



How the Few Became the Proud: Crafting the Marine Corps Mystique, 1874–1918 by Heather Venable.

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This work argues that, since the Marine Corps could not readily rally around a sole defining mission, it turned instead to an image to ensure institutional survival. As Marine officers immersed themselves in the Corps' historical records, they initiated a process by which a maligned group of nineteenth-century naval policemen eventually would come to be regarded as elite warriors.... *How the Few Became the Proud* is the first [book] to explore the origin of the myths behind the mystique. (8)

Most any US Marine today would take issue with being called “soldier.” The designation “Marine” is seen as a badge of honor earned through hardships endured at the Recruit Depots, Officer Candidates School, and the battlefield. Moreover, “once a Marine, always a Marine!” (92). There is no such thing as an “ex-Marine,” apart from Lee Harvey Oswald¹ and a very few others.

As historian Heather Venable (Air Command and Staff College) argues in *How the Few Became the Proud*, this has not always been the case. Herself the daughter of a Marine, she examines how the Corps changed from a traditional naval guard force to something quite different during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One catalyst was technological: the Navy's conversion from sail to steam power. Another threat to the Corps' existence was based on a change of mission and function foreseen by some naval officers. The concept of the Corps as an Advance Base Force charged with defending coaling stations in naval campaigns met with stiff resistance from the Corps' leadership as did Pres. Theodore Roosevelt's plan to remove all Marines from ships in 1908 (96).

Venable's study looks at the Corps through the lenses of culture, identity, and publicity in a unique, non-traditional and fascinating method of investigating the history of the Marine Corps. While Marines readily identified themselves as “soldiers” at the time of the Boxer Rebellion (1900), by the end of World War I they had embraced an organizational distinction inherent in the term “Marine.” The quandary of a Marine's status as neither “sailor” nor “soldier” was derided by his Navy and Army counterparts through the late 1800s. But as the Corps became more involved in their role as “State Department” troops—a ground force that could be readily deployed for shorter missions—these attitudes changed. It was well understood among the European powers at the time that naval forces could intervene around the globe without initiating outright hostilities. As a result, the Corps' experience in overseas expeditions from the Far East to Latin America (“small wars”) lent it credibility as a force that could master any situation; they were often first on scene and in the thick of the action. The author skillfully describes how this transition in identity and culture came about.

1. Who served in the Corps in 1956-59, attaining the rank of Private First Class.

Additionally, Venable provides an innovative analysis of the evolving identity of the Corps as it affected outreach to Americans of age to join its ranks. This includes a discussion of the concept of manliness in the Corps' mission in contrast to the duties of the Navy and sailors of the time. She describes the iconic image of sailors rowing Marines ashore where they (the Marines) would be committed to action (128–29). Not much has changed over the years. To this day, the Marine Corps generally recruits young persons seeking action, while the other armed services recruit citizenry with the prospect of greater education, new job skills, and other personal rewards. It comes as no surprise that slogans like “First to Fight” came about during Venable’s target period of the Corps’ history (134).

The author also discusses the recruitment of the first female Marines in 1917–18. She notes that their numbers were too small to have any real impact on freeing more male Marines to fight in France (182). Only 305 female Marines or “Marinettes” served during World War I. All were discharged after the Armistice (182).

One weak spot in Venable’s discussion is her evaluation of recruiting posters. In chap. 7, she posits an evaluation of Howard Chandler Christy’s 1915 poster showing a female figure dressed in Marine Dress Blues with the title, “If You Want to Fight, Join the Marines” (178). She comments on the woman’s dress and equipment as follows:

Arming her with a bayonet further distinguished her from the men, who carried rifles. On the battlefield characterized by 1915 by the dominance of the machine gun, the trench and artillery so favorable to the defender, a bayonet had a questionable utility. On a deeper level ... the seemingly harmless woman in the Corps’ ceremonial dress poses a far more significant threat because weapons, particularly bayonets, “act as fetishes of phallic power, security against the overwhelming castration anxiety brought by war.” (179)

This characterization exposes a poor grasp of the combat equipment of a Marine from Venable’s target period right up to the present. The female figure in the poster wears the Model 1910 (M1910) rifle belt with (M1907) suspenders and an (M1905) bayonet worn on the left side. This was the standard rifleman’s outfit of this period and well after. The bayonet has remained a regular item of equipment for all Marines equipped with a rifle from World War I to the present day.² It is a back-up weapon in close combat, not a tool of “questionable utility.” The “spirit of the bayonet” and open warfare were elemental in both US and French military doctrine at the time. This is not the only instance where the author’s modern gendered lens distorts the facts of period material culture.

Venable also misjudges the significance to the Corps of two key personalities. One, John Thomason Jr., known as “The Kipling of the Corps,” she describes as merely “a Marine novelist.”³ She later mentions Congressman Thomas Butler, “whose son was a Marine officer.” To say the least! That son was none other than the legendary Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler.⁴ Such glaring understatements should have been caught during editing.

How the Few Became the Proud concerns hitherto neglected aspects of the evolution of the US Marine Corps and its culture. By focusing on identity, culture, and recruitment in her target peri-

2. For more on Marine Corps equipment, see Alex S. Tulkoff, *Equipping the Corps*, vol. 1 (San Jose, CA: R.J. Bender, 2010).

3. Thomason was one of the most prolific Marines of the period. He published short stories and artwork in books and periodicals like *Scribner’s Magazine* from 1925 through World War II (162).

4. See, further, Han Schmidt, *Maverick Marine: General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1987) (186).

od, Heather Venable clarifies their crucial relevance to today's Corps as well. Minor editing slips and misinterpretations aside, she has thereby made a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Corps in an era of transformational significance.