

The Marine Security Guards and the Evacuation of U.S. Embassy Caracas

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COURTESY OF GYSGT DANIEL BEST, USMC

Embassy evacuees board an aircraft after the Department of State announced that the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, would temporarily suspend operations and withdraw diplomatic personnel in March 2019.

Editor's note: The following article is the first-place winner of the 2020 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners and honorable mention entrants.

In March 2019, the Department of State announced that the U.S. Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, would temporarily suspend operations and withdraw diplomatic personnel. Decisions of this magnitude affect important diplomatic relationships, displace hundreds of personnel, and cost millions of dollars. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained this decision by stating it "reflects the deteriorating situation." The strategically

important South American country had been dealing with political unrest for months over its contested presidential elections. Assigned to provide protection to mission personnel and prevent the compromise of national security information and equipment, the detachment of Marine Security Guards stationed in Caracas played a vital role in the withdrawal. These Marines epitomized the ethos of "adapt, improvise and overcome" by relying on their training, leadership, and personal drive to successfully evacuate the embassy.

In today's complex military environment, Marines are trained to handle every aspect of a mission, including the tactical withdrawal of forces. Though this was a unique situation, Marine Security Guards have assisted with these types of operations dating back to the evacuation of U.S. citizens at the embassy in Seoul in 1950. In 2012, the Marine Corps Embassy

Security Group shifted its mission to focus on the protection of mission personnel to prevent another attack like the one on the diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya, that left four Americans dead. There were no Marines in Benghazi, but the lessons learned during that horrific event have influenced the current training and employment of Marines.

The Marine Corps has long relied on tough, realistic training to build the type of leaders required to step up when necessary to ensure success on any battlespace. As Marine Security Guards, that training starts at a state-of-the-art facility in Quantico, Va., where potential watchstanders are instructed on Department of State regulations and the memorandum of agreement between the State Department and Department of Defense (DOD). Students also learn Department of State-specific information like defensive tactics, use of force, maintaining classified material, room clearing and tactical movement procedures. This school has a higher than average attrition rate, which can be attributed to several factors including students not being prepared for a mentally and physically demanding curriculum, intrusive physiological testing, and a comprehensive background investigation required to attain a top-secret clearance. The training has been meticulously designed to provide outstanding Marines from every unit to represent the Corps as ambassadors in blue in 146 countries around the world.

Once the watchstanders are assigned to a diplomatic facility, they must continue to sustain those skills on a constant basis along with a plethora of other tasks that ensure these Marine Security Guards are prepared for any threat. The threats these Marines face vary widely depending on regional terrorist groups, suspected espionage and civil unrest. In Caracas, the State Department's decision to evacuate was caused by the latter.

Starting in 2018, the international com-

munity was concerned with the upcoming presidential elections in Venezuela and whether a peaceful transfer of power would occur if President Nicolás Maduro was not re-elected. As numerous issues concerning the election surfaced, the opposition called the election illegal and demanded that President Maduro relinquish his position to interim President Juan Guaidó. This bold action led to increased threats toward Americans, causing the embassy to raise the security posture and place everyone on alert. When the State Department made the decision to evacuate all non-essential American diplomats in January of 2019, the Marine Security Guards were asked to augment the security detail for the transportation of personnel to the airport, an unfamiliar but flawlessly executed task. These Marine Security Guards were then tasked to begin the initial phase of the destruction process in order to reduce classified holdings and non-essential equipment. In February, as the security, food, water and power situation continued to degrade, the

remaining embassy personnel began restricting movement throughout the city.

As the water and power infrastructures continued to collapse, the security situation significantly worsened for Americans, causing all remaining personnel to shelter in place at the embassy until the final decision was made to evacuate. The sheer amount of destruction that was required by the Marine Security Guards before departure was an enormous undertaking on its own. They destroyed more than \$50 million worth of equipment that could not be left behind or flown out. This led to several days of very little sleep as the destruction continued around the clock. This was done simultaneously with the myriad other tasks that were essential to maintain a strong security posture. Throughout this experience, every Marine displayed a level of professionalism and a work ethic that has become synonymous with the title Marine Security Guard.

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The American flag is displayed in front of the embassy in Venezuela March 13, 2019, the night before the embassy was temporarily closed and personnel evacuated due to unrest in the South American country.

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product of determined and inspiring leadership. All organizations place value in leadership, but the Corps views it as the catalyst that has created a vast amount of victories, and the true warrior ethos that ensures success during times of heightened stress. Marines have been revered for their fighting spirit since their inception, but the myth of the Marine has evolved to include more than just a war-fighter but include titles such as humanitarian, guardian and even diplomat. In Caracas, the Marine Security Guard detachment faced hardships on a regular basis and relied upon each other along with institutional and personal leadership to get through the adversity together.

Imagine dealing with a constantly changing environment and the uncertainty that ensued throughout the ordeal. For weeks, these Marine Security Guards were unsure when or if they would depart. The decision changed as often as the situation, which made the planning process difficult for all involved. Then, anxiety is compounded by the Marine Corps and State Department requesting information in a relentless pursuit to guarantee all levels of leadership were informed and kept abreast of the progress.

Due to the unfamiliar nature of the evacuation and destruction protocols, there were obvious difficulties with the communications plan. By utilizing outside-the-box thinking, the detachment exploited their higher headquarters to field those inquiries, allowing them to focus on the mission. Keeping morale up was a priority for everyone, especially the

detachment commander Gunnery Sergeant Nibler, who stated, “We made sure that we came together as Marines and as a team. It got to the point where the only time we were not around each other was when we were sleeping. This was good as we all had the same frustrations and the same hardships to overcome together and not as individuals.”

GySgt Nibler’s experience, leadership and unwavering courage were vital attributes that allowed his Marines to remain composed during a highly fluid and chaotic situation.

On Marine Security Guard duty, there is a lot of time devoted to training and developing plans for emergencies without knowing if they will ever be used. Leaders must keep everyone engaged in training and during daily operations in the hopes that they will maintain that high state of readiness. When these Marine Security Guards responded in March 2019, it validated the training principles they had worked so diligently to refine. Their actions, though typical of Marines, resulted in the safe closure of the U.S. embassy and earned them appropriate recognition from the Marine Corps and the State Department. The legacy of the Marine Corps has been built on the backs of warriors who fought for more than just glory to the country. Just like Marines who are fighting around the world, Marine Security Guards risk everything based on a unique devotion to their country and fellow Marines. The essence of this duty focuses on being involved with something bigger than oneself. It is a brotherhood that is developed through the belief that each Marine will conduct valiant and selfless acts of loyalty in every situation.



MICHELE COLLINS

Marine Security Guards at the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela ensured an accurate accountability of weapons and equipment in January 2019.

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Author’s bio: LCpl Blisset enlisted in 2004 and is an MSG watchstander stationed in Bogota, Colombia, as his first post and has orders to Tunis, Tunisia. He is among the first participants of the Marine guard personnel exchange program where new infantry Marines volunteer to serve their first two years on the MSG program before finishing their five-year contract back in the FMF.