

Marine Barracks' Grounds Combat Element Platoon Sows Seeds of Precision, Pride

Story by Mary D. Karcher · Photos by Isaac D. Pacheco

Marines were forbidden to walk across the blacktop that had just been thoroughly cleaned. Freshly scrubbed seats awaited 3,500 guests. Leaf blowers had repeatedly whisked away any stray leaves or debris that might mar the sidewalks. All the stanchions supporting the chain dividers along the pathways had been repainted the day before. Every wilting flower had been removed from its stalk. No blade of grass would dare to be out of alignment for this particular Friday when the traditional Evening Parade was to be held at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., where every detail symbolizes Marine Corps commitment and dedication.

The stalwart Marines of the Grounds Combat Element (GCE), a platoon of Headquarters and Service Company, are responsible for the picture-perfect appearance of the grounds at MB Washington. Each season brings forth new challenges for this group of 20 Marines as they contend with fall leaves, winter snow and ice, spring planting and summer parades. Their hard work creates the orderly appearance of the grounds, which immaculately mimics the precision and pride of the Marine Corps for the many ceremonial events held there throughout the year.

"The Grounds Marines have the least glamorous, most under-appreciated, but absolutely critical role at Marine Barracks

Washington," said Barracks commanding officer Colonel Terry M. Lockard. "Everyone who visits the Barracks, whether for a parade or some other reason, has an expectation that Marines pay attention to the smallest details. Two things stick with [visitors] when they leave: the personal interaction they had with individual Marines and the appearance of the Barracks itself. Grounds Marines create that appearance of the Barracks and create the impression that people take with them when they depart. Grounds Marines work harder and longer than any Marines here."

Their diligence creates a safe, attractive and ultimately flawless appearance. Their dedication has earned them recog-

LCpls Justin Neel and William L. Phillips, outside section leader, discuss their "battle plan" before cleaning the sidewalks outside Marine Barracks Washington, D.C.



Although they are often unseen, their work sets the tone and provides the backdrop for the precise moves and regimented march of the parade.

dition as being the backbone of the Barracks, according to noncommissioned officer in charge of the GCE Platoon, Sergeant Jeremy S. LaForce from Santa Maria, Calif. "We're here before everybody else and we're here after everybody's gone, hanging out in the shadows. Whether it's rain, snow or burning up, Marines are out here working. That's how we got the nickname Backbone."

While spotlights are focused on the Color Guard, the Ceremonial Marchers of "Alpha" and "Bravo" companies, and the Silent Drill Platoon when they perform at the Evening Parade, Barracks guests rarely see the Marines of the Grounds Combat Element in action, though their presence is ubiquitous. Although they are often unseen, their work sets the tone and provides the backdrop for the precise moves and regimented march of the parade.

The term "grounds combat element"—note the "s" on "grounds"—to describe these hardworking Marines was derived from the Marine Corps term "ground combat element," the core element of a Marine air-ground task force. According to a former Barracks commander, Col K. G. Brickhouse, USMC (Ret), in 1999 then-Captain Robert Rhode, the Barracks' assistant logistics officer or S-4 Alpha, wanted to recognize the hard work of this unique Marine unit. To give them unit identity at MB Washington, Rhode created a distinctive uniform for the group, blue trousers and blue T-shirts with a "Grounds Combat Element" logo. He also proposed the name to emphasize their importance to the overall mission of the Barracks and worked under S-4 Major Frank Quigley to build their esprit de corps.

Today the unit is as strong as ever and setting new goals for performance. Sgt LaForce describes morale as good: "Of course, being outside, the Marines are always working with each other, always joking, [with] a real close bond with the [other] Marines. You get a lot of junior Marines, so you get to mold them to be good Marines." He said GCE Marines like to compete against their own record, trying to beat prior deadlines and raise their standards.

"Most of the Marines here will tell you we're Marines; it's what we do. When we do something, we make sure that it's done right. It's just one of the things that has always been instilled in us," LaForce said. He looked to the GCE staff NCOIC,

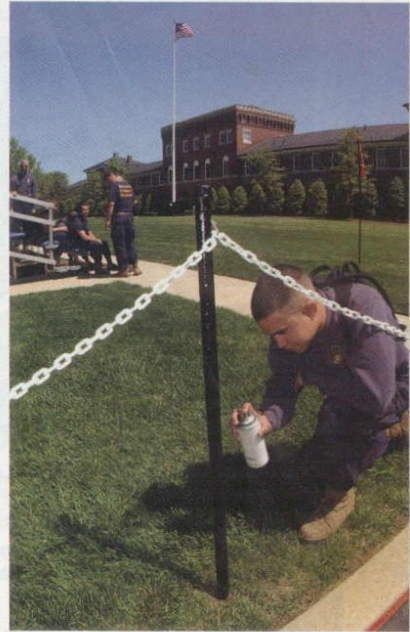
Gunnery Sergeant John J. Rivera from Costa Rica, for agreement, adding that as a former drill instructor, Rivera could explain what motivates Marines.

The former DI at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., and Officer Candidates School at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., agreed with LaForce's description, but added that the prestige of working at Marine Barracks Washington also inspires these Marines to work hard. "You have everybody from all walks of life—whether civilians or the military, from generals on down—that walk through the gates to see what Marine Barracks '8th & I' is all about," Rivera said. "As a Marine, you're instilled with that pride to consistently make things look better."

The prestige of Marine Barracks Washington has grown with the history of the Corps. The ground these Marines tend was selected by President Thomas Jefferson and Lieutenant Colonel William Ward Burrows, the Corps' second Commandant, on March 31, 1801. They designated square 927 of southeast Washington, D.C., now bordered by "G," "I," 8th and 9th streets, as the ideal location for the Barracks—within marching distance of the Naval Gun Factory and the Capitol. The Home of the Commandants is the only original building still standing on the property and is considered the oldest public building in continuous use in the nation's capital.

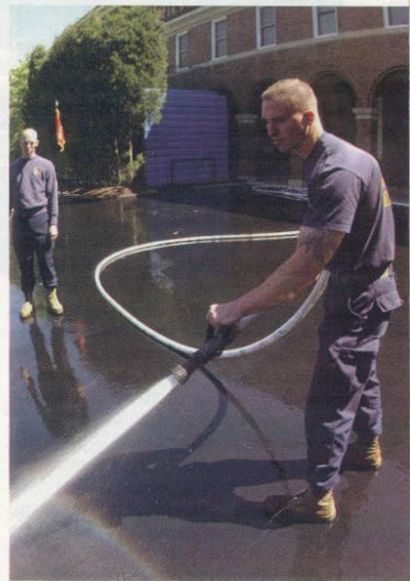
The Barracks serves as a reminder of the contributions the Marine Corps has made, and continues to make, to American history. Since its earliest days, the Barracks hosted military reviews and ceremonies, including presidential inaugurations. Today it provides the American public an opportunity to view what has been called "the most brilliantly executed military parade in the world."

According to the former Barracks drillmaster, First Sergeant Peter W. Ferral, the keepers of such a place must support an atmosphere of hallowed ground. "The atmosphere here is very important to the whole parade. Grounds makes it. They are just as important as the Silent Drill Platoon." As drillmaster, Ferral ensured that the drill and ceremonies were conducted in accordance with the official order, reinforcing the importance of precision, accuracy and perfection, a theme prevalent in the physical appearance of the Barracks as well as the Marines' performance on the parade deck.



Above: No detail is too minute to pass the observation of keen-eyed PFC Michael D. Beaty, who puts the final coat on one of many fence posts throughout the Barracks grounds.

Below: Cpl Matthew T. Dawson uses a fire hose to blast away dirt in the Barracks parking lot. Grounds Combat Element Marines often clean the same area several times during the course of the day to ensure that nothing is missed.





Above: Cpl James K. Haygood, the resident "grass expert" according to his fellow Marines, and Sgt Joseph McQuillan, GCE guide, lay sod over worn areas of the parade deck while Marines practice the flag-lowering ceremony in the background.

Below: During a lighter moment in one of his many formations, GySgt John J. Rivera checks with his GCE Marines, Sgt Jeremy S. LaForce, Cpl Haygood and LCpl Matthew J. Scali, to ensure they have everything they need to stay on task throughout the day.



Although the Friday Evening Parades at the Barracks keep the grounds element on a tight schedule, the unit also works with the National Park Service at the Marine Corps War Memorial to prepare for the Sunset Parades held Tuesday evenings in the summertime. On Tuesday mornings at six o'clock, they are on the memorial's grounds to clean, trim and set up chairs and drinking water in preparation for that evening's parade. They will not complete their job until the last chair is broken down and the grounds

are returned to their pristine condition—long after the parade-goers have left.

Dark winter mornings mean 6 a.m. starts at the Barracks to remove snow and put salt down on the walkways to prevent accidents. This tireless unit takes on whatever Mother Nature throws at them with tenacity and perseverance. Many of the tasks are tedious, but LaForce said pride in the Marine Corps feeds their enthusiasm. Besides, he added, "You've got the Commandant here, and he can always look out his window to check you out!"

Sgt LaForce explained that the unit's work is divided among three squads, each with its own geographical area of responsibility. The "CMC" section takes care of the grounds of the Commandant's home, which includes a garden setting for receptions and ceremonies, many of which are attended by senior dignitaries. The inside section is in charge of maintaining the parade deck, the Band Hall (formerly the John Philip Sousa Hall) and the gardens of the five living quarters. The exterior of the quadrangle of buildings is the responsibility of the outside section, and it also includes cleaning the sidewalks across the street on all four sides of the Barracks.

Lance Corporal William L. Phillips from Vidalia, Ga., is the outside section leader. Along with four other Marines, he cuts grass, trims bushes, picks up trash, removes snow in the winter and collects leaves from the sidewalks several times a day in the fall.

Phillips said the best part of his job is the people, both civilians and fellow Marines. Since the outside crew is visible to the public, many people approach them and compliment them on their work or ask questions. In this way, these GCE Marines are the unofficial ambassadors of the Barracks due to their opportunity to interact with the public far more than most Barracks Marines.

LCpl Phillips loves his job and it truly shows. He said, "The guys I work with, I wouldn't trade them for anybody else. We get along good. We share the section. I listen to them, they listen to me, and we help each other. We stay motivated. We all have nicknames, and at every PT [physical training] session and when we come to work, we do our outside cheer and we get to work."

Inside section leader LCpl Matthew J. Scali works with five other Marines to maintain the area inside the quadrangle. On the parade deck his Marines clean the bleachers, blow leaves and debris from the lawn and the walkways, and trim trees. In the gardens of the family living quarters they weed, rake, water, remove dead flowers and twigs, and pick up any trash. They also prepare the Band Hall by putting out chairs and coat racks.

LCpl Scali finds the deadlines challenging, but he is proud of making the grounds look nice. When his mother visited the Barracks last year, he said she wanted to know why he couldn't make their yard look that good.

The section leader for the grounds that surround the Commandant's home, Corporal Matthew T. Dawson from Columbus, Ohio, described his crew as being motivated, especially during the summer

Marines of the Grounds Combat Element succeed because they work together as a team, relying on the leadership and pride that was instilled in them from their first days in the Corps.

when everything is blooming. Winter can be slow he said, as they remove snow and make sure the walkways are clear. His crew is responsible for the front and back yards, including a large garden and a fountain. All the flowers and bushes must look perfect, he said, which means frequent checks to pick up fallen leaves or remove wilted flowers.

Cpl Dawson said he enjoys being outside all day and has learned a lot about landscaping. He points out that the grounds Marines “make the place look and run the way it does in order for everyone to perform; without grounds making it look picture-perfect, the parade pretty much wouldn’t happen.”

All of the Marines sang the praises of Cpl James K. Haygood from Chattanooga, Tenn. Calling Cpl Haygood the “subject matter expert,” Sgt LaForce said, “He is solely responsible for ensuring our deck looks the way it’s supposed to.”

Achieving that green, vibrant turf, which is the focal point for all the activity of the parade, is not an easy task. Cpl Haygood explained that everyone wants to practice on the grass, which not only wears it down but also means that he has to compete for time to work on the grass. He has learned a lot about fertilizers and repairing bare spots so that each week, despite the weather or the wear, the grass looks healthy.

Cpl Haygood also enables all the Marines to complete their work on schedule as he maintains and repairs all their equipment in the “cage,” where it is stored. The senior enlisted and officers also rely on Haygood to make sure that everything they’ve noted on their walk-through review gets done.

Once the parade begins, the GCE Platoon can begin to remove chairs in the Band Hall, signage for VIPs and handicapped parking, and the temporary entrance gate extensions by the quarters while the attendees are watching the parade. Then they stand by in case any additional needs arise. But their day isn’t over with the last note of “Taps,” the final musical piece of the parade. The day that began at 6 a.m. still is going strong at 10:30 p.m. when the parade guests are heading home. What took all day to set up will take the grounds Marines at least two hours to break down, meaning their day will not end until midnight.

The Marines of the Grounds Combat Element succeed because they work together as a team, relying on the leader-

ship and pride that was instilled in them from their first days in the Corps. Beyond their responsibilities at the Barracks, some of the Marines participate in off-duty education and all are kept current in their MOS (military occupational specialty).

Often members of this unit are called for other duties. Currently two GCE Marines are serving at Dover, Del., in support of fallen Marines. Sometimes the Body Bearer unit needs support and will depend upon additional Marines from the GCE Platoon to be road guards for a funeral detail. Some Marines volunteer for the combat replacement program, joining Marine units headed for Iraq.

Sgt LaForce was one of 21 Marines from 8th & I who volunteered for the program in 2004. He served in Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq, as a fire team leader in Bravo Co, 1st Battalion, Eighth Marine Regiment, earning a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with combat “V.” He voluntarily extended to stay with the unit because he said, “It’s what you want to do, especially as an NCO, to be able to say that you led your Marines in a combat situation; it’s what you train for.”

This combat-decorated Marine is as well versed in selecting the right flowers for varying degrees of sun exposure as he is in leading Marines in combat. “‘Gunny’ [Rivera] is a combat engineer and I’m a grunt, so it’s a completely different world for us to be taking care of flowers, but we learn to adapt,” said Sgt LaForce, laughing.

“One of the things that we try to focus on, we understand that [the Barracks has visitors from] a lot of families of Marines that are serving, prior Marines or Marines that have unfortunately passed away. They come out here to see the parades. We get an opportunity to talk to some of the families, and they tell us they come out here to be around Marines. It helps them to feel closer.”

Members of the Grounds Combat Element prove every day that they respect the hallowed ground of Marine Barracks, Washington. Their labor maintains the dignity and perfection of the Corps that is mirrored in the ceremonial performances at the Barracks. Their work is not always celebrated, but the environment they create is an ever-present reminder of the exacting standards and pride essential to the mission of the Marine Corps.

