

When Identities Collide: A Marine Musician in the Field

—John Jay McNeal

“Column of files, right platoon, forward, march!” The sound of the trumpets and drums playing “Semper Fidelis,” the Marine Corps’ song, is as fresh in my mind as what I ate for breakfast. The song echoes as the band marches past the review stand, blowing everyone away. After we play the Marine Corps’ Hymn, we march off, load our beautifully wrapped motivational bus, and depart the Officer Candidate School parade deck in Quantico, Virginia. The time is 10:00 am and after returning from the graduation ceremony, the lucky brass quintet (BQ) quickly changes from their desert (or woodland) cammies into the “Service A” (all green and khaki) uniforms and rushes to the National Museum of the Marine Corps to play the commissioning of 200 butter bars. It is the start of a typical summer.

After the BQ leaves, those of us left in the band hall get to do almost whatever they want. Almost. Most of the time, we break into smaller groups (more BQ’s, our rock band, or our party band, which is probably the best ensemble of them all) and rehearse if we haven’t done a graduation. If we *have* done a graduation we just go home and go back to sleep. Following the commissioning ceremony in 2007, sleep wasn’t an option for me and the Quantico band. No, we were set to go to the field on the following Monday. That’s right: even Marine Bandsmen go to the field to keep up with the traditions and standards set by the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Most of us didn’t have a clue what we were doing. We had never been overseas, but we still had to make sure that we were in shape and trained in the event that we got deployed (highly probable). That week in the field turned out to be a week that I will never forget. It started off as a way to get out of the barracks and shoot as many weapons as possible. But it quickly turned into a major

training exercise because sixteen members from our band had just returned from a tour over in Iraq. I'm not gonna lie: this would turn out to be my favorite week in the Marine Corps.

All Marine Musicians are required by USMC standards to attend three months of boot camp and one month of MCT (Marine Combat Training). Every active duty Marine that is in a fleet, field, band, or the Commandant's Own (his personal band) has the same amount of training as every other Marine. Bandsmen go through all this training, and after four months of not being able to play your instrument because of all the field training, there is nothing better than going straight to the Armed Forces School of Music (SOM) in Norfolk, VA. This tri-service school is attended by every Sailor, Soldier, and Marine for a minimum of six months for Active troops (a minimum of one month for Army Reserves and National Guard). The school can last up to ten months for those who require extra training. For band members, ten months of your entire Marine Corps career is spent in a training environment and not in the fleet. Once you have acquired all of the basic skills to become a Marine Musician, you are shipped out to your first band as a young Lance Corporal. That is, if you haven't done anything stupid to screw up your promotion.

I showed up in Quantico as a Lance Corporal because I was smart enough not to do anything stupid during training. Being a Lance Corporal (Lcpl) has a good side and a bad side. For example, when you're in the field, being a Lcpl is not fun: You are the one expected to clean the firing ranges and the Military Operations on Urban Terrain (MOUT) training area. This means picking up all the brass shell-casings and whatever dummy ammunition are used. I didn't like being a highly trained member of the modified janitorial service, but being able to train with Marines from both my unit and units that had just come back from downrange helped me become a more qualified and useful Marine.

Once you arrive at one of the twelve fleet bands, you are expected to start learning and memorizing all of the music that everyone else already knows. At

this point, you are either going to prove your worth, or you are going to suck and die. And by die, I mean you are going to be ripped a new one by everyone in your section who outranks you. So, it is best to learn your stuff and learn it quick. Each band has its own list of memorized tunes, consisting usually of more than thirty marches and all the standard ceremony material. These marches include: the National Anthem, the Marines' Hymn, Anchors' Aweigh, Semper Fidelis, Officer of the Day, Adjutant's Call, CMTC, and the entire set of bugle calls for trumpet players. You are only allotted thirty days to memorize it all. Keep in mind, that during these thirty days you have to do unit PT, maybe a rifle range, and a base/unit in-processing. All of these things detract from the time you have to practice music. And, if the band is on temporary assignment of duty (TAD) when you check in, or, you are the one Marine needed to complete a ceremony the next weekend, you have even less time. Either way, you better know the music when the thirty days are up. Otherwise, you will be known as the unit dirt-bag.

In MOU town, what you know about music means squat. You are not in the field to learn how to get dirt off your instrument; you are there to learn how to be a combatant. I was able to do just that during the field week. We did many exercises that incorporated teamwork, training, and living in the field with no running water for a week. That may sound disgusting, but you don't ever feel closer to your fellow Marines than when you have to live with their stench for a week. I can only imagine what Marines who don't have running water for months feel like.

I remember a specific exercise that entailed paintballs and tear gas during my MOU training. It made for an interesting three hours. We were told that we needed to clear four buildings and set up a command center. The five people in our fire team reached the first building and cleared it with no problem. The danger came when we walked back downstairs and one of the instructors threw a tear gas grenade (CS) through the window. If you have never experienced the

wonderful effects of CS gas, let me tell you that it is the most unpleasant feeling you will ever have to endure during training. The gas makes you cough nonstop, tear up, and snot runs down your face until you either feel sick or end up puking. Needless to say, when the instructor threw CS into the first building we had to clear, we all just took a seat in a corner of the room and coughed until the gas cleared enough for us to continue our mission.

Most Marine Musicians get mistaken for civilians. They look like Marines, but the typical civilian thinks of the Marine Band as the President's Own. In reality, there are thirteen fleet bands across the United States, consisting of enlisted Marines and Marine Chief Warrant Officers. The bands are spread across the Eastern and Western seaboard; they are at each of the twelve major Marine bases. One band (other than the President's Own) is located in Washington, DC and it is the premier band—the Commandant's Own—comprised of active duty Marines. I was an active duty Marine in the Quantico band when the instructors threw that CS gas through the window. Despite the ill-effects, the training was making me feel like a real warrior.

After we cleared the first building—when there was no longer gas in the air—we moved on to the second building. I didn't quite make it. While crossing the alleyway between buildings, I was hit by a sim-round (live action paintballs) in my lower back. Naturally, my first instinct was “Ow, what the hell was that!” But I soon realized that it was not friendly fire as I laid down, face-first in the dirt between the buildings. My team leader decided to continue on and forgot there were five people in his team instead of the normal four. He later realized the big mistake he made, but it was too late. I was down for the count.

A typical Marine band consists of fifty members: five percussionists, three tubas, two euphoniums, five trombones, seven trumpets, five saxophones, four French horns, four clarinets, three flutes, one oboe, one electric guitar, one electric bass, and one piano player. These are the members that actually play in each band. The leadership element of each band consists of the Band Officer

(BO) who takes care of most of the contacts for each performance, the Band Master (BM), or second in command who takes care of all orders from the BO, the Drum Major (DM), who leads the band in parades and ceremonies, and the Enlisted Conductor (EC), who manages the band during ceremonies and concerts. The Instrument Repair Technician (IRT) fixes anything the band breaks and the Small Ensemble Leader (SEL) coordinates all of the gigs for our small ensembles (i.e. brass quintets, Dixieland band, rock band). The Marine who shot me in the lower back was not in the band. And no one in my elaborate chain of command could help me when I was in the field, lying on the ground, and holding my back.

When the opposition realized that they had finally got one, they decided to make sure my teammates couldn't find me. So they threw a grenade that was supposed to spew smoke and cover my position on the ground. Unfortunately, the grenade they threw was not a regular smoke grenade. No, my luck made them throw a CS grenade to cover my position. It landed directly between my legs, which were spread in a “V” position. Because I had been “shot,” I was not allowed to move from my position (even though I was in a potentially dangerous situation because of the CS). I had to lay there, hold my breath, and hope that my team would come back and drag me to the command center before I started coughing like a mad man. This gave the rest of my team's position away.

People think that a typical band performance is all about looking good and performing well. They think there is no stress involved with all of the details leading up to a concert or ceremony. Little do they know, a fleet band performs its own logistics, set-up, break-down, and transportation of everything and everyone involved with the band. Logistics alone created the most stress I have ever had to deal with. Every Marine in the band has a specific job other than playing an instrument. For example, I was a sound technician for most of my four years. I was also the load master near the end of my tour. Even though it gave me a major headache during longer trips, being the load master was my favorite part

about being in the band. It gave me a sense of pride to get everyone to load, unload, and reload in the most efficient, time-sensitive way imaginable. There are other positions as well, such as administration, instrument repair assistant, public affairs, Sergeant of the Guard (security details), Police Sergeant (the one in charge of the cleanliness of the building), and the network gurus. And, of course, there is the senior chain of command. Being in a Marine Band entails way more than you expect when you sign that dotted line. But I never expected to be clutching at my lower back, spread-eagle, while choking and gagging from a CS grenade.

I lay on the ground, holding my breath, shutting my eyes as tight as I could, hoping that anyone would come get me. At that point, I didn't care who pulled me out of the CS gas cloud; I just wanted to be able to breathe again. Eventually, a very dear friend of mine, Corporal Heidi Beck (now Sergeant Beck) screamed for someone to get me out of the situation. Then, another good friend of mine, Lcpl Craig Witt (now Sergeant Witt) dragged me to the command post to regain whatever consciousness I had left. This was certainly not the kind of thing I had imagined when I signed that dotted line.

There are definite perks to being a Marine Musician: Staying in shape, traveling, meeting new people, and growing your musical abilities are just a few. There were so many things that I enjoyed about staying in shape, but the rigorous training for the annual physical fitness test (PFT) and combat fitness test (CFT) was not among them. Those pictures that people see of Marines running in their green-on-green PT gear where everyone looks like they are enjoying it, well, it wasn't fun to me. I enjoyed going to the gym, working out, and being able to sit in the sauna for a little bit. The problem, however, is that if you don't stay in shape you start to become a "fat body." And this means that you become the worst thing ever in the bandmaster's eyes. Some people can be three pounds under their maximum weight and still be considered disgusting if they look bad in uniform. That just doesn't sit right with me. I think if you can look like a

Marine in uniform and you can pass all your fitness tests, you shouldn't be judged for being two or three pounds under or over your maximum weight. The demand to constantly watch my weight had me thinking about these things as my friends dragged me out of that cloud of CS gas.

After recuperating in the command center, I finally realized what had happened and was able to examine my surroundings. I had been placed in the “immediate trauma” area by the doctor. They treated my “bullet wound” and declared me a “casualty of war.” In the process of the rescue, Craig had also been wounded, but not “mortally” like myself. Because this was only a training exercise, I decided to unload my weapon, give the rest of the ammo to the command center guard (Staff Sergeant Chris James) and just chill with the other “fatalities.”

Traveling is the best part about being a Marine Musician. I have been all over the Eastern seaboard. I have been to New York City, Cleveland, Staunton, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Harpers Ferry, Ligonier, and as far West as Cedar Rapids. My favorite trip was up to New York during the September 11th memorial services. Our rock band (one of the many small ensembles that a Marine band has to offer) played in Times Square for a huge crowd. That was the best hour-and-a-half I ever had playing with the Marine band. I was also humbled during this trip as we performed a memorial concert in one of the buildings that had been destroyed during the attacks. It was my favorite experience as a *musician*. But my favorite experience as a *Marine* occurred, as I mentioned, during the same trip where I was shot in the lower back with a paintball gun, surrounded by a cloud of CS gas, and was dragged to an imaginary command center by my friends.

After the training exercise came to an end, we learned that the person who threw the CS gas grenade between my legs did it on purpose. That individual got in trouble. I was glad, because I didn't find anything funny about the “prank.” That night, we did night vision goggle (NVG) training. We didn't use any sim-

rounds for this exercise because it was too dangerous. Instead, we used blanks and went completely lights out. That was by far the most interesting night of field week. At the end of the week, the band Marines were told that they were the most organized group of Marines the instructors had trained for a long time. We knew that we were organized because we had always worked together as a team. Don't ever mess with a Marine, but sure as hell don't mess with a Marine musician. We may look like a bunch of pansies, but in field week we held our own with the Marines who had just come back from Iraq. It is my opinion that we are the strongest unit in the Marine Corps.

The biggest performance that the Quantico Marine Corps Band does is the Virginia International Tattoo (VIT) Festival in Norfolk, VA. Our performance is part of the Virginia Arts Festival, which lasts for an entire week in April. The VIT is the home of a massive international music and gymnastics performance. Over six-hundred artists and performers attend every year from countries such as Norway, Russia, South Africa, Canada, Sweden, and Finland. If you have ever seen a marching band competition, it is similar to that. Everything is an exhibition and it brings more countries together than any other type of organized routine.

VIT was one of my favorite performances because we worked for two months straight preparing the show, starting in February and ending in April. There are downsides: It sucks preparing in the middle of winter because Quantico gets cold; and sometimes we practiced outside in our PT gear (this gear doesn't keep you very warm). And when we went to Norfolk for the VIT, we usually ended up in a crappy hotel. Luckily, we never had to stay in the rooms very long. The VIT is very different than the experiences gained in the field. Both have bad aspects, but both give you a sense of pride and accomplishment that you never forget.

Being a Marine musician is about more than just being a Marine, or even being a musician. It is about being able to understand that you are both of these things and that you represent the United States Marine Corps wherever you go.

As a Marine Musician, you have earned the title of Marine and the respect that goes along with it. We are not only the nation's first and foremost fighting force. We are on the battlefield at home, fighting to prove that we are still needed. In doing such, we are proud to be known as the few, the proud, your United States Marines.

