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Social Media ... Passing the Word in the 21st Century

By Col Mary H. Reinwald, USMC (Ret)

Social media. What was initially a means by which people could connect and interact with friends and loved ones virtually has now often become a source of conflict, derision and negativity. The Marine Corps has felt the sting of the downside of social media. The infamous Marines United scandal had an especially troublesome impact on

the Marine Corps and resulted in wide sweeping investigations and disciplinary action taken against numerous Marines. Social media, in all of its many forms, however, can still have a tremendously positive impact and serve as a wonderful

communications tool for Marines, family members, and veterans. A quick look at a variety of current social media groups affiliated in some way to the Corps reveals that there is much to appreciate about this relatively new form of communication.

Remembering

March 20, 1989, was a horrific day for the Marines of 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Participating in Exercise Team Spirit, 30 of the battalion's Marines were aboard a CH53-D Sea Stallion when it crashed near Pohang, South Korea. Nineteen Marines, including the pilots, were killed, and numerous Marines were wounded. Art Stillwell was one of the Marines who survived the crash unharmed physically but carrying the emotional scar of survivor's guilt and a deep frustration that he couldn't do more to help his fellow Marines who perished in the crash. Stilwell created the memorial Facebook page "Remembering Pohang Korea Helo Crash 1989" with a goal of "remembering the sacrifice of those that did not come home and a place to connect with those that did." Its 623 members are composed of survivors, other Marines from the battalion, and friends and families of those who were lost. According to Stillwell,

"The mission of the page is to put together as many people as possible to let them know/talk about that morning." The page's more than 600 members post everything from photos of Marines of the battalion before they deployed to Korea to memories of that fateful day. Some of the posts are sad and heartbreaking as members detail how the loss still haunts them. "Many wanted to know how their son/brother died. Did he suffer? Was it fast?" said Stillwell. "I was able to put to rest so many of the family members' minds that their sons died heroes." The support received from other members of the group is also cathartic and seems to help those left behind who receive reassurances that their loved ones are not only remembered but truly missed. And while posts and comments are frequent throughout the year, the anniversary of the crash always sees a spike in engagement on the group's Facebook page. "I usually write something and it goes," Stillwell confirmed. "Others just jump in to remember."



COURTESY OF ART STILLWELL

Inspired by the cover photo of the "Remembering Pohang, Korea, Helo Crash 1989" Facebook group, Marine Corps veteran Art Stilwell had this tattoo created.

Resources

A military affiliated group formed with an entirely different goal is “Military Kids: Growing, Going, Gone.” Designed to provide advice and information for spouses of retired service-members navigating their “new” world after the Marine Corps, the informational Facebook page is an outstanding resource for those embarking on the new and often intimidating post retirement world as they also face sons and daughters beginning to transition from home. An avid “Facebooker” and Marine spouse, it occurred one day to Diane Papaj that the one group who would benefit from the connections available via social media groups was the parents of military teens. Papaj, the mother of a college sophomore and wife of a retired Marine who

spent 30 years in the Corps, created the group and opened it to the parents of middle school children through young adults. Active-duty, reserve, and retired servicemembers and their spouses make up the almost 10,000 members who interact on the pages multiple times a day sharing resources, advice, and experiences. The group has been mentioned in other venues and publications as a resource for military parents and its strong word of mouth connections are perhaps the best indication of its success and impact. Information provided runs the gamut from questions about the Post-9/11 GI Bill to recommendations on the best retirement cities to concerns with various insurance options. “What I would have given for someone that could have helped me ... and shared anecdotal experiences,” Papaj said. Thanks to her efforts, other military spouses now have that resource.

Active-duty Marines also use social media as a resource. Groups have been established based on geographic locations including the Facebook group “Make the Stumps Better” which was created by a previous commanding general of Twentynine Palms as a way in which he could communicate and “share information and ideas, with an overall goal of

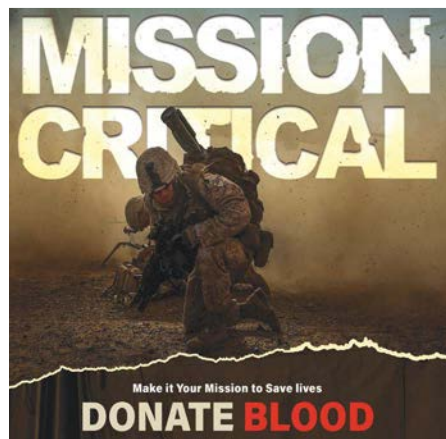
making life aboard the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center better for all” given the relatively isolated population of the military base in the California desert. The group moderator solicits input and suggestions and then forwards them to the appropriate sections or units aboard the base. Its more than 6,000 members cross all commands aboard the sprawling base and the group has served as a platform

for live events in which senior Marines have addressed and answered questions from base residents and Marines. Other bases throughout the Corps have similar social media presences and use their sites to keep base personnel and family members informed, often much more quickly than traditional methods. When dealing with fires near Camp Pendleton, typhoons in

Okinawa, or hurricanes impacting Camp Lejeune, social media platforms are often the first place Marines and families look to for the most up to date information.

Individual units use social media to help pass the word (think a modern-day frost call) or to keep loved ones informed

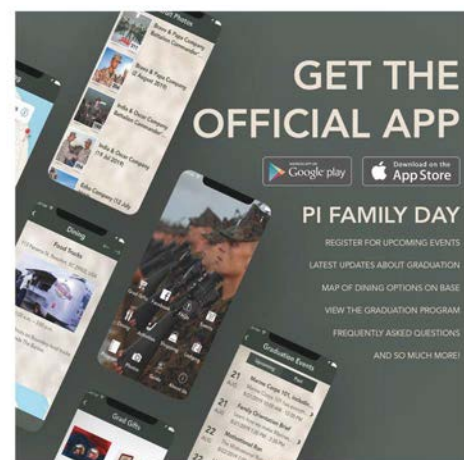
**“What I would have given for someone that could have helped me ... and shared anecdotal experiences.”
—Diane Papaj**



CPL ANTONIO GARCIA, USMC

of what their Marines are doing on deployment. During the 22nd MEU’s recent deployment to Spain as part of Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force–Crisis Response-Africa 20.2, its COMMSTRAT office provided a steady flow of content on all its social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) ranging from tributes in memory of those lost on Sept 11, 2001, to photos of the Marines training on the Iberian peninsula. The command also maintains two other Facebook groups: one for spouses and another for family readiness recognizing that spouses of Marines have different interests and concerns than parents/grandparents, according to Captain Karen Holliday, COMMSTRAT Director. While the MEU’s main Facebook page is open to all, membership in the spouses and family readiness groups is vetted and limited to authorized contact members of a 22nd MEU Marine or Sailor. Capt Holliday noted that the commanding officer responds and posts in the groups as needed to communicate with the spouses and family members.

The Corps’ embrace of the use of social media platforms has been especially



Many of the official Marine Corps social media accounts create eye-catching and attractive posts like the two above as a means by which to pass information to Marines, families and others aboard bases across the Corps. (USMC photos)

Official Marine Corps social media accounts are often filled with photos and stories of unit events including Birthday Balls, reenlistments and promotions like the one to the left in which Sgt Richard Ramsahai, an intelligence specialist with the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, was promoted to the rank of sergeant, Jan. 4.

beneficial to families and friends of recruits and candidates undergoing initial training at the recruit depots and Officer Candidates School.

While recruits still make the traditional phone call when they arrive and send old-fashioned letters home during their time aboard the recruit depots, their loved ones now have almost daily visibility on what their sons and daughters are doing thanks to pictures and videos posted by recruit battalions and the depots themselves. Photos of recruits and candidates on the rifle range or practicing drill are posted on a regular basis, and family members and friends enjoy hunting for “their” future Marine among the exhausted, dirty and often unrecognizable recruits and candidates. The comments accompanying the posts are clear evidence of the joy that the photos invoke in those who are anxious to see their children. Social media is also used to pass the word on graduation activities and even to advertise banners, photo frames and other memorabilia by which family members can show their pride in their Marines. Recent Officer Candidates School posts show emotional candidates receiving their first eagle, globe and anchor while also providing detailed information on the upcoming graduation restrictions.

Resources for Military Occupational Specialties

Especially beneficial to those still on active duty are the various groups designed to share information, examples and points of contact for those Marines in certain military occupational specialties. The Adjutant USMC Facebook group provides a venue for manpower and administration officers with a means to connect to others in the relatively small MOS where they are usually the only 0102. The lack of MOS mentors or even assistance in a job where policies and directives are constantly changed and updated and the Marines they serve present new and often unique challenges on a daily



LCPL GRACE J. KINDRED, USMC

The first female Marines to graduate from Drill Instructor School at MCRD San Diego, Calif., Sgt Ikea Kaufman, Sgt Stephanie Jordi and Sgt Stephanie J. Fahl stand in front of the MCRD’s Drill Instructor Monument Dec. 16, 2020. The photo was posted on numerous Marine Corps social media accounts in celebration of the milestone.

basis makes the group a godsend to many. A review of the group’s posts provides a startling insight into the variety of both questions asked and answers provided as well as general topics thrown out to the 01s for discussion. Posts ranged from “Has anyone successfully processed a Combat Action Ribbon where the command recommend ‘ZZ’ [no award]?” to requests for information on the history of the S-1 serving as the responsible officer for EPW handling to job announcements. Confirmation of rumors (“Are Marines involved in COVID support being put in for Humanitarian Service Medals?”), memes (“Look angry and carry a bunch of folders”), requests for specific Standard Operating Procedures, check-in sheets, briefs and even polls (“Who is in charge of the Government Travel Charge Card program in your unit?”) can be found at any given time. The success and reach of the page is perhaps best shown when members of the group serving within Headquarters Marine Corps, including the Awards Branch or the Promotion Branch, use the page to let members know that updates to directives have been made or ask for input on projects they are working on.

Like the Marine Corps itself, the Adjutant group started over drinks. Major James Sheehan, the original group administrator, sent an email out to his fellow company grade 01s in the fall

of 2014 to see if anyone wanted to get together while the assignment monitors were on Okinawa for the annual Manpower Management Officer Assignment road show. While talking to the 10 or so officers who met on Camp Foster, Sheehan asked the group, “Why don’t we have a forum where we can all talk as a community?” He noted that the personnel officers had a Facebook group but not the adjutants. As he was talking, Capt Viviana Lee grabbed her smartphone and created the group.

While the initial concept was for the group to be company grades only, within a week more than 100 adjutants of all grades had joined. The group is now open to all 0102s whether active, reserve or veteran, civilians and CWOs in key manpower billets, and even some lawyers. The group has attracted the attention of senior leaders within the community and one occupational field sponsor is actively engaged and regularly uses the page to ask opinions, get input, and pass information. According to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Donald, the assistant head of the Manpower and Reserve Affairs Secretariat and a former 01 occupational field sponsor, “The proliferation of Facebook has connected the Manpower & Personnel Administration community in incredibly beneficial ways. It allows the professional community to exchange ideas and seek recommendations and guidance from peers globally, 24 hours

From base road closures, gym hours, official travel information and even what Marines can and can't do during election season, social media is often used to ensure information is promulgated in a timely and efficient manner. (USMC photos)



Travel Type	Approved Authority	Remarks
Domestic, Military	1. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Domestic, Civilian	2. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
International, Military	3. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
International, Civilian	4. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Official Business	5. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Personal	6. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Medical	7. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Religious	8. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Family	9. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	
Other	10. Commanding Officer (CO) or an authorized representative. (Management of the Unit)	



a day. Additionally, it's available on our personal handheld devices any time we choose to use the forum." Donald also mentioned the advantages of social media's 24/7 cycle. "We no longer have to wait for the workday to start on Okinawa while we on the East Coast end ours to ask a general question about pay and entitlements or a question concerning an overseas PCS move. Posting a single request for information will undoubtedly elicit a host of responses. Additionally, sharing and commenting on articles of interest from professional periodicals is an incredibly powerful way to exchange views and ideas across the community."

Capt Catherine Baniakas, the assistant aircraft maintenance officer for VMM-362, started the Female Marine Corps Officer Facebook group when she was newly stationed in North Carolina and

looking for mentorship and professional development while also hoping to meet other female officers within her MOS. She carefully vets all prospective members with the goal of ensuring that the group is a safe space where women in the Corps can discuss a variety of issues and concerns. Open to female officers past and present, the group's membership is more than 1,200 and includes some of the Corps' general officers. Growing the group, however, wasn't exactly easy. "When I first launched the group, I would stop every officer I saw, and ask them to check out the group. At first, some were hesitant. However, once I communicated the intent for personal and professional development, some women requested to join, and others didn't. I also asked everyone in the group to add their Facebook friends that were also female

Marine officers," said Baniakas. She continued to work to make the group diverse in terms of rank and MOS. "I knew for the group to be useful for everyone, it needed to have several women from each MOS. You can share an MOS and have different experiences and know about different opportunities simply due to each person's individual experience and connections they made along the way. I really wanted this to be a forum in which that knowledge was shared among the masses. My experiences have affirmed that you are only as knowledgeable, and good at your MOS, because of who mentored you, who you worked with, and what conversations you had with the people you have met. I wanted to be mentored and be successful, and I knew I wasn't alone." Like the adjutant page, mentorship is a huge component of the female Marine officer page. "Having members that can give advice on career decisions, billet opportunities, and overall mentorship is invaluable. I am so humbled and elated that we have so many Field Grade Officers and General Officers," she explained.

The page averages about four new posts a day with multiple comments on each. While the specifics are different, the pattern is the same as many as the other groups. Informational (the McCain Fellowship is taking applications), requests for assistance (a young family member is about to go to TBS, any ideas of how to best prepare these days?), recommendations (the War on the Rocks article "From Capt Queeg to Winston Churchill: Lessons in Leading Up") and of course, memes ("Daughters should not be taught to depend on a knight to save them; they should be taught how to use the sword themselves").



PAUL X. KELLEY COLLECTION, MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

As an example of how things were done in the "old Corps," the Adjutants Facebook page recently posted this photo taken in 1984 of Gen Paul X. Kelley, the 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps receiving a brief on a unit's staffing.

Joining

While many groups are open to the public and a simple “Like” or “Join” provides instant access to the various Facebook pages, others carefully vet potential members. Administrators for the “Remembering Pohang” page are especially careful. “Anyone that has some sort of relation to that day is open to join. You have to request,

and I vet as much as I possibly can. I get requests for individuals to join. If I see they have a friend in the site, I allow it. I may send them a message back to see what their interest is in joining our page,” according to Art Stillwell. Other groups start the screening process by asking a few questions. “Military Kids: Growing, Going, Gone” uses that method combined with invitations from current members. Administrators for the female Marine officers group go a step further after prospective

members answer initial questions thanks to their ability as active-duty Marines to access various systems. “I verify their name, rank, billet in MOL [Marine On Line]. If they are no longer found in MOL, then the requesting member provides a photo of themselves in uniform with their name and rank visible. It may sound a bit stringent, but it is really important to ensure this group remains a safe space for our discussions,” said Baniakas.



Social media accounts at the recruit depots and Officer Candidates School are especially popular with the family and friends of the soon-to-be Marines who eagerly await each photo posted, like this one from OCS graduation Nov. 17, 2020, hoping to catch a glimpse of their sons and daughters.

USMC

Problems

As beneficial and popular as the social media accounts can be, problems do surface. While the 22nd MEU hasn’t experienced many issues, one in particular stood out. “One instance I can think of on our public facing Instagram page occurred during our SPMAGTF Crisis Response Africa deployment. We posted a photo of a young, female, African-American corporal. Her hair was in regulation with the recent reformed changes in the Marine Corps Order on African-American hairstyles,” according to Holliday. Numerous derogatory comments were made on the post. “We responded to the commentary with portions of verbiage from the new regulations and in support of our Marine and her hairstyle. This helped reform the conversation to one that was more positive and spoke of the changes to the hair regulations.”

The “Remembering Pohang” group’s administrator is diligent about removing anyone or any post that could be considered even remotely offensive from the group. “There have only been a handful of times that someone gets out of line or posts something that has no relevance to our

crash. I remove it. Some things are better left unsaid. I want to protect the feelings of all the surviving family members,” said Stillwell.”

The Adjutant group has also experienced a few minor issues. “I’ve deleted few posts,” said Sheehan. “I deleted one be-

“[We] provide the tools for our Marines to accomplish the mission.”

—Maj Jim Sheehan

cause it would have reflected poorly on the lieutenant but messaged him.” He understands the responsibility the group has towards its Marines. “We as the leaders of our community provide the tools for our Marines to accomplish the mission. If we have failed to adapt and function like a DMV, then WE the officer have failed the Marine and the Marine Corps.”

Way Ahead

While the subject and focus of each group varies significantly, all understand the need for platforms to communicate both within and outside the Corps. “We anticipate more and more leaders will understand the power of social media influence and presence on that of our Marine Corps messaging. In order to reach important audiences, we MUST maintain communication on the most up to date social media platforms and outlets,” said Holliday. Banakais’ goals for her group are in keeping with Holliday’s sentiment. “I am hopeful that the group will continue to be used as professional means to network, seek and provide mentorship, and continue to have thought provoking discussions—ultimately ensuring the Marine Corps continues to be the finest fighting organization the world has ever seen!” Banakais said. Others have simpler but just as important hopes for their members. Stillwell’s goal for the “Remembering Pohang” page could be used by most other Marine Corps pages. “Connect with each other. Share experiences.” And do so in a positive, helpful manner. 🇺🇸



COURTESY OF LTCOL MELANIE R. BELL-CARTER, USMC

Left: Social media accounts often allow friends and followers to create their own posts, including this recent one from the “Female Marine Corps Officer” Facebook page featuring retired LtCol Katrina D. Patillo, LtCol Rhonda Martin, LtCol Liz Gomez Welch, LtCol Nicole M. Bohannon, and LtCol Melanie R. Bell-Carter.

Right: The plaque at the base of the 25-foot flagpole was erected by Mark V. Cerney on July 1, 2020, in San Diego, Calif., in memory of his fellow Marines lost in the helicopter crash in Pohang, Korea, March 20, 1989.



COURTESY OF MARK V. CERNEY