

Top Flight Marines offer 50-Minute Ceremony on Fridays

By James E. Hague
Post Reporter

Every fair Friday, from May to October, the Marine Corps struts its stuff at the barracks at 8th and I sts., se.

Officially, it is a formal retreat. Unofficially, it is 50 minutes of pomp and ceremony by the Marines' sharpest experts in military pageantry.

There is nothing fancier in the Marine Corps than this 5 o'clock performance and, say the participants, there is certainly no regular military events in the United States to surpass it. But the tourists who throng to Washington have yet to discover, in any great numbers, this real showpiece of this tourists' Mecca. Customarily, less than 300 persons gather to see something which in many ways rivals the changing of the Guards at Buckingham Palace.

Into the 50 minutes of martial music and precision – all to do the evening honors to the American flag – go hours and hours of tedious preparation and a half of tradition of the “8th & Eye” Marines.

The buildings, fringing a parade ground constantly manicured in a military manner, house the picked men and officers of the Stateside Marine Corps. This is the home of the Commandant; the scarlet clad Marine Band; the drum and bugle corps; the frill team; the Marine Corps Correspondence school, and the men who make up all the ceremonial details to which Marines are assigned in this city of Washington.

A Show Place

The barracks was built 152 years ago and, says the weekly program for the “sunset parade,” in the long dormitory on the 9th str. Side, “the spirit of the 1801 Marine is perpetuated today.”

This air of being a special kind of Marine permeates the whole barracks. It is evident as one passes through the gate, guarded by two hours a day by a spit-and-polish Marine whose eyes must never waver from the front, who must never speak, who must be impervious to the gibes and false orders of the patient-testing urchins, and who must click his cleated heels together so sharply that he knocks one of them at least an inch along the concrete of his post (just 14 paces long).

It is evident in the swagger sticks all officers must carry. It is evident in the little differences to which the barracks clings (thus, normal marching cadence is 120 paces per minute, the guard here does it at an unorthodox 90) so that it may be a place apart and above. Every shoe must have a double sole and every brass button must have a mirror gloss.

The barracks is always a beehive of cleaning and polishing, but especially so every Friday. The preparations start about 1 o'clock and last until just before the rehearsal at 3 with a final brush or two between rehearsal and the show itself -- the parade.

The men and officers buff away at their buttons, using Brasso for the first shine and Glass Wax for the last luster. The shoes are officially brown but they have a jet gleam to them, results of weeks of labor. The final treatment is a shaving lotion, a hard rub with

a nylon stocking (they say ordinary cloth would scratch the gloss).

The blues, meticulously tailored for every man, from private to colonel, must be wire brushed and then whisked. The white belts (for the men) and the drum decorations must be starch-stiffened with white shoe polish. A smudge on the white gloves is unthinkable and inexcusable. Some even press their shoelaces.

At 4:45, the men fall out in the pillared arcade alongside their quarters. The NCO's go from man to man, straightening here and tightening there (a man excused from a ceremonial detail because he isn't up to snuff gets what is euphemistically called “extra instruction”).

Starts at 5 P.M.

The bugler steps out in front of the flagpole at 4:55 p.m. and summons the officers to their units. Incidentally, swords are required on this post for both officers and NCO's. At 5 p.m. precisely, unless the commandant delays the parade for an honored guest, the adjutant strides to his post and the parade steps off.

As the companies march onto the parade ground, the drum and bugle corps breaks into the first music and moves down the quadrangle. It turns about and the Marine band, resplendent in its scarlet and gold braid, steps off to meet the drum and bugle corps. The two drum majors meet dead center, their feet hitting the sidewalk which bisects the grounds.

The two groups countermarch and take their parade posts, and the colors are marched on. The color guard, carrying the Stars and Stripes and the battle-streamered Marine flag, is the ultra in smartness. Instead of marching in the relaxed fashion which is the American military standard, the two color bearers and the two rifle-carrying guards are squeezed shoulder to shoulder so they'll never miss step, even when the colors flap in the bearers' eyes.

As they wheel – colors held true vertical with arm at right angle – they lift their knees so the heel parallels the other kneecap and take a dipping first step when they march forward again.

Then comes one of the most unusual features, a tribute by the drum and bugle corps to the British Royal Marines. It plays the “Globe and Laurel,” British equivalent of “Semper Fidelis,” slow stepping down the field in a Brittanian test of balance and sobriety.

As the band plays our National Anthem, the colors are lowered. The size of the flag depends on the wind. The Marines like to fly their big one for this event but it is so big -- 38 feet by 20 feet (bigger than many roofs) -- that it cannot be flown in a smart breeze. If it is used, a Marine is stationed behind the parapets atop the barracks to pole it away from the trees and buildings. He can't be seen, but like his visible fellows below, he, too, must be spit and polished, even though it is for the edification of no one but himself.

“In Confusion, March”

There is a manual of arms for all the assembled troops – with a resounding slap, slap as hands trim the rifle to port arms, right shoulder, left shoulder, and finally order arms,

the position where the rifle is alongside the right leg. When the rifle is put down “to the order” anywhere else, it is done with considerable gentleness. Not at this barracks. To the dismay of many a supply officer, they slam the steel butts down on the ground with a very military clatter.

More ceremony and then the drill team performs, having been marched to the center of the parade ground and left with the literal command:

“In confusion, MARCH”

They seemingly do just that. The tangle, they untangle, form squares and wheels, and take off in sundry directions and come back to formation all without another command. Then they stand in a long rank and flip their rifles up, over and around. Each one starts a movement later than the man at his left, producing a startling spiral effect. When the last man at the right is finished, he flips his rifle back and starts the reverse spiral to the other end.

The drum and bugle corps put on a show. Some drum sticks have scarlet and gold ribbons, scotch-taped to prevent fraying. The cymbals send darts of sunlight throughout the grounds as they whirl in the air.

Finally, the precious colors are marched off and the band parades down the ground, the troops fading off unit by unit as the band is interposed between them and the spectators. The ceremony is over. For the officers, there is one last tradition -- at the informal reception, port wine is served.

What manner of men are these who make such a fetish or military show and, almost to the man say they like it? Most are recent combat veterans (about 60 percent). Many are married. The musicians are chosen for their proficiency, the correspondence school troops for their scholarship, and the barracks detachment as exemplars of military bearing and conduct.

Standards High

They pride themselves that many are looked over for “8th and Eye” duty but few are chosen (out of 35 enlisted men selected as possibles at Quantico recently, only three met the standards). The rejects, of course, all say they want no part of such a tight post but the chosen are proud they are chosen. They are all of aa pattern, height variance is rigidly restricted, for example. They all seem to feel that they are doing is setting the pace for the Marine Corps (and no Marine has ever finished boot camp without thinking that means setting the pace for everyone else).

They look upon the requirements for spit and polish as giving themselves the innate satisfaction of being always “squared away.” If a man doesn't pass the scrutiny of the corporal of the guard as he goes on liberty, he is turned back and, these Marines say, he finally feels that he got what was coming to him and good for him.

There are other advantages. The chow is excellent, the liberty is fine, and Washington is a good liberty town. But the number one reason, they agree, is that when you're at 8th and Eye, you're in the showcase of the Marine Corps, and you have to be the best to get there.