

The United States Marine Corps Historical Company is a unique organization committed to furthering the heritage and legacy of all Marines. Members of USMCHC participate in numerous pageants, exhibits and parades. They also work as technical advisers and actors in Hollywood productions such as in this scene from Clint Eastwood's World War II movie "Flags of Our Fathers," where retired GySgt Tom Williams fires the flame thrower during filming of the Battle of Iwo Jima.



The United States Marine Corps Historical Company: Celebrating the Corps

Story by the United States Marine Corps Historical Company · Photos courtesy of GySgt Tom Williams, USMC (Ret)

Marines of the United States Marine Corps Historical Company (USMCHC) may look unique compared to today's Corps; however, they would blend in easily with the leather-necks of World War II, the Boxer Rebellion or even the American Revolution.

But that's the point.

Their mission is the presentation and preservation of Marine Corps history. Applying the concept of history presented "by people (Marines), to people, about people (Marines)," the USMCHC endeavors to take history from behind glass and put a human face on it. The company continually goes to great lengths to maintain and present the high standards first set by the Marines of past eras. This pride in their work stems from a desire to honor fellow Marines of the past and accurately pass that heritage on to Americans of today.

When Gunnery Sergeant Thomas Williams and Sergeant Timothy Kueberth

founded the USMCHC in 1990, it was a part-time operation, offering presentations at Marine Corps active and Reserve units, recruiting stations and national and state historic sites in the Mid-Atlantic area.

The Historical Co has grown into a major professional nonprofit corporation, working in direct support of the Marine Corps and Marine Corps Heritage Foundation. It functions both as a "traveling" educational organization, developing and presenting highly diversified historical programming throughout the country, and as a specialist agency, providing consultation, logistical and material development and support to other agencies in providing Marine Corps historical programming.

Through lectures, interactive exhibits, demonstrations, classes and ceremonies, the USMCHC serves both civilian and military audiences. In addition to a small full-time management staff, the company has more than 65 active volunteers—most

of them current or former active-duty Marines—stationed in nine districts across the country. The USMCHC also regularly incorporates active-duty Marines from local commands and bases in its programs.

Williams, who now functions as the company's full-time director and chief executive officer, said that increasing membership, especially those who will qualify as a "living history" interpretive specialist, is not easy. Each member must first become a capable educator and historical "interpreter." Those who eventually qualify as specialists wear historical uniforms and are proficient in the military skills of the Marines they represent.

Williams advises his interpretive specialists, "If you are going to adequately represent the Marine Corps, you must first learn that the uniform doesn't make the Marine [interpreter], the person does. History was not made by the artifacts that we use; it was made by the most valuable com-

modity of the Corps: its people!”

Although a professional staff manages the Historical Co, its front-line historical interpreters and historians are dedicated volunteers. Even so, to ensure quality programming, all members are tested annually and recertified in both educational skills and historical knowledge. Testing covers Marine Corps history, both general and specific period(s) being represented, military skills, material history and usage of equipment, customs of the service and familiarity with the weapons and tactics of past eras. In addition, every member also is extensively trained and annually evaluated on their educational and interpretive skills and presentation techniques.

“The ability to effectively relate historical information and concepts to the public is just as important as mastering the historical skills and knowledge,” said Williams.

Each living-history-qualified member also is required to complete a physical fitness test each year. This test, based in part on the Marine Corps’ current Physical Training Test and old Physical Readiness Test (PRT), is necessary from both safety and historical standpoints. Members often are involved in training demonstrations such as amphibious landings, negotiation of obstacle courses or even climbing the rigging of a frigate, which are physically demanding tasks. Testing upper-body strength, abdominal strength, balance and endurance, the USMCHC’s PRT follows closely the combat conditioning given to Marines from the past and in many ways is as rigorous as today’s Marine Corps PT test.

The purpose of all of this is to prepare the company’s historical interpreters to present the most realistic image of Marines of the past. “To do justice to the persons [Marines] that you are emulating, you must represent the best of what they were. To do any less is a disservice to them, yourself, the Corps and the country we represent,” stated Lieutenant Colonel J. Colin Smith, USMC (Ret), a senior interpretive specialist and coordinator of the company’s 7th (Texas) District.

The USMCHC presents a variety of programs, from traveling museum exhibits, symposiums and lectures, ceremonies and color guards to historical demonstrations.

According to Williams, living history, combined with other presentation techniques, is one of the more effective educational tools. It allows the public to go beyond viewing artifacts so they can associate the items with the people who made the history. It lets viewers use all of their senses and, in a limited way, immerse themselves in history, as they interact with the interpreters—from the smell of mili-



Above: USMCHC members don the uniforms worn by Marines during the War of 1812 and man the howitzers at Fort McHenry, Md., the birthplace of our national anthem.

Below: Members of the USMCHC become experts on older military weapon systems and frequently teach these systems. SgtMaj Bob Burns, a member of the Historical Co, is instructing United States Naval Academy midshipmen on the firing and maintenance of the M1 service rifle.



tary canvas, to hearing commands on the drill field, to seeing a platoon of Marines in training. All this helps the public understand that those Marines of the past were real people, very much like themselves.

As part of its own outreach programming, the USMCHC develops partnerships with various historical sites where the Marine Corps was involved. The objective is to tell the Corps’ story at these sites through living history and contemporary programs, related permanent exhibits and printed brochures based on the concept title

“History Through the Eyes of Marines.”

Currently, the partnerships include Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, where the story of the Marines who captured John Brown in 1859 is presented; Fort McHenry National Historical Site, focusing on Marines during the War of 1812; and the Battleship *North Carolina* museum, where the history of “seagoing” Marines during WW II is told. Additional partnerships are under development in California, Texas, Florida and other historic sites across the country where the

Marine Corps' presence had an impact.

Along with public educational programs, the Historical Co often is asked to make professional military education presentations to our active-duty Marines at bases around the country. Williams noted, "This type of training complements their current military skills and provides a solid base for our Marines to gain a true understanding of their heritage and get a real-world hands-on understanding of what it took to get where we are today."

The one thing that you will not see when you visit a USMCHC program is a battle "reenactment." "Many of the company's members have had combat experience," said Chief Warrant Officer 3 William Hutchison, USMC (Ret), the company's deputy director of programming and a Marine veteran of Vietnam.

"We have interpreters, educators and consultants on board who are veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam and even the current war in Iraq, and the one thing that we are certain of is that you cannot accurately or realistically re-create the horrors and intensity of combat for a live audience. On the other hand, we can present training demonstrations that are every bit as real as when they were originally conducted and hold the excitement factor for the public, while giving them an accurate picture of Marine Corps life."

The USMCHC has a wide array of company-owned and -maintained historical weapons, uniforms and equipment to help present programs covering Marine Corps history from the Continental Marines to Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. With a large stock of reproduction uniforms and equipment, the Historical Co is able to provide issues for use by members, equip additional active-duty Marines for special large-scale programs and provide uniforms and equipment to other Marine Corps agencies and commands in support of their own programs.

The company also keeps an inventory of original artifacts of various periods for its traveling and permanent exhibits. Although it readily accepts donations from veterans or their families for use in exhibits, the company prefers to use museum-quality reproductions for its active living history programs.

"We cannot risk using original equipment in the field. The original items are irreplaceable artifacts and need to be preserved for future generations. Besides, when the veterans were using them, they were not antiques; they were new. Our reproduction uniforms and equipment must

Embarked Marines frequently are assigned a specific ship's gun mount. In this photograph, USMCHC interpretive members man a 40 mm gun aboard the Battleship *North Carolina* museum in Wilmington, N.C., during an educational demonstration filmed by GySgt Steven Williams (lower left), Marines TV.



be of museum quality, but have the appearance of recent issue," Williams said.

Many pieces of uniforms and equipment from the USMCHC's inventory have been used in numerous museum exhibits, including outfitting most of the cast figures in the National Museum of the Marine Corps, and are regularly used in live programs, including the Commandant's Marine Corps Birthday Ball and special classes at the United States Naval Academy.

In addition to the development and presentation of live programs, members of the Historical Co regularly act as consultants and instructors to other agencies. The USMCHC has provided to the motion-picture industry lead historians, material specialists and trainers on such films as "Windtalkers," "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Letters From Iwo Jima," as well as documentaries. It also offers training and seminars on presentation skills and techniques to the staffs of museums and historic sites throughout the country.

The driving force that motivates these Marines and historians to dedicate so much effort to their mission can be summed up this way: "Watching the veterans' eyes light up, especially fellow Marines, as they reminisce, knowing they are being remembered, and seeing our younger generation develop an understanding of the Corps and a bond with these veterans—there's a lot of gratification in that—and that's what it's all about," Williams stated. "Making sure that the Marine Corps, its

importance and significant contributions, and the people who made the Corps what it is today are never forgotten."

Editor's note: Leatherneck thanks GySgt Tom Williams for his efforts in coordinating this informational article for our Marine Corps Birthday issue.

The USMCHC won the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's Distinguished Service Award and its Colonel John H. Magruder Award for excellence in preserving and presenting Marine Corps history. At present, the company is directly involved with the Heritage Foundation in developing various outreach public educational projects.

The company also is directly contributing to the development of Marine Corps museums throughout the country, including the National Museum of the Marine Corps near Quantico, Va., the Marine Corps Legacy Museum in Arkansas and the Museum of the Marine in Jacksonville, N.C., as well as continuing to present traveling historical and educational public programs and Marine PMEs. Many of the USMCHC's active-duty interpretive members currently are in, or have recently returned from, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf (some from third and fourth tours), making Marine Corps history of their own.

If you are interested in becoming a supporter or volunteer member of the USMCHC, or would like more information about the organization, check the Web site www.USMCHC.org, call (301) 662-3141, or e-mail Director@USMCHC.org.

Leatherneck—On the Web For more images of the Historical Company in action, visit www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/marinehistoricalcompany

