

# “Pageantry of the Corps”

## A Brief Pictorial History of the Pageants to Commemorate the Marine Corps’ History

By GySgt (Ret) Thomas Williams

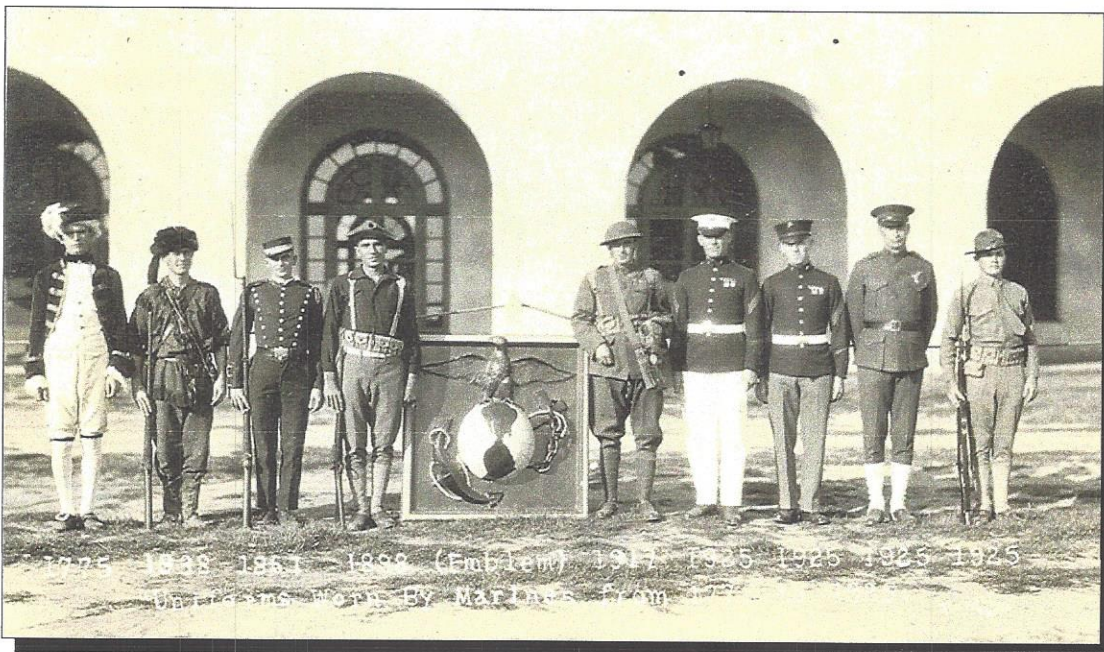
The concept of commemorating a nation’s heritage through recreations of past uniforms and events and “reenacting” iconic moments in history is not a new concept. As long as man has been creating history, he has attempted to celebrate the past by endeavoring to recreate it. Over 2000 years ago the Romans would regularly reenact great battles and victories as part of their gladiatorial games. Many nations throughout their history have used representations of their military’s past uniforms for ceremonies to remember their past glories.

When the United States was founded after the Revolution, Americans were quick to perpetuate this tradition. However, our small Corps of Marines were slow to pick up this particular tradition.

The *Continental* Marines were formed as a branch of our fledgling country's armed services by an act of the Second Continental Congress on 10 November 1775. But, because of America’s distrust of the use of a standing military force to dominate the civil populus by many European countries, at the close of the Revolutionary War the Continental Marines, the Navy, and most of the Army, were disbanded. The *United States* Marine Corps as it exists today, was permanently established by the Congressional Act of July 11, 1798. For the first 125 years of our existence that date was recognized as the official establishment of the U.S. Marines, but would receive little commemoration or fanfare by the Corps. However, in 1921 during a political fight for the Corps’ survival Commandant Gen. John Lejeune would, in an effort to boost Marine Corps moral and “Espirit-de-Corps,” and raise public awareness and opinion, issued Marine Corps Order No. 47 officially recognizing 10 November 1775 as the founding “Birthday” of the Marine Corps. This would be the beginning of 100 years of now well established traditions, ceremonies, and celebrations commemorating the founding of our Corps. Every year, on 10 November, Marine Corps Commands and organizations, and Marines stationed around the world, observe the Corps “birthday” through cake cutting ceremonies, pageants, and Birthday Balls.

However, long before the establishment of Balls celebrating the Birth of our Corps, the first established tradition would be the commemoration of our heritage through historical uniform pageants and reenactments heralding the battle history of our Corps. The first known “documented” historical program was at MCB San Diego in 1925. Although today we usually associate these historical “pageants” as part of Marine Corps Birthday Ball ceremonies, from their beginnings these historical programs have often been stand-alone presentations. Not just around November 10th, but on dates throughout the year on anniversaries of famous incidents from the Corps’ past. The uniforms for these programs would come from a wide variety of sources, both Marine Corps and civilian, through the years

What follows is a pictorial chronology of some of those pageants and reenactments commemorating the proud history, heritage, and esprit-de-corps of our Corps.



This is the first known photograph of Marines in “historical” uniforms taken at MCB San Diego in 1925. Although the technical accuracy of the early uniforms is more whimsical than factual, nonetheless they reflect the pride and esprit-de-corps the Marines took in their history.



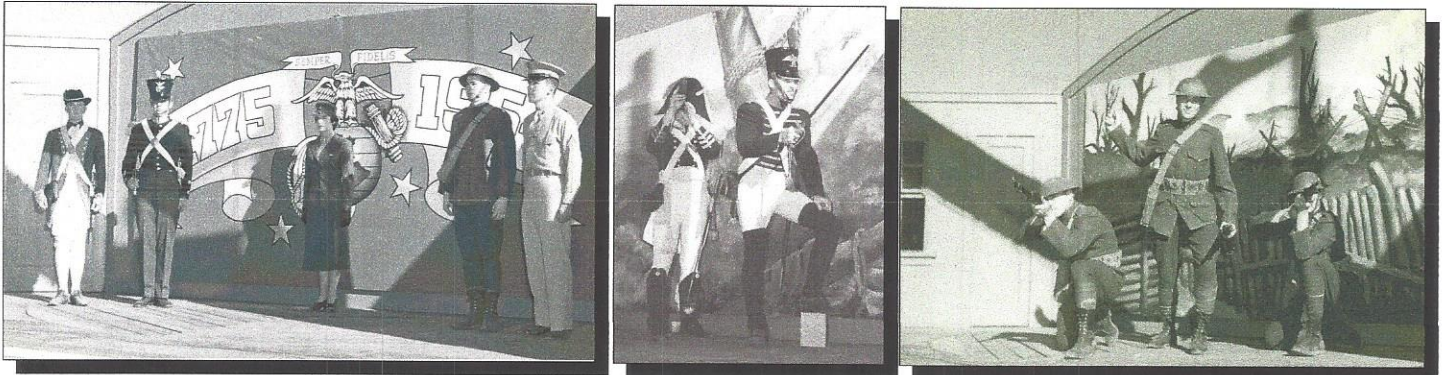
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Following those first pageants this tradition would continue to evolve, and become part of today’s celebrations of our Corps’ founding. The first “birthday” cake cutting ceremonies would start during the early 1930s, and would soon be incorporated, along with historical pageants, into formal dances or “Balls” celebrating the birth of our Marine Corps. Although we have yet to find further photos of historical pageants during this period, we do have surviving examples of historical reproduction uniforms in our artifact collection labeled as property of the Marine Corps, dated 1938.

Although World War Two and Korea would keep the Marine Corps’ focus on current operations, Marines in Theaters of Operations around the world would keep the celebration of our Corps alive. World War Two would see the Marine Corps size, achievements, and reputation rise far beyond anything that could have been imagined in previous generations, and Korea would also add new and iconic battle streamers to the Corps heritage. All of these would now become a major part of Marine Corps history. With these two new wars under our collective belt, the close of the Korean conflict would see a major resurgence in programs.



The above photographs are from a stage presentation presented by the Marine Corps in 1954 that would, through a series of vignettes, commemorate the battle history of the Marine Corps.



A pageant of historic Marine uniforms plays a central part of this Marine Corps Birthday ceremony in 1956. Note the addition of uniforms representing WW2 and Korea, including Marine aviation and Women Marines, had now become a major part of our celebrated history.

Historical pageants during Marine Corps Birthday Ball season would not be the only time that Marines would commemorate iconic moments in history. On many occasions the Marines would partner with historic sites to recreate incidents in the site’s past in which the Marines participated.



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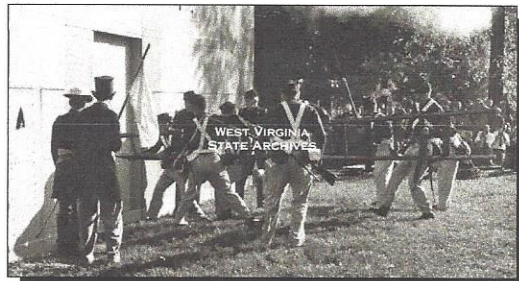
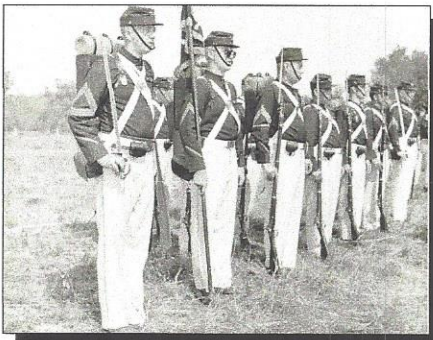


At left, in 1936 the First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment (1/5) and the 10th Marine (Artillery) Regiment would participate in a battle reenactment commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of First Manassas.

The Marines, dressed in their blue denim utilities to represent the Union Forces (which, in 1861, included a battalion of US Marines) would go against a battalion of the 12th US Army Infantry, dressed in their Summer Service khakis to represent the Confederates. The event would take place on Henry Hill which is now part of the Manassas National Battlefield.

Right; 75 years later, in July 2011, the Marines would once again return to Manassas. Partnering with the National Park Service to tell the story of the Marines that participated in the battle in 1861. Marines in historic uniforms recreated that Marine Battalion, and would install and dedicate a wayside marker honoring those Marines of 1861.

For the past 20 years the Marine Corps (through the Marine Corps Historical Company) has annually presented a historical program telling the story of the battle and those Marines that fought there.



Above; In 1959 the Marines would participate in the 100th Anniversary of John Brown’s infamous raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), and reenact the capture of Brown by the Marines.

Below: Fifty years later the Marines would partner with the National Park Service to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Brown’s raid. New research lead to a more accurate and historically correct representation of the uniform the Marines wore, and a better interpretation of the Marine involvement in resolving the raid. Telling the Marine Corps story at Harpers Ferry has become an annual program.





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As we moved into the latter 20th and early 21st century the Corps would continue to add new Battle Honors to its record, and along with them new stories and uniforms to add to our history. By 1957 the Marine Corps’ History and Museums Division would take over the responsibility of procuring/producing the uniforms used for these historic presentations and developed Historic Uniform ‘Pageant’ Kits that could be signed out by Marine Corps Commands.



This panoramic photo, which appeared in Time Magazine in 1957, shows the wide array of reproduction Marine uniforms that were produced through the Marine Corps History and Museums Division. In an effort to present more accurate representations of each uniform, surviving original uniform items were used as patterns for the production of the uniforms, and even incorporating original artifacts to complete the uniforms. These Pageant kits were widely distributed throughout the Corps and were continuously updated and improved. However, in 2004, with the beginning of construction of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, the old History and Museums Division would be absorbed into Marine Corps University at Quantico, and would discontinue the development and upkeep of reproduction historic uniforms.

From Viet Nam, Beirut, and Desert Storm, to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom the Marine Corps’ achievements and honors would continue to grow, and along with them an ever expanding array of historic uniforms heralding those exploits.



Outdoor ceremonies celebrating the Marine Corps Birthday conducted in the early 1970s. To commemorate the Navy Marine Corps team note the addition of Naval personnel, aviators, and even an astronaut as part of the array of historic uniforms.

In 2006 to fill the historical uniform void left by the History Division the Commandant’s office would ask a small not-for-profit historical educational team, the *USMC Historical Company*, if they would assist by providing historic uniforms to equip Marines for the Commandant’s Marine Corps Birthday Ball that year. Since 1994 the Historical Company, working in partnership with the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, had developed and provided traveling



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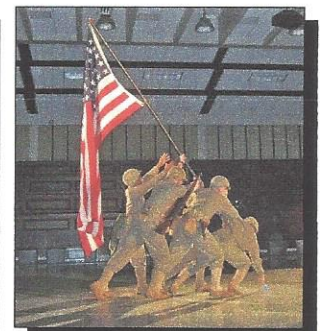
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historical/educational PME and outreach programming for Marine Corps bases and commands, and partnered with historic sites and agencies such as the National Park Service, in the development of public historical programs telling the Marine Corps story relevant to each historic site. To support their mission the Historical Company has continually researched, developed, and produced a highly accurate full spectrum, covering from 1775 to the modern era, of historical Marine Corps uniforms and equipment for use in our own educational programming.

Since 2006, by default, the USMCHC, working with the NMMC curator staff, would become one of the Corps’ recognized material history specialist organizations, and the new principle producer of historic Marine uniforms. For the past 15 years the Historical Company, in addition to its own historical programming, has provided sets of uniforms for bases and commands around the world. Along the way, because of the HC’s primary educational mission, they have been able to continually improve the technical accuracy and authenticity of these reproduction uniforms.



Marines from Marine Barracks, Washington and the USMCHC, attired in a variety of historic uniforms ranging from 1776 to the modern era, annually participate as part of the Commandant of the Marine Corps’ MC Birthday Ball. Prior to each Ball the Marines are custom fitted in each uniform, and receive a PME classes on the history of the uniforms they are wearing and proper handling of the relevant weapons for each era. Left: 2013, Right: 2018.



Many uniform programs target a specific eras or events. Left: In 2015, as part of the Retirement Program for the USMC’s CH-46 Helicopter at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, 7 Marines and one navy Corpsmen in period uniforms reflecting the CH-46’s 6 decades of service, from 1964 through 2015, debarked from the aircraft during a narrated sequence. Center: a color guard honors the Marines in World War One, including carrying the blue Marine Corps colors of the era. Right: a team of Marines recreate the iconic photo of the flag raising on Iwo Jima.



Left: In August 2021 thirteen freshly graduated and commissioned Marine 2nd Lieutenants from the US Naval Academy participated in the annual Marine Corps History and Traditions Brief presented as part of “Plebe Summer” for new incoming Midshipmen. The one hour Brief, using in combination a power point program, narrators, and several Marines dressed in various historic Marine uniforms, followed the battle history of the U.S. Marine Corps from 1775 to today.

As we look to the future, we are once again looking to pass the torch. The USMC Historical Company, working with the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, are looking at the concepts of developing a new supply of sets of reproduction uniforms that can once again be available to be signed out to Marine Corps bases and commands on an as needed basis. Regardless of the source, there is no doubt that the Marine Corps will continue to celebrate the proud and hard earned history and heritage of our Corps through uniform programs and pageants for many years to come.