

The Power of Music

Moving the Marine Corps forward

by Col Jason K. Fetting

On 11 July 1798, President John Adams signed an Act of Congress that permanently re-established the United States Marine Corps and began the development of our heritage as the Nation's premiere naval expeditionary force. Embedded in that Act of Congress outlining the structure of our fledgling Corps was a provision for 32 drummers and fifers, along with a drum major and fife major prescribed to lead them. This collection of new Marine musicians would soon evolve into what is today known as "The President's Own" United States Marine Band. This Act set in motion a tradition of music that has been interwoven into the very fabric of our Corps for more than two centuries.

On its surface, music may not seem to be essential to the core warfighting mission of Marines; however, that Congressional action clearly allotted a substantial portion of the original force to the specialized service of musicians, and the initiatives of our earliest Commandants tell us why. At the behest of President Thomas Jefferson, Commandant William Ward Burroughs sent his officers on an international recruiting mission to find highly trained musicians to staff the early Marine Band. Music was the primary tool to demonstrate the high standards of the new force to potential recruits and was essential to encouraging the necessary support of a skeptical public. The tradition of music in those early days was not just used to move troops on the battlefield and in ceremony, although that was an important function; it also possessed the power to communicate the emotion inherent in the independent spirit of the Nation. Music moved people to serve, motivated the support of those who did not serve, and, perhaps most impor-

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tantly, connected those in the fight with all those for whom they fought.

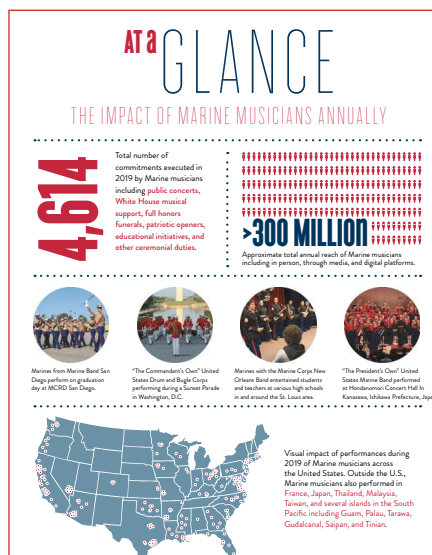
Much has changed and evolved in our Nation and in our Corps since 1798, but the fundamental values and standards of excellence that were established by our earliest generation of Marines have been passed along through the cen-

Corps stronger, leaner, and evermore skilled. Our 38th Commandant has directed that "we must communicate with precision and consistency, based on a common focus and unified message." Communication of our values and goals will always be an essential component of our collective success in every area of performance on and off the battlefield, and music can—and will—continue to play a vital role in moving our Marine Corps forward.

Warfighting

Marines are an elite warfighting force with a strong naval heritage. Understanding our rich history as warriors during both times of conflict and times of peace informs the future capabilities of the force, and music has always been central in communicating those stories. During times of war, Marine Corps bands spread out across the Nation not only to rally the support of both major influencers and the American public but to also viscerally remind them of those who are in harm's way. In some cases, those very same musicians have put down their instruments and deployed alongside their brothers and sisters to join the fight.

Marines are known as the "first to fight," but they are also often the first on scene to assist in emergencies or contain a brewing crisis. Our Corps' long history with the Department of State and its expeditionary nature suits the Service



The music provided by Marines during one year. (Image provided by author.)

tries. The music provided by Marines since our founding continues to proudly illuminate them.

Gen David H. Berger has set the Marine Corps on a new path toward further modernization and strategic focus on five critical pillars designed to make our

well to support the goal of deterrence. As much as Marines are prepared for war, the primary goal will always be peace through strength and diplomacy. Time and again since the founding of our Nation, music has been the most powerful public tool of soft power and diplomacy, encouraging the support of allied nations, building coalitions, and celebrating cultural exchanges as the centerpiece of our collective strength.

Music directly supports theater security cooperation. It can enable commanders worldwide to engage with publics and local governments in creative and meaningful ways that traditional instruments of theater security cooperation might not allow. From symbolically representing our Nation in the most sensitive diplomatic environments to executing joint performances with our foreign counterparts both on our soil and abroad, the fundamental and constant presence of music in our Marine Corps extends a warm and welcoming hand across borders and cultures wherever possible, from the halls of the White House all the way to the most unstable and dangerous corners of the globe.

Force Design

As the Commandant leads the effort to maximize the effectiveness of our assets and modernize the force where needed, he reminds us that *people* are our most important asset and that “everything starts and ends with the individual Marine.” Every force structure change will depend on the abilities and health of our Marines and the support they receive from both inside and outside of the Corps. The proliferation of music in the Marine Corps is central to this latter effort: putting Marines in full focus for all those we encounter. Just as the goal of our foundational naval integration is to ensure we can reach any clime or place at any time to meet our adversaries, our ability to *represent* that capability to the American public through the communicative and universal nature of music is not only very powerful, it is necessary. Music is a vital tool in the overall communication strategy of shaping the public’s view of Marines and, equally important, the

further potential and relevancy of the Marine Corps in the future operating environment.

People from all backgrounds often draw their impressions from emotions and symbolic gestures. Those emotions can drive critical decisions. When a President, member of Congress, or an everyday citizen personally interact with Marine musicians, they receive a specific storyboard of emotion that can frame the impression of the entire force. The most important identity of that force is a combination of our long and storied heritage seamlessly combined with the capacity for constant innovation and adaptability. The very essence of military music continues to be the perfect representation of our fundamental identity and a vital strategic asset to capture and reinforce that messaging for audiences of the widest possible range of backgrounds and views.

Harkening back to the earliest days of the Corps, music is still at the tip of the spear in building the future of the Marine Corps. When prospective recruits hear and see “The President’s Own” perform for them in their small town, witness “The Commandant’s Own” Marine Drum and Bugle Corps play to thousands on an elite international drill field, or watch one of the ten exceptional Marine field bands stationed at major commands throughout the Corps bring incredibly diverse music and engagement to local communities, they are very often moved to be a part of that same culture of excellence. Quite simply, talent attracts talent, and the immediate impact of music on inspiring each generation of Marines to join this elite Corps has been borne out time and again on Marine Corps Recruiting Command’s total force and the Musician Enlistment Option Program missions. If people are the Marine Corps’ number one asset, there remains no greater tool to bring those people to the fight.

Education and Training

As with our naval expeditionary forces, not all Marine musical units need to be identical, and indeed the Corps’ musical capabilities have been adapted and shaped by our evolving

needs. While each Marine musician is a highly trained expert in their field, the ten field bands, the Drum and Bugle Corps, and “The President’s Own” Marine Band each continually expand the skillsets of their units to meet the mission and continually broaden the modes of outreach to meet the needs of the service as we modernize.

Talent management is central to this effort and, since recruiting, nurturing and keeping talent is a priority for the Commandant, the music field provides an ideal model for the rest of the Corps in this area. By the very nature of this occupational field, it is entirely staffed by well-trained and disciplined professionals who demonstrate a never-ending quest for improvement and expansion of skills. As the premiere musical unit of the Marine Corps, “The President’s Own” in particular attracts and retains the most elite and highly educated musicians the Nation has to offer who specifically choose to enter the Service with their unique talents. Nearly 100 percent possess a bachelor’s degree in the field, with more than 60 percent holding master’s degrees, and over 15 percent achieving doctorates. The Drum and Bugle Corps is the only active Drum Corps in the Armed Forces and remains an exceptionally prestigious career field for specialists in this area. Along with the Drum and Bugle Corps, the more than 500 Marines who serve around the globe in Marine Corps field bands also possess a significant percentage of college educated professionals in their ranks and demonstrate the dual capability of exercising their advanced skillset while maintaining combat readiness and ability to deploy when called.

Professional military education (PME) is a core value between all elements of Marine music. In addition to perpetual and intense training of individual Marines to grow their specialized capabilities, “The President’s Own” provides regular PME throughout the fleet, bringing the highest level of expertise and experience available within the Corps to the occupational field. Musical units in the Marine Corps continually expand the influence each has on the other and share resources to prepare the next generation of Marines

to enhance our collective capabilities. Providing significant opportunities for Marines to acquire valuable new skills and leadership responsibility is a critical aspect of operations in the music field. These opportunities are central to both the success of individual Marines and the program in whole, as future leaders must be identified and cultivated from within our unique professional community.

This mentorship philosophy is also regularly shared with the civilian communities each band serves in their commands—as well as across the Nation when musicians travel—through extensive and long-standing educational outreach programs. These significant efforts to reach out to connect with young people not only provide valuable resources and instruction to students at all levels, but it is also a strategic communication tool to encourage the essential support of the communities that are served and a recruiting tool to identify the talent that will become the next generation of Marines.

The very nature of music making and the highly specialized training that is required to perform at an elite level directly aligns with the Commandant's vision to create Marines who “think, decide, and act” and who are “challenged by problems that they tackle as groups in order to learn by doing and from each other.” Musicians constantly work to adapt to the evolving mission and learn from each other in realtime each and every day. The success of a musical unit depends entirely on the synergy and chemistry of the team and provides an important and easily understood model for the pursuit of dynamic problem-solving. Further, musical performance is a prime example of the success that is fostered by bringing substantial *individual* talents together to augment the efficacy of the group effort.

Command and Leadership

The high standard of leadership and professionalism in the function of our musical units is on public display for the Marines who see and hear their brothers and sisters perform for them, as well as for the supporting civilian community at large. The occupational field organi-

cally empowers Marines to think creatively, grow, and proactively lead as they carry the mantle for so many others who do not have the same public opportunities to represent these qualities on behalf of our Corps.

Music is also critical in reminding all who experience its impact of the innate *human* factor in our Service, both as individuals and as a team. Providing good leadership is dependent on recognizing the inherent value of enriching and nurturing each individual to be at their best. It is remembering that we are indeed at our best as leaders when we take care of our Marines—and each other—physically, mentally, and spiritually. For more than 220 years of shared heritage across so many generations, there has been no more effective way to keep the human aspect of our Service in the forefront of our minds as leaders and comrades-in-arms.

Core Values

Our Commandant reminds us that “the Marine Corps developed its war-fighting spirit in the values of honor, courage, and commitment” and that “our rich history demonstrates this ethos and has led generations of Marines to success on and off of the battlefield.”

Everything Marine musicians accomplish is designed to embody our core values for the more than 300 million individuals they reach and influence each and every year in person through media and via the ever-expanding digital platforms that have been mastered and leveraged by the occupational field. The commitment and courage Marines display every day in their service is plain to see for those who have opportunity to witness it. It is Marine music that takes on the immense responsibility to tell their story to everyone else both domestically and abroad and to vividly demonstrate what it is that makes Marines different.

In addition to the courage and commitment that is at the foundation of our Corps, it is the concept of honor that is particularly special to Marines, and honor is chief among the sacred values that is best communicated through music. Everything that Marine musicians endeavor to contribute to our heritage is

to honor something that is important to our Corps and our country. We honor our fallen with music. We honor our comrades in arms, past and present, with music. We honor our traditions and our identity as Marines with music, and we honor all those who choose to connect with Marines around the world. “The President’s Own” Marine Band is further entrusted on the international stage at the White House to honor our very identity as Americans and to represent and honor our artistic and cultural achievements as a country.

In our Service, we are most successful when we are able to bring all of these things together for all people, binding our values as Marines together with our values as a Nation so that they cannot be undone. For nearly as long as we have been an independent Nation and a Marine Corps, music has been at the very heart of that mission.

There is substantial opportunity for leaders in today’s Marine Corps to continue to use the power of music to not only amplify the objectives of the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*,¹ but also to strategically engage those who have the greatest influence in perpetuating our Service and setting up every Marine for success. For those leaders who have not had the opportunity to experience that unique power in person, I encourage them to seek out that interaction and take note of the strong and universal emotional impact that can be felt at every single performance given by Marine musicians, whether in ceremony, parades and tattoos, in concerts of all kinds, or in the expansive educational environment. Music is a mode of communication that has been proven time and again to have no equal in our Corps over these past two centuries. It will continue to vividly illuminate our unshakable values and capabilities well into the future.

Note

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant’s Planning Guidance, 38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

