



NANCY S. LICHTMAN



Representing the Past

Pageant of Historic Uniforms Honors the Marines Who Came Before

By Nancy S. Lichtman

On Nov. 10, 2018, the 243rd birthday of their beloved Corps, Marines wearing their distinctive dress blue uniforms began to gather with their guests outside of the ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. The Commandant's Marine Corps Birthday Ball was about to begin and the spirit of Semper Fidelis was in the air.

And then, like ghosts from the Marine Corps' attic, 25 Marines wearing uniforms representing previous eras of the Corps' history fanned out through the room. The historically dressed leathernecks, all outfitted by the United States

Marine Corps Historical Company (USMCHC), posed for pictures and talked with guests, answering questions about the historical firearms they were carrying and the uniforms they were wearing.

From a musket-toting Continental Marine in his bright green regimental coat and powdered wig, to the World War I era Woman Marine carrying a swagger stick, to the Desert Storm Marine in his "chocolate chip" camouflage utilities, carrying an M249 SAW, no detail is too obscure for retired Gunnery Sergeant Tom Williams, head of the USMCHC, to overlook.

Above left: At an October 2018 uniform fitting, retired GySgt Tom Williams, right, adjusts the bayonet belt for LCpl Asanti Kollore in preparation for his portrayal of a Continental Marine at the 2018 Commandant's Birthday Ball. Note the "whisk and pick" on the chain that is attached to the uniform coat. Those tools were vital when operating a flintlock musket and were part of the Marine Corps uniform as long as muskets were in use.



SGT OLIVIA ORTIZ, USMC

Above: Gen Robert B. Neller, the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, and Gen Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, meet with the historically dressed Marines before the Commandant's Birthday Ball at the Washington Hilton, Washington, D.C., Nov. 10, 2018.

The Marines are not wearing costumes, Williams emphasized, but replicas of uniforms that have been custom-made to exacting standards. For example, the wool used to make the reproduction World War I-era forest green uniforms is specially milled to replicate the mil spec wool first introduced in 1912. Williams has about 30 different companies he works with to ensure historical accuracy. "I want to make [each Marine] proud to put on that uniform," said GySgt Williams.

Founded in 1990 by Williams and fellow Marine, Sergeant Timothy Kuerberth, the mission of the USMCHC is the presentation and preservation of Marine Corps history. With more than 60 active volunteers in various locations across the country, the nonprofit organization serves military audiences with professional military education programs and the development and presentation



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN

of static displays that include Marine Corps uniforms. Civilian audiences can experience the historical company's unique approach to history education during ceremonies, interactive exhibits and demonstrations that take place throughout the year at a variety of historical sites and national parks, including Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and Fort McHenry National Historical Site. This type of living history programming plays an integral role in telling the Corps' story, and its impact was recognized in 1999 when the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation awarded the USMCHC

the Colonel John H. Magruder Award for excellence in preserving and presenting Marine Corps history.

Each year, in November, the company's primary focus is supporting Marine Corps Birthday celebrations, including the Commandant's Birthday Ball in Washington, D.C., said Williams, who

Left: LCpl Minh C. Nguyen portrays a WW II Marine Corps aviator assigned to VMF-122. He is wearing a reproduction Mae West life jacket. Wherever possible, USMCHC uses reproduction artifacts rather than originals to avoid wear and tear on irreplaceable items.



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

LCpl Asanti Kollore, representing a Continental Marine; LCpl Brian Rojas, representing a Vietnam War Marine; and LCpl Justin Winkler, far right, wearing the uniform of a Marine during the 1900 Philippine Insurrection, compare notes on their uniforms at the USMCHC headquarters, Oct. 24, 2018.

begins preparing for his organization's role in that event months ahead of time.

The USMCHC has been providing the historical uniforms for the Commandant's Ball since 2006, and Williams, with his unfailing attention to detail, has the process down to a science. In early October, about a month before the event, active-duty Marines serving at Marine Barracks Washington, meet with Williams and seamstress Beth Hall at the USMCHC headquarters in Frederick, Md. There, along with some of the historical company's regular volunteers who are also active-duty Marines, they are outfitted with uniforms from the USMCHC's inventory.

According to Hall, the uniforms have been created using a combination of new and old tailoring techniques—the fabrics are draped in a historically accurate way, however, seams are machine-sewn,

rather than hand-sewn. "A museum piece would be period-correct, these items merge authenticity with functionality," she said. There is also plenty of extra material in the design of the garments to allow Hall to make alterations due to the wide variety of sizes of the Marines who volunteer with USMCHC. After uniforms are issued, Hall, as much a stickler for detail as Williams is, evaluates each uniform for fit and marks necessary alterations that she will make before the Birthday Ball. "It is particularly important to me that our Marines look like squared-away Marines," Hall said. The combination of a well-fitted uniform and the knowledge about the accompanying weaponry are all part of the big picture, according to Hall. "They have to look better than good and then they will feel the part," she said.

"It's just an honor to wear this," Private First Class Deanna Artiga said of her World War I Summer Service uniform. PFC Artiga said her love of history is part of what compelled her to volunteer to participate in the birthday ball historical pageant. "It's good that we get to wear [these uniforms] so other people can see them," said Artiga who completed boot camp in May 2018.

Williams wants to inspire the Marines to have the same pride for the historic uniforms that they feel when dressed in their modern uniforms. "There's a story behind every uniform you're wearing," Williams tell his volunteers. "You're living history. You're representing those Marines. The only thing that separates us is time and technology. They are you and you are them," he added. Noting that

The details matter, said seamstress Beth Hall, right, as she perfects the fit of a WW II era Woman Marine Reserve summer service uniform on Cpl D. Martinez, Oct. 24, 2018.



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

“There’s a story behind every uniform you’re wearing,” Williams tell his volunteers.
 “You’re living history. You’re representing those Marines. The only thing that separates us
 is time and technology. They are you and you are them.”

Marines believe they are “the baddest guys on the block,” Williams reminded the volunteers, “We have to remember we are standing on the shoulders of every Marine who has gone before us.”

On the day of the uniform fitting, Williams spends a fair amount of time teaching the evolution of Marine Corps uniforms and how they are a critical part of the Corps’ history. Many of the things that are synonymous with a squared-away Marine—polished brass and boots, gleaming bayonets, precision drilling—can be traced back to the Corps’ early days. In the fledgling years of the United States, the Corps’ uniforms were brightly colored and ornate in part because it was the style of the time, but also, said Williams, because it had a psychological impact on the enemy. The uniform was meant to intimidate the enemy. “A well-turned out Marine,” said Williams, “sent a message to the enemy that said ‘look at me, I’m a professional Marine ... we’re going to come over there and kick your butt.’ ”

Arming the volunteers with knowledge about the Marines who came before them is a key part of the day’s training. Williams wants the young volunteers to be prepared to answer questions that ball attendees might ask. It’s a labor of love for Williams, who takes very seriously his opportunity to educate the Marine volunteers on the history of



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

LCpl Deanna Artiga, representing a Woman Marine from the WW I era, said she volunteered to participate in the pageant of historic uniforms because she is interested in history and it’s an honor to represent Marines of the past.

the uniforms they are wearing. “For me, it’s the passing of the realities of the heritage and legacy of the Marine Corps to the next generation,” said Williams.

Teaching is a role for which Williams is perfectly suited. His enthusiasm is contagious and his dedication to presenting Marine Corps history quickly catches on.

Lance Corporal Justin Winkler, who was being



COURTESY OF USMCHC

On the day of the ball, GySgt Williams is always on hand to help with correct placement of all the pieces of the uniforms. Pictured here at the Commandant’s Birthday Ball in 2013, he is buttoning the epaulets of a War of 1812 Marine. Epaulets were originally part of a Marine uniform for functional purposes: they held the cartridge box sling and bayonet belt in place.

This newfound knowledge and understanding of the differences between Marines over the years is what Williams hopes the Marines will begin thinking about. And ideally, they will take the things they learned back to their units. “Who better to teach that history than Marines?”



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

In the USMCHC inventory are the blue enlisted dress coat that was worn 1859-1875 and the red dress coat worn by a Marine Corps “field music” during the same era. Before radios were invented, a musicians’ calls communicated commands on the battlefield and the red coat made him more visible to his fellow Marines.

fitted for the uniform of a Marine in 1898, said he had much more mobility in the older uniform. “Compared to my dress blues, I have better mobility in this. It’s comfortable and loose and I can ... move around,” he said. Although, that mobility came at a price, said LCpl Winkler, who noted the protective benefits of the body armor in modern-day utilities. He said he had a new appreciation of the Marines who came before him and their willingness to risk their lives with so little protection.

Winkler wasn’t the only one who noticed the difference in the level of protection provided by a modern combat uniform. “It’s incredible, the fortitude they had,” said PFC Nigel Ortiz of the Korean War Marine he was portraying.

LCpl Brian Rojas, dressed in the utilities of a Vietnam War-era leatherneck, said he was surprised that the uniform only had “padding and that’s it.” Rojas said his grandfather’s 24 years in the Marine

Corps included a tour in Vietnam, which is part of the reason he opted to represent that particular time period.

This newfound knowledge and understanding of the differences between Marines over the years is what Williams hopes the Marines will begin thinking about. And ideally, they will take the things they learned back to their units. “Who better to teach that history than Marines?” he said.

After Williams has checked every brass button and Hall has marked every hem, the Marines spend time learning about the historic firearms they will be carrying. Close-order drill and the manual of arms have not drastically changed since the birth of the Corps, but have merely been modified to accommodate ever-changing technology, Williams explained.

In the early years of the Corps, close-order drill and the manual of arms were part of warfighting, and Marines of that era, who were armed with a 5-foot muzzle-loading musket with a 16-inch bayonet attached, stood elbow-to-elbow with each other. “The Marines in the rear rank would be only 16 inches from those in front so when they leveled their muskets to fire, its muzzle would not be next to the ears of the men in front,” Williams said.

“When in this ‘close-order’ every man had to work as one, moving each musket in the same way to load, fire and advance so as not to disrupt those Marines around them,” he added. Discipline in drill was essential in order to lay down a high volume of fire to overwhelm the opponent. As technology progressed, it became impractical to stand in such close proximity, and warfare was no



NANCY S. LICHTMAN



NANCY S. LICHTMAN

In preparation for the 2018 ball, GySgt Williams works with the Marines from Marine Barracks Washington to familiarize them with the manual of arms for the historic firearms they will be carrying.



SGT MALLORY VANDERSCHANS, USMC

longer conducted in formation, but the training is still important because it teaches such intangibles as teamwork and discipline.

“Although we no longer must stand as close together, and the weapon is now only 3-foot long, getting it from point A to point B still requires the same basic movements,” Williams said.

He brings this concept to life for the Marines when he lines them up on his makeshift “parade deck” at USMCHC to rehearse basic close-order drill commands. He reminds the Marines that they are not learning something new, they are merely taking information they already have and applying it to handling older weapons.

The teaching continues on the day of the ball. Williams, along with Tom Frezza, USMCHC Deputy Director, and regular volunteers, Sgt A.J. Wells, Cpl Chris Cranford, and Cpl Autumn Schlecht arrive on site early in the morning to unload the trailer filled with historic uniforms. When the leathernecks from “8th and I” arrive, a rehearsal begins. Usually, the USMCHC Marines serve as side boys during the entrance of the official party; however at the 2018 Commandant’s Birthday Ball, the ballroom was a little more crowded than usual, so during the ceremonial portion of the ball, the USMCHC Marines stood at attention near the entrance to the ballroom in a formation that highlighted the evolution of the Marine Corps’ uniform.

After rehearsal is complete, it’s time to put on the full uniform of a Marine from a different era and go out to meet the guests at the ball. Dressed in the 1900 Boxer Rebellion-era uniform, Williams is constantly on the move through the pre-ball reception, and like any good gunny, taking care of his Marines and ensuring that they are executing their mission flawlessly.

Williams said it can be a little overwhelming at first for some of the younger Marines—some of whom have been out of boot camp for less than a year—to be around so many high-ranking officers. And he wants to be close at hand to assist with any in-depth questions, but he can’t be in two places

at the same time. That’s where Cranford, Schlect and Wells come in—they are active volunteers for USMCHC and are almost as well-versed as Williams on the subject of older uniforms and weapons.

The questions vary, said Sgt Wells, who has been part of the USMCHC team since 2016 and has participated in the historic pageant of uniforms at the Commandant’s Birthday Ball for the past three years.

“Guests at the ball are always interested in the historic weapons and tend to gravitate toward the older, less familiar uniforms,” said Wells. “I’ve been asked what era or war’s uniform I’m wearing ... and sometimes guests even ask if I’m representing an American,” Wells added.

“One year I was dressed as a Wake Island Marine, with the pre-WW II combat uniform of long-sleeved shirt, trousers tucked into canvas leggings, and a doughboy-style Brodie helmet, and I really enjoyed talking with guests about how many of our current uniforms—service ‘Bravos’ in that case—are based on what Marines wore in combat years ago,” Wells added.

After the ceremonial portion of the ball has ended and the historic pageant of Marines is complete, the historic uniforms are carefully packed up. Williams will take them back to USMCHC where he will use them in other educational living history programs.

While the ball may be over, it made a lasting impression on the young Marines from “8th and I” like PFC Artiga, who was celebrating her first Marine Corps Birthday. “It was a huge honor and privilege to be able to attend such a historic event,” she said, adding that the ball “was not only an unbelievable event, it was my first experience as a Marine that I will never forget. Moments like these make me proud to be a Marine.”

Author’s note: For more information about the USMCHC, or to make a tax-deductible donation to the organization, visit www.usmchc.org.

The 35th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen James F. Amos, center right; the 17th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, SgtMaj Micheal P. Barrett, center left; and Medal of Honor recipient Sgt Dakota Meyer, center; pose for a group photo with Marines at the Commandant’s Birthday Ball, at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, National Harbor, Md., Nov. 9, 2013. The USMCHC pageant of historical uniforms has been a tradition at the Commandant’s Birthday Ball since 2006.