

U.S. MARINE BODY BEARERS

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If you want to know about drilling, there are two places you can go—Black & Decker and Marine Barracks 8th and "I."

The quote came from Gunnery Sergeant Dan Hall, Company "A" gunny, but it seems to be the sentiment of most of the Marines at the Washington, D.C., Barracks. And rightfully so. Consider the multitude of drill.

The Silent Drill Team carries the name and fame of being the premier performing unit of its kind. The marching Marines of Companies "A" and "B" may not be as well-known, but they, too, make a living at drill. And there's the Marine Corps Color Guard, also masters of drill. And not to be forgotten are the United States Marine Band and the U.S. Drum and Bugle Corps with their own unique style of drill, choreographed into a wide array of musical performances.

There is yet another group of Barracks Marines who are experts at drill, but they are not in the spotlight like the others. In fact, most people (Marines included) probably do not even know this unit exists.

Six Marines in blue dress uniform execute precision drill movements, step by step, in unison, in near silence, gliding effortlessly (or so it seems) across the grass. Their form is impeccable; their pride emanating.

Precision. Perfection. The epitome of Marine discipline. No, they are not in the Silent Drill Team; they are not even performers in a parade. Their drill is in a much more somber light. They carry a casket, not rifles. These men are U.S. Marine Body Bearers.

Eighteen Marines, grades E-2 through E-4, make up the Marine Body Bearer Section of Company "B". Their mission is to provide funeral/burial support at national cemeteries in the metro D.C., Maryland and Virginia area, mostly at Arlington National Cemetery. Body bearers also participate in joint-service funerals, such as those for senators and congressmen, wherever they are held across the country.

Any Marine who was honorably discharged from the Corps, from private to general, may have a military funeral with body bearers. Other services use eight-man teams to carry the casket; 8th and "I" uses only six. With 18 men in the section, there can be three teams out on de-

tails at the same time. The Body Bearer Section averages 40 to 45 funerals per month. (More or less depending on the time of year. Statistics show more deaths occur during the change of seasons, winter to spring, spring to summer, etc.)

When new Marines arrive at 8th and "I", they attend the Barracks' Ceremonial Drill School. There, they are screened for strength and the ability to work alone. (All Marines are screened for security clearance purposes before getting orders to 8th and "I".) The reason for strength screening is fairly obvious—it takes six strong men to carry a casket ranging from 800 to 1,200 pounds. Screening a Marine for his ability to work alone is less apparent, considering it takes a group of them to carry a casket.

"It's a big responsibility to carry a person's casket, especially with loved ones watching. And the Marines have to fold the flag and present it to the next of kin. Many times, it's a lance corporal out there doing this, so we look for someone who can think on his feet and act independently," explained Captain David Close, Company "B" commanding officer.

Once it is determined that a Marine is psychologically capable of performing the job, he must prove that he is physically capable by passing the strength test. The test was developed by the body bearers, and it is administered by them, usually two corporals, with the company gunny looking on.

"The test starts with a bench press of 225 pounds. . .15 times," explained Lance Corporal James S. Clift, a body bearer who helped develop the test. "Immediately following, he has to take a 135-pound bar and do a military press (chest to overhead) 10 times.

"Then holding the bar at his side, and using ceremonial steps, he carries it the length of the basketball court. He sets the bar down, picks it up ceremonially, and curls it five times," Clift continued. "He sets it down again, then picks it up and carries it ceremonially back down the basketball court. He sets it down, and then does five body-bearer presses (palms outboard, lifting the bar over the head). All this is done ceremonially, using exaggerated movements."

At this point, the test is over, but the Marine is still being observed. "This is the hardest part," Clift said, "because you have to act like the test didn't bother you, like you're not under any strain or exhausted."

The test is designed for strength as well as endur-



ance—some carries may only be a few feet, but others could be 75 yards to the gravesite.

Marines who score well on the test may be selected to serve as body bearers. (Selection is based on need/billet availability.) These Marines attend the Barracks' Body Bearer School, where they are trained in casket drill, how to lift the casket out of different kinds of hearses, how to fold the flag, etc.

Once they complete the school, body bearers begin an intense six-month weight-lifting program to obtain maximum body growth, which they then level off and maintain. During this time, the Marines are given a moratorium (no inspections) on their uniforms because their bodies are still growing.

The average body size of these Marines is a 46- to 50-inch chest and 32- to 34-inch waist. Bodies with these dimensions require specially altered uniforms—not just because of size (mostly extra large, size 50), but because of a peculiar problem with wear and tear that comes with the job. Body bearers lift the casket overhead, then set it down without bending their knees. This particular movement tends to make the side seams of the jacket burst. Thus, the uniforms are specially made with a matching colored elastic strip sewn on the seams under the arms.

U.S. Marine Body Bearers, part of Company "B" at Marine Barracks 8th and "I", provide burial support at national cemeteries in the Metro D.C. area.

This is the uniform body bearers work in. The uniform they *work out* in (their regular uniform of the day) is entirely different. It consists of red PT (physical training) shorts and black "muscle man" tank tops. This type of attire is required because of their daily training routine.

To maintain the strength needed to perform their duties, body bearers lift weights every day as part of their training. At a funeral, they lift the casket up over their shoulders, pause for a second, then bring it down onto the casket stand. (This is done in honor of the deceased.) Weightlifting builds the muscles required to perform this and other specialized movements.

Also as part of their daily routine, body bearers train with a real casket to practice the various drill movements. The casket is weighted down with rocks to make it a realistic weight. The Marines practice lifting and carrying it up and down steps, turning corners, etc., all the while staying in step and in synch with the movements. This includes keeping the casket level, not tilted, at all times. They also practice ceremonially folding the flag.



When body bearers aren't working out, practicing drill or actually doing a funeral detail, they have classes and field training in their primary military occupational specialty (MOS)—infantry.

Sounds like a great job, right? Pumping iron, wearing PT gear as a uniform, practicing drill. . . Now that's the life! However, things are not always as they seem. Consider this: Body bearers average 40 to 45 funerals per month, and with three six-man teams, that averages out to about 14 or 15 per month per team. That's a funeral every other day.

Now think about the funeral itself: In the summer, it's 90-plus degrees, the humidity is so dense you can see it. The Marines are wearing full dress blues (a 100-percent wool jacket), and they're sometimes carrying an 800-pound casket a distance the length of a football field, using meticulous ceremonial movements. Not much fun. Now, let's change the season: It's winter, temps are somewhere in the teens, the wind chill factor makes it feel like 10 below. The Marines' faces, feet and fingers are numb; their bodies are involuntarily shaking from the cold.

Still sound like a great job? The body bearers think so. . . .

"People ask, 'How can you do something like that?' But it's an honor! It's a special kind of duty; we're picked to do this. Plus, it's a prestigious position. It's a once-in-a-lifetime privilege to represent the Marine Corps like this," said body bearer LCpl Benjamin Bourgeois.

As representatives of the Corps, they have to display a by-the-book example of Marine discipline and military bearing. Sometimes, especially on a solemn occasion such as a funeral, that's easier said than done.

"At your first few funerals, you're pretty nervous. Your heart is pounding; you're afraid that you're going to mess up," explained LCpl Tom Martin. "But once you've done a couple of funerals and you get used to it, it gets easier all the time.

"Sometimes, you'll be doing a funeral where the father was killed in the line of duty, the immediate family is there, and the wife and child are crying. That's sad. Those are the toughest times," Martin said. "But you have to keep your military bearing. You can't show any



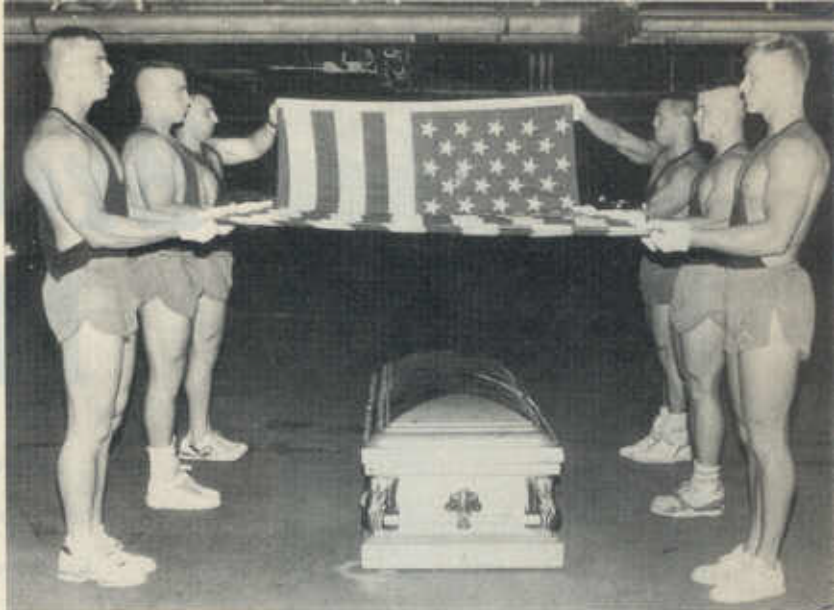
(ABOVE) From left to right, Lance Corporals Michael Peluso, Brian Metler, Benjamin Bourgeois, James Clift, Tom Martin and Ron Bevens. As a part of their daily routine, body bearers train with a real casket to practice the various drill movements. Rocks are placed in the casket to provide the necessary weight.



emotion, even though you might feel it on the inside."

Part of the reason the Marines can't be emotional is because it shows lack of military bearing. However, another reason, perhaps the most important, is that even the slightest display of emotion may impair their performance.

"People, particularly the next of kin, want and expect a flawless performance as a sign of respect for the individual who passed away," explained First Sergeant John Mersino, Company "B" first sergeant. "A Marine burying a Marine is a sign of loyalty—a Marine's last farewell. Sometimes it's hard not to be emotional out there, but their concentration has to be total. There is no room to think about emotion; there's no room for human error.



The average chest size of body bearer Marines is 46 to 50 inches. Dimensions like these require specially altered uniforms, not just because of the extra large size, but because the side seams of the jacket tend to burst when the Marines lift the casket overhead.



Body bearers practice lifting and carrying the casket, as well as how to ceremonially fold the flag and present it to the next of kin.



It's not tolerated here. Understood, yes. Tolerated, no."

However, when a mistake is made, these Marines are trained to "recover" in such a way that the error would go unnoticed. Mersino said, "Body bearers are so well-rehearsed, so refined, that even an obvious mistake seems planned."

What happens when a Marine does make a mistake? In the same way the body bearers develop their own

strength test, weightlifting program and MOS training, they also impose their own form of "punishment" on those who make mistakes in drill. The Marines have to do laps, pushups, sprints, etc. These ultimately build more muscles... and more strength... which make the body bearers better at their job.