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*“A Harsh and Spiritual Unity”:
A New Look at Culture and Battle in the Marine Corps’ Pacific War*

Aaron B. O’Connell
Yale University

In the last two decades, the military history community has finally begun to acknowledge culture as a causal force in warfare. After an lengthy period of dismissing race, gender, and cultural theory as irrelevant to the study of combat, most scholars of warfare are prepared now to admit what is obvious to most: our beliefs, identity narratives, and idea templates affect how we act – whether in our home lives, work lives, or, for military members, on the battlefield. Not only does culture influence when and why we go to war, it shapes how we fight: the tactics and tools we use, including the rhetorical tactics that help us understand, explain and justify our participation in the conflict.¹ To paraphrase Edward Said, wars require stories as well as guns, and it is the

Aaron B. O’Connell is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at Yale University.

¹ An excellent survey of the increasing attention paid to culture in military history may be found in Wayne E. Lee: “Mind and Matter – Cultural Analysis in Military History: A Look at the State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* (March 2007) 1116-1142.

Marines' stories about their community during World War II that this article analyzes and explains.²

There has been previous cultural history written on the Marine Corps in the Pacific War, most notably, John W. Dower's *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* and Craig M. Cameron's *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division 1941-1951*.³ Both of these works explore how culture affected the conduct of war in the Pacific and offer racism as a dominant explanatory framework – a problem John A. Lynn addresses well in his *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*.⁴ But besides the overemphasis on race, there is another gap in the historical literature on culture and battle in the Pacific War. No scholarly work has yet explained satisfactorily the opposite side of the culture/battle relationship: cultural norms may have shaped actions on the battlefield, but how did the experience of warfare shape the Marines' culture? How did the Marine Corps' stories about World War II – which remain so important to the organization today – emerge and grow in power? Memoirists and historians alike use terms like “esprit de corps,” and “Marine Corps spirit,” but fail to historicize the emergence and growth of that set of feelings and stories. This article offers one analysis of that historical process.

² Mary A. Renda paraphrase Said's famous comment on empire in Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 9.

³ John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). Craig M. Cameron, *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴ John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003), 219-80.

Cameron's *American Samurai* is the only scholarly work that attempts to track the emergence and trajectory of the Marines' service culture in World War II but it fails in several respects. With chapters on gender in recruit training, race on Guadalcanal and technology and interservice rivalry on Peleliu and Okinawa, Cameron's is a scattershot approach to the culture of the Corps. If there is a central thesis to his book, it is one of rise and fall: the stories Marines told themselves in World War II emerged in recruit training, flourished on Guadalcanal and eventually, destabilized and collapsed in the post-war occupation of China and later, Korea. This article challenges two of Cameron's assertions. First, Cameron's claim that gender narratives were central to creating a sense of Marine superiority in recruit training is too simplistic. Gender did play a role in Marine recruit training, but it was hardly the most important tactic of distinguishing Marines from civilians or the other services. Rather, what I call the "narratives of Marine exceptionalism" – a constellation of ideas, feelings and stories emerging from the Corps' small size, demographics, and the specific practices of Marine recruit training – explain the Corps' cohesion on the battlefield and off. Second, Cameron misjudges the trajectory of the Marine Corps' culture and its power. He argues that the increased violence of the final months of the Pacific War weakened the Marines' notions of their own exceptionalism and their experiences with occupation and limited war in North China and Korea caused the World War II stories to collapse entirely.⁵ I take the opposite view. The increasingly violent nature of the warfare Marines experience strengthened their commitment to their stories and community as did the interservice rivalry that grew

⁵ Cameron's discussion of the collapse of the World War II Marine identity narratives is found in Cameron, *American Samurai*, 203-40.

through 1944 and 1945. These two factors made the Corps' culture stronger after the war than it had been in 1941.

Any article on culture must give some attention to definitions. While excellent scholarship exists on how culture, ideas and belief systems affect both individuals and institutions, it too often requires substantial translation to be accessible to the general public. Here, I use the word "culture" to mean the whole host of ways that individuals and groups differentiate themselves from other individuals and groups.⁶ In short, culture is the stories people tell themselves and others about themselves. And while "stories" usually implies a linguistic form – something told or written with words – I use the term and its synonym "narrative" more loosely. Rituals, traditions, uniform insignia and even habits of dress and posture tell stories too, even if they do so without words.

One more definition is necessary, one specific to the Marines' service culture. Throughout the history of the Corps, mere separation or distinction from other groups has never been enough. Using terms like "Marine spirit," tradition and "Marine Corps feeling," Marines have always made claims of *superiority*, both in comparison to other military organizations, and at times, civilian ones. For that reason, I refer to the Corps' identity narratives as the narratives of Marine exceptionalism, which I define as those stories which asserted unconditionally that the Corps was both unique and superior to any other group, and located the source of that difference in transcendent notions of mystique, spirit, and feeling.

⁶ I take this definition of culture from Immanuel Wallerstein: "Culture is a way of summarizing the ways in which one group distinguishes itself from other groups." See Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2000), 265.

My argument is divided into three parts, all designed to explain how the Marines' service culture grew stronger in, and because of, World War II. Part I argues that the Corps' small size and demographics gave it a structural advantage in preserving its institutional culture as it expanded and accepted draftees. The Army was almost fifteen times larger than the Marines in World War II; the Navy, six times as large.⁷ This allowed the Marines to keep their organization elite and cohesive and helped them avoid some of the bureaucracy that degraded networks of affiliation in the larger services. Demographics were also relevant: as a service they were younger and more often volunteers, which made them easier to indoctrinate than the older draftees of the U.S. Army.

Structural factors like size and demographics only explain so much of how and why a culture flourishes. Individuals matter too: they negotiate their community's rules and networks, and adopt narratives to explain the organization and their place in it. Part II takes another look at the processes of indoctrination in Recruit Training, where young men first came into contact with the culture of the Corps. While gender was relevant to this process, the rituals of violence and other techniques used by the Drill Instructors built commitment to the organization in ways more complicated than those offered by Cameron's *American Samurai*.

It was not just that the Marines had effective stories about their organization, but that their experiences in the war confirmed and deepened their attachment to those stories. Part III explores the Marine Corps' Pacific campaign and argues that the Corps'

⁷ This statistic does not include the Army Air Forces (AAF), which had their own distinctive culture, or the Coast Guard. See OASD (Comptroller) Department of Defense, *Selected Manpower Statistics*, ed. Directorate for Information Operations (1971), 19.

culture grew stronger during the war because their combat experiences were compatible with the stories they brought to the battlefield. Interservice rivalry and the Marines' beliefs about suffering, death, and the transcendent community of the Corps strengthened their attachment to the Corps because they reinforced the Corps' notions of their own difference and, much like in recruit training, used suffering and mistreatment to make claims of loyalty and prestige.

Mobilization: The “New Corps” and the “Democratic Army”

World War II did not create Marines' service culture or the narratives of Marine exceptionalism. The Marines culture was already comparatively strong. During the interwar years, as the Army languished from inaction and under-funding, the Marines deployed repeatedly to Haiti (1915-1934), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) and Nicaragua (1927-1933) to fight insurgencies and train indigenous forces. The Corps of this era was battle-hardened and selective. Recruiters took only one of every five applicants.⁸ Officers were often commissioned from the enlisted ranks based on their combat performance in Central America. With only seventeen thousand enlisted men and two thousand officers in 1939, the Corps was too small to form even one division.⁹ Most officers and senior enlisted men knew each other, either personally or by reputation.

⁸ For recruiting statistics, see United States Marine Corps, *Annual Report of the Major General Commandant of the United States Marine Corps to the Secretary of the Navy* for fiscal years 1939, 1940, 1941, cited in Cameron, *American Samurai*, 52.

⁹ By comparison, the Army (excluding the AAF) had 166,384 men in 1939, of which roughly eleven thousand were officers; the Navy had 125,202 total personnel of which twelve thousand were officers. Department For officer statistics, see "Department of Defense Selected Manpower Statistics," ed. Operations and Reports (DIOR) Directorate for Information (OSD Washington Headquarters Services, Washington DC, 1980), 86.

With just a handful of bases, ships, and overseas stations to serve on, Marines had a strong shared sense of place. Theirs was still an imagined community – no one knew *everyone* in the Marine Corps like in an actual family – but a strong sense of fraternity existed simply by virtue of size.¹⁰ While equally strong networks existed in specific Army divisions or ship's crews, the Marine Corps had a single culture binding together their entire service.

Even as the Corps expanded dramatically after 1939, this close-knit culture remained strong. This did not occur to the same degree in the other services. The Army expanded 35 times their pre-war size, to over six million members – eighty percent of whom were draftees.¹¹ The Navy, which like the Marines took only volunteers until 1943, grew to three and a half million members. The Marine Corps never reached five hundred thousand.¹² Even at this size, everyone remained connected by just one or two degrees of separation. Two enlisted men of the same grade would have gone through one of only two recruit training depots at either Parris Island, South Carolina or San Diego, California, sharing Drill Instructors, Sergeants Major or Company Commanders. Officers all went through training at Quantico, Virginia, and served under or met the same

¹⁰ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

¹¹ Army figures include the Army Air Forces (AAF) which did not become a separate service until 1947. For active duty statistics, see "Department of Defense Selected Manpower Statistics," 80.. For inductee statistics see United States. Selective Service System., *Selective Service and Victory: The 4th Report of the Director of Selective Service* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1948), 605. and United States. Selective Service System., *Problems of Selective Service* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1952), 193.

¹² Allan Reed Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 439.

Battalion, Regimental, and Division Commanders. At its largest, the Corps had just seventy two General officers; the Army and Air Forces combined had over fifteen hundred.¹³ With so many shared networks of affiliation, the Corps was able to preserve its sense of community and culture even in its expanded form.

The Marines' recruiting strategy also helped them weather the expansion and "civilianization" of the armed forces required by the war. As the poorest and most poorly-equipped service, the Corps could not attract volunteers with ships like the Navy or the newest planes like the Air Corps. Instead, the Marines marketed the symbolic benefits of membership: tradition, history, and their reputation as an all-volunteer force.¹⁴ The emphasis on elitism worked. In the first six months of the war, the Marine Corps doubled in size and had a faster rate of growth than either the Army or the Navy.¹⁵ Weekly enlistments, which had peaked at a pre-Pearl Harbor one-week high of 552 jumped to 6,000 per week.¹⁶ These first volunteers were not simply patriotic; they were ready converts to the culture of the Corps even before they donned a uniform.¹⁷

13 U.S. Bureau of Naval Personnel, "Register of Commissioned and Warrant Officers of the United States Navy and Marine Corps," ed. U.S. Bureau of Naval Personnel (Government Printing Office, 1945), 594. For Army General Officer figures, see United States. Selective Service System, *Selective Service and Victory*, 921.

14 This claim conveniently ignored the fact that they had already taken some 7,000 draftees during World War I. See Robert George Lindsay, *This High Name: Public Relations and the U. S. Marine Corps* (Madison,: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 24. On advertising the opportunity to kill Japanese, see Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 360.

15 *Selected Manpower Statistics*, 80.

16 Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 360.

17 For just two examples, see William Raymond Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980)., George Lince, *Too Young the Heroes: A World War II Marine's Account of Facing a Veteran Enemy at Guadalcanal, the Solomons and Okinawa* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1997).

The all-volunteer Corps did not endure long in World War II. The Marines and Navy had become so successful at poaching soon-to-be draftees from the induction stations that the Army had trouble meeting their quotas. To remedy the situation, President Roosevelt signed an executive order in late 1942, requiring all branches to procure personnel through the selective service system. Marines could still recruit those outside the draft age – seventeen year olds and those over thirty-five – but all others would be assigned by selective service. Fearing that their volunteer image was in peril, the Corps changed tactics. Focusing on the young, they brought in 60,000 seventeen year old volunteers between 1943-1945 (as well as some younger than seventeen who forged papers).¹⁸ They also stationed liaisons at the induction centers who addressed those new inductees and offered them the option of choosing the Marines over the other branches.¹⁹ Those who agreed usually had their induction status changed, dropping the “SS” (for selective service) off their record books. Of the 669,000 who served in the Marine Corps in World War II, roughly one-third came in through Selective Service. However, only seventy thousand exercised no choice in choosing the Marines.²⁰ The

¹⁸ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 374. Nearly every Marine memoir of World War II mentions underage Marines who lied about their age to join. The most famous of these was Private First Class Jack Lucas, who enlisted at age 14 and won the Medal of Honor on Iwo Jima. See Jack Lucas and D. K. Drum, *Indestructible: The Unforgettable Story of a Marine Hero at the Battle of Iwo Jima* (Waterville, Me.: Thorndike Press, 2006). For other references to underage enlistees, see Lince, *Too Young the Heroes*, 3-11; Kerry Lane, *Guadalcanal Marine* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 5-6.

¹⁹ For a detailed explanation of how the Corps adapted to executive order 9279, see “Induction and enlistment of men received through the Selective Service System” in History Division Subject File “Selective Service” Reference Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico Virginia.

²⁰ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 374.

rest volunteered in one way or another – either joining the Corps voluntarily before 1943, or choosing the Marines over the other branches once drafted. This system of partial choice allowed the Corps to maintain the fiction of an all-volunteer Marine Corps, which preserved their elitist image. The Army, which was four-fifths inductees, could not make a similar case.

The volunteers of 1942, and the partial-volunteer system thereafter, made the World War II Marine Corps a self-selected group. Unlike the pre-war Marine Corps, in which the South was over-represented, the World War II Corps came disproportionately from the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. The South was under-represented.²¹ The most over-represented states – Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Michigan and Illinois – all had large urban populations, which tended to draw more recruits to the Marines than did the poorer, rural areas. (Of the top ten most rural states, nine were underrepresented in the Marine Corps.)²² African Americans were segregated and severely underrepresented,

²¹ The comparative regional percentages of USMC population in World War II and the estimated U.S. population in 1945 are: Midwest (31%/30%), New England (29%/27%), South (28%/31%) and West (12%/12%). In contrast, of all servicemen enlisted or inducted in World War II, the comparative percentages are: Midwest (29%/30%), New England (29%/27%), South (30%/31%) and West (11%/12%). See United States. Selective Service System., *Problems of Selective Service*, 190. and "Marine Corps Personnel . . . December 1941-July 1945" in RG127, E107, Box 10, Statistics folder, Archives II, College Park, MD.

²² One study of selective service in South Carolina showed that draftees from highly industrialized areas chose the Marine Corps four times as often as did those coming from rural areas. See Peter Karsten, *The Military in America: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, New, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1986), 337. According to the 1940 census, the most rural states were Mississippi, North Dakota, Arkansas, South Carolina, South Dakota, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, and New Mexico. Of these, only West Virginia was overrepresented. Census data available at www.census.gov

comprising only three percent of all who served in the Corps during the war.²³ Women served in equivalent numbers to African Americans, totaling just under twenty thousand by war's end.²⁴ Hispanics and American Indians were integrated into combat units with whites, though they too encountered regular racial discrimination. The Marine Corps in World War II was still a club for white men, and there was serious resistance from all ranks to making it otherwise.

The most significant demographic characteristic of the World War II Marine Corps was their age. In the testosterone-infused environs of the recruiting and induction stations, where boys stood "grinning from ear to ear, strutting like peacocks, chests puffed out beyond recognition," it was the younger men who were most vulnerable to the peer pressure of joining the toughest outfit.²⁵ Consequently, the average age of a Marine in the war was twenty-three, four years lower than that of the average Army soldier.²⁶

²³ The Marines were the most resistant service to including African-Americans. 19,168 African-Americans served in the Marine Corps in World War II, far less than the 1943 quota of 10% of the total force. They served exclusively in labor and defense battalions, but even here, they saw combat on Saipan, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, and suffered nearly 100 combat casualties. See Ralph W. Donnelly, Henry I. Shaw, "Blacks in the Marine Corps," ed. History and Museums Division (Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., 2002), 29-46, 48. and Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 374-75.

²⁴ Women in the Marine Corps Reserve served in administrative, clerical and technical positions during World War II, mostly at Headquarters Marine Corps. See LtCol Pat Meid, "Marine Corps Woman's Reserve in World War II," ed. G-3 Division Historical Branch (Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1968), 55.

²⁵ This description comes from a Marine who was seventeen year old when he joined. See Lince, *Too Young the Heroes*, 11.

²⁶ United States. Selective Service System., *Selective Service and Victory*, 605. See also "Age Distribution, Enlisted personnel on active Duty 1 Aug 45" in "Strength and Distribution 1930-1949" Subject File, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

Most Marine recruits were fresh out of high school and like many young men, they yearned for tests of manhood. In the Army, where 88 percent of the soldiers were over twenty-one, identities were more fully formed.²⁷ These men had greater experience with responsibility and adulthood; they needed no Drill Instructor to tell them they were men. But the younger Marine recruits did. For these boys, still in search of themselves, and desperate for role-models in the new social universe of wartime America, the Corps offered a compelling narrative of self, community, and most importantly, manhood.²⁸ By the end of the war the Marines would fill almost one third of their ranks with men age twenty-one or younger.

Though some friction existed between the Old Breed (those who had enlisted before the war) and the “New Corps,” the rift was minor. Recruits entering the Marine Corps understood they were leaving civilian culture behind; indeed, many had chosen the Marine Corps because of its distinctiveness from civilian society. Most recruits admired their non-commissioned officers (NCOs), most of whom had combat experience in Central America or had been stationed in Asia during the interwar years. Even officer-enlisted relations, which are always fractious in militaries, were less problematic in the Marines because so many of the Old Breed officers were commissioned from the enlisted

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ One sixteen year old who joined with forged papers remembers why he had put his life “in hock for four years to the most fearsome and hazardous of the country’s armed forces.” He joined because “there is something about being sixteen years old that is different from any other year in a man’s lifetime. It is an uncertain and dangerous time. He is reluctant to turn loose of one’s childhood, yet he is more than eager to attain manhood and to prove to the world, and especially to himself, that he is a man and can handle a man’s responsibilities. It’s a very uncertain age, full of emotional conflicts. I hoped I would do well and make my family proud.” See Lane, *Guadalcanal Marine*, 5-6. See also, Lince, *Too Young the Heroes*, 10-11.

ranks. These “Mustangs,” as prior-service officers were called, made up 62 percent of the Second Lieutenants in 1942 and 49 percent of the Lieutenant Colonels.²⁹ They and the enlisted leaders passed on the sense of community, tradition and elitism that were integral to the narratives of Marine exceptionalism.

The Army also had a pre-war service culture steeped in martial tradition, but it did not weather the wartime expansion as successfully as the Marines’ did. The draft forced civilian culture into the Army, creating deep rifts between the pre-war regulars and the new inductees. Educational differences between draftees and the pre-war regulars exacerbated tensions, particularly since the regulars had less combat experience to bolster their authority with the new recruits. Army identity narratives were tied to the individual divisions; as a result, no single, unifying story for the entire Army ever gained authority.³⁰ The only attempt at a service-wide identity narrative was that of the “Democratic Army,” which further diluted martial tradition by asserting that the military was a natural extension of civilian life.³¹

²⁹ U.S. Bureau of Naval Personnel, "Register of Commissioned and Warrant Officers of the United States Navy and Marine Corps," ed. U.S. Bureau of Naval Personnel (Government Printing Office, 1942), 734-807.

³⁰ As one Army officer explained, the division is the “the most vital unit. It transcends all claims or prerogatives of branch, arm, service. It is the basic fighting unit – the center of accomplishment, esprit and morale. . . . What ships are to sailors, divisions are to soldiers. The Marine Corps, smaller, more compact, and less burdened with necessary housekeeping duties, is more fortunate; it can maintain its pride in the whole corps. In the Army, basic esprit is tied to the division.” See Major Thomas H. Farnsworth, "The Division," *United States Army Combat Forces Journal*, Vol 2, No. 1 (1951), 18.

³¹ For a detailed discussion of the Democratic Army narrative, see Benjamin L. Alpers, "This Is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II" *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (1998).

Army inductees in World War II had a firm sense of patriotism and agreed on one goal: to win the war. Beyond this, however, there was little to bind them together. Some entered by choice, others by force. Some fought in the Pacific, others in Europe or the Mediterranean. Almost a quarter stayed in the United States. Service-wide cohesion was hindered further by the fact that infantry divisions were separated by type: regular, reserve, and National Guard, with no small amount of inter-unit rivalry between them. Across the service, there was a relatively low density of common experience. The wide variation of Army experience in the war, the deployment to many theaters, and the sheer number of units made it impossible to create a uniform culture across the whole service. With such weak bonds of commonality, few draftees found any sense of martial identity in the Army. They were citizens first and soldiers by necessity.

Because Army inductees retained their civilian culture upon entering the Army, personnel relations during World War II were more prone to conflict than in the Marine Corps. The volunteer army of the 1920s and 1930s had produced a tight-knit corps of professional non-commissioned officers. They were tough and dedicated to the Army way, which had provided over three-quarters of them an education in lieu of completing high school. The majority of inductees were high school graduates, and most had little investment in their NCOs' lessons and traditions. More than half of the inductees found their NCOs lacking. Only one-third thought their instructors were good teachers; many draftees felt their NCOs were "inefficient," "incompetent," and "not too intelligent."³² One draftee expressed a common complaint in a survey taken the day after Pearl Harbor:

³² Samuel Andrew Stouffer, *The American Soldier, Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1949), 59-62, 66, 67.

My First Sergeant knows the NCO's are not too intelligent – he admits this. He also admits that the SS [selective service] men are, by far, more intelligent than the Army's regular NCO's. But he says there is nothing can be done about this. My advice is to run an IQ test and let the men who have the most knowledge be the bosses.³³

The old regulars also had contempt for the draftees. The “selective service men,” complained one regular, “are treated much better than we soldiers (the significant underlining was the writer's own). They grunt and gripe too much.” Said another regular NCO: “I think discipline was relaxed on Selective Service men, from what it was formerly on Regular Army men. Selectees have been allowed to wise off too much. Many of them are too smart for their own good.”³⁴

Relations between officers and enlisted men were no better. Inductees complained bitterly of a “caste system,” that destroyed morale and undermined a spirit of teamwork: “the Army idea of class distinction between officers and men is all wrong . . . Men do not like to be treated as if they were just toys and dogs for someone to play with. We are entitled to the respect we worked for and earned in civilian life.”³⁵ Said another: “I consider the Army tradition bigoted and medieval, utterly out of keeping with our democratic ideals.”³⁶ So strong were these sentiments that they prompted widespread

33 Ibid., 68.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 74.

36 Ibid., 212.

strikes and protests from soldiers awaiting demobilization after the war. With the enemy defeated and patriotic duty fulfilled, the Army had little binding it together.³⁷

Inductees rejected the undemocratic nature of military life because they had been conditioned to do so. Americans had long defined their nation in opposition to Europe and in particular, to Europe's standing armies. America's entry into the war required a new means of national differentiation. Political and military leaders responded by arguing that unlike Germany and Japan, the U.S. had an army of citizen-soldiers – its power derived from the greater degree of individualism that came with ordinary folk forming a “democratic army.” Conscription was not as an deviation from American tradition, but a mere “change in circumstances, demanding a redirections of the skills and efforts of every American, but allowing even those men drafted into the Armed forces to continue revised versions of their civilian lives.”³⁸

This reframing of the war as an extension of civilian life may have been necessary to reconcile the requirements of the war with the anti-militarist tradition in the United States, but it created cultural friction within the Army. Recruits came in expecting the right to voice dissent and believing that civilian values of meritocracy and individualism could co-exist with military hierarchy and discipline. The culture clash that resulted not only undermined the democratic Army narrative, it diluted the Old

³⁷ Ibid., 449.

³⁸ Alpers, "This Is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II": 138-
³⁹. See also Benjamin Leontief Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s*, *Cultural Studies of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Regular's pre-war martial tradition and thwarted the development of a single cohesive service culture during World War II.

Unlike “democratic Army” proponents, the Marine Corps did not downplay the costs of moving from civilian to military life; it emphasized them. Rather than celebrating similarities to civilian life, the Corps insisted on its own radical difference from every other group – the Japanese and German enemies, the other American services, and even the civilian society from whence it came. To demonstrate that difference, boot camp, also called recruit training, effected a total break with civilian society, and used ritual, tradition, and violence to imprint the culture of the Corps on recruits.

“A Harsh and Spiritual Unity”: The Cultural Transformation of Recruit Training

Recruit training was the central locus of cultural indoctrination for the Marine Corps. Because there were only two recruit depots (Parris Island, South Carolina and San Diego, California), recruit training was a unifying experience; the entire enlisted corps as well as with those officers commissioned from the enlisted ranks could share stories of their time as a “boot.” The lessons imparted to them from their Drill Instructors – both by the book and the rod – were as much a primer in the culture of the Corps as they were instructions for combat. The primary purpose of recruit training was to create “basically trained Marines,” capable of serving as infantry riflemen and inculcated with the Corps’ values of endurance, sacrifice, and above all, discipline. The methods of inculcation and recruits’ own memories of that experience reveal much about how the Corps built a cohesive service culture of both volunteers and inductees in World War II.

Cameron's *American Samurai* offers the most detailed treatment of the cultural mechanics of Marine recruit training during World War II.³⁹ Cameron attempts to uncover recruit training's hidden cultural processes by exploring its manipulation of gender norms. Marine recruits were inculcated with a masculine ideal, he argues, which "generated highly polarized boundaries that reduced any 'outsiders' – broadly defined – into potential objects for violent overthrow." At the heart of the process was a "pathological fear and loathing" of all things female, which was then "transferred to the Pacific battlefields and the brutal conquest of the [feminized] Japanese." Marines readily adopted the Corps' culture not because they wanted to, but because they had little opportunity to resist. If the Marines' culture was at all attractive, he concludes, it was because their all-male world offered "an escape from female-dominated society." The war, in this reading, was a "boyhood fantasy" which allowed one "new opportunities to prove one's worth, demonstrate self-reliance, and restore a 'proper' [meaning male-dominated] balance between the sexes." ⁴⁰

Cameron is right to argue that recruit training, like all rites of passage, entailed an isolation from the previous culture and a transition to a new one. Gendered narratives were a central part of this process, as they have historically been in most military services. This was particularly true in the Marine Corps, which viewed the Women's Reserve as a wartime expedient to be dismantled at war's end. Since most women served in the United States, the wartime Marine Corps was essentially an all-male community and did espouse the hyper-masculine values Cameron details. However, all American

³⁹ See Cameron, *American Samurai*, chapter 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 49-88.

military cultures in the war were male-dominated and deployed gendered narratives in their initial training. What was different about the Marines?

What distinguished boot camp from the other services was the emphasis on cultural transformation rather than tactical or technical instruction. Whereas the goal of the Army's training program was to properly classify and then train soldiers to function effectively in large units (battalions, regiments and divisions), the goal of Marine boot camp was to instill each recruit with a new identity and culture, complete with its own language, myths, heroes and rituals. 41 The Drill Instructors (DIs) accomplished this by emphasizing tradition and history and by resorting regularly to punitive violence. Together, these strategies of acculturation venerated loyalty and suffering, teaching recruits that what made Marines unique was their deep devotion to their community and their capacity to endure hardship. It was these narratives of Marine exceptionalism, even more than the manipulation of gender, that powered the indefinable rhetoric of Marine esprit de corps.

In contrast, initial Army training in World War II was highly de-centralized and pragmatic. It occurred at 242 different training centers around the country, each operating according to the requirements of the individual commander. Because the Army's basic goal was to prepare and then integrate all the component parts of an infantry division, the

41 The desired end-state of recruit training, according to the Commandant's directive to the Recruit Depots, was to produce recruits who "have completed the transition from a civilian to a Marine and be ready to begin his training as a member of a team at the training center." See Kenneth W. Condit, *Marine Corps Ground Training in World War II* (Washington,: Historical Branch, G-3, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1956), 170. The Army's goal with initial training are well summarized in R. R. Palmer, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington,: Historical Division, Dept. of the Army, 1948), 442-55.

training philosophy was Taylorist: it emphasized rational and efficient classification rather than cultural transformation.⁴² After a brief orientation in basic subjects, units broke off to train in the specialties assigned to them by the classification officers: engineers built bridges; clerks learned administrative procedures; signalmen strung wire, and infantry units conducted tactical exercises. The primary methods of instruction were lectures, films and practical demonstrations. Individual, or basic, training lasted thirteen weeks, but two thirds of the time was devoted to technical subjects and small-unit training.⁴³ Soldiers received only one month of common training before being segregated according to specialty.

In 1941, Marine recruit training was six weeks long. As the war progressed, it was lengthened first to seven and later to eight weeks. The recruits first contact with the Corps' culture was designed not for orientation, as in the Army, but for shock and disorientation. Upon arrival at Parris Island or San Diego, Marine recruits received what former recruit depot commander General Victor H. Krulak called an "ego-ectomy": "initiation starts with a reduction of all to a common denominator. Stripped naked in a group for a physical examination, they are bathed together, their heads clipped, civilian clothing and jewelry removed, all dressed exactly the same. From this moment, none is different from any other. None is better than any other. . . . [T]hey start from an initial

42 For just a description of the Army's training philosophy during World War II, see B. N. Harlow, "Training for Military Service: Organizing for Total War," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 220 (1942): 45-48. Alpers also makes mention of the rational, pragmatic, approach of the wartime army that made it seem a natural extension of Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management*. See Alpers, "This Is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II".

43 Palmer, *Procurement and Training*, 444-45.

zero and they are rebuilt from there.”⁴⁴ Unlike the other services, which bestowed the label soldier or sailor upon induction, the new recruits could not yet call themselves Marines. Officially, they were “recruits” or “boots”; more colloquially, they were “shitbirds.” Nor could they yet wear the eagle, globe and anchor emblem of the Corps. Neither civilian nor Marine, they were like novitiates in a religious order, consigned to a liminal status until they completed recruit training.⁴⁵

To emphasize the abrupt shift away from civilian life, Drill Instructors resorted readily to what General Krulak called “rigorous physical punishment” to imprint the culture of the Corps on the new initiates.⁴⁶ The first step was to learn the Marines’ language: “It was unwise” remembers one World War II recruit “to call a deck a ‘floor,’ a bulkhead a ‘wall,’ an overhead a ‘ceiling,’ a hatch a ‘door,’ or a ladder ‘stairs. . . . On Parris Island these and all other customs of the boot’s new way of life were flouted at great risk.”⁴⁷ Mistakes were corrected with exhausting exercises performed in flea-ridden sand pits, and sometimes slaps, kicks, or worse. Particularly in the early years of the war, when the DIs were often Corporals or Privates First Class just a year or two senior to the new recruits, the reliance on “rigorous physical punishment” could lead to

⁴⁴ General Krulak served as the Depot Commander of San Diego in 1960, though the processes he describes are well documented in Marines’ memoirs of World War II. Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, Bluejacket Books (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 161.

⁴⁵ For a detailed explanation of the stages of separation, liminality and incorporation involved in rites of passage, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London,: Routledge & Paul, 1960).

⁴⁶ Krulak, *First to Fight*, 167.

⁴⁷ Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness*, 122.

beatings and concussions.⁴⁸ The harshest punitive measures were most often used to correct cultural gaffs – mistakes in terminology, failures in military courtesy, or symbolic mistreatment of one’s rifle.

The time dedicated to different activities in recruit training reveal the program’s underlying goals. Of all the subjects in the training schedule, weapons instruction received the most attention – over twice as many hours as any other subject. Field training ranked second in total hours; physical training ranked fourth. The physical components of boot camp were intense and at times brutal: in 1943 they included thirty minutes of “body contact exercises” and thirty minutes of “massed bare-handed boxing” every day.⁴⁹ There were twice-weekly training sessions in hand-to-hand and unarmed combat, as well as bayonet drills, judo and wrestling. Though much of this training was pragmatic in nature, the violence of the process served another function as well. The punitive exercises, hand-to-hand fighting, and disciplinary violence not only prepared the recruit for combat; it linked the measure of his worth to his capacity to suffer. Recruits learned, in ways they would not forget, that what made Marines exceptional was their ability to endure more hardship than their sister services.

Though physical conditioning was an obvious priority for combat, it accounted for less than one-tenth of the total scheduled hours.⁵⁰ Nearly twice as much time was spent on garrison subjects, much of which was devoted to close-order drill: the highly-ritualized art of maneuvering a military unit around a parade ground in perfect unison. Up

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Condit, *Marine Corps Ground Training*, 165.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 172.

to three hours a day were spent “on the grinder,” as the recruits called it, during which DIs would single out the poor performers and assign them extra exercises.⁵¹ (By contrast, initial training in the Army involved only 45 minutes of close order drill daily, and only for the first month.)⁵² Regular rifle and uniform inspections, which were also highly ritualized affairs, gave the DIs further opportunities to find innumerable (and often fictional) flaws in their recruits. Though seemingly irrelevant for modern combat, drill, inspections, and other “spit and polish” traditions of military service were critical to the recruit depots’ primary mission of effecting “the transition from a civilian to a Marine.”⁵³ They taught recruits to submit to authority, to venerate tradition, and to sacrifice comfort, safety, and even life all in the name of Marine Corps discipline.

The Marines emphasis on violence, drill, and inspections were not the only methods of imprinting the culture of the Corps on new recruits. Marine Corps history was another critical component. In addition to formal classes on the Corps’ customs and courtesies, DIs at one recruit depot held *ad hoc* instruction sessions to pass on the oral history of the Corps, giving recruits stories about themselves and their community to replace the civilian identity they had left behind. As one Marine explained years later:

The thing that makes Marines different is our esprit de corps. And, the esprit de corps comes from several things, but one of the contributing

⁵¹ Training schedules did not separate out drill from other garrison subjects, so precise hours of drill are impossible to calculate. This figure comes from one Marine’s recollection of boot camp at Parris Island. See Gerald P. Averill, *Mustang: A Combat Marine* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987), 17.

⁵² See E. J. Kahn, jr., “The Army Life” in *The New Yorker Book of War Pieces*, (New York,: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 107-10. and Palmer, *Procurement and Training*, 444-45.

⁵³ Condit, *Marine Corps Ground Training*, 170.

factors is a knowledge of our heritage. . . .Whenever we were marching somewhere or taking a break from close order drill . . . they [the DIs] would just give us a two- or three- minute vignette about some individual in Marine Corps history or some great battle. And we listened. . . . we'd hear it again a week later, two weeks later, three weeks later, from another DI or a different instructor. By the time we graduated from boot camp, we knew a lot about Marine Corps history . . . the heritage and history – you just absorbed [it], you soaked it up. By the time you left boot camp, you were really a Marine. Not just because you could wear the emblem, but in your heart, you were a Marine.⁵⁴

As the hours Marines spent on ceremony, tradition and history demonstrate, much of recruit training during World War II was designed not to impart specific combat skills, but to ritualize the recruit's induction into a new culture. This is not to say that drill and inspections had no practical military purpose. They did. But the pragmatic goals of such training – to instill discipline, teamwork, and encourage proper care of equipment – were only part of their purpose. Their greater effect was symbolic. The endless drill, specialized jargon and monastic strictures concerning the proper wear of the uniform gave the narratives of Marine exceptionalism visible markers: upon graduation, Marines looked, talked, and even walked differently from everyone else.

If the tradition and ritual gave the recruits stories and gestures to mark themselves apart from civilians and other services, the violence of recruit training filled a deeper need in the young men seeking to transition from boyhood to manhood. The haranguing DIs seemed at times excessive to some, but for many of the younger recruits, the violence was not only tolerated it was expressly desired.⁵⁵ “Boot camp was wonderful!”

⁵⁴ Oral Interview with Major Rick Spooner, USMC (ret'd), 2, 21. Recording and transcript in author's possession.

⁵⁵ For a skeptical perspective on recruit training, see S.G. Silcox, "A Hillbilly Marine," ed. MCU library (Quantico, Virginia: Library of the Marine Corps, 1977). More positive

remembers one World War II Marine. “I thought it would be very demanding and that was fine with me. I wanted to be a Marine.”⁵⁶ “It is a process of surrender” wrote Private Robert Leckie, who joined immediately after Pearl Harbor. “We were having it rough, which is exactly what we expected and what we signed up for. That is the thing: having it rough. The man who has had it roughest is the man to be most admired. Conversely, he who has had it the easiest is the least praiseworthy.”⁵⁷ This logic, that suffering was not a cost but a benefit – a symbolic marker of prestige – would serve to galvanize members of the Corps as casualties mounted in the Pacific.

While the desire to prove oneself was strongest among the youngest recruits, it was not only they that tolerated willingly the excesses of the young DIs. Dan Levin, who entered the Marines at age twenty-nine, remembered boot camp as a “gift.” By giving “fond obedience to the playfully brutal routines of boot camp,” he wrote, the recruit entered “a harsh and spiritual unity. Stripped of higher education, of past, and of future ambitions for myself, I was becoming one of the anonymous many. I was happy . . . I was part of a totality and felt a great collective will working on me and shaping me.”⁵⁸ Sergeant William Manchester, whose *Goodbye Darkness* has become one of the most

portrayals are found in Lince, *Too Young the Heroes.*, E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1981)., Averill, *Mustang.* and Samuel E. Stavisky, *Marine Combat Correspondent: World War II in the Pacific*, 1st ed. (New York: Ivy Books, 1999), 9-25.

⁵⁶ Spooner, 2 and 21.

⁵⁷ Robert Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow* (New York,: Random House, 1957), 6, 13.

⁵⁸ Dan Levin, *From the Battlefield: Dispatches of a World War II Marine* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 3.

respected memoirs of the Pacific war, also entered Parris Island in his twenties. As he describes it:

Astonishingly, I adored Parris Island . . . I am told that corporal punishment has since been banned on the island, but in my day it was quite common to see a DI bloody a man's nose and some boots were gravely injured, though I know of none who actually died. I recall being baffled later when Patton was reprimanded for slapping a GI. All of us had endured much more than that. . . . How could I enjoy this? Parts of it, of course, I loathed. But the basic concept fascinated me. I wanted to surrender my individuality, curbing my neck beneath the yoke of petty tyranny. . . . Everything I saw seemed exquisitely defined – every leaf, every pebble looked as sharp as a drawing in a book. I knew I was merely becoming a tiny cog in the vast machine which would confront fascism, but that was precisely why I had volunteered. 59

The spiritual tone of Levin's and Manchester's descriptions – the pleasure of surrendering the self and the deep feeling of community that resulted – is commonplace in memoirists' descriptions of Marine boot camp. Descriptions of Army initial training are quite different. Soldiers surveyed at the outset of the war used the language of rational organization. They discussed their training in terms of its efficiency or inefficiency, its practicality, and the value of the skills. Even in the more elite units, like the Armored and Airborne divisions, where one would expect a higher degree of tradition, training focused almost exclusively on transmitting combat skills.⁶⁰ Soldiers had little interest in

59 Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness*, 120.

60 J. Ted Hartman, *Tank Driver: With the 11th Armored from the Battle of the Bulge to Ve Day* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 6-13, 26. See also T. Moffatt Burriss, *Strike and Hold: A Memoir of the 82nd Airborne in World War II*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000), 15-20., John D. McKenzie, *On Time, on Target: The World War II Memoir of a Paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2000), 1-6, 37-53.

martial tradition; they derided the lessons in drill and ceremony as irrelevant and distracting from the business of learning to fight.⁶¹

For the Marines, however, boot camp did more than transmit practical knowledge. It conferred prestige and granted one membership in a community of deeper mutual obligation than they had found in the civilian world. Unlike in the democratic Army, submitting to Marine Corps discipline was an act of spiritual devotion. “The first requirement” of being a Marine, noted a leadership pamphlet in 1942, is to “know our Corps. We must be proud of its traditions. It must be our religion, our main spring, our very soul. We must be willing to sacrifice, suffer and die – just as Marines have done since the capture of Fort New Providence in the Bahamas in 1776, to the defense of Wake Island.”⁶² For Dan Levin, that willingness to sacrifice, which he called a “pride in a prodigal throwing away of the self,” was “at the bottom of the psychology of those who became Marines.”⁶³

Unlike the Army, those who joined the Marines in World War II willingly parted ways with a culture that venerated individualism. Though fiercely hierarchical, the Marine Corps had its own version of egalitarianism. Every Marine, no matter what rank, had access to the narratives of Marine exceptionalism; they could all claim a shared title that bound them together and distinguished them from outsiders.⁶⁴ They found in the

⁶¹ Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, 55-78.

⁶² United States Marine Corps, "Leadership," ed. Navy Yard Marine Barracks, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (United States Marine Corps, 1942), 1.

⁶³ Levin, *From the Battlefield*, 117, 33.

⁶⁴ While all military cultures are what religious anthropologist Mary Douglas calls “hierarchist” cultures, the Marine Corps, more than any other, has some of the traits of

Corps a community of interdependence in which the suffering and sacrifice inherent in war were reconfigured into symbolic markers of prestige and devotion. That pride in sacrifice became a primary explanatory framework for the Marines in the Pacific, one which made sense of events which no other narratives could explain. The result was a culture which not only endured, but grew stronger as the suffering grew more severe in the Pacific.

“A Lop-Sided War”: Fighting in the Pacific

The small size and recruiting practices of the Corps allowed its pre-war culture to survive the expansion required by World War II. Recruit training then imprinted that culture on willing novitiates. However, the most important factor shaping the culture of the Marine Corps in World War II was the combat experience in the Pacific. There, the values imbued at recruit training were put into operation. The interservice rivalry of the Pacific theaters and the trauma of the amphibious assaults provided the evidence for the narratives of Marine exceptionalism; the loss of friends became the proof of Marines’ devotion to their Corps. The abuses (both real and perceived) suffered at the hands of the enemy and the other services only strengthened their ethos, both during and after the war.

Of all the services, the Marines had the most homogeneous and violent experience in the war: they went to the same places, performed the same types of missions and saw the same kind of combat in higher percentages than did the larger, more

the “enclave” or “sect” culture. Their culture of elite egalitarianism, deep insularity, and paranoia of outsiders are just a few of those traits. See Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, Rev. ed., *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series* ; (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 44-53.

widely-dispersed Army, Navy or Army Air Forces (AAF). Because the Marine Corps used Army and Navy supply and logistical facilities in the U.S., more Marines were available for overseas service. Over 90 percent of the Corps served overseas during World War II, compared to just 73 percent across the other services.⁶⁵ With negligible exceptions, the Marines all went to the Pacific. All six Marine Divisions performed the same type of combat operation: the opposed amphibious landing, which involved moving troops from ship to shore against a defended beachhead. These operations, which were the costliest type of tactical activity of the war, are the reason the Marines endured the highest casualty rates of any service in World War II – nearly fourteen percent of all Marines who served in the war were either killed or wounded.⁶⁶

Opposed amphibious landings, deployment to just one theater, and the interservice rivalry of the Pacific gave the Corps a higher density of shared experiences in World War II than occurred in the other, larger services.⁶⁷ This produced greater consensus within the Corps about the war and their role in it. A dominant narrative, one which asserted that the Corps suffered more than the other services in the Pacific, became so powerful among Marines as to attain the status of common sense. This narrative of

⁶⁵ “World War II Facts” in *World War II, General*, Subject File, Reference Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico Va.

⁶⁶ Gilbert W. Beebe and Michael E. DeBakey, *Battle Casualties* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1952). On overall casualty rates see “World War II Fact Sheet,” *World War II, General*, Subject File, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico VA.

⁶⁷ Officially, there were three operational theaters of the Pacific: China-Burma-India, Southwest Pacific Area, and Pacific Ocean Areas. No Marines fought in China-Burma-India in any significant numbers. My discussion of the “Pacific theater” refers to both the Southwest Pacific Area and Pacific Ocean Area.

injustice strengthened their service's internal cohesion and helped Marines cope with the trauma of combat by deflecting blame away from the Corps and onto the other services.

The Marines' first piece of evidence of their hardship was their location. Compared to Europe, the islands of the South and Central Pacific were wastelands. Temperatures rose over 100 degrees with high humidity. The jungles carried parasites, stinging plants, and poisonous snakes. Coral reefs and kunai grass cut and infected the skin; volcanic ridges and cliffs exhausted the foot soldier. The water caused intestinal cramps and diarrhea. Malaria, dengue fever and scrub typhus gave the Southwest Pacific theater disease rates that were almost twice as high as those in the European theater.⁶⁸ For those serving the Pacific, the most common infectious or parasitic condition was malaria. In the European and Mediterranean theaters, it was gonorrhea.⁶⁹

Campaigns in Europe lasted much longer than in the Pacific, but were also closer to the relative comforts of civilization. In the rear areas, Red Cross workers occasionally distributed coffee and donuts to the troops. After Paris was liberated, it became a oft-visited liberty destination for the troops. In the Pacific, men languished in island camps, with little to distract them besides poker and, if they could find it, alcohol. To these men, fighting in Europe at least meant *being* in Europe, with the important ancillary benefit of being able to meet, or even just look at, European women. The boredom and loneliness

⁶⁸ Beebe and DeBakey, *Battle Casualties*, 69, 31-37.

⁶⁹ United States. Army Medical Dept., John Lada, and Frank A. Reister, *Medical Statistics in World War II, Medical Department, United States Army, in World War II* (Washington: Office of the Surgeon General, Dept. of the Army: for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1975), 738-46. These numbers are for the Army only, but other sources confirm that the majority of disease admissions across the services were for malaria. See also James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, *The Pacific War Encyclopedia* (New York: Facts On File, 1998), 144-45.

of the Southwest Pacific were two of the reasons it had the highest rates of psychosis in the war.⁷⁰

The type of fighting was arguably more brutal, though the men who suffered through the hedgerows of Normandy might not agree. The European war occurred over large swaths of territory, with fairly clear fronts and rear areas. In the Pacific, combatants were thrown onto tiny coral atolls and islands, sometimes less than two square miles in diameter. Assaulting forces were packed together on exposed beaches; there were no rear areas of comparable safety. Even the aid stations and supply depots were under regular sniper and shell fire. Limited naval shipping made tanks and other protected vehicles far more rare than in Europe. The principle weapons were the rifle, flamethrower, hand grenade and bayonet.⁷¹ Hand-to-hand fighting was common; surrenders were not. It was “war to the knife hilt.”⁷²

Soldiers have an easier time in combat when the rules that govern it make sense and are followed. Though fighting on the Eastern front and Germany’s race war against the Jews degenerated into utter brutality, the Americans’ contact with the Germans did not. Both sides made efforts to give respectful burial to enemy war dead, and to recognize the immunity of noncombatants. 99 percent of Americans prisoners of war survived their captivity. These standards of conduct led over half of the men fighting

⁷⁰ Robert S. Anderson, Robert J. Bernucci, and Albert J. Glass, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II* (Washington,: Office of the Surgeon General, Dept. of the Army, 2:1017.

⁷¹ In Europe, the bayonet was used so little that it was lampooned in one of Bill Mauldin’s cartoons as a can opener. See Bill Mauldin, *Bill Mauldin's Army* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1983), 249.

⁷² Lee B. Kennett, *G.I.: The American Soldier in World War II*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 1987), 162.

Europe to agree that the Germans “are men just like us. It’s too bad we have to be fighting them.”⁷³ No such civility existed in the war against Japan. The racial and cultural differences between the two enemies removed all constraints on conduct on the battlefield.⁷⁴ The Japanese beat over 90 percent of their American prisoners of war; 35 percent died in captivity.⁷⁵ Americans rarely took prisoners. Souvenir gathering turned quickly to corpse mutilation and trophy hunting. This was not only the result of the brutalization combat brings – even before the first land campaign of the war, shipboard Marines were talking about pickling “Jap ears” and making necklaces of their gold teeth.⁷⁶ Human souvenir hunting got so bad that in 1943, the First Marine Division issued a directive that “no part of the enemy’s body may be used as a souvenir. Unit Commanders will take stern disciplinary action against any person acting contrary to this directive.”⁷⁷ It didn’t work. By 1944, human souvenir hunting had become prevalent enough for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese to warn American Catholics not to accept Japanese body parts mailed from the front.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid., 158-84.

⁷⁴ The definitive work on the influence of race in the Pacific war is Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*.

⁷⁵ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 2 vols., *The Oxford History of the United States* ; (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 813; Kennett, *G.I.: The American Soldier in World War II*, 184.

⁷⁶ Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary* (New York,: Random House, 1943), 15-16.

⁷⁷ 1st Marine Division Directive of 26 Sept 1943, Division Intelligence Section HQ, Samuel Cosman Papers, Marine Corps Personal Papers Collection, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico VA (hereafter PPC).

⁷⁸ "Honor after Death," *Time Magazine*, June 26, 1944.

Marines did not just compare their experience to the greener pastures they assumed lay in the European theater, however. They compared themselves with the other branches serving alongside them. In Marines' memoirs, diaries, and correspondence of the Pacific War, two themes dominate. First, because the Marines depended on the other services for logistical support, the interservice rivalry that ran rampant in the Pacific was more deeply felt by the tiny Corps. When supplies failed to arrive, fire support was cut short, or the Army moved slower than Marines in an assault, the friction did not remain at the staff levels. It pervaded the ranks. Second, the Marines' higher casualty rates in the Pacific and the tactical differences between the Marines and the Army strengthened the Corps' Spartan logic, that "the man who has had it roughest is the man to be most admired."⁷⁹ These two beliefs – that the Marines were being mistreated by the other services, and that their greater hardship proved their devotion to the Corps – grew only stronger as the war progressed.

The perception of unfairness started early in the war, in the first week of August, 1942. The 1st Marine Division's landing on Guadalcanal was the first ground offensive of the war and came at a time when Japan still ruled the seas of the Southwest Pacific. Problems began on the second day of the landing, when the Navy, rightly concerned with protecting its ships, weighed anchor and departed before the Marines could finish offloading their supplies. Because of the Navy's premature withdrawal, the Marines began the campaign with roughly half their equipment. They lacked food, ammunition and basic defensive materials like barbed wire. The Division immediately went on "short rations," giving the troops only two small meals a day, much of which were captured

⁷⁹ Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, 6.

Japanese rations which quickly rotted. The enemy attacked regularly from the sky and sea, launching daily raids on the airfield while their battleships shelled the beach. Artillery and mortars hidden in the area surrounding the Marines' positions fell every night. The Marines held only a small enclave around the airfield, in a dense jungle that provided excellent cover for Japanese snipers. Malaria, dysentery, malnutrition, and parasitic infections made life miserable. The Japanese repeatedly landed reinforcements and surrounded the Marines. With no naval support, the Marines felt abandoned. They dreaded another surrender like Wake Island or Bataan. Major victories over the Japanese in late August and September improved morale, but the Marines retained a sense that they were fighting the war entirely alone. 80

After holding off repeated Japanese land assaults, the Marines received reinforcements from the Army in the third month of the operation. The Army formally relieved the Marines in early December, but Marine-Army relations suffered another blow when General MacArthur billeted the war-weary division near Brisbane, Australia, in a marshland infested with malarial mosquitoes. Cases of malaria and related fevers quickly reached "epidemic proportions," surpassing the already high rates that occurred on Guadalcanal.⁸¹ Repeated efforts to convince MacArthur to move the Marines failed until the Navy agreed to provide all the transportation. These two incidents set the tone for the remainder of the war. MacArthur's slights, the supply failures, and the months of

80 Ibid., 108. See also George MacMillan quoted in Stanley E. Smith, *The United States Marine Corps in World War II; the One-Volume History, from Wake to Tsingtao, by the Men Who Fought in the Pacific and by Distinguished Marine Experts, Authors, and Newspapermen* (New York: Random House, 1969), 203.

81 Allan Reed Millett, *In Many a Strife: General Gerald C. Thomas and the U.S. Marine Corps, 1917-1956* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 213.

hard fighting with little outside help gave the First Marine Division plenty of evidence that they were undervalued by their sister services. The five other Marine divisions found similar evidence of mistreatment in the amphibious assaults of the Central Pacific.

The landing at Guadalcanal had surprised the Japanese defenders; they did not oppose the landing at the water's edge. The majority of Marine operations thereafter, however, were amphibious assaults against *defended* beachheads. These operations, whose purpose was to seize island bases and airstrips for the Navy and Army Air Forces, were the Marines' specialty: they had authored much of the doctrine, tested the tactics with the Navy, and trained the Army in the complicated process of moving troops to the shore under fire. The landing at Tarawa in November 1943, validated the tactics developed by the Marines, but at a cost that shocked the American public: over three thousand Marines were killed or wounded in just seventy-six hours of fighting. Ensuing operations on Saipan, Guam and Peleliu in 1944 caused two, sometimes three times as many casualties each. The last six months of the war were the worst: over half of the Marines' ninety-one thousand total casualties in World War II occurred in the final two assaults on Iwo Jima and Okinawa.⁸²

As the war progressed, the Marines' sense of injustice grew, because the high casualty rates of the amphibious operations were not shared equally across the two ground services in the only Pacific. Overall, the Marines suffered half the total battle casualties as the Army in the Pacific, but these were confined to just six divisions. The

⁸² United States. Marine Corps., *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* ([Washington]: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, 1958), 4:797, 5:884.

Army had twenty-seven divisions in the Pacific.⁸³ The three divisions with the highest casualties in the Pacific were all Marine divisions, and all six Marine divisions ranked in the top eight.⁸⁴ The division of labor between the services was one reason for the casualty differences: in combined operations with the Army, the Marines always went in the first waves and consequently suffered the heaviest casualties. Once the assault phase concluded, the Marines would turn the island over to the Army and Navy to mop up the remaining resistance and convert the island to an allied base or staging point. This earned the other services no small amount of disrespect from the Marines: from their perspective, they were the shock troops; everyone else was the clean-up crew.

Relations with the Navy were more amicable than with the Army, but still difficult. The Navy chaplains, surgeons and corpsmen (medics) that served ashore with the Marines were all beloved, but disagreements between the senior officers and operations planners caused regular conflict between the two services. Naval doctrine for amphibious landings dictated that the Navy retained control of the landing forces until the establishment of a beachhead. This gave Marines little control over major elements of the landing: the targeting and duration of pre-landing naval gunfire, the pre-landing air bombardments, and even the location of the landing were controlled by the Navy. Navy and Marine planners fought constantly over how much ordnance would be dropped on

⁸³ For Army casualties and troop statistics, see United States Army Medical Dept., Lada, and Reister, *Medical Statistics in World War II*, 70-71. See also John Ellis, *The World War II Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (London: Aurum Press, 1993), 192-95; Dunnigan and Nofi, *The Pacific War Encyclopedia*, 2:233.

⁸⁴ The 1st, 4th, and 2nd Marine Divisions had the highest casualties in the Pacific. Only the 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions had casualties higher than any of the Marine Divisions. See Dunnigan and Nofi, *The Pacific War Encyclopedia*, 142.

the islands before the landings. On Peleliu and Iwo Jima, two of the costliest landings of the war, the Marines felt the Navy short-changed them. At Iwo Jima, they asked for ten days of pre-landing bombardment. They got only three.⁸⁵

The greatest source of interservice friction concerned the differences in Army and Marine amphibious assault tactics. The Army, schooled in a long tradition of ground warfare, believed in conserving manpower at the expense of time or terrain seized. When they encountered stiff resistance, they would prudently re-group or attempt a different avenue of attack. Such methods were effective but slow. The Marines, by contrast, trained for quick, decisive engagements. Bypassing an enemy position or waiting for reinforcements cost momentum, and left more forces packed into the exposed areas of the beach and landing zone. Delays also placed the Navy at further risk, because ships were particularly vulnerable to submarine and aerial attack while conducting landing operations. From the Marines' perspective, success was achieved through the "continuous assault": landing quickly and seizing the objective, even when it meant directly assaulting the enemy's strongest positions.⁸⁶ "Speed of conquest" was critical; the carnage it produced an unfortunate, but necessary, requirement for victory. The Army found the Marines' direct approach reckless and unimaginative; the Marines thought the Army lacked tenacity and yielded the initiative to the enemy. The differences were never resolved. In all of their combined operations, the Marines had higher casualty rates, but

⁸⁵ United States. Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 4:104, 487-93.

⁸⁶ This is explained in detail in Cameron, *American Samurai*, 135. See also Jeter Allen Isely and Philip Axtell Crowl, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War; Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific* (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1951), 11-12.

took more ground; the Army worked slower but conserved lives in ways Marine tactics did not.

For the junior soldier or Marine, an amphibious landing began with the movement to shore in an amphibious tractor or landing craft. More than in European landings, the size of the islands, beach conditions, and tidal and reef patterns greatly restricted where the Marines could land. This allowed defenders to concentrate their fires on the landing forces. In the landing craft and ashore, Marines faced direct fire from Japanese rifles, machine guns, and large caliber anti-ship and anti-armor guns. Mines occasionally lay in the surf. Falling on them from above were mortar and artillery rounds, all of which had been registered – pre-fired to ensure they would fall exactly where the defender desired. With so many troops packed into so small a space, casualties were severe. A single artillery round could kill five men. A combat correspondent's audio recording of the assault on Guam captured what the young Marines experienced in the opposed landings of the Pacific:

You can hear the machine-gun fire coming at us from the Japs in the hills. . . . There's heavy fire falling on us! . . . The trailer went over – oh, one boy's been hit – one boy's hurt now. They're putting him in the rubber boat – four men are putting him in the rubber boat – I don't know who it is – I can't see him. But he has been hurt and he's lying on his side – Hold it! – What! Another boy's hit – another boy's just been hurt! I think he's been killed . . . Oh, there's one Marine lying on his back on the beach – there's a Marine lying on his back with blood pouring out of him into the water. . . Marines are going forward one by one. They rise up and move forward. There are not too many casualties on the beach, but there are several – sort of sprawled out – well, like little boys.⁸⁷

The Marines made their first major opposed assault on Betio Island in the Tarawa Atoll in November 1943. The Second Marine Division suffered over one thousand dead

⁸⁷ Alvin M. Josephy, *The Long and the Short and the Tall; the Story of a Marine Combat Unit in the Pacific* (New York, : A. A. Knopf, 1946), 219.

and twenty-two hundred wounded in just three days – taking over three times as many casualties as would the Army’s First Infantry Division in the seizure of Normandy’s Omaha Beach.⁸⁸ One commander counted 105 dead Marines in a space of twenty yards.⁸⁹ Despite the heavy losses, the Marines secured the island in 76 hours, destroying the entire Japanese garrison of almost five thousand men. The Army’s objective in the Tarawa operation, nearby Makin Island, contained only 800 Japanese defenders. They took the island with skill and care, suffering only 218 total casualties, with only 66 killed.⁹⁰ However, it took them four days to do it – a fact that was noted with contempt by the Marines. The Navy concurred: on the fourth day of the operation, they lost the escort carrier *Liscome Bay* to a Japanese torpedo. These deaths, 53 officers and 591 men, might have been avoided, some later argued, had the Army adhered to the Marines’ tactic of continuously pressing the attack.⁹¹

Tarawa horrified the public, not just because of the high casualties, but because clear mistakes were made in the Navy’s landing plan. Over the protests of a member of the Marines’ planning staff, the Navy assumed they would have a depth of five feet at high tide – just enough to pass their landing craft over the coral reef that lined the island. They were wrong. A “dodging” tide stranded landing craft six hundred yards from shore, forcing the Marines to wade in under withering fire. Critics called for an Congressional

⁸⁸ United States Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 3:636.

⁸⁹ "Our Will to Die Won Tarawa, Says General," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 30, 1943, 4.

⁹⁰ United States Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 3:97.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3:93.

investigation; some hasty politicking by the Navy and Marine Corps eased the crisis. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Archer A. Vandegrift asked Congress to steel the public to the realization that future amphibious operations would be equally costly. Amphibious operations will always have heavy losses, he wrote to Congress, because “there are no foxholes off shore.”⁹² Despite the losses, the Marines and the press hailed Betio and Tarawa as a victory, not only because they took the island so quickly, but because their young Marines had shown such discipline and fortitude in continuing forward into oncoming fires. “This island was won over the dead bodies of United States Marines” wrote one correspondent. “Betio fell because the marines kept coming.”⁹³

After Tarawa came Kwajalein, Roi-Namur and Eniwetok in the winter of 1944. On Kwajalein and Eniwetok, the Army again moved slower than the Marines would have liked. ⁹⁴ Marines secured the island of Roi in under a day; Namur in two days. The Army took four days to seize Kwajalein, even though it had the lightest defenses. ⁹⁵ Interservice tensions finally boiled over in June 1944, on the island of Saipan. The operation, the largest amphibious landing thus far in the war, involved 71,000 Marines and soldiers, under the command of Marine Lieutenant General Holland M. “Howlin’ Mad” Smith. In one month of fighting, the Corps suffered eleven thousand killed or

⁹² "Marines' Chief Defends Gilberts Conquest Cost," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 1943, 3.

⁹³ Robert Trumbull, "Marines Charge into Certain Death on Betio; Bodies Cover Every Foot of Tarawa Atoll," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 28, 1943, 4.

⁹⁴ See Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 400-03. See also United States Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 207.

⁹⁵ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 402.

wounded – almost three times the casualties of Tarawa. “We had so many dead Marines, we were having a hard time not stepping on dead bodies” remembers one enlisted Marine. “They blanketed the beach.”⁹⁶ In three days of hard fighting, the Marines secured the beachhead, after which the Army’s 27th Division came ashore. Maneuvering in the interior of the island was challenging. The jungle was thick, and the terrain ideal for defenders. General Smith was impatient with his commanders, demanding, as he had on Tarawa, that they continuously press the attack – a tactic whose utility was questionable in the rugged island interior. Unhappy with the progress of the Army’s 27th Division, Holland Smith relieved Army Major General Ralph Smith of command for his lack of aggressiveness and “defective performance.”⁹⁷ The “Smith versus Smith” controversy soured Army-Marine relations for the remainder of the war. The Army convened an investigation that found the relief legal but unwarranted. Howlin’ Mad Smith, never one to mince words, stood his ground. The 27th Division’s performance, he claimed, was not only due to a difference in tactics, but cowardice, pure and simple: “They’re yellow. They’re just not aggressive. They’ve held up the battle and caused my Marines casualties.”⁹⁸ Holland Smith never commanded Army troops again, a fact which only increased the Marines’ sense that they were being mistreated by the other services.

⁹⁶ Oral interview with Major Rick Spooner, USMC (ret’d), 18. Recording and transcript in author’s possession.

⁹⁷ United States Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 318.

⁹⁸ Cameron, *American Samurai*, 144.

The controversies over who seized more ground, how quickly, and at what cost, did not just exist among officers and strategists. They trickled down to the most junior ranks. PFCs and Corporals assaulting a beach probably knew little about the Navy's naval gunfire or air support plans. They would, however, see that such elaborate bombardments did little to reduce the blockhouses and caves that dotted the islands and would likely have heard that the Marine Corps had asked for more pre-landing support than they received. A Private may not have known the details of Army-Marine disagreements over tactics, but understood well that the Army's slower progress opened gaps in the lines and kept him on the island longer. Though Marine operations were at times reminiscent of slaughter of World War I, there was little blame registered up the chain of command, only resentment at the other services. Marines "get the shitty end of the deal" remembered Sergeant Dan Levin. "You bury your dead and send the wounded to the hospitals and those of you that are still alive go someplace else and get knocked off yourselves while the Army comes in and gets the glory. . . . But that's the Marines. There's the kind of outfit it is. You asked for it, didn't you, so don't look for no pity."⁹⁹ Even in the rest camps and rear areas, which dotted the very islands the Marines had seized, friction abounded: "All the army does around here is construction, building PX's, officers clubs and recreational facilities" wrote home one Lieutenant. "They are also the military police of the island and sure do push the Marines around."¹⁰⁰ A Platoon Sergeant, who fought in the seizure of Guam, returned to find the island populated with

⁹⁹ Levin, *From the Battlefield*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Kennard, letter to his father dated 22 Feb 1944, folder 9, Kennard Papers, PPC, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico VA.

rear-echelon troops, which only furthered his sense that the Marines were being mistreated. He wrote in his diary:

Late afternoon we were trucked back to our area with our hearts full of bitterness. All along the roads were barracks, mess halls, even movie screens. . . . our nights were spent in the darkness of our fox holes waiting for sudden death, our days in the steaming jungle on patrol, . . . making it possible for those dog-faces [Army] and Seabees [Navy construction engineers] less than two miles from us to live a life of luxury. This is a lop-sided war.¹⁰¹

As other historians have noted, the constant friction between the services hampered operations in the Pacific theaters: it affected logistics, command arrangements, and led to massive duplications of effort.¹⁰² But while it may have hurt the war effort, interservice rivalry strengthened the culture of the Corps. The presence of a rival service performing similar missions and operations but with less casualties did not degrade esprit de corps – it strengthened it. The timetable of the island occupations – Marines in first, Army to follow, and then Army and Navy rear echelon forces last – proved to the Marines that they were “having it rough,” and were consequently deserving of the most admiration. The speed at which they took their objectives, regardless of the losses, only reinforced this view. The perception of unfair treatment made them more insular and deepened their internal bonds of affection. As one Marine explained in a memoir, “Esprit de corps is what brings us all together in a real tight brotherhood in which we defy any outsider to say or do anything about the Corps or anyone in it. This esprit is the result of

¹⁰¹ Diary of Platoon Sergeant Thomas R. O’Neill, entry for August 24th, 1944, p. 33, O’Neill Papers, Folder 2, PPC, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico, VA (Hereafter, O’Neill Diary).

¹⁰²Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 144, 87.

all of us being uniformly crapped on repeatedly by everyone and everything since we got into this damned outfit.”¹⁰³ The tight-knit culture and discipline of the Corps precluded junior Marines from registering complaints about the war or combat operations, but allowed them the right to gripe about the other branches serving alongside them. Interservice rivalry functioned as a safety valve for the culture of the Corps, giving them a way to voice discontent without attacking the chain of command or decisions of their senior leaders.

Interservice rivalry explains something of the strength of the Corps’ culture in wartime, but that alone does not suffice as an explanation. Though strengthened by their comparisons to outsiders, Marines’ loyalty to their organization and culture did not depend on the Army. Marine esprit de corps was essentially self-sustaining. It stayed strong whether they operated alone or with other services. Even on Iwo Jima, an all-Marine operation, the junior members of the Corps continued to assault directly into oncoming fire for 35 straight days. Why? What kept the community of the Marines so strong, even when their tactics produced such horrible losses?

The same factors that were integral to the processes of acculturation in recruit training kept the Corps’ culture intact in the Pacific. Among these, youth was paramount. “[T]he Marine Corps knew what it was doing, concentrating on eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year olds” recalled Sergeant Dan Levin. “How ready they were to do what was asked, and sometimes more. How careless of their existence. . . . it takes the very young to fling themselves forward, to die in battle, because they do not really know yet what life

¹⁰³ Major Rick Spooner, *The Spirit of Semper Fidelis: Reflections from the Bottom of an Old Canteen Cup*, Second ed. (Williamstown, NJ: Phillips Publications, 2005), 284.

is about.”¹⁰⁴ The young Privates and PFCs, sometimes ten years younger than their Army counterparts, had a level of idealism absent in most older men. Just as it led the recruits to tolerate the harassment and abuse of boot camp, their idealism helped them sacrifice themselves with greater ease than older men could muster. “[W]e were still dreamers,” remembers Rick Spooner. The Army was “more mature, more realistic . . . [they] were old enough to be wise and not want to be killed and the Marines were teenage kids.”¹⁰⁵ “Howlin’ Mad” Smith put it more succinctly. Why did the Marines succeed?, he asked a group of reporters rhetorically. “Gentlemen, it was our will to die.”¹⁰⁶

Despite General Smith’s bravado, it was not a “will to die,” that spurred the young Marines on, just a greater willingness to risk it. The narratives of Marine exceptionalism, which celebrated interdependence and submission of the self into the group, gave them a way to reconfigure loss of life as proof of devotion. Venerating sacrifice gave the Marines a way to derive symbolic benefit from suffering and loss. “It is to sacrifice that men go to war,” Private Leckie wrote in his memoir. “They do not go to kill, they go to be killed, to risk their flesh, to insert their precious persons in the path of destruction.”¹⁰⁷ This “exultation, the self-abnegation, the absolute freedom of self-sacrifice” is what distinguished Marine culture from the other, more civilianized services.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Levin, *From the Battlefield*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁵ Spooner interview, 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ “Our Will to Die Won Tarawa, Says General,” 4.

¹⁰⁷ Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, 311.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

What these statements by Marines reveal is a core compatibility between the stories Marines were telling themselves and their experiences in warfare. As Marines had learned in recruit training, adopting the narratives of Marine exceptionalism involved a process of symbolic exchange. Receiving the title “Marine” meant elitism, an intimate community, and access to a set of stories granted only to a few, but that title could only be acquired for a price. Prestige required willing obedience, sacrifice and the capacity to suffer. The experience of the Pacific War confirmed the terms of that same symbolic contract. The poorer conditions of the Pacific theater, the Corps’ higher casualty rates (nearly double the average across the other services) and the constant conflict with the other services gave the Marines proof positive that they were different from the other services, and the extended strategic debate between the Army and Marine Corps on amphibious tactics only exacerbated that sense of difference.

Not all Marines had such romantic visions of sacrifice. For the most part, they were more focused on killing Japanese than on dying themselves.¹⁰⁹ However, the Marines’ belief in spiritual unity – in a bond linking all Marines, past and present, into the community of the Corps – gave them stories about dying and sacrifice that carried greater authority than did the other services’. This reconfiguration was not always explicit, nor was it entirely absent in the other services who fought in World War II. In the Marine Corps, however, stories that celebrated sacrifice and suffering were given

¹⁰⁹ Joanna Bourke argues that military history has too long emphasized the act of dying over killing, and that killing, rather than dying, is the most “characteristic act of men at war.” This is undoubtedly true of the Marines in the Pacific. See Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* ([New York]: Basic Books, 1999), xiii-xxiii.

greater weight. Gerald Averill, a Private who rose through the ranks to Lieutenant Colonel believed that:

to the Marine, the *Corps* is his religion, his reason for being. He cannot be committed up to a point. For him, involvement is total. He savors the traditions of his Corps and doubts not the veracity of them. He believes implicitly that he must live up to those epics of physical and moral courage established by those who preceded him. He believes that the corps is truly unique – that it is the most elite military organization ever devised and that he, as an integral part of that organization, must never bring disgrace or dishonor upon it. His is an unsworn oath, an unspoken promise, a conviction that he must never betray the trust of his comrades and that his individual safety, his very life must be secondary to the attainment of the unit's assigned objective.¹¹⁰

For Averill and the other World War II Marines, the weight of tradition, even more than the desire to differentiate oneself from the Army, spurred them forward under fire. The “unsworn oath” of the Corps, to live up to the “epics of physical and moral courage established by those who preceded him” motivated the young Marine in circumstances where a flight instinct would normally operate.¹¹¹ The stories they heard in boot camp and from the Old Breed Marines assured them that they belonged to a deep historical community, one that antedated the United States itself. They owed loyalty not just to their “primary group” (the men with whom they fought) but to the whole community of the Corps – both past and present. This more expansive notion of community, one that transcended time and the mundane world, was key to the Marines’ notion of being “always faithful.”

¹¹⁰ Averill, *Mustang*, 3.

¹¹¹ For a brief discussion on the flight instinct in battle, see Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 5-9.

The strength of the Marines' identity narratives would be severely tested in the final year of the war. By mid 1944, the Japanese defenders had given up on repulsing the invaders; instead they dug extended cave networks from which they hoped only to take as many casualties as possible before being killed themselves. The Marines propensity to continuously press the attack proved costly in these later campaigns. Fighting in the interior of the islands meant caves and cliffs, where the enemy could hide and infiltrate at night. Betio took three days to secure; Iwo Jima took thirty-five days; Okinawa, eighty-two. Everywhere in these latter campaigns, explained one correspondent the Marines "died with the greatest possible violence. Nowhere in the Pacific war have I seen such badly mangled bodies. Many were cut squarely in half. Legs and arms lay 50 feet away from any body. Only the legs were easy to identify—Japanese if wrapped in khaki puttees, American if covered by canvas leggings. In one spot on the sand, far from the nearest clusters of dead men, I saw a string of guts 15 feet long."¹¹²

The severe terrain of the volcanic islands gave a natural advantage to the defender and exhausted the attacker. Platoon Sergeant Thomas O'Neill saw his forty-man platoon reduced to twelve in the first five days of the battle for Guam, and was still ordered back into the attack. He wrote in his diary:

I couldn't believe my ears when informed that we would continue the attack. For the past few days we've heard scuttlebutt [rumors] that the elements of the Army's 77th Division had landed and we had hoped to be relieved and with only a few men left, over half the company gone and other companies worse than we were. I just couldn't see how we could go on. When I informed the Platoon of the plan of attack Duravelo and [Private] Watts both broke down and cried."¹¹³

¹¹² Robert Sherrod, "It was Sickening to Watch" *Time Magazine*, March 5, 1945.

¹¹³ O'Neill diary entry for 25 July 1944 p. 15.

After Guam came Peleliu, which planners estimated would be secured in a week. It took over a month. The First Marine Division on Peleliu lost almost four thousand men battling the Japanese garrison; Colonel Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller reduced his 1st Marine Regiment to combat ineffectiveness by hurling company after company against the protected defenders of the Umurbrogol ridge. Temperatures on the island rose as high as 115 degrees; the coral ground made it impossible to bury the dead. Largely because of the duration of the operation, Peleliu broke the minds of more men than any Marine operation thus far in the war: 748 were evacuated for what was then known as combat fatigue.¹¹⁴ The Marines suffered some six thousand casualties *in toto* before turning the island over to the Army.¹¹⁵

As traumatic as it was, the losses on Peleliu paled in comparison to those on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, where the Marines suffered over fifty thousand killed or wounded in just four months. Like Peleliu, both operations lasted over a month. At Iwo Jima, another all-marine operation, the Third, Fourth and Fifth Marine Divisions suffered almost four times the losses of Peleliu. 23,203 Marines were killed or wounded on an island that measured just eight square miles.¹¹⁶ The small size of Iwo and the lack of protective terrain ensured that even the rear-echelon Marines lived under constant shellfire. “[T]here were no lines, nowhere to be safe. It was so small that you couldn’t

114 “U.S. Marine Corps Casualties” in Hanson Baldwin Papers, Series I, Box 18, File 919, “USMC, HQ,” Yale University, Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

115 United States Marine Corps, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations*, 4:797.

116 *Ibid.*

maneuver” wrote Lieutenant Robert Schless, whose job as an embarkation officer initially kept him in the “rear” area of the beach.¹¹⁷ Americans lived with the dead; it was impossible to bury them all. The closeness to so much death – most caused mortars, artillery and other high-caliber weapons that tore the body apart – wore down the psychological defenses of the troops. As Lieutenant Schless wrote in a letter just weeks after the battle:

some men became senile; really they seemed to age forty years before your eyes. Some turned into idiots and forgot where they were and began walking around upright and laughing and yelling and not knowing his old buddies. Some just sat down and stared until you thought their eyes would pop out. Most just sank down on the ground on their hands and knees and cried like babies, shaking all the while, and they’d look up at you with eyes full of tears and so full of uncontrollable anguish that you couldn’t stand looking at them. Remember, these were big grown men, the pick of the nation; our toughest fighters. And so very many cracked up.¹¹⁸

Twenty-four hundred Marines left Iwo Jima as combat fatigue casualties. Another twelve hundred joined them from Okinawa, in states ranging “dull detachment seemingly unaware of their surroundings, to quiet sobbing, or all the way to wild screaming and shouting.”¹¹⁹ Together these two battles accounted for over half the Marines’ combat fatigue casualties for the war. And yet, the Marines probably had the lowest numbers of combat fatigue of any service in the war. Though accounting

¹¹⁷ Ltr, Robert A Schless to his parents, dated 20 Mar 1945, in “Description of battle by 2ndLT Robert A. Schless B-2-25,” Marine Corps Archives, Iwo Jima Collection, Quantico, VA, 15 (Hereafter, Schless).

¹¹⁸ Schless, 15.

¹¹⁹ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 264. For combat fatigue casualties by battle, see “U.S. Marine Corps Casualties” in Hanson Baldwin Papers, Series I, Box 18, File 919, “USMC, HQ,” Yale University, Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, CT.

procedures for what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder were notoriously flawed and differed between (and even within) the various services, the statistics are telling. The Marines admitted only 68 hundred combat fatigue casualties throughout the war, accounting for just over one percent of all Marines who served in World War II.¹²⁰ In the Saipan operation, they evacuated 304, or one for every 109 infantrymen in the operation. The Army, which had half as many troops on the island, evacuated 297.¹²¹ Army psychiatrists treating patients from the New Georgia and Okinawa operations also noted that the Marines had lower admission rates than the Army for psychiatric casualties during combat.¹²² Even those coming off Iwo Jima and Okinawa, who were visibly

¹²⁰ The Army had a total of 648,460 cases of “psychoneurosis” in the war, though this included non-combat cases of what the Army termed “individual surrendering to an adverse situation.” Combat-related psychiatric breakdowns can only be obtained by examining psychiatric admissions during a given battle, which is why the Saipan statistics are the only comparative figures given. Another useful, but imprecise indicator, are the cases of “psychosis” in the Southwest Pacific and Pacific Ocean Areas, the two theaters where both Marines and Army fought. The total Army admissions for these figures, 13,088, is equal to 12% of all Army battle injuries in the two theaters. The same statistic (using combat fatigue as a rough equivalent to psychosis) for the Marine Corps is equal to just 8% of all battle injuries. See United States. Army Medical Dept., Lada, and Reister, *Medical Statistics in World War II*, 70-71. and Anderson, Bernucci, and Glass, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, 583, 1004-25.

¹²¹ Because the Marines only evacuated psychiatric casualties when they broke completely or became psychotic, the actual numbers of Marines severely traumatized by war will likely never be known. For USMC combat fatigue statistics, see Hanson Baldwin Papers. The figures on the 27th Infantry Division comes from the 27th Division surgeon, and reflects only combat casualties, not the garrison incidence of psychoneurosis, which caused army psychiatric casualties to balloon. For the Army’s Saipan figures see Anderson, Bernucci, and Glass, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, 583.

¹²² As Cameron notes, the Marines took great pains to avoid the stigma of psychoneurosis by labeling it “blast concussion” which then routed the casualty through medical, rather than psychiatric channels. See Cameron, *American Samurai*, 157-65. For psychiatrists perspective on the Marines, see Anderson, Bernucci, and Glass, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, 2: 1063-4, 610-611, 664.

traumatized by the extremity of the combat felt guilty about leaving and asked to be sent back to their units in numbers that surprised the psychiatrists.¹²³ The Marines' greater attachment to their organization, concluded the psychiatrists, was due to "Marine indoctrination" and "the idealized ego of the Marine Corps," which tied their sense of self to the Corps and its capacity to endure hardship.¹²⁴ That indoctrination helped keep "group cohesive forces" – those interpersonal dynamics that kept a group strong even under extreme stress – intact. The narratives of Marine identity, whether motivated by guilt or affection, continued to function even among those exposed to the worst combat in the Pacific.

Even as these experiences broke men's minds, they also strengthened the emotional bonds between Marines. Their stories about their deep historical community readily incorporated those killed in the Pacific, just as it had done with the fallen Marines of previous wars. As David Tucker Brown, Jr., a Lieutenant killed on Okinawa explained in a letter to his mother: "I have seen a spirit of brotherhood, more evident in the most tattered companies, that goes with one foot here amid the friends that we see, and the other with those we see no longer, and one foot is as steady as the other. This is that 'we' [.]"¹²⁵ "All of us feel the reality of death in a new way, as if *we ourselves* had already gone over there in some way" wrote Brown. "With so many friends on either side of the boundary, one half of us is keenly alive, the other half quite gone into that land of

¹²³ Anderson, Bernucci, and Glass, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, 2:610-11, 64.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:664.

¹²⁵ David Tucker Brown jr., *Marine from Virginia: Letters 1941-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 66.

shadow.”¹²⁶ The closeness to death, experienced by both the infantry and the rear-echelon in the Pacific, gave survivors a powerful connection to each other, one that lasted long after the war. “There is a long line of silent men stretching from Brandywine and Trenton and all the other early battles through the Bois de Belleau, Soissons, Blanc Mount, and the great struggles of the Pacific war, who watch us very critically,” reminded one retired Marine shortly after World War II.¹²⁷ Breaking faith with tradition means breaking faith with them. By remaining “always faithful” the living Marine “becomes his brother Marine’s keeper; a custodian of the honor of the Corps and all it represents.”¹²⁸ Another Marine explains it more succinctly: “no one is really dead until they are forgotten.”¹²⁹

The dedication to the Corps was not only evident in the letters and memoirs of those who fought on the islands of the Pacific. It can be seen in the actions of the least articulate: the dazed and traumatized privates fighting both the Japanese and their own descent into madness in the final weeks of the Iwo Jima campaign. As Lieutenant Schless described his men:

On the last attack they’d just stood up and walked bolt upright, waiting to get shot. After walking ten or twelve yards they’d fall flat on their faces, get up and walk again, straight into criss-crossing machine gun fire. They no longer cared whether they lived or died, those few that were left. Almost half of those left – and there were hardly any when I came up

¹²⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹²⁷ LtCol Donald R. Carter, “High Button Shoes,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (October 1949): 25-29.

¹²⁸ Master Sergeant Samuel W. Miller, III, USMC, Letter to the Editor, *Infantry Forces Journal* (April, 1949), 52.

¹²⁹ Spooner, *The Spirit of Semper Fidelis*, 251 and Spooner interview, 16.

there – were just about to crack anyway. They were all standing up and walking around and getting shot. 130

What is significant about the Marines behavior is not that they were in shock or mad with fear – some doubtless were by this point – but that so many continued to advance directly into the enemy’s strength. For fifteen months, a public debate had raged in military circles concerning the best tactics for seizing the islands, with regular condemnations of the Marines’ habit of advancing directly into the teeth of enemy resistance. As late as Okinawa – the last amphibious landing of the war – junior Marines not only kept advancing, but scorned the Army’s safer (and arguably more effective) tactics: “My impressions serving with the soldiers is very unfavorable[,]” wrote Lieutenant Kennard in a letter to his father: “Most of the men are old, lacking initiative and fortitude. They don’t care whether it takes two days or two months to take the ground to their front and are always wanting to be relieved.”¹³¹

Why wouldn’t Kennard and his men – those who saw the horrible effect of the “continuous assault” – adopt or at least wish for the Army’s safer tactics of waiting and enveloping? The Marines continued forward because they had stories to tell themselves about their actions, stories that propelled their bodies forward even when their minds could no longer function. Interservice rivalry only furthered those narratives, as did the high casualties of the Pacific. The mystical strands of Marine esprit kept death from being unimaginable; it could be incorporated into the Marine’s stories about his own

130 Schless, 19.

131 Kennard letter dtd 24 April 1945, Kennard Papers, Folder 24, PPC, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico, VA.

identity. Failing one's comrades, however, could not.¹³² Bonnie A. Little, a Captain, who was killed in the assault on Tarawa explained it well in his last letter home to his wife. "The Marines have a way of making you afraid – not of dying, but of not doing your job."¹³³

Previous scholarship on the Corps' culture has focused on how the stories Marines brought to the battlefield affected their conduct in the Pacific. This article has argued that the reverse was also true: the experience of the war changed the Marines' service culture, making it stronger at a time when the wartime expansion and inclusion of draftees should have diluted it. The Corps' smaller size, youth, and system of partial volunteerism ensured that the Marines remained distinct from the Army, even though they performed nearly identical missions in the Pacific. Recruit training imprinted the pre-war service culture on the new Marines, instilling them with an ethos that valorized tradition and suffering both on the drill field of recruit training and the battlefields of the Pacific.

More than anything else, however, it was the island combat of the War with Japan that empowered the Marines' culture. As suffering and dying increased in the final

¹³² Gerald Averill explains this in his memoir: "The Marine does not want to die, but he is not afraid to die if he must. Perhaps it would seem inconceivable to an outsider, but often a Marine is far more fearful of the judgment of his peers than he is of the knowledge that he may well be killed in the action that he must take. It is this very simple fact that makes the Marine the superior fighting man that he has been and always will be. No particularly magic. Just his unshakeable belief in his Corps and in himself, and the generous ration of pride and self-confidence that the Corps dispenses so freely to those who wear its uniform." See Averill, *Mustang*, 3.

¹³³ W. O Maxwell, Letter to the Editor, *Time Magazine*, 17 Apr 1944, 9.

months of the war, so too did the strength of the Marines' narratives. At first glance, this seems counter-intuitive: the costs of the war, in terms of lives and limbs lost, friendships and minds shattered, would seemingly prompt disaffiliation with the community, not deeper attachment. As operations and casualties grew steadily worse, cohesion should have decreased as the gulf between costs and benefits widened. Instead, the reverse occurred: the dedication to and insularity of the Corps grew even stronger throughout the war even as the latter campaigns pushed many to the breaking point. When blame needed assigning, it fell always on other services, never on the very organization that demanded so much sacrifice of its members. The narratives of Marine exceptionalism continued to function and grew stronger, even when their service's principle marker of difference was greater suffering and dying.

This article attributes the steady increase of internal cohesion in the Marine Corps to the compatibility of Marine identity narratives with the experience of combat in the Pacific. The narratives of Marine exceptionalism endured because they reconfigured the costs of war into symbolic benefits: higher casualties became proof of the Marines' greater dedication and willingness to suffer and sacrifice. In short, the narratives of Marine exceptionalism gave combatants a way to interpret trauma as devotion, thus converting suffering into prestige. Their greater "will to die," as Howlin' Mad Smith put it, bound them together in a community of remembrance, one which kept them connected to those who did not survive the war. That sense of family and community continued long after the war's end; it remains central to Corps ethos and culture today.

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