



The Storytellers

Museum's Docents Bring Marine Corps History to Life

By Sara W. Bock

As visitors to the National Museum of the Marine Corps weave their way through the extensive exhibits and galleries that chronicle the 246-year history of the Corps, they'll find the revered flag raised atop Mount Suribachi in February 1945, captured in the famed photograph by Joe Rosenthal. Just steps away, visitors can brave refrigerator-like temperatures and hear the roar of gunfire as they venture through the "Frozen Chosin" alongside Marines in Toktong Pass, Korea. Along the Legacy Walk, they can see Sergeant Major Dan Daly's Medals of Honor—one from the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and a second earned during

the first Haitian Campaign in 1915—and get up close to original works by Colonel Charles H. Waterhouse, the Marine Corps’ first official artist-in-residence, in the Combat Art Gallery. Here, just outside the gates of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., the legends of the Corps come to life, but not just in the museum’s impressive and interactive displays.

Visitors also have an opportunity to learn from those who have lived the history that lines the walls around them and can speak about it firsthand: Marine veterans serving in the museum’s robust, all-volunteer docent corps.

They might have an exchange with 98-year-old Jack Elliott, who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and can point up at the SBD-3 Dauntless dive bomber that hangs in the museum’s Leatherneck Gallery and tell stories of his exploits as an SBD-3 rear gunner. Or perhaps they’ll peer into the Vietnam exhibit and meet helicopter pilot Larry Britton, who can stand beneath the CH-46 marked with the insignia of the HMM-364 “Purple Foxes,” the squadron he was assigned to during the war and recount the missions he flew as

a young lieutenant at Marble Mountain.

Whether they take a 45-minute docent-led tour of the museum or briefly interact with a docent posted inside one of the galleries, visitors’ experiences are enhanced by these seasoned storytellers,

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who devote a great deal of their time and energy to connecting with those who enter the museum doors, from young students on school field trips and prospective Marine recruits to veteran Marines visiting with reunion groups.

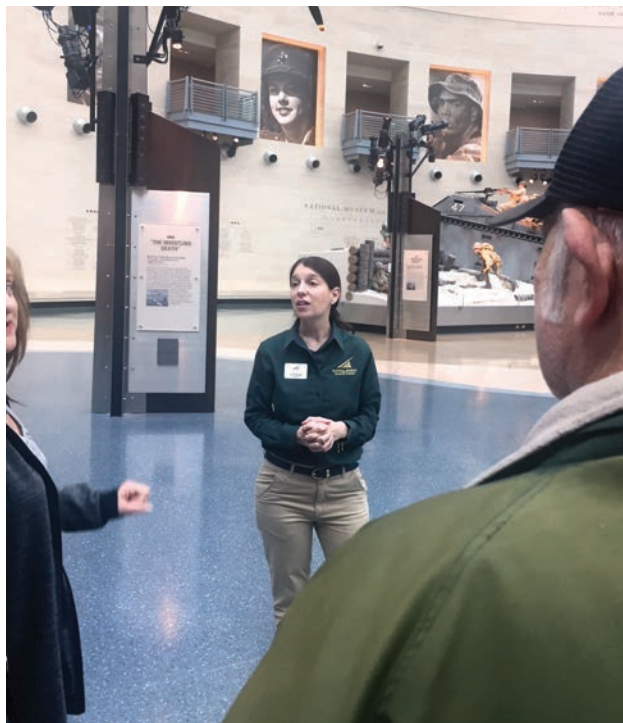
“The docents bring a level of context to the history that a visitor may not fully grasp, particularly if the visitor is not a Marine. It’s one thing to read about Marine Corps history, it is another thing to speak to someone that has lived it, and many of our docents have lived it,” said Scott Gardiner, the museum’s Visitor Services Chief, who retired from the Navy in 2008 after more than 21 years of service as a Chief Culinary Specialist and joined the museum staff in 2017 after earning a master’s degree in applied history from George Mason University. “Our volunteers have recorded over 319,000 volunteer hours and welcomed more than [6 million] visitors,” he added.

The docent corps, which was established just before the museum first opened its doors in 2006, is a diverse group of individuals who reside in Northern Virginia and come from varying backgrounds and different generations. It’s important to note that not all the museum’s docents served in the Marine Corps: Some served in other branches of the Armed Forces, some are children or spouses of Marines, and others simply have an interest in Marine



Above: Museum docent and Marine veteran Frank Matthews talks to high school students about his experiences during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Left: The National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., has welcomed millions of visitors since its opening in 2006. An integral part of the visitor experience is interacting with the museum’s docents, many of whom served in the Marine Corps during critical times in its history. (Photo courtesy of National Museum of the Marine Corps)



SCOTT GARDINER

Docent Nayla Mengel speaks with museum visitors in the museum's expansive Leatherneck Gallery. The museum is proud of its diverse docent corps, which includes individuals of varying ages, backgrounds and experiences.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

Docent Randall Arnold talks with active-duty Marines during a professional military education event at the museum.

Corps history and a passion for teaching and interacting with people. Their service to the museum, said Gardiner, is of equal importance and value as the service of the Marine veterans who volunteer.

Prospective docents must complete a series of eight Saturday morning training sessions, as well as a mentorship with a more experienced docent, in order to "graduate" and begin volunteering. Even after they become certified, the museum offers monthly training events for all docents, during which dinner is served, important announcements are made, a guest speaker gives a presentation, and the docents have an opportunity to socialize with one another. On the museum's second deck, a docent lounge houses a library of publications about Marine Corps history that can be utilized for continuing education.

"We are teaching, but we are learning the whole time," said Wally Jabs, one of the original docents who has dedicated more than 5,000 volunteer hours to the museum since it opened. "You can talk all day about the Marine Corps and not a soul will tell you to shut up! That's what I enjoy about it," he added with a chuckle.

Each year in November, the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, which

supports the museum as its nonprofit arm, puts on a Marine Corps Birthday celebration and dinner for the docents, who enjoy the opportunity to observe traditions like the reading of Lieutenant General John A. Lejeune's birthday message and the cake cutting ceremony

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which honors both the oldest and youngest Marine present.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced lengthy closures of the museum during 2020 and early 2021, many docents described feeling a bit unmoored without their weekly routine of spending their assigned days at the museum interacting with visitors. Many have re-

turned since its reopening on May 17 and were excited to get back to a new "normal."

As the museum's staff members look ahead to the next decade and beyond, they recognize their need for the younger generations of Marine veterans, particularly those who served in the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan, to join the docent corps and share their stories, knowledge and experience with museum guests.

"Our volunteers not only make a difference to the museum's mission, but they make a difference to the Marine Corps as a whole," said Gardiner. "I cannot tell you how many times a parent has said to me that their child is getting commissioned [or] promoted today and it all started with a visit to the museum. I have also had parents and grandparents tell me that before they visited the museum, they did not understand why their child [or] grandchild would ever want to join the Marines, but they do now. When that happens it is very humbling, but it is almost always because of an interaction a visitor had with a docent that inspires that visitor to commit to the Marine Corps," he added.

Here are the stories of just a few of the many Marine veterans who volunteer their time as docents:

Jack Elliott

Every Friday morning, 98-year-old retired Marine Major John “Jack” Elliott gets in his car at the Springfield, Va., assisted living facility where he resides, and drives himself more than 20 miles south to the museum. The son of a Marine who served during the First World War, Elliott enlisted in 1942 as an aviation ordnanceman and served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam during his 24-year career in the Corps. Elliott, a mustang officer who worked his way up the ranks from “buck private to warrant officer to major and every rank in between,” he says, worked on the first F4U Corsairs to head for Guadalcanal and as a rear gunner in the SBD-3 Dauntless as a young Marine during WW II. He later served as an ordnance officer.

Elliott has authored numerous books and articles on Marine aviation and says his passion for preserving the Corps’ history began when he was still serving on active duty. Once, he caught wind that the Marine Corps’ aircraft history cards—which documented the record of each individual aircraft by tail number—were at the burn pile loading dock at the Pentagon and would soon be destroyed.

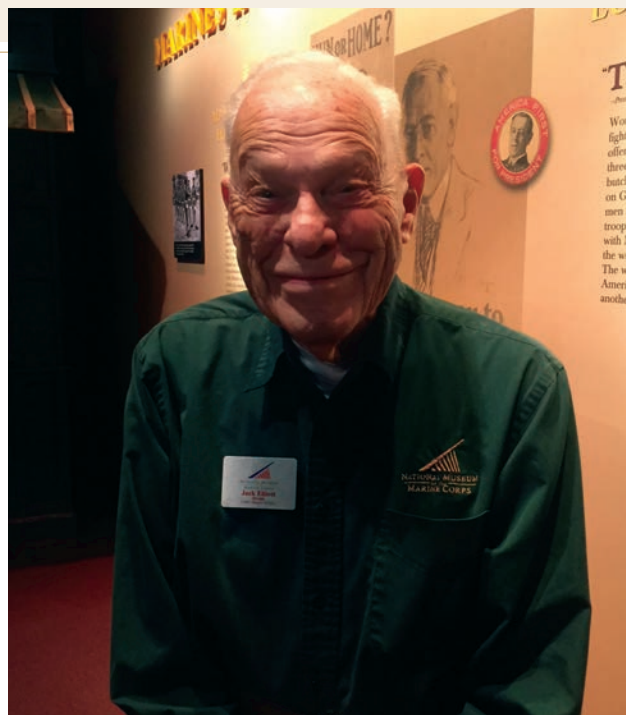
“I called over. I was the air station ordnance officer here at Quantico, so I had nothing to do with the museums, and I told more lies than a recruiting sergeant!” Elliott said with a laugh, describing how he overstated his position and then drove from Quantico to Arlington to rescue the cards. “I went there, and I took the whole damn file.”

After he retired from the Corps, Elliott took his military background and interest in history to a second career with the Smithsonian Institution. Initially, he was assigned to work in collections for the National Armed Forces Museum, which was a planned addition to the Smithsonian and was in the preliminary stages of development throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The museum never became a reality due to a lack of funding, but Elliott stayed with the Smithsonian, becoming a contract administrator and later working in various other roles. He also was involved in the establishment of the Marine Corps Aviation Museum on Brown Field at Quantico, which later was renamed the Marine Corps Air-Ground Museum and was a precursor to the National Museum where he serves as a docent today.

When the National Museum of the Marine Corps acquired the SBD-3 Dauntless that hangs in the Leatherneck Gallery today and began extensive restorations, Elliott helped advise the staff as a technical consultant. It’s not surprising, then, that the Dauntless is his favorite artifact in the museum to talk with visitors about.

“I enjoy talking with them. I tell them ‘This is the way it was,’ said Elliott.

As soon as the museum began looking for docents, Elliott



SCOTT GARDINER

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COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

signed up. Today, he says, there are just a handful of the original docents left.

For Elliott, whose wife passed away in February, the museum is more than just a volunteer opportunity.

“This is home,” said Jack Elliott of the museum. “This keeps me going.”

Mike Styka

The Battle of Iwo Jima is arguably the most well-known in Marine Corps history, and for museum docent and retired Master Gunnery Sergeant Mike Styka, visitors' interest in the iconic battle presents an excellent opportunity for him to share the greater context that surrounds it.

"Everybody understands, I think, that we raised the flag on Mount Suribachi, so I like to put things into perspective because a lot of people don't realize how important attacking the island of Iwo Jima was and what it was going to do for the Allies," said Styka, who retired from the Marine Corps in 2001 and then worked for Marine Corps Recruiting Command as a civilian for 15 years. After retiring from his second career, he volunteered as a docent and recently passed the 3,000-hours of service mark.

"We were going to take this island at any cost, and that's basically what happened," Styka tells visitors about Iwo Jima. "On Dec. 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked—65,000 Marines on active duty. About 39 months later, we're putting Marines ashore on Iwo Jima—over 70,000 Marines ashore. In today's world, that would be half of the enlisted force of today's Marine Corps."

Once, when Styka was giving a museum tour, he stopped in the Leatherneck Gallery next to the mounted Sikorsky UH-34D helicopter that depicts Marines exiting the aircraft during Operation Starlite in Vietnam. Just below the cockpit on the right side of the helicopter, the name "Gracious Lady Bev" is painted. A museum guest asked Styka what that meant, and he didn't have an answer.

But just as Styka said that, the man standing next to him said, "That's my wife's name." He had served as president of the HMM-361 Flying Association, which refurbished the aircraft prior to donating it to the museum, and he told Styka that after all the hours he spent in the barn to refinish the aircraft, he honored his wife for putting up with his absence by painting her name on it.

The museum is filled with untold stories and fascinating details like these, and Styka enjoys the opportunity to learn something new every day from the museum's visitors, as well as from fellow docents—both those who served in the Corps and those who didn't, he says.



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN



COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

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Wally Jabs

“Get off my bus!” bellows a loud voice from the entrance to the museum’s Legacy Walk, causing heads to turn in that general direction. But it’s not a drill instructor they see when they look that way: it’s retired Major Wally Jabs, one of the museum’s original docents, who relishes the opportunity to make a visitor’s walk through the “Making Marines” exhibit as realistic as possible.

His goal? To gain followers as he gives a museum tour rather than lose any along the way.

“I scared the security guards the first time I did it,” he says with a hint of mischief in his voice. “Now they say ‘Oh, that’s just Wally!’ I like taking people through here and giving them the boot camp experience.”

Whether it’s teaching visitors about boot camp, the Marine Corps’ early years and its beginnings in Philadelphia or telling them about his own experiences as a Marine Security Guard assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Paris, the mustang Marine officer’s enthusiasm for the history of the Corps is contagious.

“It’s the greatest thing in the world to be able to tell people about different parts of Marine Corps history,” said Jabs, who is also the son of a Marine. “You don’t have to know everything. You’ll learn it.”

When he’s not volunteering at the museum, Jabs, who spent most of his Marine Corps career in aircraft maintenance and started a construction company after his retirement in 1978, stays busy with woodworking projects and ballroom dancing lessons. He’s been known to turn on some polka, foxtrot or tango music in the museum on lower-traffic days—whenever he can find a willing dance partner, that is.

As a docent, Jabs has enjoyed the opportunity to meet general officers from different service branches and members of foreign military services, as well as Marines who served during World War II. He prides himself on being able to captivate an audience with stories of the Marine Corps and encouraging them to participate by asking them questions and interacting with them.

“We know how to engage people and keep them interested because now they want to know the answer to that question I asked them!” Jabs said.



SARA W. BOCK



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And when he talks with visitors or finishes a tour, Jabs often reaches in his pocket and presses a special memento into their hands in a gesture of camaraderie: a “challenge coin” with an Eagle, Globe and Anchor that reads, “Once a Marine, Always a Marine: Maj Wally Jabs, USMC (Ret).”

Tom Smith



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN

When Marine veteran Tom Smith gives a tour of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, he stops and takes his time next to a glass display case entitled “Every Marine a Rifleman.” Within the case, among other things, are dog tags once worn by the legendary SgtMaj Dan Daly. But what Smith really likes to point out to visitors is the M1903 Springfield rifle in the center of the case.

“They carry it with them to Europe in World War I. Which rifle do you think they take with them to Guadalcanal? Same one. What is the sniper weapon in Korea? The 1903 Springfield rifle,” Smith tells visitors. “The Marine Corps has a reputation for being frugal [...] we have a whole history of things like the 1903 Springfield.”

In the pre-World War I “early years” section of the museum’s main thoroughfare, the Legacy Walk, Smith believes that visitors to the museum can learn a lot about the Marine Corps’ traits—ones that he says haven’t changed throughout its history.

“We’ll stand here and talk about how the Marine Corps uses these obsolete planes in the Banana Wars, and what they do is develop a message system,” said Smith, gesturing upwards to a de Havilland DH-4, staged to appear as though it’s picking up a pouch containing a message. “The Marine Corps has learned over the years to find ways around problems, and they’re known for that,” Smith added.

Smith, who served in Vietnam during his three-year enlistment in the Corps, was a truck mechanic and engineer. He resided in New Jersey for many years but

became connected with the museum when his son, who is an active-duty Marine lieutenant colonel, was stationed in the area. The two attended the opening of the museum together along with their wives.

Smith enjoys interacting with visitors and asking questions to keep them engaged. He says the best part of being a docent is the people he’s had the privilege to meet.

“I always said I wanted to volunteer here,” said Smith, who eventually relocated to Northern Virginia and now is a mainstay within the docent corps, having recently surpassed 3,000 hours of service.

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Larry Britton

It's hard to walk through the doors of the National Museum of the Marine Corps without noticing the rows of engraved bricks that line the expansive walkway to its entrance. If you're looking for it, you just might find one that reads "With Gratitude, Aug 69, LtCol Larry Britton, Medevaced Grunts 2/7."

"That brick means a whole lot more to me than anything you wear on a uniform," said Britton, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel and one of the museum's original docents.

But the story behind the brick is what's truly remarkable, and it never would have happened had Britton not been volunteering at the museum when a reunion group of Marine veterans who had served with 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment in Vietnam, came to visit.

Britton began chatting with Bill Schuler, one of the veterans in attendance. The two had never met but realized they served in Vietnam at the same time. This led to the typical "Where were you when?" conversation, which in this case was "Where were you on Aug. 25, 1969?" That day, Schuler was severely wounded by shrapnel in Hiep Duc Valley, and as it turns out, Britton, a CH-46 pilot with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 364, was flying night medevac flights in the area as part of a mission called "Bald Eagle."

"We were on standby in case somebody really stepped in it, and they needed reinforcements or support, and we got launched that night," recalled Britton. "We took in a reinforced company. Their battalion had run into an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] regiment at a place called Hiep Duc. So, we took in the reinforcements and then spent the next five or six hours that night bringing ammunition, water, food—whatever they needed in, and if they had medevacs they'd jump on the helicopter and we'd take them back to the LZ [landing zone]."

Britton and Schuler realized that it was plausible—likely even—that Britton was the one who had flown Schuler to the battalion aid station.

That year, near Christmas, Britton received a card in the mail from Schuler, with a receipt for the commemorative brick he had purchased in his honor.

"He said he considers the 25th of August his 'second birthday,' " said Britton.

While Britton can speak from experience about Marine Corps history between 1966, when he commissioned, and 1989, when he retired, he has enjoyed learning from the museum curators and historians about other eras in Marine Corps history.

"I like telling stories of Dan Daly during the Boxer Rebellion. I like to point out to people, because we have his two Medals of Honor on display, that after he died, his daughter donated them to the museum. The curators asked her, 'Did he have them displayed in the house?' and the daughter says, 'No, we found them in a kitchen drawer,' " said Britton. "And I point that out to people, and say, 'I've served with Medal of Honor recipients, Navy Cross, Silver



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Star guys, and unless somebody else tells you, you wouldn't know that they have those awards."

For Britton, serving as a docent is about enhancing a visitor's experience with knowledge and information they wouldn't otherwise acquire during a walk through the museum's exhibits.

"In Vietnam—in any of the galleries really—they're pretty much self-explanatory and they've got the signs up to tell what it is and everything, but I like to concentrate on the rest of the story. Anybody can walk through here and read, but I try to tell the backstory," he said. 🐼