

Head tailor Nhean Keo examines the fit of a Marine second lieutenant's dress blue coat at The MARINE Shop in Quantico, Va., Feb. 19.



ABIGAIL WILSON



Squared Away—

At The MARINE Shop, Uniform Excellence is the Standard

By Sara W. Bock

There's a soon-to-be-commissioned second lieutenant in the fitting area of The MARINE Shop at 300 Potomac Avenue in Quantico, Va., in early April, and she walks out of her dressing room wearing the newly redesigned female dress blue coat. The coat was made to order—constructed using her exact measurements, giving it the perfectly fitted, precisely tailored appearance that has long been heralded as the Marine Corps' signature look.

She steps up on the fitting platform in the center of the room and head tailor Nhean Keo helps her fasten the gleaming gold buttons. There's something mesmerizing about his movements and about the entire scene, as she looks into the three-way mirror and sees for the first time an image of her future as an officer of Marines.

Next, she is fitted for her white dress skirt. It's a bit loose and needs to be taken in. Quickly and adeptly, Keo gets to work measuring, marking and pinning the skirt. It's a task he's done thousands of times, and his expertise in tailoring Marine Corps uniforms is unmatched; yet it's evident that he views each customer as an individual and each uniform as a custom piece.

For Keo, it all began in 1982, when he moved from his home in Cambodia to join The MARINE Shop's tailoring staff,



ABIGAIL WILSON

Keo buttons the dress blue coat of a soon-to-be-commissioned second lieutenant in The MARINE Shop's fitting area, April 3. The recently introduced female dress blue uniform is the newest addition to The MARINE Shop's high-quality uniform offerings.

and was personally hired by the founder and then-president of the shop, retired Major Harry D. Elms Sr.

The introduction of the new female dress blue coat in the fall of 2018 is just one of the many changes Keo has witnessed over his nearly 40 years in the Marine Corps uniform industry and within The MARINE Shop itself. Since 2007, the store

Taken in the early 1980s, this photo shows the exterior of The MARINE Shop at 300 Potomac Avenue prior to the store's 2007 renovation after being purchased by MCA&F.

has been owned and operated by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation and has upheld the retail establishment's decades-long reputation for providing superior service and the highest quality uniform items in the Corps.

It's a unique business with a remarkable story that all began after Maj Elms, a mustang Marine officer and World War II veteran who fought at Guadalcanal and Bougainville, retired from the Corps in 1961. He had become an expert on Marine Corps uniforms and insignia over the last 13 years of his active-duty career by serving as executive secretary of the Marine Corps Uniform Board, which was established to regulate and improve the quality of all uniforms and insignia for the Marine Corps.

"There were many companies manufacturing insignia items that varied from vendor to vendor," said Elms' daughter, Pamela Scott, of the standardization issues that plagued the Corps in the late 1940s, when the uniform board was established. "He was also instrumental in standardizing the design of all insignia to meet strict specifications," she said of her father's accomplishments.

While serving on the uniform board under General Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Elms would leave a permanent mark on the Corps by designing the official seal of the Marine Corps, which was approved by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in June 1954.



COURTESY OF PAMELA ELMS SCOTT

In 1959, Elms was responsible for the redesign and standardization of the Marine Corps emblem worn on uniform items, both enlisted and officer, the product of which is still used today. With unprecedented experience in the area of Marine Corps uniforms, opening a uniform shop post-retirement seemed a natural progression—but he didn't rush into it.

According to Scott, the newly retired major first spent an entire year evaluating the quality of available uniforms and the service provided to Marines by private vendors. Elms concluded that the current offerings were inadequate for all Marines, but especially



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

President Dwight D. Eisenhower presents the new Marine Corps Seal, designed by then-Capt Harry Elms, to Gen Shepherd, 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps, during a White House ceremony on June 22, 1954. Though not pictured here, Elms was present at the ceremony.

for newly commissioned second lieutenants. The MARINE Shop, she said, was created to fill the “quality and service void” that Elms perceived, and the town of Quantico, or “Q-town,” was an optimal location due to the fact that Marines tend to return to Marine Corps Base Quantico often throughout their careers earning it the nickname “Crossroads of the Marine Corps.” Its proximity to Officer Candidates School, The Basic School, Marine Corps University, Headquarters Marine Corps and the United States Naval Academy made it an obvious choice.

Elms designed a store logo that incorporated the Eagle, Globe and Anchor, which he submitted to the Marine Corps for approval. The shop’s original storefront, located at the opposite end of Potomac Avenue from where it currently stands, included a tailor shop on the premises. Elms hired tailors from across the globe, primarily from countries like Hong Kong that had longstanding reputations for producing the finest tailors in the world.

Within the first few years, Elms designed a more fitted look for the dress blue uniform, which was approved by the Corps and became the standard. The Hirsch Tyler Company of Philadelphia, which at the time was The MARINE Shop’s primary uniform manufacturer, initially owned the store while Elms served as its vice president and general manager. The MARINE Shop quickly became known for offering the highest-quality uniforms and tailoring available to Marines.

“Eventually, because of Hirsch Tyler’s expansion into other markets, Harry purchased the business from the company,” said Scott.

In 1976, after a fire destroyed the Quantico Town Drug Store, Elms purchased that land to build a new MARINE Shop building at 300 Potomac Avenue. Opened in November 1979, the store continues to operate today.

Maj Elms acted as an adviser on uniform matters to each Commandant of the Marine Corps until he passed away in 2002, but The MARINE Shop was his true passion. He worked tirelessly, often seven days a week, determined to live out the shop’s longstanding motto of “Serving Marines Around the World.” The business was a family affair—over the years, all three of his children, Pamela, Harry Jr. (David), and Stephen worked at the shop in different capacities, and both of his sons enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school.

“It was his pride and joy,” said Scott of her father’s dedication to The MARINE Shop. “He never lost sight of his passion to make his customers feel proud to wear a MARINE Shop uniform that represented their service in the Marine Corps and to their country.”

Elms is remembered fondly by a number of employees whom he hired that are still on the staff today, including Keo and The MARINE Shop’s general manager, Pat VanZummeren, the spouse of a retired Marine, who began working in the store’s mail order department in 1984. VanZummeren worked for Elms on and off as her husband’s orders brought her back and forth from Quantico and permanently rejoined the staff in 2002. Elms earned a special place in his employees’ hearts and would encourage them to bring their children to work with them on days off school.

“He would take them out around town and buy them a treat,” said VanZummeren of her children’s relationship with Elms. “The kids basically grew up at The MARINE Shop.”

One of VanZummeren’s most treasured memories at the shop was watching Nhean Keo—who had watched her children grow up—fit her son, Troy, for his dress blues as he prepared to commission as a second lieutenant.

VanZummeren, who is an expert in Marine Corps uniforms in her own right, attributes much of The MARINE Shop’s success to the vast connections Elms made in those early years both



COURTESY OF PAMELA ELMS SCOTT

For The MARINE Shop displays and special events, Elms, pictured here with a second lieutenant in 1997, often wore this red vest and navy blue blazer with an embroidered Marine Corps emblem.



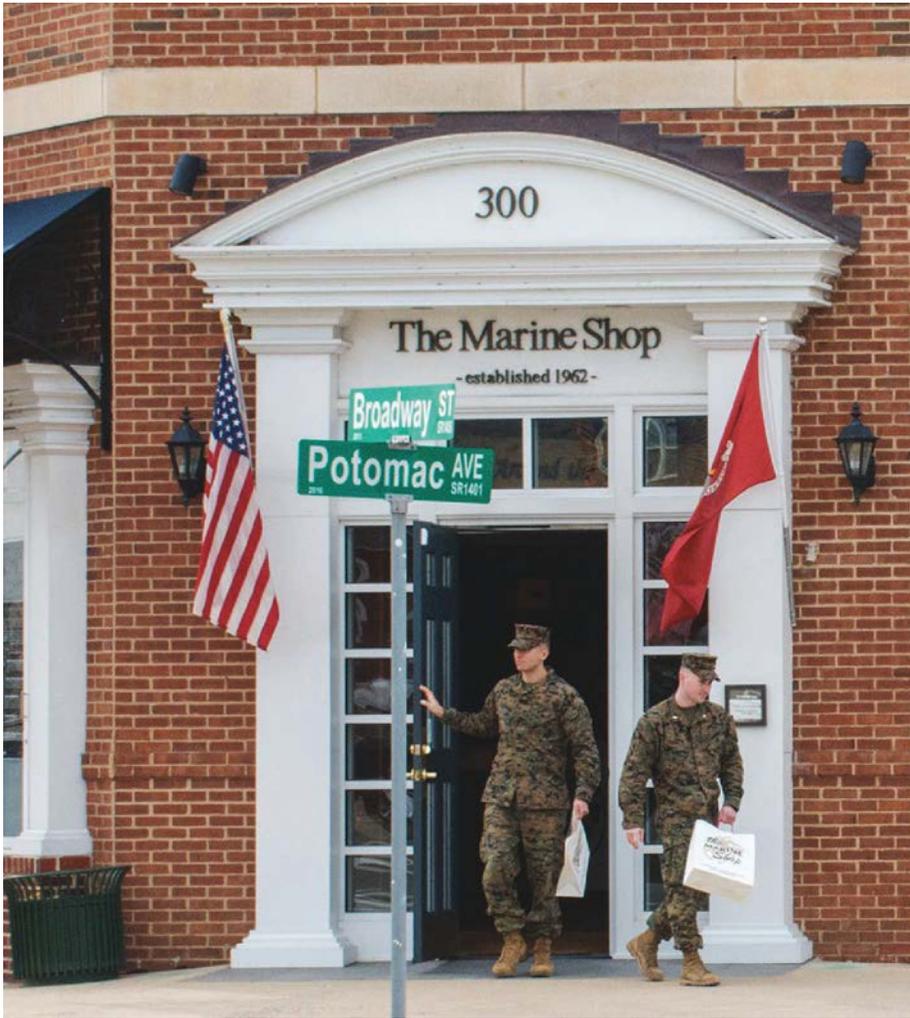
ABIGAIL WILSON

A seamstress hand sews a uniform piece at The MARINE Shop, April 3. Today’s staff takes pride in upholding the shop’s decades-long reputation for uniform excellence.



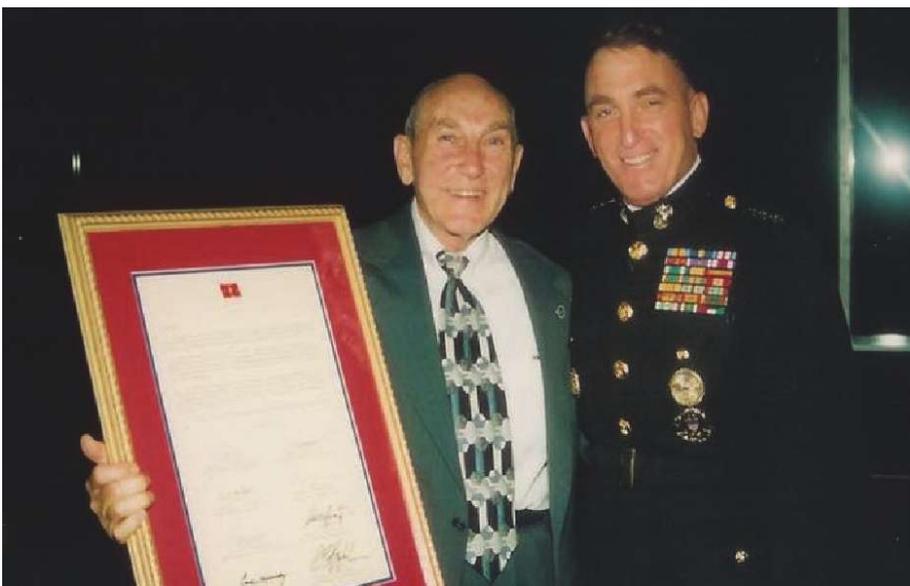
ABIGAIL WILSON

Pat VanZummeren, pictured here in The MARINE Shop’s uniform department, began working for Elms in 1984 and today is the store’s general manager.



ABIGAIL WILSON

Though the appearance of The MARINE Shop significantly changed after it was purchased and renovated by MCA&F, today's Marines continue to trust the iconic retailer with their uniforms. Their purchases benefit the Marine Corps Association Foundation, which exists to promote the professional development of Marines.



COURTESY OF PAMELA ELMS SCOTT

At Elms' 76th birthday celebration on July 30, 1997, Gen Charles C. Krulak, 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, presented him with a congratulatory letter signed by Krulak and seven other commandants, recognizing Elms' service to the Corps both before and after his retirement as a major.

within the Marine Corps and among small vendors. "He knew everyone," she said.

Of those employees who worked for Elms and remain at The MARINE Shop today, Scott said, "They are a testament to their dedication to continue the major's legacy, and for that, the family has been humbled and inspired by their love."

While the Marine Corps Association didn't purchase the business until nearly five years after Elms' death, the acquisition had been set in motion years earlier when Major General Les Palm, USMC (Ret), then-CEO of the association, approached Elms with a proposition.

"Have you ever thought about selling the shop?" MajGen Palm recalls asking Elms during a casual conversation in the shop, which is located just a block away from MCA headquarters. The two discussed the possibility of the MCA purchasing the store, but they never moved forward on it. After Elms' passing, ownership transferred to his children, and in 2007 the association purchased it from the family. The iconic MARINE Shop became an extension of the association's mission as the professional organization of the Marine Corps.

"A lot of things just fell into the right place," said MajGen Palm of the transition period, which included merging the Marine Corps Association Bookstore and the uniform sales at The MARINE Shop into one retail establishment. The MCA Bookstore located at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., also took on The MARINE Shop name. Nearly all of the employees remained on staff throughout the transition, which helped ensure that the shop would continue to maintain its reputation for quality and excellence.

The association hired the renowned Boston-based design firm Bergmeyer Associates, whose clients include major retailers like L.L. Bean and Talbots, to oversee a \$1 million redesign and renovation of both the exterior and interior of the store. Bergmeyer designers spent time at OCS and at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., to get a feel for what the Marine Corps was all about and worked to reflect that in their design, said MajGen Palm. The new and improved The MARINE Shop reopened in 2008, featuring a visually stunning remodel with rich woods and high-quality finishes, a lounge area and a distinctly separate uniform shop located beyond the main retail area.

The store offers clothing, accessories, gifts and books—with the Commandant's Professional Reading List taking center stage—as well as a variety of other

The décor and design of The MARINE Shop highlights the professionalism of Marine uniforms and creates a space for a memorable shopping experience.



ABIGAIL WILSON

services such as medal and ribbon mounting, sword repair and refurbishment, custom challenge coins and engraving, but the uniforms continue to be the linchpin of The MARINE Shop's success.

Members of the Marine Corps Association & Foundation receive a discount of up to 10 percent at The MARINE Shop, and the proceeds from all purchases benefit the Marine Corps Association Foundation, which promotes the professional development of today's Marines through unit libraries, writing programs, excellence awards and educational forums.

Lieutenant General W. Mark Faulkner, USMC (Ret), President and CEO of MCA&F, views the operation of The MARINE Shop as a direct support of the association's mission.

"We consider it an honor and privilege to support Marines and friends of the Corps through The MARINE Shop either online or at our brick and mortar store aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico," said LtGen Faulkner.

Commandants and Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps, as well as many general officers, Medal of Honor recipients and other "VIPs" trust The MARINE Shop with their uniform, accessory and alteration needs. Their patronage speaks volumes to the quality of the store's services, but VanZummeren insists that she and her staff of 25 employees strive to treat every customer equally.

Keo pins a white dress skirt for alteration at The MARINE Shop, April 3. Shortly after founding the shop, Elms created a more tailored, fitted look for the dress blue uniform which was adopted by the Corps and continues to be the standard today.

"We try to give everyone the same service whether they're a general or a PFC. We try to provide the same amount of professional service regardless of rank," she said.

While The MARINE Shop does not sell the enlisted dress blue coat, which is made in large quantities and sold through the Marine Corps Exchange system, it does offer the Staff Noncommissioned Officer evening dress coat and trousers as well as the enlisted blue trousers, chevrons, covers and other accessories. According to VanZummeren, the shop does a great deal of alteration work on enlisted dress blue coats and also offers measurement services for customers who want to know what size to buy.



ABIGAIL WILSON



ABIGAIL WILSON

Sales associate Dreanna Perkins assists Maj Angela Zunic at The MARINE Shop, May 31. With a clientele that ranges from junior enlisted Marines to four-star generals, the staff of the store endeavors to provide the same level of customer service to each individual who enters, regardless of rank.

There's a focused energy that's easily discernible in The MARINE Shop's tailor room, where 17 tailors, seamstresses and pressers work meticulously and quickly to meet their deadlines. Keo assigns the work, and each individual has a specific job they've perfected. Whether it's hand sewing, machine sewing or pressing, each has mastered his or her skill.

"With the volume we have, you have to be able to do it very quickly," said VanZummeren, who credits Keo and a few of the other longtime employees with teaching and training newcomers who, while extremely skilled in their trade, have to learn the processes that are specific to Marine Corps uniforms.

The MARINE Shop recently launched an updated, redesigned website at www.marineshop.net. Customers who are unable to visit the shop in person can upload their measurements and full body photographs on the site and the uniforms are made according to their exact specifications and shipped directly to them.

For uniforms purchased elsewhere—or for those that need to be taken in or let out over time—the alteration services offered by the shop are unparalleled. Many alterations are labor intensive and time consuming and require moving pockets and buttons while maintaining adherence to Marine Corps uniform standards, said VanZummeren, who added that most other tailor shops won't even take on these types of alterations and will often suggest that the customer buy a new coat altogether.

The shop's uniforms have to be certified by the Marine Corps, but over the years, the staff has developed enhancements to the certified pattern that set The MARINE Shop's uniforms apart,

said VanZummeren. They also carry their own brand of khaki shirts, which have a more fitted, athletic cut compared to other approved brands. These seemingly small variations make a big difference in the way the uniform fits or hangs.

Throughout the year, The MARINE Shop staff travels to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., as well as to OCS, where they measure and fit the Corps' future second lieutenants for their uniforms. With a quick turnaround time during those busy commissioning seasons, the tailor shop in the back of the store is overflowing with racks of uniform coats and trousers.

By focusing on uniform commissioning packages, The MARINE Shop staff creates customers for life. Many Marines will stop in the store over the years to have their measurements updated and added to their file. They can then place orders from installations worldwide—Okinawa, Camp Pendleton and beyond—and be confident that their uniform items are made to the highest possible standard and that their purchases benefit their fellow Marines through MCA&F's programs.

Founded by the Marine Corps' foremost uniform expert, The MARINE Shop continues to carry on the legacy of Major Elms while also supporting the mission of the professional association of the Corps. Few can claim the title "Marine," but those who are proud to wear the uniform of the nation's finest fighting force continue to trust The MARINE Shop to help them look their professional best. 🇺🇸