



USMC

IN THE BEGINNING

Story by MGySgt James W. Carmickle, USMC (Ret)

**Fifty Years Ago the Corps Created What Would Eventually Become
An Icon for the Marines: the Ceremonial Drill Team.**

An Original Member of the Team Recalls That First Year.

It was September 1948. I was a 19-year-old corporal and had been in the Marine Corps 17 months, certainly long enough to know better than to volunteer for any detail. Yet, somehow, this one seemed different. First Lieutenant William Lanagan Jr.

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and a Staff Sergeant Jones had received permission to start a ceremonial drill team at the Marine Barracks, 8th and I in Washington, D.C. I don't know whose idea it was, but I do remember that SSgt Jones was very committed to forming such a team.

I was asked if I would like to be a part of the detail. It would entail hours and hours of extra training and drilling, and it would mean giving special presentations instead of being on liberty. Despite these additional duties, it did *not* mean any more pay, privileges or personal recognition. Lt Lanagan and SSgt Jones wanted only the most dedicated, sharpest drilling, most conscientious Marines available. I decided to give it a try.

The volunteers, some from the Marine Corps Institute staff and some from the Marine Barracks Company, were assembled in mid-September, and our training began. We practiced an hour every day, first learning our new manual of arms, then fine-tuning the precision that one day would make the team famous. We became a separate platoon for the Friday evening sunset parades and slowly but surely increased our expertise. But mainly, in those first weeks of October, we developed our first performance routine and practiced it for the upcoming drill presentation at the Tennessee State Society in the Shoreham Hotel on Oct. 14, 1948.

That first performance was given with oral commands, and we learned a great deal. We were nervous, but the nervousness made us keenly aware of each movement and the timing required to execute it properly. We had not put much thought into how the hotel's slick dance floor might affect our footwork, but it did not cause any real problems. We just walked carefully. Later we would temporarily glue rubber soles to our leather-soled shoes for exhibitions on dance floors. We also learned how soft or hard to strike the M1 rifle butts on such smooth floors, since the management did not want a ruined floor when we finished our routine. Also, we realized how dangerous it might be for the audience in the row closest to the demonstration, and we modified our rifle-spinning routine accordingly.

As we moved outside for future presentations, we discovered that upon completion of any given movement the applause from the crowd might drown out the sounds of the next command. The now-famous decision was then made to make ours a silent drill team, a tradition that continues to this day. In essence, we memorized specific maneuvers and followed a set routine until completion of a drill.



Courtesy of James W. Carmickle

Among the team's many duties was serving as Presidential Honor Guard. During its first year, President Harry Truman used it to help welcome visiting heads of state at Washington, D.C.'s National Airport.

We perfected the execution of the regular manual of arms by honing our timing so that every Marine responded at exactly the same instant and in the same way. We found new ways to pass the rifles from one Marine to another and learned new formations that made the performances visually pleasing as well as impressive. By far the most eye-catching maneuver was tossing the rifle in the air and twirling it, then catching it (either yours or someone else's). We learned to march with all the rifles, arms, legs, gloves at a precise angle and elevation, how far to raise the legs for various steps, how long the steps should be and, most importantly, how to keep aligned in the various formations without looking like we were concentrating on that task. The attention to such minute detail became a hallmark of the team.

Each presentation had its own problems to overcome: the space limitations, the time element, the marching surface, the type of audience, etc. No two presentations were ever the same.

We practiced daily, especially just before a performance. One way to make practice interesting and less boring was

to have an elimination drill contest. We were given commands by the lieutenant, and when we made a mistake, we had to drop out. The last one left was the winner for that day.

We had two ceremonial appearances in December 1948. The Ceremonial Drill Team was part of the honor guard for the United Nations Beauty Pageant held at the Statler Hotel in New York. All the contestants wore their national costumes, and the differences in what constituted "beauty" was interesting. One of the famous actors of the day, Walter Pidgeon, helped crown the winner, Miss Turkey.

The other event was the arrival at the Washington National Airport of the President of Cuba, Carlos Socarras. All of the dignitaries who visited the United States in those days flew into National Airport, instead of arriving by helicopter on the White House lawn. When they arrived, there were at least three companies of military honor guards including Marines. The guest would be welcomed by the President, Harry Truman in this case. Then together they would troop the line (walk along in front of all the troops),

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get into their respective limousines and ride to the White House. We would get into our buses for the trip back to the barracks. It was a scene that would be played time and time again.

One big event for us was our participation in Harry Truman's Presidential Inaugural Ceremony Jan. 20, 1949. The Ceremonial Drill Team members were each given write-ups in their hometown papers, which gave many of us our first 15 minutes of fame. We Marines stood guard around the bleachers on the east side of the Capitol just prior to, and during, the inauguration ceremony on that clear, cold, windy day. We had been bused there from the barracks, took up positions about 16 feet apart all around the bleachers and stood at parade rest during the preparations and the swearing-in ceremony. Then we formed into a company formation and marched to the White House to escort the President. That night we were part of the guard at one of the Presidential Inaugural Balls.

Washington-area commitments quickly became part of our growing tradition. One evening in the first week of February 1949 we participated in a colorful ceremony for an international organiza-

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tion in Washington. I was a flag bearer, carrying the color of Panama. Other members of the Ceremonial Drill Team carried flags of other countries. Later in the month the team was part of the honor guard at the Lincoln Memorial where President Truman gave a speech for Lincoln's birthday celebration. For Washington's birthday the Ceremonial Drill Team marched in a parade in nearby Alexandria, Va.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Alexander A. Vandegrift, retired on April 1, 1949, and there was a large retirement ceremony on the 8th and I parade ground. The drill team put on an exhibition and marched in the Comman-

dant's final parade. We also helped welcome his successor, Gen Clifton B. Cates.

On May 17, 1949, we were part of the honor guard when Gen Lucius D. Clay, who had served as America's military governor of Berlin following the end of WW II, returned home from Germany. The next day we were again in the honor guard for the visit of the President of Brazil at National Airport. On the 24th, the Secretary of the Navy retired, and we were part of that ceremony at the Pentagon. Former Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal's funeral was on the 25th, and we were part of the military escort. Last but not least, we marched in the Memorial Day Parade in Arlington. All of that ceremonial activity was in addition to our regular military duties, the Friday sunset parades and the weekly funerals. If we weren't shining and polishing in preparation for the next event, we were cleaning up after the last one.

On June 3, 1949, the Ceremonial Drill Team went to the Pentagon to help promote a defense bond rally. That night we put on a special silent drill performance during the annual Congressional Baseball Game at Griffith Stadium. The bleachers were packed, and it was a good thing we



The original Silent Drill Team, led by 1stLt William Lanagan Jr., gave a crowd-pleasing performance at the Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., Oct. 14, 1948.

had a silent routine because we couldn't hear ourselves think in the uproar, especially when we did something that looked spectacular.

A week later we performed in Griffith Stadium again, this time for the Night of Thrills where we watched baseball great Connie Mack crown the Queen of the Night. No rest for us, though; the next day we marched in the Fourth Marine Division's Reunion Parade down Constitutional Avenue and later that night put on more silent drill for them at the Statler Hotel.

Over the next four months, the drill team's growing popularity and military obligations kept us very busy. We welcomed scores of foreign dignitaries, stood funeral details at Arlington National Cemetery and more.

On Nov. 10, 1949, the birthday of the United States Marine Corps, the Ceremonial Drill Team was involved in the celebration festivities and were part of a historical pageant. The next day we were part of the honor guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for ceremonies that included a wreath laying by President Truman. We, in the Ceremonial Drill Team, took great pride in our drill and our bearing; however, the Army troops who regularly stood duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were as sharp or sharper than we were. They were the masters of perfection in every move they made. I really admired them.

We had two special Ceremonial Drill Team presentations that December. On the 3rd, we gave a halftime performance at the Washington, D.C., Inter-High Football Championship in Griffith Stadium. The stands were packed with high school students, and we did our best to impress them. In later years I have wondered if any person who ever saw us perform was influenced or persuaded to join the Marines because of what we did.

The second presentation stands out in my memory because we had a new maneuver. Again, it was during halftime festivities, this time at the East Coast Football Championships in Quantico, Va., on Dec. 10. We did normal drill and rifle exchange in circles and various other maneuvers, then we re-formed into platoon formation as though we were going to march off. At a certain count we divided, every other rank going toward each goal post. After so many steps we all stopped automatically, did the manual of arms to ground our rifles, then precisely and deliberately we mounted our chrome bayonets on our rifles, went to right shoulder arms, and the two halves of the platoon started marching toward each other. At a certain point we twirled

United States Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon

The United States Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon, a 24-man rifle platoon, performs a unique precision drill exhibition. This highly disciplined platoon exemplifies the professionalism associated with the United States Marine Corps.

The Silent Drill Platoon first performed in 1948 and received such an overwhelming response that it soon became part of the routine parades at Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C.

The Marines execute a series of calculated drill movements and precise handling of their hand-polished 10.5-pound M1 Garand rifles with fixed bayonets. The routine concludes with a unique rifle inspection involving elaborate rifle spins and tosses.

These Marines are individually selected from the Schools of Infantry located in Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Camp Lejeune, N.C., from interviews conducted by barracks personnel. Once chosen, Marines are assigned to Marine Barracks, Washington to serve a two-year ceremonial tour. Beyond their ceremonial duties, the Marines collaterally train in the field as infantrymen. Throughout the year, these Marines hone their infantry skills at the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, Va., and other bases.

Experienced members of the Silent Drill Platoon have the opportunity to audition to become rifle inspectors.



USMC

They must go through inspection try-outs graded by rifle inspectors of the previous year. Only two Marines become rifle inspectors.

Once the year's Silent Drill Platoon members are selected, they begin their training at Marine Barracks, Washington and continue to train at Marine Corps Air Station, Yuma, Ariz. They work year-round on perfecting their routine.

Throughout the year, they perform at Marine Barracks, Washington and at numerous events across the United States and abroad.

PAO, MB, Washington, D.C.

our rifles a time or two, and just before we met in the center, the rifles came down, parallel to the ground and pointed straight ahead.

From the grandstands it looked like we were going to skewer, or bayonet, the Marines we were marching toward. We could literally hear the crowd gasp. From the center of the field we could hear them sucking in their breaths. Then we passed through each other, and the crowd collectively let out their breath, which again we could hear. Trying not to smile, we twirled our rifles a couple more times, turned about face and marched back together. This time, as we came together as a platoon, we collectively turned, formed one unit, then marched off to thunderous applause. Our new maneuver was a hit! And it's still per-

formed in some form or fashion today.

Shortly afterward I was transferred to the West Coast and went on to participate in the Korean and Vietnam wars. I was transferred to the Fleet Reserve in 1969 and formally retired in March of 1977. The Ceremonial Drill Team continued to perfect its presentations and eventually became the Silent Drill Platoon, known the world over for its precision, expertise and exemplary demonstrations.

How many times did I drop my rifle during those high-flying maneuvers? More than I care to admit, but never during an exhibition. I am proud to say that I was there for the Silent Drill Team's beginning.

