

# MCRD San Diego Marks its Centennial

## West Coast Base Blends Historic Architecture With the Corps' Modern Mission



COURTESY OF THE COMMAND MUSEUM, MCRD SAN DIEGO

One of the first platoons to graduate from the new West Coast Recruit Depot in San Diego, Calif., was 4th Plt, Co C, on Sept. 28, 1923.

By Barbara McCurtis

**M**arine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego is celebrating its 100th birthday and its beginnings are quite interesting. Following World War I, San Diego, Calif., was a sleepy border town struggling to establish a stable economic base that would attract new residents and generate prosperity. The main thing the area had going for it was perfect climate.

The city's chamber of commerce, led by a powerful group of local citizens, began courting the Department of the

Navy to select San Diego as its southern Pacific port. Initial efforts were rejected as the Navy did not want to invest in an undeveloped location. The group then began lobbying President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1908, the fleet was passing San Diego on its world tour and the committee made a bold move. They raised more than \$20,000 and chartered a fishing boat to take the mayor and a group of directors 600 miles south to intercept the fleet off the coast of Mexico. They pleaded their case on the foredeck of a battleship, and the admirals agreed to stop outside the bay of San Diego as the harbor was

too shallow, narrow and dangerous.

When the fleet landed on April 15, 1908, they were greeted with parades, ceremonies, balls, guided tours, dinners and other functions in the homes of prominent San Diegans. The visit was such a success the group began to pursue opportunities to improve the harbor. Meanwhile, a revolution in Mexico brought the Marines to the area. The United States activated the 4th Marine Regiment to support the existing regime in Mexico. At that time, limited operations had been conducted in many parts of the globe in support of national interests.

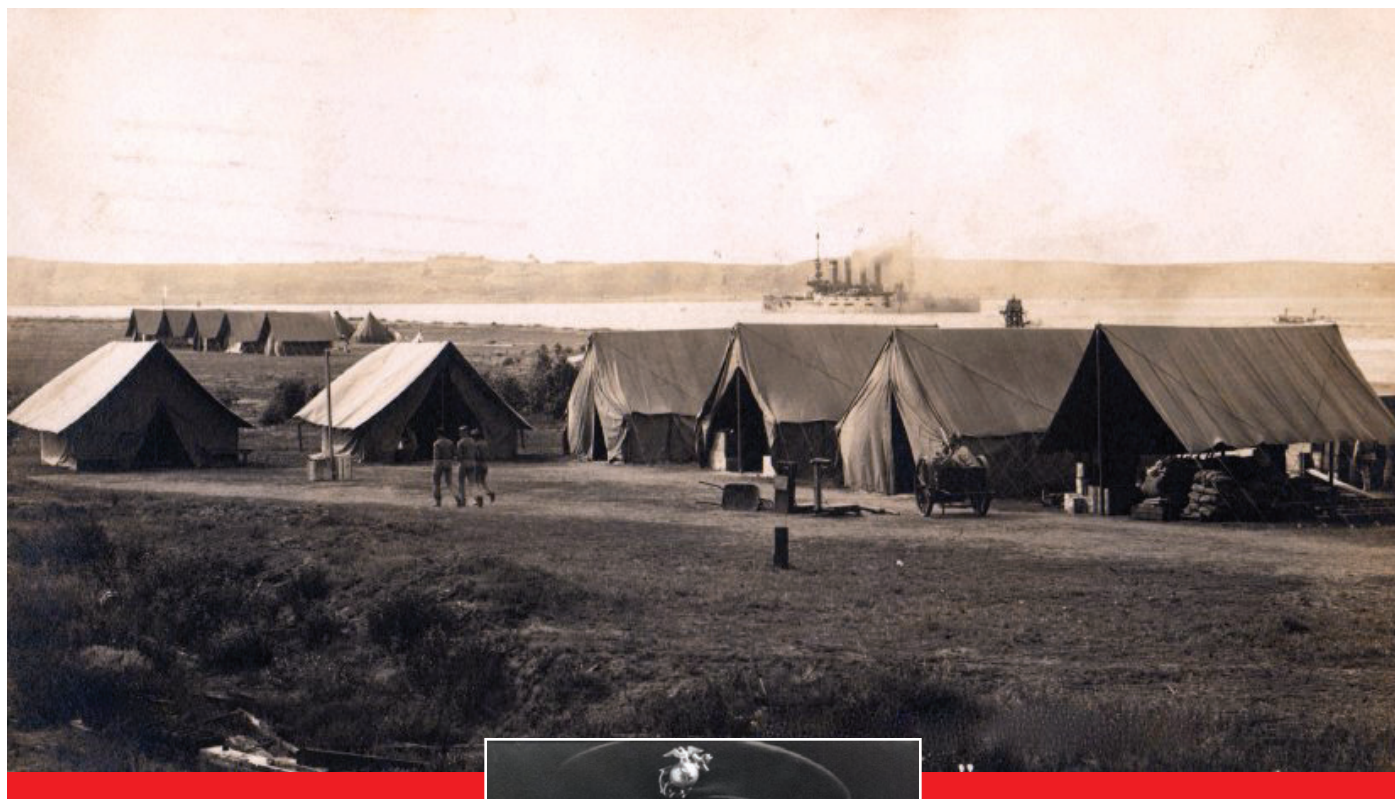




CPL BETHANIE C. SAHMS, USMC

Marines aboard MCRD San Diego, Calif., run along Hochmuth Ave., during a 3-mile run to celebrate the Marine Corps Birthday on Nov. 5, 2015.





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In March 1911, the 4th Provisional Brigade, under Colonel Charles A. Doyen, sailed from San Francisco to San Diego where they waited on Navy ships for orders south. After a week of waiting, Doyen and his Marines disembarked on March 20 and set up a temporary camp on North Island they called Camp Thomas, in honor of Rear Admiral Chauncey Thomas, Commander of the Pacific Fleet. North Island was one of two islands that transformed San Diego Harbor from a broad bay, wide open to the Pacific Ocean, into a landlocked harbor on the Pacific Coast. A flat spot of sand and scrub growth, the camp allowed the Marines to conduct physical exercises, close order drill and marches under full packs. Marksmanship training was carried out on a range that had been constructed by First Lieutenant Holland M. Smith.

By the end of May the revolution was over, and the 4th Provisional Regiment was disbanded. In 1912, William Kettner, Director of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce, was elected to Congress. Kettner used his new position to find federal funding and eventually persuaded Congress to appropriate \$238,000 to dredge San Diego Harbor. This was an important first step in making San Diego a Navy town.

Trouble with Mexico occurred again in 1914, and the 4th Regiment was in camp on North Island under the command of Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton. Col



USMC

**BGen Joseph H. Pendleton served as the first commanding officer of MCRD San Diego from March 1 to June 1, 1921.**

Pendleton saw San Diego as a strategic point for the Marines to train and embark quickly for expeditionary duty. He was not alone in this idea; Marine officers had been recommending a permanent advance base regiment since 1911.

In camp on North Island, Col Pendleton took every opportunity to generate support for the Marine Corps. Interested in local affairs, he rarely turned down an invitation to attend civic functions. He held an open house every Tuesday and Thursday and hosted the regiment parade for public viewing.

Pendleton's presence in the city is

well-documented in the photographs of the Panama California International Exposition as well as more than 15 articles written on him in the local newspapers. He was sought after as a speaker for civic engagements and soon became a close associate of local leaders to include Congressman Kettner, who became a strong advocate for a permanent Marine Corps installation in San Diego. Before and during the exposition, Kettner prepared the city for new military installations when he deepened the harbor and added a coal wharf and fuel oil station and a Navy radio station in Point Loma.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, inspected the area in April 1914 and recommended San Diego as the site for an advanced base. His proposal was approved and the 4th Regiment, ordered ashore at San Diego for an indefinite stay, became the nucleus of the West Coast advance base force. The Marines remained in Balboa Park after the Panama-California Exposition ended, and leased buildings that were part of the exposition and used them for barracks, work spaces and offices.

The 1916 Naval Appropriation Act approved \$250,000 to purchase 232 acres of tidal land abutting Dutch Flats, where the San Diego River frequently emptied into San Diego Bay. Dutch Flats was a low-lying marsh near downtown that was covered with water at high tide. Congressman Kettner had a home that





LCPL ANTHONY D. PIO, USMC

**Marines of "Fox" Co, 2nd Recruit Training Bn, stand in formation during a graduation ceremony at MCRD San Diego, Jan. 15, 2021.**

overlooked the eyesore that was Dutch Flats, and he convinced Pendleton that Dutch Flats was the perfect spot for the Marine base. The San Diego airport was also in Dutch Flats. The airport would be dedicated in 1928, but by 1934 it was crowded with two flying schools; United, American and Western Airlines; Ryan

Aircraft and the Marines. Located in the center of the city, the airport's proximity to downtown gives it little room to expand due to lack of land space and the environmental impact of neighboring communities.

May 15, 1917, reported that Congress had appropriated \$250,000 to pay for the

land for the Marine base. On Dec. 1, 1921, Col Pendleton raised the flag and the base officially opened. The new San Diego base was the Marine Corps' first purpose-built installation. Prior to this, Marines were tenants in Navy Yards or occupied former Army or Navy installations and either expanded or remodeled them for their own purposes. The architect for the new base was Bertram Goodhue, the principal designer for the Panama-California Exposition buildings in Balboa Park.

The original land parcel that abutted Dutch Flats was 232 acres. Eleven different land acquisitions from 1916 to 1942 state the base acquired 890 acres. In 1948 the Marines relinquished 245 acres to the airport for construction of a new terminal. The proximity to the airport has created what one commanding general referred to as the San Diego Pause; that interval of time when multiple planes are taking off and individuals speaking outdoors must stop speaking.

Goodhue's original plan for the base used the Spanish Colonial Revival style architecture featured in the exposition and called for 46 buildings according



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**Dutch Flats was chosen as the site of the future MCB San Diego, Calif., in 1917.**



to a *Los Angeles Times* report in 1919. The barracks would be linked by a great arcade facing the parade ground; secondary structures would form a long axis behind the arcade creating a series of courtyards. Six major support buildings and small utility structures were completed from 1922 to 1923. During the 1920s and 1930s, the primary function of the base was supporting Marine Corps expeditionary operations. In August of 1923 that changed when the Marine Corps Recruit Training Depot for the West Coast relocated from Marine Barracks, Navy Yard on Mare Island.

The first group of recruits arrived in San Diego on USS *Sirius* (AK-18). Major E.P. Moses was the officer in charge of recruit training. At that time, the recruit depot had three departments: the recruit detachment, which consisted of all the recruits in training; the personnel section; and the recruit depot detachment which was made up of the depot's permanent personnel and Sea School. The 4th Regiment, nicknamed "San Diego's Own," was serving on expeditionary duty and did not return to San Diego until 1924.

In 1924, the base was redesignated Marine Corps Base, Naval Operating Base, San Diego and served as the headquarters

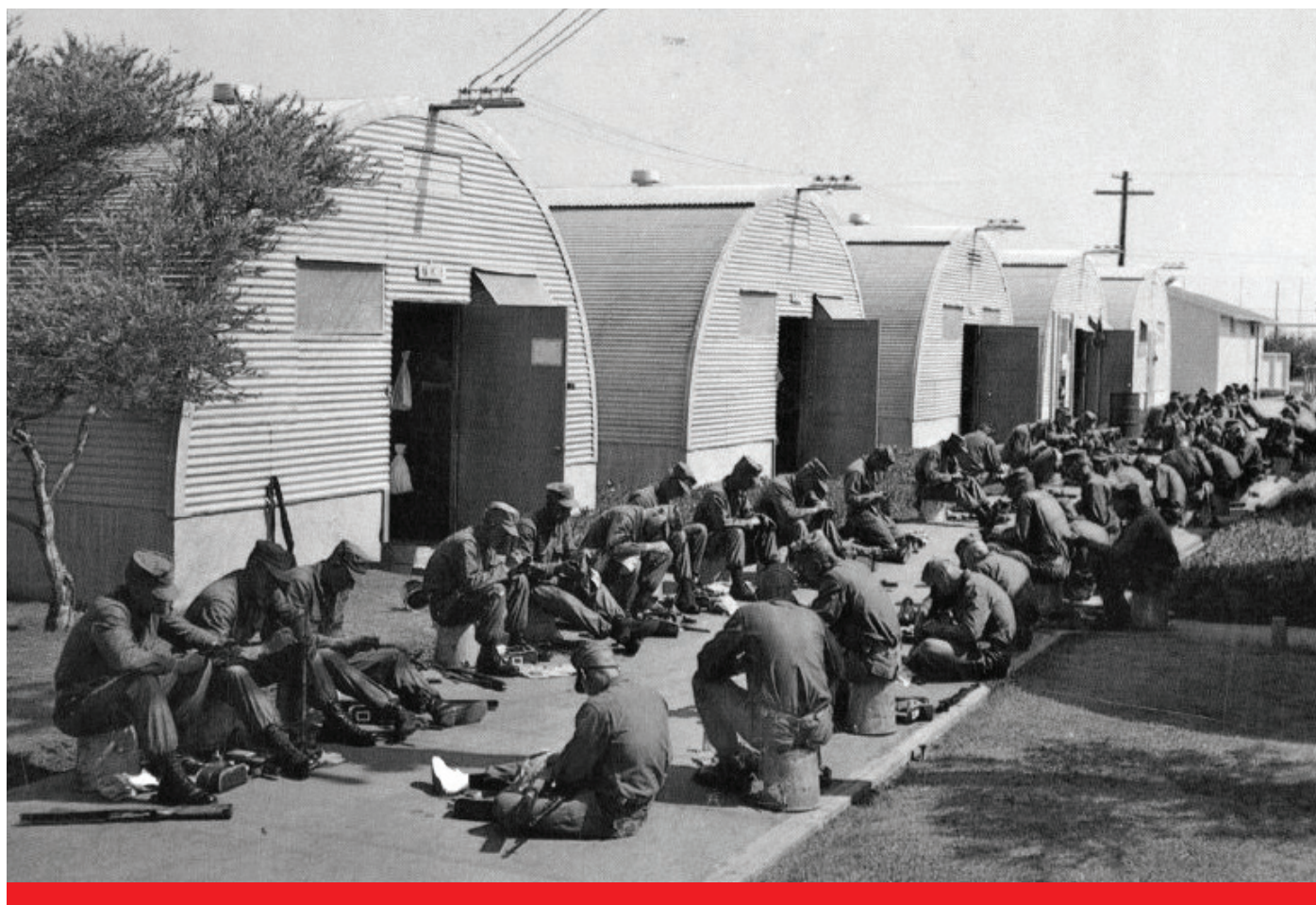


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**Above: A Marine Corps Women's Reserve battalion color guard aboard MCB San Diego, Calif., during the 1940s.**

for Observation Squadron One, the oldest organized air unit in the Marine Corps. Aircraft were stationed across the bay at North Island Naval Air Station at Coronado, Calif. An emergency expansion of the base began in September 1939 with construction of 27 new storehouses, a defense battalion barracks, mess facilities, hundreds of 16-man prefabricated metal huts for the recruit depot, post exchange, recruit parade ground, neuro-psychiatric building, dental and dispensary quarters, new roads, and a railroad. When the Department of the Navy authorized the Marine Corps Women's Reserve in 1942, several buildings were constructed to house and support female Marines. The first Woman Reserve (WR) officer assumed her duties the week of Sept. 25 and by the end of 1943, 187 WRs were stationed on base. When World War II ended, the base focused on demobilization for thousands of Marines returning from the Pacific. WW II had a significant impact on the area; by 1942 San Diego's population swelled so much in a single year that it surpassed the projected population growth for the next two decades. A large portion of the new arrivals were military personnel and their families.

In 1948 recruit training became the



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**Recruits clean rifles along the Quonset hut area on MCRD San Diego in the 1960s.**



principal tenant, and the base was re-designated Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego. The Korean War in the 1950s resulted in a need for housing for returning reserve Marines and new recruits. Tents were assembled on the parade deck for billeting, and the base also built hundreds of Quonset huts. The 270 corrugated galvanized steel huts were in the western area of the base with 180 additional huts located adjacent to the parade deck. Each hut housed 24 recruits.

The depot also served as a staging area for reserve Marines recalled to active duty for the Korean War. The Marines were quickly processed through medical, legal and administrative procedures on and then transported to Camp Pendleton to join new units. The units would eventually be shipped out from San Diego's Broadway pier as they had during WW II. Col Pendleton's foresight for the base to be quickly able to support expeditionary needs had proved true.

President John F. Kennedy visited the base on June 6, 1963. A pair of brass footprints were created on the site where he stood, with his feet at a 45-degree angle, just as Marine recruits stand on the yellow footprints at the start of recruit training. Dating back to at least June of 1963, generations of recruits have started their Marine Corps training by standing on the yellow footprints painted outside the receiving building at the Recruit Training Regiment.

The rapid construction of facilities for recruits occurred on the depot during WW II, Korea and Vietnam. In 1967, construction began on the first two of five new permanent "H-style" barracks. Each barrack was three stories high and was designed to house 900 recruits. The depot used the Quonset huts and tents to house the large number of men reporting due to the draft before the barracks were completed.

The end of the Vietnam War and subsequent fewer recruits in training meant changes on the depot. In 1972, the final H-style barracks were completed, and 242 Quonset Huts were demolished two years later. In 1976 the correctional facility was demolished, and Recruit Training Regiment moved into offices on the arcade vacated after Communication and Electronic School moved to Twentynine Palms in 1975.

The depot has had as many as five Marine Corps schools as tenants over the years. Sea School was a tenant from 1921 until its closure in December 1987. In 1965, Field Music School consolidated with a like unit at Parris Island. Recruiters School was established on Parris Island in 1947 and San Diego opened its school



LCPL GRACE J. KINDRED, USMC

**Recruits with Alpha Co, 1st Recruit Training Bn, during receiving at MCRD San Diego, Dec. 29, 2020.**

in 1971. The two schools eventually were consolidated in San Diego in 1972. Both depots have had their own drill instructor schools since WW II.

The needs of the Marine Corps have always ruled the demolition and construction of buildings and tenant commands on the depot. In 1976 the depot was redesignated Marine Corps Recruit Depot and Western Recruiting Region after the addition of the recruiting headquarters. Women were no longer in separate companies and the new enlisted barracks model of two person rooms was developed. By 1985, the Women Marine

and Staff Noncommissioned officer barracks were demolished.

In 1987, Headquarters Marine Corps directives increased recruit training in support of basic warrior training. General Alfred M. Gray, the 29th Commandant, was looking for more meaningful physical exercises such as forced marches and confidence courses.

In 1988 the base opened a Command Museum and to this day, the recruits receive history classes taught by docents, most of whom are retired Marines. The docents use the displays in the museum to reinforce Marine Corps history lessons.





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**Recruits participate in one of the many events during the Crucible, the final challenge during recruit training, at Edson Range, Camp Pendleton, Calif., in 1996.**

**Recruits demonstrate the four firing positions used during range qualification at Camp Matthews Rifle Range in 1942.**

New Marines escort their families through the museum retelling the history they have learned from the docents on every Family Day.

In 1991, 25 buildings aboard the base were added to the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to the buildings, 110 acres of land including the parade grounds, was delineated the Historic District. The depot was nominated for the register because of the significant architecture and the arcade, a covered walkway north of the parade ground, more than 1 mile long that contains nearly half of the buildings. Other historic places include the commanding general's residence and garage, four married officer's quarters and garages, the depot disbursing office, Headquarters and Service Battalion headquarters, the Command Museum, and the Recruit Training Regiment headquarters.

In 1996, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles C. Krulak, established "The Crucible." Gen Krulak called the Crucible "the defining moment in a young Marine's life." It is a grueling test every recruit must pass to earn the title "Marine." The Crucible and rifle range training for recruits are conducted at Weapons Field Training Battalion which is part of the Recruit Training Regiment but located on Camp Pendleton.

Rifle range training for recruits had been conducted on Marine Corps Base San Diego which was about 13 miles north of San Diego and built by the Marines in 1916. In 1942 the Secretary of the Navy redesignated it as Camp Calvin B. Matthews. Progressive and continuing

growth of the city of San Diego in the vicinity created hazardous conditions and in August 1964 the property was transferred to the Regents of the University of California. Rifle range training was relocated to Weapons Training Battalion at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton and formally dedicated as the Edson Range Area Sept. 21, 1965.

Recruits are bused to Weapons Field Training Battalion in their second phase of training for rifle qualification. They live on the base for two weeks and return to San Diego to start the next phase of training. In the last phase of recruit training, recruits are again transported to Weapons Field Training for the Crucible. One distinctive aspect of the MCRD



MSGT DANIEL BALDERAS, USMC

**Marines attending Recruiters School at MCRD San Diego, Calif., undergo an inspection prior to graduation.**





CPL BROOKE C. WOODS, USMC

**After almost 13 weeks of training, Marines of Echo Co, 2nd Recruit Training Bn, prepare to reunite with their loved ones during Family Day at MCRD San Diego, Calif., Dec. 13, 2013.**

San Diego Crucible is “The Reaper,” the grueling steep ridge of rugged terrain that recruits hike carrying 55-pound packs to conclude the event.

New facilities constructed in the early 2000s have energy efficient designs that save money. Physical training fields feature artificial turf cutting down on water use. In September 2007 a new 47,360 square foot Recruit Clothing Issue facility consolidated five facilities in one location. The building has four uniform alteration bays, phase lines for clothing issue, administrative offices for staff, a high-bay warehouse, and a DI lounge.

In 2009 construction of two new barracks, a recruit rehabilitation facility, and several independent restrooms were planned as part of the Grow the Force Initiative. The project was part of \$175 million awarded to MCRD to upgrade facilities. The upgrades allow the Department of Defense to utilize the base in the case of a large war or natural disaster. The new barracks were designed with “Black/Grey” water recycling, energy saving electronic monitoring systems, separate laundry facilities and a local area network.

Major changes also have affected the training schedule with the start of inte-

grated training in 2020. Three female Marines completed DI school at MCRD San Diego for the first time in December, 2020. In February 2021 the first female recruits reported for training and graduated in May. The second integrated class started training Oct. 29, 2021 and is scheduled to graduate Jan. 21, 2022.

Integrated training and new efficient facilities are signs of the future. That they take place on this space created 100 years ago is a blend of old and new. The San Diego Chamber of Commerce was seeking a new path for the city in 1911 when it pursued the Navy. When the exposition broke ground in 1911, San Diego was an optimistic, progressive metropolis of almost 40,000 people.

The chamber of commerce directors were correct: military bases produce positive economic impact. Military-related spending in San Diego County grew by 5.4 percent in 2021. An annual report released by the San Diego Military Advisory Council reported that government spending associated with the defense industry in San Diego amounts to 25 percent of the local economy. That same report claimed almost 350,000 jobs can be attributed to the defense industry.

About 23 percent of the total labor force in the region works, directly or indirectly, in service of the military.

The relationship between MCRD San Diego and the surrounding community has changed over the years. Urban encroachment has been held at bay yet remains in the background. Friday parades are still popular with visitors. Training methods may change, but the mission of making Marines remains. The iconic architecture of Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego is a historic place, one that echoes with the memories of 100 years of marching feet and cadence calls.

*Author's bio: Barbara McCurtis served in the Marine Corps from 1976-1998, retiring as a first sergeant. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism and worked for a weekly paper. After earning a master's degree in public history, she was a curator for the San Diego Hall of Champions Sports Museum and served as the director of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot Command Museum. Prior to retirement in 2018, she was the MCRD Historian and the History Inspector for the Commanding Generals Inspection Program.* 🦖