

Lessons from the Smoke Pit

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“Hey Gunny, What Do You Think About ...”

Let’s face it, smoking is prevalent in the ranks. Even “Generation Vape” has quite a few tobacco users. We know it is bad for us. We are required to listen to an avatar Gunny on MarineNet once a year. The legal age of tobacco use has been raised to 21, which is a little mind blowing. You may be an NCO leading your Marines into combat, but you are not old enough to fire up a lung rocket. For decades cigarettes came in the C-rations just like gum and toilet paper. Believe it or not, there was a time when smoke breaks were part of the training schedule at the recruit depots, although it was done “by the numbers.” My, my, how the times have changed. One thing that has not changed, however, is the smoke pit.

Smoke pits can be found at every base, station, camp or detachment around the globe; from the snow of far off northern lands, and in sunny tropic scenes. Aboard ship too. An ammo can, or perhaps a number 10 can from the mess hall, filled with sand serves as a butt can. These are often painted red which somehow makes us appear more squared away. Many salty Marines are accustomed to field stripping their cigarette when they are done smoking. This consists of extinguishing the cherry, rolling the butt in your fingers (pointed toward the deck) while the remaining ash and tobacco are spilled on the ground. The butt is then placed in the Marine’s pocket and a quick brush of the boot across the ground sanitizes any remaining evidence.

The smoke pit is outdoors, a prescribed number of feet from the building and communal in nature. The communal aspect of the smoke pit is a valuable and overlooked cultural marker. Smokers come from all pay grades, although overwhelmingly represented by enlisted folks. Not a very gentlemanly appearance for the Marine officer, I suppose.

Thankfully we’ve never had separate smoke pits as we do with our NCO or SNCO mess decks. The “all hands” nature of the smoke pit organically creates conversation among junior and senior Marines. The act of smoking is informal, and the accompanying conversation is too.

That is not to say the conversations lack serious content. Many times, they certainly do. They are not, however, formal counseling sessions, lectures, or rigid exchanges.

The topics vary and range widely. It could be navigating marriage and life in the FMF, exploring the development of TTP’s for a problem set, or how to deal with difficult people in the unit. Sometimes it’s sharing dreams and plans for *after*. After

coming out of the field, after deployment, or after an enlistment is complete. Sharing life.

It’s not uncommon to find two junior Marines in the smoke pit engaged in a discussion, when a SNCO walks up and fires up a Marlboro Red. It seems only natural to ask “Hey Gunny, what do you think about ...”

The ensuing conversation is where magic occurs.

The older Marine opines on the matter, generally related through a sea story. The younger Marines get a glimpse of what things were like “back in the day” or in the “old Corps” (though each of us knows we missed the old Corps by about one year). Always boot to someone.

These sea stories, the advice, the counsel, they each serve as lessons. Lessons from the smoke pit.

Human beings learn through storytelling. It has been that way all throughout history, especially in tribal cultures. The Marine Corps certainly is a tribe. Stories are remembered more than lectures. Stories connect on a deep level. Thought and emotion. Heart. The stories of the Corps, our heritage, are a primary characteristic that sets us apart from our sister services. We continue to write these stories as we serve alongside one another.

Lessons from the smoke pit serve another purpose, forming bonds among brothers in arms. These are lifelong relationships. It is common to find Marines veterans who feel strong affection for old platoon mates that they never really liked. This is because the Marine Corps is a family, albeit a very dysfunctional family ... with generational trauma! But a family, nonetheless.

Lessons from the smoke pit are instructive and often accompanied by humor. The lessons have a bit of a “take it or leave it” feel to them. Maybe that’s just what the old man thinks. Then again, one might consider the thoughts of an old man still playing in a young man’s game.

Here at *Leatherneck*, we are going to explore Lessons from the Smoke Pit. Our goal is to capture timeless pieces that evoke reflection and elicit a few laughs; all in an effort to promulgate a love of Corps that we’ve inherited and will continue to pass down to future generations of Marines.

Author’s bio: Adam Walker served as an infantryman for 25 years, retiring as a master gunnery sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. He now writes stories on laughter and leadership from an old field desk. 🍷

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