washington, D.C. The senior Lehrer left the Corps for a career mostly in the busing industry, in the Kansas and Texas areas.

Wherever the family lived, the "scarlet and gold" reigned supreme. Lehrer and his brother, Fred Jr., learned "The Marines' Hymn," how to stand straight, the meaning of Semper Paratus and that "swabbies and doggies" were no match for a Marine.

"My father was only 5 feet 7 inches and weighed 150 pounds, but, oh, did he have presence. People used to joke that my dad would put on a tie to take the trash out. He was a good dresser and that came from being a Marine," said Lehrer. "The biggest thing he gave us was a firm conviction that the Marine Corps was the best service. It never occurred to Fred and me to do anything but join the Marines."

While a journalism student at the University of Missouri, Lehrer took his first plane ride to undergo officer candidates training at Quantico in the summer of 1955. At the train station platform, a drill instructor (DI) mispronounced Lehrer's name while taking a roll call. Lehrer corrected him while in ranks and all hell broke loose. The DI slowly strode over and barked loudly in Lehrer's face: "Candidate, if I say your name is Little Bo Peep, it is Little Bo Peep. Do you hear me?" "Yes, sir!" replied Lehrer, who instantly learned about being a Marine.

Fifty-one years later near Quantico, on a breezeless, warm, Indian summer-type afternoon on the Corps' 231st Birthday in 2006, Lehrer told that same story before President George Bush,



Backed by the United States Marine Corps Color Guard, Jim Lehrer surprised many during the National Museum of the Marine Corps opening ceremonies, not only with his humorous recollections of his time on active duty but with his very visible dedication to country and Corps. (Photo by Nancy Lee White Hoffman)



A youthful 2dLt Jim Lehrer looks to future.

COURTESY OF THE LEHRER FAMILY

several Marine Commandants, thousands of Marines and their families and a national television audience. He was the keynote speaker at the dedication of the National Museum of the Marine Corps. In essence, he represented all four million Marines who served since 1775.

"I was stunned and honored to get that invitation. Why me? I only spent three of my 72 years in the Marines as a piss-ant lieutenant," said Lehrer. "I never worked as hard on anything in my life."

Lehrer's preparation reveals his drive to succeed. He tackled that speech like a Marine unit searching an enemy village. His research disclosed that while some Marines go to war, most do not see combat. However, they all undergo the same "Marine Experience." Lehrer agonized over every word to express that theme. He read the speech 34 times to his wife. Lehrer's standards are high.

"Your number-one bar that you are always aiming for is your own," said Lehrer. "If someone tells me I did a good interview and I thought it was lousy, it was lousy. It works the other way too."

Lehrer is impressed no Marine Corps official asked what he planned to say. "They rolled the dice with me. I gave the speech for not only Dad, Fred and me, but for everyone who wore the uniform," he said. "It was an important day and the finest moment of my life."

The next morning, *The Washington Post* featured a front-page photograph of President Bush; General Peter Pace, the first Marine Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and other uniformed notables laughing at the Little Bo Peep story. President Bush congratulated Lehrer on three different occasions since.

Lehrer said the reaction to his speech was bigger than anything he has ever done.

"Jim's speech was outstanding, and we've received positive feedback from all ranks. The phone is ringing off the hook for copies," said Lieutenant General Ron Christmas, USMC (Ret), president of The Marine Corps Heritage Foundation.

Lehrer was commissioned a second lieutenant when he graduated from college in 1956. He sailed through The Basic School at Quantico, and before reporting to Okinawa, he was assigned to the Officer Candidates School to lead two platoons of "candidates" at mainside Quantico.

"I knew all the tricks," said Lehrer, laughing, who double-starched his utilities so that sweat wouldn't show and put cardboard on the sides of his pack to look sharp. Despite being a lifelong "bus nut" and now an avid collector, Lehrer requested the infantry instead of motor transport. "If you're going to be a Marine, be a Marine," he explained.

On Okinawa, Lehrer joined the 1st Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment (1/9) where he commanded an antitank assault platoon, served as the "Bravo" Company executive officer and later became the battalion personnel officer, or S-1. At first, the battalion lived in a tent camp at Camp Kinser. During the rainy season, there wasn't much to do except drink or read.

"I wanted to be a writer and we had this little library at Kinser. For six months, all I did was read great American fiction, including all the works of Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and John O'Hara," Lehrer recalled. "When they moved us to Camp Zukeran [a modern facility], we thought we [had] died and gone to heaven."

The late 1950s were good years to be a Marine. Generally, no one was shooting at them. Yet, the feats of Marines in World War II and Korea were still fresh. The Corps' money was tight, but the units trained hard. Marines used mainly WW II weap-

ons, helmets, gear and tactics. It was a time of salt pills, guilt-free "happy hours," swagger sticks, spit-shined boots, professionalism, good liberty, dime beers, close camaraderie and "brown or green side out." Most Marines were noncareerists. Who could imagine that their career buddies would lead Marines in Vietnam?

"Vietnam was our war and I missed it," said Richard Anderson, Lehrer's friend on Okinawa. Like others, he wonders about not having been tested in combat. "Jim has settled my unease and helped me understand that bloodied or not, we are all Marines."

Lehrer said he and his troops were ready to go anywhere. He was appalled by the few Marines who were obsessed by war and the need to earn medals and even get wounded to further their careers.

"There is absolutely nothing glamorous about combat. Anybody who thinks otherwise is probably going to get his butt killed," Lehrer said. "I don't feel that I'm some

half-a-- Marine because I wasn't in combat. I'm a full-a-- Marine."

On Okinawa, Lehrer filed his career papers. "Jim was a squared-away, very affable and an effective junior officer. I thought he had the qualities sought by the Corps to seek a regular commission," said retired Colonel William Dick, one of Lehrer's 1/9 commanders. Dick is remembered for his 100-mile battalion hike around the island in 5½ days that included mock strafing runs by Marine aircraft.

Marine headquarters accepted Lehrer's application after he arrived at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., for his final tour. A "gung-ho" First Lieutenant Lehrer wanted to be a series officer and lead recruits. Instead, a nonsympathetic colonel, spotting his journalism degree, put him in charge of *The Boot*, Parris Island's weekly newspaper. Lehrer soon withdrew his papers to be a career officer.

"Except for student newspapers, *The Boot* was my first real

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Lehrer Novel: Examines "Poetic License" With Valor

Since leaving the Corps, Jim Lehrer has written 16 books, mostly fiction. "I don't know anybody as highly disciplined as Jim," said former broadcaster Roger Mudd. "Writing is as important to him as oxygen is to me."

Lehrer's latest novel, "The Phony Marine," came out last October. It is about a middle-aged clothing salesman who decides to wear a Silver Star medal and pose as a Marine. He assumes the role and the expectations that real Marines take for granted.

On page 34, a minor fictional character raised eyebrows when he said that 50 percent of the people wearing military lapel pins and buttons are phonies. Blame "poetic license." There is no evidence that the problem is close to being that bad.

The Marine Corps does not have such concerns in its active ranks, but civilian cases occur either involving veteran Marines who claim decorations they have not earned or

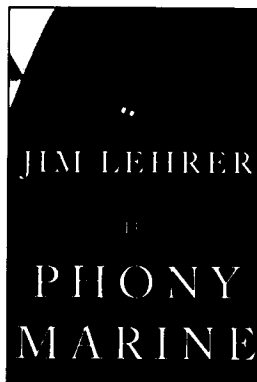
with people posing as Marines.

The recently passed Stolen Valor Act should limit such behavior. It prohibits phonies from wearing, displaying or claiming to have earned the Purple Heart and other decorations from the Silver Star medal on up.

"The Phony Marine" is scheduled to be out in paperback this October.

Lehrer got the idea when someone introduced him as a combat infantry commander in Korea. "Everything was true except the word 'combat.' We trained in Korea," Lehrer said. "I wished it was true. I didn't want to correct him, but I did."

—Arthur P. Brill Jr.



Note: "The Phony Marine" is available at MCA bookstores by calling toll-free (866) 622-1775, or shopping online at www.mca-marines.org.

job in journalism," said Lehrer. "The McKeon [recruit drowning] incident had everyone spooked. I watched every word to make sure no one would get in trouble, particularly me."

In 1959, Lehrer left Parris Island for the newspaper business, but he took his Marine Corps savvy with him. "Learning how to handle yourself as a young guy gives you self-confidence," Lehrer said. "My Marine experience has shaped who I am personally and professionally."

In Dallas, Lehrer worked for both leading newspapers in a variety of grinding assignments. There, he met and married Kate Lehrer, an English teacher who is now a novelist. They produced three daughters. After publishing "Viva Max!" a novel that became a movie, he slipped into a news and anchor role for public television in Dallas that eventually brought him to Washington, D.C., in 1972.

His close working and personal friendship with MacNeil developed into a business partnership where they conceived, owned and operated "The NewsHour" since its inception in 1975. They also produce documentaries. MacNeil stepped down from day-to-day "NewsHour" matters in 1995.

"You can't buy a piece of stock in "The NewsHour." They are their own bosses. It is truly unique," said Roger Mudd, the well-known former CBS and NBC broadcaster. "They are not prosecuting attorneys trying to nail people, and they aren't afraid of a complete answer. There has never been a program like it."

Lehrer sets the tone of "The NewsHour." Its basic principles have not changed much since 1975. Lehrer avoids any trace of partisanship or ideology on any side. Reporters follow his tough "Code of Journalism," and personal agendas are forbidden. Guests are treated fairly. Impartial questions and the one-hour format allow for competing viewpoints to air in sufficient detail.

"The NewsHour" is Jim's crowning achievement. Everyone wants to come on the program," said Jim Dickenson, author and former political reporter for *The Washington Post*. "Jim is regarded as a solid newsman, not an entertainer or reader of news."

"The NewsHour" succeeds amid a changing landscape in the broadcast news business. The news audience is shrinking. Talk shows are replacing news even on the all-news channels. A few Americans are very informed while many others are not. Unlike newspapers, there is no clear separation in broadcasting between news and the type of commentary Lou Dobbs does on CNN. In an era of specialization, many people tune in not to learn things but to reinforce their preconceptions.

"The idea that Rush Limbaugh is America's anchorman is hogwash. Limbaugh is an advocate. He is no more a journalist than Howard Stern," said Jim Bohannon, the nationally known talk show host of Westwood One Radio. "Jim Lehrer is a straight down-the-middle broadcaster, and such objectivity takes courage."

The low turnover on "The NewsHour's" 110-person active staff says something about Lehrer's leadership. He is a no "BS," quick-to-the-point guy who is impatient with people talking around an issue. MacNeil thinks his desire for clean lines of decision and authority comes from the Marines.

"When "The Marines' Hymn" is played, Jim is misty-eyed. He often says he would cry at a bad commercial," said MacNeil. "If you look at Jim's eyes after "The NewsHour" honors the U.S. military personnel killed in Iraq, they are humid. He just cannot help it."

Jim Lehrer retains his spirit of Semper Fi and his Kansas roots. He is terrific one-on-one, doesn't miss a trick and is wound tighter than he looks. He often flies to the Kansas area where he drives alone, gathering material for his novels. Jim and Kate Lehrer do not cook. They eat out often and are on Washington's "A" social list. Since his 1983 heart attack,



Kathleen McCleery, deputy executive producer (left), and Dan Sagalyn, deputy senior producer/reporter-foreign affairs, discuss an upcoming "NewsHour" with Jim Lehrer. Success week after week, whether as a Marine or a television news moderator, demands discipline, training or rehearsal, and a strong team. Lehrer's appreciation of those principles has kept him at the top of his profession. (Photo by Art Brill)

Lehrer naps daily, walks and does water aerobics. He is a faithful friend who responds to e-mails and notes.

Lehrer remains close to his 1/9 buddies and sent them signed copies of his most recent book, "The Phony Marine." When they gather for informal reunions, Lehrer and Kate try to attend. "We revert instantly to our relationship on Okinawa. It's 'a----- this and a----- that,'" Bill Moore, a semiretired attorney in Virginia, said, laughing.

Anderson remembers when Lehrer departed Okinawa: "Jim willed me his 'piss-cutter' [garrison cap] because it fit better. I asked him what he was going to do. Jim said, 'I'm going into journalism.' Then I asked, 'Jim, is there any future in that?'"

Editor's note: To hear Jim Lehrer's motivated and entertaining speech at the Nov. 10, 2006, opening of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, courtesy of PBS, go to the Leatherneck Web site at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck.

Retired Marine LtCol Arthur P. Brill Jr. writes on national security issues for defense publications. LtCol Brill commanded an infantry company in Vietnam and retired as the Corps' press spokesman.

He also was the media spokesman in key jobs for both the Carter and Reagan administrations.

