

MAKING THE CORPS¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JEFF BRADY²

“Marines, the Nation’s 911 force.”³ Selective service registration begins today as the Marines take over Congress and the White House!

Thomas Ricks’ book, *Making the Corps*, explains the Marine “culture” like few others. Ricks, however, takes an otherwise excellent review of the recruit training process and leaps to the radical conclusion that the Corps may eventually rebel against the public it serves. Set against the backdrop of recruit training, Ricks follows sixty-three prospective new Marines through recruit training and the first year after the rigors of Parris Island.

Making the Corps, however, is more than a flowery version of the life and times of sixty-three young men aspiring to become Marines. Ricks artfully details the philosophical, psychological, and mechanical processes Parris Island and the Marine Corps use to transform civilians into United States Marines. Unfortunately, although he spent considerable time and effort studying the forging process Parris Island employs to transform civilians into Marines, Ricks never understands fully what makes Marines. Ricks abandons everything he has learned about Marines and the transformation process in his radical conclusion. Perhaps one must be transformed himself to truly understand Marines.

Thomas Ricks is a *Wall Street Journal* Pentagon correspondent. He conceived the idea for this book while observing young Marines in Somalia and other operations. On his first deployment as a Pentagon reporter, Ricks went on a night patrol in Mogadishu, Somalia, with a squad of young Marines. That experience piqued an interest in the Marine Corps and especially its unique “culture.” Ricks’ interest deepened when he observed and interacted with Marines around the globe over the next four years.

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1. THOMAS E. RICKS, *MAKING THE CORPS* (1997).
 2. United States Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.
 3. Marine Corps recruiting poster.

Ricks used his observations to describe the Marine Corps as a subculture within the culture of the Armed Forces, separate and distinct from the other services. His book is a study of how the Marines “stand out as a successful and healthy institution that unabashedly teaches values to the Beavises and Buttheads of America.”⁴

The author traces the recruit training cycle of Platoon 3086, from initial arrival through graduation and service school training. The author insightfully describes the platoon members’ backgrounds, which allows the reader to understand how each person adapted to the Marine Corps. The first six chapters focus on recruit training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), Parris Island, South Carolina. These chapters also contain short biographical sketches of individual recruits. Ricks thoroughly explains the various phases of recruit training. He allows the reader to empathize with the recruits’ experience of MCRD Parris Island. Chapter titles in the first six chapters are well suited to the various training stages the recruits face during their stay at Parris Island.⁵

Ricks artfully describes the first major transformation tool recruits experience—the “disorientation” phase. This phase begins almost immediately when new recruits reach Parris Island. Ricks’ writing style vividly captures the sensory assault on the new recruits, which allows the reader to be the metaphorical “fly on the wall” at Parris Island. He correctly summarizes the effect of the techniques used. The Marines designed these techniques to strip away an individual’s civilian identity, leaving room to begin building the group culture of Marines. He discusses many examples of this process in the four-day stage marked by lack of sleep and civilian culture breakdown. For instance, when recruits initially step off the bus the drill instructors force them to stand on yellow footprints. These footprints are so close that recruits lose their individual identity and become one mass. Then, the drill instructors strip everything away to include clothing, hair, jewelry, food, friends, and even the recruit’s name. This short four-day period begins the transformation from civilian to Marine.

The reader is unaware while reading *Making the Corps* that Ricks will eventually use this description, and the other transformation tools described in later chapters, to support his final, controversial thesis. This forces the reader, therefore, to reread prior chapters to validate or invali-

4. Ricks, *supra* note 1, at 20.

5. Chapter 1: Disorientation; Chapter 2: The Forming; Chapter 3: Training; Chapter 4: Warrior Week; Chapter 5: Graduation.

date the final thesis in the last chapter of the book. Ricks' method of organization in *Making the Corps* subtracts appreciably from the force of his argument.

Making the Corps' next section amplifies Ricks' previous description, by explaining the second transformation tool Platoon 3086 faces at MCRD Parris Island. He traces the "forming" where members of the receiving barracks formally meet their drill instructors and learn that they are a unit—Platoon 3086. Drill instructors "swarm" the recruits when they arrive at the barracks that will be their home for the next eleven weeks. Ricks points out that this strategy performs two functions. First, the one to two week forming process has an accelerated pace that forces each recruit to perform beyond his perceived limits. Most orders given require teamwork for successful completion. These orders minimize the egocentric philosophy affecting society today. Second, Ricks explains that the drill instructors force recruits to endure a state of "chaos." The drill instructor serves as a symbol of order in this "chaos." This further emphasizes the good of the organization over that of the self. This phase reinforces the lessons learned during the short disorientation phase.

Ricks then explores the beginning of formalized training for Platoon 3086. Here, Ricks includes the personal views of selected Platoon members. He incorporates their response and reactions to the training. While Ricks covers many valuable points in this discussion, including the historical development of recruit training and reflections on the woes of American youth, he makes his first in a series of troubling stereotypes about Marines. Ricks stereotypes drill instructors into two major categories in his analysis: rural southerners and tough city kids. From my practical experience, this is patently false and misleading to the reader. Drill instructors are no different from any cross-section in the Marine Corps—they represent a wide variety of Americans.⁶

Ricks then masterfully traces how James Webb⁷ and General Gray⁸ revamped and revitalized the Marine Corps after the Vietnam Conflict. He accurately details the efforts that brought the Marine Corps to its current training and operational level. Ricks, however, also sows the seeds for his

6. There are only two Recruit Depots, one at San Diego, California, and the other at Parris Island. It is more likely that these Marines have tried to get near their homes and families during their tour. Thus, if a Marine is from the East Coast, and does not want to go into the recruiting field, Parris Island is the logical choice of duty assignment. West Coast Marines choose San Diego, and Mid-Westerners shoot for recruiting duty or inspector-instructor duty near their friends and families.

final chapter and his unusual thesis: the Marine Corps' possible split from the society it serves and its potential overthrow of the government. He sets this theme in motion with numerous quotes and surveys. Recruit interviews depict the changed views of several young recruits after they have been indoctrinated into the norms and expectations of the Marine Corps. The views universally change to contempt for the society they serve. Of particular note in his discussion is a quote from James Webb's book, *Fields of Fire*:

These people have no sense of country. They don't look beyond themselves We've lost a sense of responsibility, at least on the individual level. We have too many people . . . who believe that the government owes them total, undisciplined freedom. If everyone thought that way, there would be no society. We're so big, so strong now, that people seem to have forgotten a part of

7. See generally RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 132-49. Secretary James Webb was, at the time, the youngest appointee to hold the office of Secretary of the Navy. A decorated veteran of the Vietnam conflict, Secretary Webb was a prolific writer after Vietnam regarding the erosion of patriotism and sense of duty in American culture. Appointed to the position of Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration, Secretary Webb sought to reinstall the values of patriotism, valor and sacrifice into the leadership philosophy of the Marine Corps. As part of that effort, Secretary Webb sought and installed General Alfred Gray as Commandant of the Marine Corps to replace General P.X. Kelley when his term expired. General Gray was not a popular candidate for the position, but Secretary Webb was impressed with his "grasp on the spiritual problems of the Corps." Secretary Webb resigned shortly thereafter, but his installation of General Gray marked a redefining moment for the Marine Corps.

8. *Id.* General Alfred Gray was an old "mustang" Marine. He dropped out of Lafayette College in 1950 and enlisted in the Marine Corps where he served in the Korean War and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. His experiences in Vietnam provided General Gray with a broad vision of the needs of the Corps. (General Gray was one of the first officers to serve in Vietnam in 1962 where he performed special operations work. And he was one of the last officers to leave, commanding the Marine ground troops in the evacuation of Saigon in 1975). Soon after assuming the position of Commandant, General Gray instituted a professional reading program for all Marines, corporal and above. Another major contribution of General Gray was a total restructuring of the way in that Marines fight. General Gray reshaped the Marine Corps' tactical thinking and doctrine, focusing on maneuver warfare concepts vice the traditional concepts of attrition warfare. This sparked large debates within the Corps but eventually, the Corps changes its methodology of warfare to encompass a maneuver warfare strategy. As Commandant, General Gray also restructured recruit training to instill combat training and virtues from the very beginning of each Marine's training. General Gray's inspiration and vision revamped the structure and training of all Marines, private to general, and became the bedrock of the force the Corps is today.

our strength comes from each person surrendering a portion of his individual urges to the common good.⁹

Ricks opines that this quote, “in a nutshell, states the ideology that the Marine Corps tries to inculcate today at Parris Island.¹⁰” This single paragraph serves as the major underpinning to the controversial conclusion that Ricks reaches in the final chapter of his book. The quote, however, is in the middle of the book and does not refer to the author’s thesis. Therefore, the reader must recall this point, or reread portions of the book, to uncover one of the author’s major premises in support of his final point.

Ricks then evaluates the Marine Corps and compares it to the other branches of the Armed Forces. His major premise in this comparison is that the other services try to accommodate themselves to changes in society, while the Marine Corps tries to separate itself from societal changes. This premise is true to some extent. The Marine Corps *is* more hesitant to incorporate *self-imposed* change to accommodate societal shifts. This only makes sense with the Corps’ two hundred twenty-plus year history, which has seen both permanent and temporary societal changes.

History and tradition are a primary building block for the Corps. The Corps’ traditions and history strengthen the inculcation of its values, as Ricks points out in numerous places within the book. What Ricks fails to acknowledge, however, is that the Marine Corps, like all the services, is an institution controlled by civilian society. Numerous changes have occurred in the Marine Corps as a result of changing societal values. Some examples are integration, women in the military, and policies regarding homosexuality. The Corps adapts through a process of civilian-imposed changes instead of internally generated changes based on society’s passing fads. The Marine Corps is not the recalcitrant, isolated, culturally elite society bent on self-determination that Ricks projects. Rather, it responds to important societal changes that its civilian leadership believes in and decides are important enough for the Marine Corps to adopt.

Chapters six, seven, and eight cover the graduation, follow-on training, assignments, and connections to past lifestyles of Platoon 3086’s graduates. Ricks describes the difficulty some recruits experience returning to civilian society, their family, or peer relationships. He uses these examples as further support for his final conclusion that the Marine Corps is cultur-

9. RICKS, *supra* note 1, at 138 (quoting JAMES WEBB, *FIELDS OF FIRE* (1978)).

10. *Id.*

ally isolated from the society it protects. He opines that the Marine Corps views society as a chaotic state of poor values, decadence, and individualism. He concludes that the Marine Corps' greater political involvement, coupled with its focus on "chaos" as a mission, may lead the Marine Corps to view the next war as being at home.

To support his thesis, Ricks offers some quotes and vignettes from Platoon 3086 members:

In the Marines you get an identity, people who never had a family, they belong to something—maybe for the first time in their lives . . . you know you are in a brotherhood that will never die.¹¹

. . . .

[Recruit training] was . . . all the basic things that you should learn growing up, but for some reason society de-emphasizes.¹²

Ricks offers these quotes, and other excerpts, as support for the premise that the Marine Corps has instilled its values into these Marines, thereby separating them from society. He does not stop there, however. He then establishes a series of weak links that attempt to build upon these strengthened values to reach his controversial conclusion.

One of the weak links that Ricks proposes is that the Corps' imparted values cause the recruits to despise the society from which they came. But, there is a more reasonable explanation for this behavior. Throughout the book, Ricks builds upon the point quoted earlier about teaching values to the Beavis and Butthead of America. "[The Marine Corps] does a good job dealing with the bottom half of American society . . . the Corps takes kids with weak high school educations and nurtures them so that many can assume positions of honor and respect."¹³ Ricks is partially correct that the recruits' changes in outlook are a product of the heightened values that they receive in recruit training. This new outlook, however, relates more closely to the reason these young men joined the Marine Corps in the first place. If they joined the Marine Corps to get away from the "bottom half of society," as Ricks claims, then it is only natural that they would look even less favorably upon their past. Justification for their enlistment decision, coupled with an improved set of cultural values, would naturally lead to each recruit's downplay of past experiences and values. Jumping from

11. Ricks, *supra* note 1, at 252.

12. *Id.* at 256.

13. *Id.* at 20.

this observation to the radical conclusion that the Marine Corps views all of society as deprived of morals and deprived of culture is a large leap in analysis.

Ricks attempts to pull these conclusions, along with other observations, together to reach his final, controversial points. In his final chapter, Ricks sets forth three areas of societal change he claims have created a large gap between the military and society. Ricks describes changes in the military, society, and the international security environment that could lead to a potentially dangerous result. He concludes that there is a danger of an autonomous military taking matters into its own hands to clean up society.

Ricks claims that an all-volunteer force of professional soldiers creates a separate class of citizenry. The feeling of superiority over society when added to this class distinction leads to fear and loathing of the government during cutbacks and privatization of military functions. A shift in focus from defending society to defining society through higher morals and values creates a dangerous situation. He adds that this is particularly true where society has grown more fragmented, individualistic, and is less disciplined in areas of family, church, and education. Finally, he claims the post-Cold War shift of missions toward foreign policy enforcement to combat world "chaos" leads eventually to domestic missions involving "cultural chaos" in the United States. These three changes are ostensibly a recipe for self-determination by the culturally elite military over the culturally deprived society in America.

In *Making the Corps*, Ricks correctly identifies numerous problems in modern society; however, he falls short of understanding the essence of the Corps and the military in general. Each member of the Marine Corps understands that he surrenders a portion of his individual urges for the common good as James Webb described in *Fields of Fire*.¹⁴ Each Marine swears an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States upon initial entry and upon each enlistment. Marines acknowledge that civilian elected society controls the military. While there may be some reluctance or questioning of societal changes imposed upon the Corps, the Marine Corps carries out civilian directed changes as it has for the past two hundred twenty-two years. Marines understand our system of government and the Corps' place within that system. Their deep respect for that system, our country, and the American people they defend would not allow the actions Ricks fears. Marines would have to abandon all that they

14. See WEBB, *supra* note 9.

believe in, their “culture” as Ricks defines it, before they would reach the conclusion he suggests; Marines would not engage in such conduct.