

# The People of *LEATHERNECK*

## A Century of Telling Marines' Stories

By Sara W. Bock

There's a common scenario that generations of *Leatherneck* staffers have observed: the surprise, and sometimes utter amazement, of readers and other guests who set foot in the *Leatherneck* office for the first time, silently calculate the number of individuals within—which often can be counted on one hand—and exclaim with incredulity, "This is it?"

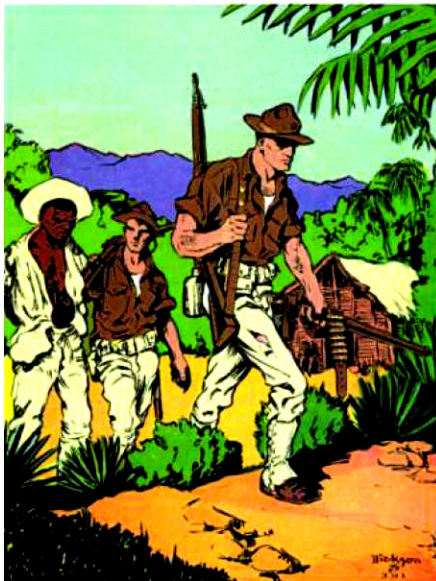
In contrast to the impressively augmented active-duty staff of eras past, particularly during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, the *Leatherneck* staff of the last several decades has been anything but prodigious.

But what the modern-day *Leatherneck* staff lacks in size and grandeur, it more than compensates for in spirit. In a flurry of writing, proofreading, drafting headlines, photographing, selecting content and designing layouts—all with a deadline looming—it's that spirit that gives life to a magazine, month after month. *Leatherneck's* ability to adapt to and survive the onset of new media—and a publishing industry that has increasingly been digitized—can without a doubt be credited to the remarkable "people of *Leatherneck*," whose determination and dedication have kept the magazine alive, telling the Marine Corps story for a century and counting.

Written, edited and compiled during off-duty hours by an all-volunteer staff of Marines with Sergeant J.C. Smith and Corporal W.L. Foster at the helm, *The Quantico Leatherneck* of 1917 bears little visual similarity to the *Leatherneck* of today. Its newspaper-style format was unpretentious at best, raw and unrefined, a hodgepodge of information riddled with errors. Yet the "by Marines, for Marines" spirit within its pages remains central today, a century later. A 1918 edition of *The Leatherneck*, as it had then been renamed, included headlines such as "Popsy-Wopsy Must Stay with Mommy-Wommy," "Attention All Ye Tooters of the



**Don Dickson began contributing artwork to *Leatherneck* in 1927 and was the magazine's editor from 1951-1970. Known for his depictions of Marines serving in every clime and place, Dickson's artwork appeared on the cover of *Leatherneck* numerous times, including the December 1930 issue (below) which showcased the Marines' involvement in the "Banana Wars" in Central America.**



Scintillating Brass," "Glee Club Seeks Members" and "Big Man of Marines Back from France," interspersed among ads from local Quantico businesses.

Among its many volunteer staffers in the early days, who turned over frequently due to the wartime needs of the Corps, were Courtney Ryley Cooper, who wrote circus and mystery stories, and Major Donald Keyhoe, who later became an aviation writer for *True* magazine. And while current editor Colonel Mary H. Reinwald, USMC (Ret), is recognized as the magazine's first female editor, there was technically another before her, Private Lela Leibrand, who acted as editor for three months in 1918.

It wasn't until the first world war had ended that *Leatherneck* would become a Marine Corps-wide publication, as its offices moved from Quantico to "8th and I," Washington, D.C., in 1920, where it was for more than two decades an arm of the Marine Corps Institute, a newly formed establishment aimed at providing educational opportunities for Marines.

Still in its infancy, *Leatherneck* relied heavily on Marines in the field to furnish stories from their individual units during their own spare time, and it wasn't always easy to get them to deliver. A letter from the editor implored its readers to pitch in: "If there are any ex-newspapermen in the bunch, late arrivals in camp ... step out and give us a hand and help us make *The Leatherneck* a better paper."

It may have taken some time, but the Marines came through. Offering readers a mix of educational, informative pieces, the latest sports news and stories of travel and adventure, *Leatherneck's* list of contributors grew, as did its circulation around the Corps. In the 1920s, well-known civilian authors penned content for *Leatherneck*, including Rudyard Kipling, Damon Runyon and William McLeod Raine.

Following *Leatherneck's* expansion to a full-size magazine in 1925 and a year later, the introduction of its first color cover, names like Captain John W. Thomason



**PFC Norman T. "Norm" Hatch operates a motion picture camera during his assignment to "The March of Time" documentary film series in the early 1940s. He had previously served on the *Leatherneck* staff and later became known for his footage of the Marines' landing on Tarawa in 1943.**



COURTESY OF USMC HISTORY DIVISION



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**From the left, Tom Lovell, H. Koskinen, John Clymer and Pat Denman made up *Leatherneck's* art department during World War II. During the war, the magazine's circulation hit an all-time high and the staff grew to 58 individuals.**

and First Lieutenant Donald L. Dickson began appearing among *Leatherneck's* pages. Thomason, whose stories and sketches were unrivaled, earned the nickname "the Rudyard Kipling of the Marine Corps." Dickson, a Reserve officer, was a gifted artist who would become known for his "on the spot" paintings during the Guadalcanal campaign. His 1930s paintings from the "Banana Wars" graced the covers of *Leatherneck*. Both Dickson and Thomason would one day be promoted to the rank of colonel, and Dickson would eventually serve as editor from 1951 to 1970.

In 1928, Private Frank Hunt Rentfrow, who by all accounts was an extraordinarily prolific writer, joined the staff, where he was known to generate content at an unparalleled rate. He also was promoted through the ranks at high speed, ascending from private to sergeant during his first nine months at *Leatherneck*. In addition to writing and editing, Rentfrow collaborated with Dickson on "Sergeant Stony Craig," the "perfect Marine," a well-loved syndicated comic strip.

*Leatherneck* writers—many of whom



were serving out in the field and sending in stories from their units—would often use pseudonyms or initials as their bylines in a quest for anonymity. Rentfrow was known for using several different pen names within a single issue and used more than a dozen during his 11 years on the *Leatherneck* staff. The pre-World War II Marine Corps was remarkably small and *Leatherneck's* pages reflected as much with its Marine correspondents making jokes about people by name with the expectation that most of the readers would know who they were speaking of. Even in its early days, and still now, *Leatherneck's* staff has attempted to strike a balance between lighthearted and serious content.

"The Question Box," a predecessor to today's "Sound Off," was a perennial favorite that invited Marines to be active participants in "their" magazine by writing in and having their letter or question published in the magazine with a response from the column's editor.

Many staff members worked at *Leatherneck* for a short time and later became well-known throughout the Corps and beyond for particular accomplishments.

In 1939, then-Private First Class Norman T. "Norm" Hatch joined the *Leatherneck* staff. He arrived in Washington with orders to teach English courses at the



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**Lou Lowery**

Marine Corps Institute, but requested a swap with a Marine in the barracks who was assigned to *Leatherneck* but didn't enjoy the work. It was a bold move for a junior Marine, but it paid off.

"We did a little bit of everything ... I got a good idea of publishing and a good feeling for it," said Hatch of his time on the *Leatherneck* staff during a 2012 interview.

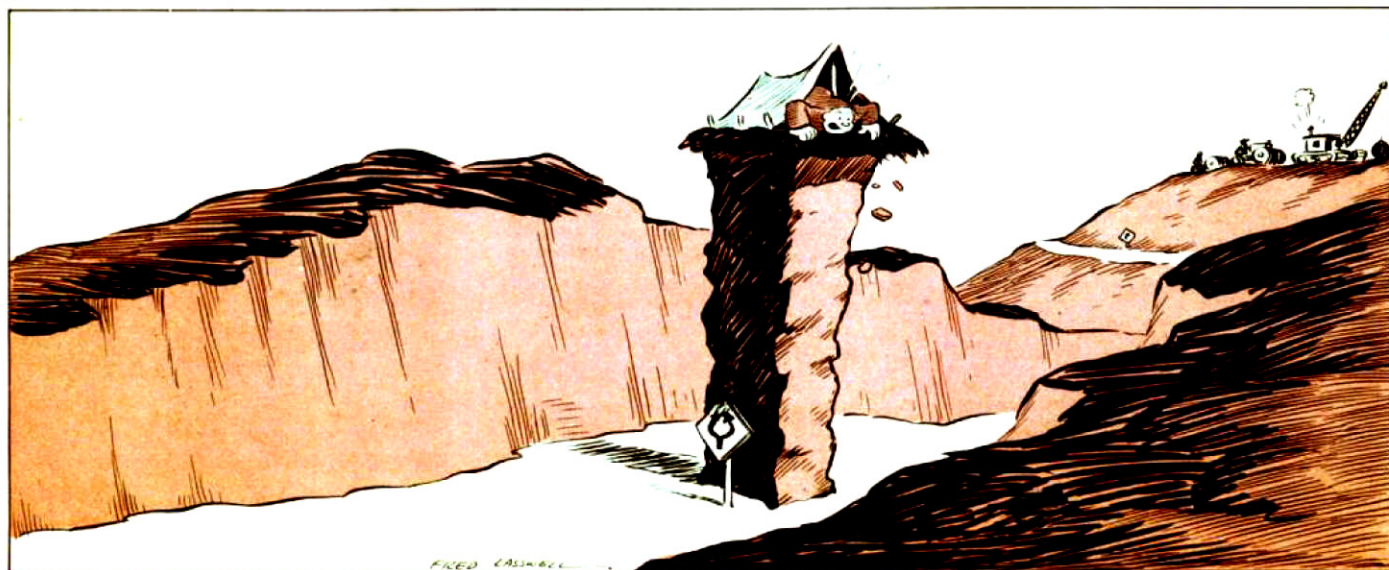
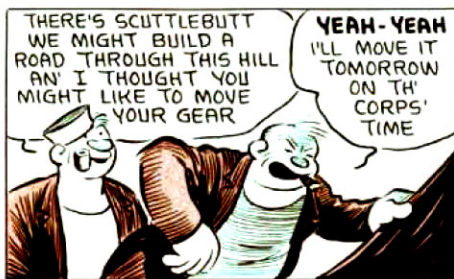
Hatch, who would later rise to the grade of major, was assigned as the photo

chief for the Second Marine Division during the Marines' landing on Tarawa in 1943. His footage helped the Marine Corps win an Academy Award for the 1944 documentary "With the Marines at Tarawa."

The 1940s was a decade of a change and tremendous growth for the magazine. In 1942, a separate *Leatherneck* Association was formed and the magazine, still staffed by active-duty Marines, was "on its own," separate from the purview of the Marine Corps Institute.

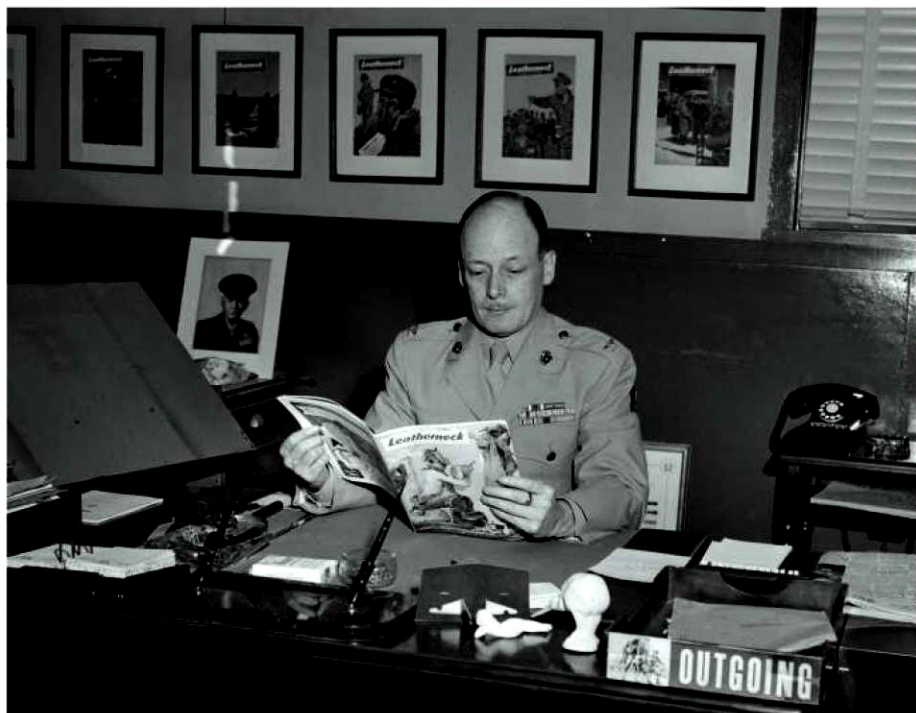
Civilians who were notable journalism professionals—photographers, writers, artists, illustrators and others—enlisted in the Corps to support the war effort and joined the *Leatherneck* staff, which grew to 58 individuals in 1942 under editor Major Walter W. Hitesman. They included Bob Sandberg, a photographer from *Look* magazine; Harold Helfer, known for his articles in *Reader's Digest*; Fred Laswell, a cartoonist who had gained fame for his "Snuffy Smith" cartoon and created the "Hashmark" cartoon for *Leatherneck*; Tom Lovell and John Clymer, both famous illustrators, as well as many others.

Circulation grew from a few thousand subscribers to somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000, and *Leatherneck* staff members were on hand at every single Pacific invasion during the war,



The May 1945 *Leatherneck* contained this installment of Fred Laswell's "Hashmark" cartoon. Laswell, a cartoonist known for "Snuffy Smith," was one of many industry professionals who joined the Corps and was assigned to the magazine during WW II.





LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

Col Donald L. "Don" Dickson, USMCR, sits behind his desk during his 19-year tenure as *Leatherneck* editor. He continued to produce artwork for the magazine throughout his time as editor and kept an area of his office as a dedicated art studio.

sending back stories, photographs and drawings of combat that would captivate Marines and civilians alike.

Among them was Lou Lowery, formerly of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, who had joined the Corps as a combat photographer. He covered six of the Marines' Pacific landings and photographed the first flag raising on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, mere hours before Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal would shoot the iconic photo of the second flag raising. When the war was over, Lowery left active duty but remained a part of the *Leatherneck* staff as its photo editor for more than 40 years.

Between the "insider" knowledge of the Marine combat correspondents and the professional expertise of Marines like Lowery, *Leatherneck* ascended into a league of its own.

A significant dip in circulation and funding post-war challenged the *Leatherneck* staff, but the Korean War ushered in a resurgence of the magazine that nearly paralleled its World War II heyday. In 1951, Reserve Colonel Donald L. Dickson, whose art had been appearing in the magazine for decades, was recalled to active duty to serve as the new editor of *Leatherneck*. Lowery and other civilians were named department heads in an effort to stabilize a magazine that had previously seen its leadership turn over every few years.

Dave Biesel, who served on the staff from 1953 to 1957, recalls Lou Lowery

teaching him how to size illustrations and the addressograph plates the circulation department used to stamp mailing labels at the magazine's offices in Henderson Hall, Arlington, Va. With today's technology in mind, it is remarkable to think of all the *Leatherneck* staff accomplished over the years with relatively limited resources.

Just as they had during World War II, *Leatherneck's* teams of writers and photographers covered just about every event in Korea in which Marines were involved: Bunker Hill, The Chosin Reservoir, Inchon-Seoul and beyond. In 1958, *Leatherneck* staff members provided coverage of the Cuban missile crisis and the Marine invasion of Lebanon.

The Marines' involvement in the war in Vietnam brought another period of rapid expansion to the magazine. The staff doubled to 102 Marines, and circulation, though not quite matching the pinnacle of the World War II days, reached over 200,000.

*Leatherneck* photojournalists and writers rotated in and out of Vietnam on three- to six-months tours. Several, like Bob Bowen, Paul Thompson, Bruce Martin and Tom Bartlett, would return multiple times.

"*Leatherneck* magazine was a real feather in your cap," said Paul Thompson of receiving orders to the magazine's offices in Building 4 of Henderson Hall, Arlington, Va. "It was really an absolutely great duty station for people in this MOS. You had to be pretty good at what you did."

Bob Bowen had previously worked on the staff of a newspaper before enlisting in the Corps in 1960. After writing for the *Quantico Sentry* and finishing a tour in Okinawa for Armed Forces Radio, he was transferred to the *Leatherneck* staff in 1964, where he would conduct three tours to Vietnam and a fourth with First Marine Division. His time on the *Leatherneck* staff totaled seven years, during which he covered Operation Double Eagle in 1966 and Operation Independence in 1967.

According to Bowen and Thompson, who also made four different deployments to Vietnam as a combat correspondent, *Leatherneck* staffers had a lot of freedom to roam around to find the action and get a good story. Bowen considers it to have been "quite an adventure."

Thompson remembers being given a set of orders to Vietnam, signed by the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, which essentially gave him free reign.

"I've never seen orders like that!" Thompson recalls people saying with skepticism when they saw them. But his ability to go anywhere and do anything proved essential when he covered the Battle of Hue City in 1968.

"I knew it was a big, big story, far beyond my abilities at the time. But I 'coughed one up' and the magazine printed it," Thompson said. The breathtaking images he captured on camera in Hue City are still printed in books today.

Bowen, Thompson and their counter-



COURTESY OF BOB BOWEN

Bob Bowen

**"It's the magazine of, for and by Marines. As long as the Corps exists then I don't see an end to it in sight."—Bob Bowen**





COURTESY OF PAUL THOMPSON

Paul Thompson, pictured here in Vietnam on assignment for *Leatherneck*, served on the staff in the 1960s and became known for the photos he took during the Battle of Hue City in 1968. He returned to the staff as a retired master sergeant in 1981 and remains involved as a contributing writer today.

**"It's always interesting, there's always something in the magazine that you want to read. Maybe some of the stories don't interest you but there's always something about what the Marine Corps is doing today, where it's headed—even for old folks like me!"**

**—Paul Thompson**

parts shared a wall locker full of camera gear and various weapons. They spent time with Marines out in the bush and the rice paddies and aboard various aircraft, in a quest to fill *Leatherneck's* pages.

"When I went over to Vietnam, I'd carry about four story ideas with me and get them covered, but for the most part it was action-reaction. We'd develop stories as the days unfolded because we couldn't keep strictly to a pre-conceived plan. There was too much going on," said Bowen.

Also arriving on the *Leatherneck* staff in the early 1960s was Tom Bartlett, who served four tours of duty in Vietnam with the magazine and, like Thompson and Herb Richardson, who joined *Leatherneck* as a staff sergeant in 1967. Bartlett returned to the staff after retiring from the Marine Corps as a master sergeant in 1971. Bartlett became a mainstay, work-

ing for the magazine for more than 25 years. Known affectionately as "Mr. *Leatherneck*," Bartlett produced an astounding 955 articles published in *Leatherneck*, in addition to other content.

Vietnam aside, *Leatherneck* staffers had the opportunity to travel to all sorts of other locales. Bowen has fond memories of traveling to locations like Bermuda and Newfoundland for "Posts of the Corps" features, and Richardson recalls that Tom Bartlett seemed to always manage to get first choice of locations.

"Tom got to go to New Zealand, and I got to go to New River [N.C.]," Richardson said with a laugh.

The staff of *Leatherneck* received a Meritorious Unit Commendation for the work of its combat correspondents during the Vietnam War. While that tight-knit group of staffers all went their separate ways, many would cross paths again.

Bowen attended a photojournalism program at Syracuse University and received a commission in 1972. He retired as a captain. He, Thompson and Frank Beardsley had worked together in Okinawa for Armed Forces Radio during the early 1960s, spent time on the *Leatherneck* staff together, and eventually reunited on the staff of Voice of America in Washington, D.C. Richardson retired from the Marine Corps as a master sergeant and returned to the *Leatherneck* staff in 1974 as a civilian. He retired from *Leatherneck* in 1980 but stepped in several times since then as needed. Thompson, who also retired as a master sergeant after serving as the public affairs chief at Marine Corps Base Quantico, took Richardson's place at *Leatherneck* in 1981 before accepting a position with Voice of America. He continues to contribute stories to *Leatherneck* today.

Col Dickson retired in 1970 after 19 years as editor, a record that has yet to be matched by any other editor in the magazine's history. During his tenure, he continued to create a wide variety of paintings, illustrations and sketches that would grace the pages and covers of *Leatherneck*.

"Part of Dickson's office became a miniature studio, complete with easel, tabouret, palette, vases with brushes, a jar of turpentine and myriad tubes of paint," wrote Karl Schuon, who was on the staff for almost 30 years and who succeeded



COURTESY OF BOB BOWEN

Bob Bowen, left, interviews a Marine artillery forward observer atop Marble Mountain near Da Nang, Vietnam, in February 1967. Bowen served four tours of duty in Vietnam, three of which were as a *Leatherneck* staffer.





LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**SSgt George Booth, an infantryman, served two tours on the *Leatherneck* staff in the 1940s and '50s as a gag writer and cartoonist. After leaving the Marine Corps, he created work that appeared in several publications including *The New Yorker*.**

Dickson as editor for a short time. "Don Dickson's style soared above what many artists search for in a lifetime," he added.

Among the many Marines who worked for *Leatherneck* under Dickson were John Chalk, Chuck Beveridge, George Booth, John DeGrasse, Gordon Bess, Ronald D. Lyons, Norval "Gene" Packwood, Steve Stibbens, Cherilee Noyes and Jim Elliott.

They may not have realized it at the time, but Dickson's staff would see the magazine to the end of an era. Shortly after his retirement, in 1971, it was announced that active-duty Marines would no longer receive assignments to the *Leatherneck* staff. With civilianization came a series of new challenges, but as a result of the dedication of Bartlett, Schuon, Richardson, Lyons and others who stayed with or returned to *Leatherneck* during the transition period and beyond, the magazine endured and began a tradition of bringing Marine veterans into the staff to work alongside its dedicated civilian employees.

In 1976, the *Leatherneck* Association and the Marine Corps Association, publisher of *Marine Corps Gazette*, merged. It was a move that concerned many members of the *Leatherneck* staff, recalls Colonel William "Bill" V.H. White, USMC (Ret), *Leatherneck*'s editor from 1985 to 1999, who joined the MCA as its assistant director in 1976. The fear,

he said, was that *Leatherneck* would fall victim as a result of sharing a common publisher with *Marine Corps Gazette*.

But in true *Leatherneck* fashion, the staff was determined to keep the magazine alive and relevant, come hell or high water.

White recalls visiting New York City to sell advertisements for the magazine. To save a cab fare, he walked across the city. His efforts landed *Leatherneck* a deal with Budweiser, among other notable businesses and corporations. It was a survival mechanism: Over time, *Leatherneck*'s ads had dwindled to T-shirts and other small items and the magazine relied wholly on subscriptions to stay afloat.

"It was nickel-dime stuff we were making and it was really a labor of love," said White, who during his tenure formed a partnership with Marine Corps Recruiting Command to send copies of *Leatherneck* to high school libraries across the nation, a tradition that continues today.

"Nobody was in it for the money certainly, and we really had to rob Peter to pay Paul just to exist," White added, recalling the difficulties he and his staff faced. During his time as assistant director of MCA, he worked alongside Lyons, who served as *Leatherneck* editor for nine years (and a total of 34 years on staff), on a marketing campaign that quickly brought the number of *Leatherneck*



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**Tom Bartlett first joined the staff as an active-duty Marine in the 1960s and returned after his retirement as a master sergeant in 1971. Because of his four tours to Vietnam with the magazine, an astounding 955 articles written, and 25 years of service, he earned the unofficial title of "Mr. *Leatherneck*."**



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**In the early 1970s, Cpl Cherilee Noyes reported from Da Nang and was recognized by the USMC Combat Correspondents Association for "Best Civic Action Story of the Year" in 1972.**



COURTESY OF BOB BOWEN

**"You know, they say if you're having fun you don't work a day in your life!"—Herb Richardson**





LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**MGySgt Renaldo R. "Ron" Keene, USMC (Ret) was *Leatherneck's* associate editor for 25 years. The only *Leatherneck* staffer to win the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation's Heinl Award, Keene is a skilled storyteller with a wealth of knowledge of Marine Corps history and culture.**



**"There's nothing like it. 100 years old—it's incredible, and it's an honor and a privilege to serve the magazine and serve Marines and their families and do the work."**

**—Nancy Lee White Hoffman**

subscribers from roughly 40,000 to over 110,000.

White would go out and talk to every class that graduated from Officer Candidates School, Amphibious Warfare School and The Basic School, among others, encouraging Marines to subscribe. He was committed to ensuring that *Leatherneck* served two major functions—

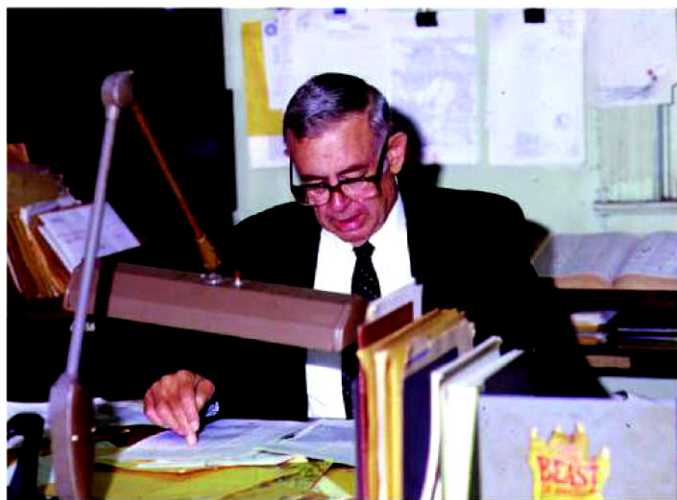
to teach young Marines more about the Marine Corps and the opportunities it provides; and to give their parents a better idea of what their sons or daughters were doing and where they were doing it. He increased the magazine's publication of stories written by active-duty public affairs Marines, wanting *Leatherneck* to continue providing them with an outlet for

their work. This effort continues today.

Subscription and funding challenges aside, producing the magazine prior to the use of computers and the internet was a feat in itself. Stories would come in handwritten, and a typesetter on the staff would painstakingly input them on a typewriter. Changes and edits were made manually with pen and ink, layouts were made on "cut and paste" boards, and the "blue lines," the final page proofs that came from the printer, had to be turned around in one day. During White's 14 years as editor, the magazine replaced typewriters with computers and slowly increased the amount of color printed among its pages.

Longtime members of the staff included Master Gunnery Sergeant Renaldo R. "Ron" Keene, who served for 25 years as *Leatherneck's* associate editor until his retirement in 2015, and Nancy Lee White Hoffman, who spent 33 years with the magazine and retired as deputy editor in 2016. Patricia "Patty" Everett, editorial and production coordinator, has worked for the Marine Corps Association since 1981 and joined *Leatherneck* as a typesetter in 1987. Jason Monroe, art director, has been on the staff since 1989, and Nancy S. Lichtman, who joined the magazine's staff as copy editor in 2007, now serves as *Leatherneck's* senior editor.

Under the leadership of Colonel Walter G. "Walt" Ford, USMC (Ret), who served as editor from 1999 to 2014, these dedicated individuals worked alongside young combat correspondents like Joe Chenelly, John Hoellwarth and Isaac Pacheco, who each joined the *Leatherneck* staff after leaving active duty in the early 2000s, and civilian staff writers Mary Karcher, Mara Rutherford and Clare Guererro, among others.



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

**Ronald D. Lyons served as *Leatherneck* editor from 1976-1985 and had previously worked on Col Don Dickson's staff.**



RON LUNN

**From the left, Col Walt Ford, USMC (Ret); Col Bill White, USMC (Ret); and Col Mary Reinwald, USMC (Ret), *Leatherneck's* three living editors, enjoy each other's company at a retirement dinner for Ford at The Globe & Laurel Restaurant in Stafford, Va., June 25, 2014.**





LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

A former combat correspondent, John Hoellwarth was the 2002 recipient of *Leatherneck's* Lou Lowery award for best photograph to appear in the magazine. Today, he works as the national director of communications at AMVETS.

Early in his tenure, Ford surveyed both readers and non-readers of the magazine. What he received in response was a collective request for more historical content, and he saw this as a promising way to differentiate *Leatherneck's* offerings from the "free" content become increasingly available on the burgeoning internet.

Ford ushered *Leatherneck* into the modern era by assessing the actions of the magazine's "near-peer competitors" and introducing a digital version of the magazine that could be read on computers and other electronic devices.

Known for going above and beyond for *Leatherneck* readers, Ford even took it upon himself to plan a funeral at Quantico National Cemetery for a devoted reader who had passed away. He set up a ceremonial detail and rounded up the members of his staff, who came to pay their respects.

"The bottom line is how much trust and confidence people have in *Leatherneck*, how much they care about the magazine," said Ford. "It's the people who write you these letters and come by and see you ... there are so many stories," he added.

The "people of *Leatherneck*" are by no

means limited to the handful of names on the magazine's masthead.

They are the routine contributors, who, while not staff members, are part of the *Leatherneck* family and fill its pages, month in and month out, with stories of the Corps both old and new. Some are former members of the staff; some are veteran or retired Marines; others are respected historians and freelance journalists.

They are the public affairs Marines and combat correspondents whose news stories from Marine Corps installations and operating forces keep *Leatherneck* readers informed on current events in the Corps and help the magazine stay true to its active-duty roots.

They are the readers with whom the staff of *Leatherneck* has always had an exceptional relationship. Their phone calls, letters, emails, in-person visits, bringing both "constructive criticisms" and compliments, are motivating reminders of the magazine's purpose: to provide a connection to the Corps to readers in all stages of life.

And they are the people who are no longer present—*Leatherneck* legends like Lou Lowery, Don Dickson and Tom Bartlett, among countless others—



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

Mary D. Karcher

**"There's something about Marines. And that something is what *Leatherneck* magazine strives to include in each and every issue. That bond. That desire to serve with fellow Marines. That desire to recall the history, read stories of battles, share similarities with one's own time in the Corps and above all, to be among Marines. The magazine is one way to connect, to reminisce, to be inspired and, as General John A. Lejeune said, call to mind 'the glories of its long and illustrious history.' May it exist another hundred years!"**

**—Mary D. Karcher**

whose names, still spoken often, serve as reminders of where *Leatherneck* came from and the legacy its staff is entrusted to carry on.

As *Leatherneck* prepares to enter its second century, it's equally important to look back and remember those who came before.

*Author's note: Over the last 100 years, there have been hundreds of staff members and countless contributors to the magazine. While we couldn't name them all, we appreciate all of their efforts in support of Leatherneck, however large or small.*

*Author's bio: Sara W. Bock joined the Leatherneck staff in 2008 as a recent college graduate. She left in 2009, but continued as a freelance writer for the magazine until 2014 when she returned as a full-time writer for Leatherneck.*

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