

Enlisted Marines Take to the Hill:

Congressional Fellowship Program
Bridges the Gap for Federal Lawmakers



MSgt William "Spanky" Gibson (right) and GySgt Bradley Simmons are the first senior staff noncommissioned officers to serve as congressional fellows.

By Ed Vasgerdsian

Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA)

The Marine Corps' Office of Legislative Affairs on Capitol Hill exists to facilitate "a shared understanding between the USMC and Congress in order to ensure support for the Commandant's legislative priorities and requirements; and to maintain the Corps' unique role within the Joint Force as the Nation's premier force in readiness." This small group of experienced Marines carries the warrior ethos to the Hill through varied programs and initiatives. One of the more valuable programs supported by OLA is the Marine Corps Congressional Fellowship program.

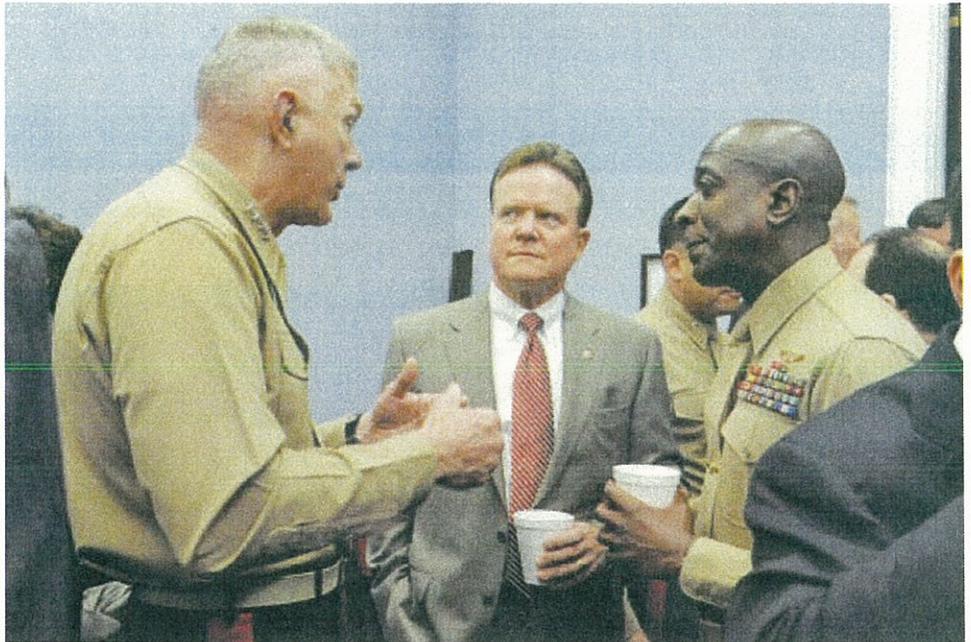
Fellowship programs exist both in the public and private sectors of society and are embraced by disciplines far and wide. Those selected as "fellows" within the Marine program share a common purpose with the Marines in OLA—sharing knowledge with members of Congress.

In 1953, the American Political Science Association (APSA) opened its first class of congressional fellows, promoting a concept that had been established a year earlier by the Marine Corps. In effect, the Marine fellowship program was teaching the political process to Marines through practical experience, and that continues today. Although the fellowship program is mutually beneficial to the Marine Corps and Congress, more recently General James L. Jones, who became Commandant in 1999, put new life and energy into the Corps' fellowship program.

After selection and assignment, the first phase of a Marine congressional fellow's introduction to Capitol Hill is an intense on-the-job orientation to Congress while working in the OLA offices. The Marine Corps maintains OLA liaison offices in the House and the Senate, so new fellows rotate through both these offices, getting to know the day-to-day functions.

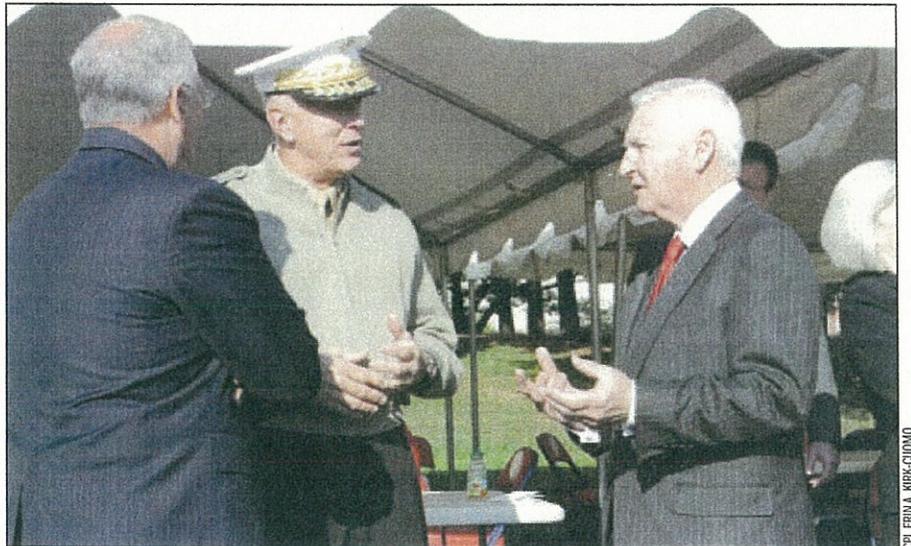
An enormous amount of this daily effort is focused on responding to congressional questions. Marine Corps data reveals that members of Congress receive more than 4,000 constituent Marine-related inquiries each year. These inquiries are passed on to OLA where the information for a Marine response is collected and passed back to congressional staff to formulate a constituent response.

The requests for information may relate to dependent services, veterans care and benefits, inquiries on records, enlistments and discharges and more. These queries are very important, providing significant opportunities to the Marine Corps to demonstrate responsiveness support. Getting involved in providing feedback to congressional inquiries is a key piece in



Above: Gen James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, SgtMaj Carlton W. Kent, speak with Marine veteran Sen. James Webb, D-Va., at an April 2009 Congressional Marines Breakfast. (Photo by Cpl Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

Below: Vietnam veteran and retired Marine LtCol M. L. "Buzz" Hefti (right) served as Marine liaison officer to the U.S. House of Representatives, 1977-80, and later as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs and also as national security adviser to Sen. John Warner. He and LtGen Earl B. Hailston, USMC (Ret) speak with Gen Conway during an Oct. 1, 2009, Congressional Marines Field Mess Breakfast hosted by CMC at the Marine Corps War Memorial, Arlington, Va.



the education of Marine fellows.

After an orientation period working in the OLA offices, the fellows attend a special Georgetown University Government Affairs Institute course of instruction. The classes include details on congressional testimony preparation, the appropriations and authorization process, congressional committees, the preparation and processing of a bill and much more. After this education, the fellows interview for positions in congressional offices.

While there are 17 Marine legislative

fellows, only two are enlisted Marines. Master Sergeant William "Spanky" Gibson and Gunnery Sergeant Bradley Simmons are the nation's first senior staff noncommissioned officers from any military service to serve in this capacity.

MSgt Gibson came to the OLA-supported Marine congressional fellowship program after two combat tours in Iraq; arrival home as an above-the-knee amputee from wounds received; the completion of a swim in San Francisco Bay from Alcatraz Island; and a return to Iraq

for a third combat tour—this time as an amputee.

GySgt Bradley Simmons was one of six candidates in the final selection process for the enlisted congressional fellowship. Simmons said he was a corporal or sergeant when he first heard of the fellowship program and OLA. At that time, the Marine fellowships were only for Marine officers and qualified civilians working for the Marine Corps. A few years later, an e-mail directed to all staff noncommissioned officers from Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Carlton Kent caught his attention. The information announced a change in policy for the Marine congressional fellowship program—enlisted Marines were eligible.

Since he has a Bachelor of Arts degree in organizational leadership from New York's Fordham University, and is currently working toward completing a master's degree in political science, Simmons felt the transition from battlefield to the political science arena was a natural for him. "There are times the Marine Corps needs you to put on a different uniform for a different mission," said Simmons. "I first experienced this in Moscow, Russia, and later Caracas, Venezuela, where I interacted, as a Marine security guard, with members of the diplomatic community at the American Embassy."

In mid-November 2008, Gibson and Simmons arrived in D.C., completed an orientation period at OLA and completed the 2½-week government affairs course of instruction at nearby Georgetown University. Thereafter, GySgt Simmons, a 13-year veteran Marine, was assigned to

Senator Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, a member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, while MSgt Gibson was assigned to Representative Steve Buyer, R-Ind., former chairman and current ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Need for Enlisted Personnel

Congressional representatives want to hear both the enlisted and officer points of view on Marine-related questions and, more importantly, the Commandant wants members of Congress to have those experienced views. An enlisted person's unique situational awareness may assist lawmakers in making decisions on issues such as suicide awareness and prevention and other concerns of the returning wounded.

The needs of those receiving ocular injuries during the war on terrorism became a particular concern to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. GySgt Simmons was asked to help determine the scope of the population affected. Meetings were held with veterans organizations, resulting in testimony presented at committee hearings. Based upon the hearings and other findings, a scholarship of \$15,000 per academic year for students seeking a degree or certificate in rehabilitation for the blind is being proposed.

As a legislative proposal, the bill needs the support of other lawmakers. In order to obtain the required votes, the fellows will arrange meetings, write reports and collaborate with other congressional military personnel. Since the Marine fellowship program dictates that all fellows' period of service is limited to one year, Simmons,

who was promoted to first sergeant Nov. 10, 2009, may not see the passage of the bill during his fellowship.

Gibson was in Iraq when he learned of SgtMaj Kent's OLA announcement. Gibson's war injury did not, in and of itself, make him a clear choice for the OLA program. Gibson brings to the Congress a point of view from an enlisted servicemember who can speak, with conviction and credibility, about the merits of veterans programs for the disabled.

Few members of either the House or the Senate are veterans, and, therefore, have little or no direct experience with the military services. It has been said that this lack of experience can create confusion and misunderstanding. Thus, the ability to work comfortably with nonmilitary personnel who are congressional representatives, as well as their constituents, is an important factor in receiving the fellowship assignment.

Gibson, as an infantryman with more than 20 years in the Marine Corps, continues to receive remedial surgery and rehabilitation. As a husband and father, he can advocate, with personal experience, for the need for regional amputee centers, which will facilitate family members' participation in the rehabilitation process. The committee Gibson serves with can determine whether a private hospital or veterans hospital has the ability and expertise to give the best possible care. In the case of brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder, these same centers are evaluated for their ability to provide the quality of care required.

"As an amputee, my appearance at a hospital bedside with a member of Congress, for example, eases whatever anxiety the patient may have and gives assurance that our appearance is not a photo-op but an effort to understand the needs of the patient," said Gibson, showing yet another way he finds to utilize his war wound as a plus.

Each fellow is assigned to one of the two Marine OLA congressional liaison offices, one on the Senate side and one on the House side. As Gibson and Simmons near the end of their assignments, two other enlisted Marines will have completed their orientation as well as the Georgetown University education and will be moving forward with congressional representatives. Gibson and Simmons will return to duty in a capacity where their legislative experiences will be of value.

There are 535 congressmen and senators, many with a need for assistance and looking for fellowship assignments. "In response to a growing need for military expertise in Congress, the [S]ecretary of [D]efense directed all military services to



MSgt Spanky Gibson (left) and GySgt Bradley Simmons, Marine congressional fellows, bring new insights to members of Congress and their staffs on all military matters, not just Marine-related issues.

Marines on Capitol Hill

A reunion of Marines may take many forms, as in gala events celebrated at Marine division reunions, or smaller occasions celebrated by Marines who served as drill instructors, security guards, combat engineers or on board Navy ships. Marine reunions, large and small, abound with camaraderie in recognition of the past and present. One smaller and unique reunion takes place as a breakfast meeting of Marine veterans serving in the U.S. Congress.

In 1941, Dorsey Joseph “Joe” Bartlett was, as are all pages for the U.S. Congress, a high-school student. Pages act as messengers carrying documents to and from members of the House of Representatives or Senate. Graduating from the House Page School in 1944, Bartlett enlisted in the Marine Corps. After World War II, he resumed his House duties, but as chief of the pages, and remained in the Marine Corps under a Marine officers’ Reserve program. In 1953, Bartlett won the prestigious position of House Reading Clerk, whose duties include reading bills before the House, reading motions and tracking changes to legislation made on the floor.

Also in 1953, with invaluable assistance from Colonel James Donald “Don” Hittle, legislative assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Bartlett formed the Congressional Marines Breakfast Club, an association of Capitol Hill Marines.

According to now retired Brigadier General Joe Bartlett’s November 1999 *Marine Corps Gazette* article, “In the Beginning: The Congressional Marines Are Formed,” the congressional Marines were “not a clandestine clique ... not an



Retired BGen Joe Bartlett, co-founder and charter member of the Congressional Marines Breakfast Club, continues to participate in the breakfast meetings, as he did during this April 2009 gathering. (Photo by Cpl Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo)

instrument for influence peddling.” As a fraternal group of congressmen, its members had worn proudly the uniform of the United States Marine Corps. With officers and enlisted participants, it was not intended to be anything more than a reunion of Marine veterans and now members of Congress.

The July 1953 charter members of the congressional Marines breakfast group were “[m]embers and former [m]embers of the United States Senate and House of Representatives and Officers of the Senate and House of Representatives who served with the United States Marine Corps.” Later, 49 other members of the 95th Congress joined the group. The charter members were:

Joe Bartlett, House Reading Clerk
MajGen Melvin J. Maas (Minn.)
Rep. Jake B. Brooks (Texas)
Sen. Michael J. Mansfield (Mont.)
Sen. Frank H. Case (S.D.)
Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy (Wis.)
Rep. Paul B. Dague (Pa.)
Rep. James T. Patterson (Conn.)
Rep. James C. Davis (Ga.)
The Hon. Ralph R. Roberts (Clerk of House)

Rep. James P. S. Devereux (Md.)
Rep. Clark W. Thompson (Texas)
Sen. Paul A. Douglas (Ill.)
Rep. William M. Tuck (Va.)
Rep. Joseph F. Holt (Calif.)
Rep. Donald L. Jackson (Calif.)
Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr.,
Commandant of the Marine Corps
Col J. Don Hittle, legislative assistant to the
Commandant

In 2009, there were eight Marine veterans serving in Congress:

Rep. John “Jack” Murtha (Pa.)
Rep. Vic Snyder (Ark.)
Rep. John Kline (Minn.)
Rep. Paul Broun (Ga.)
Rep. Duncan Hunter (Calif.)
Rep. Mike Coffman (Colo.)
Sen. Pat Roberts (Kan.)
Sen. Jim Webb (Va.)

—Ed Vasgerdsian

increase their presence on Capitol Hill,” according to MARADMIN 175/07. You can bet the Corps will ensure experienced enlisted Marines remain a part of our presence on Capitol Hill in the fellowship program—telling the Marine Corps story as only they can.

Author’s note: Thank you to Brigadier General Dorsey “Joe” Bartlett, who retired from the Marine Corps Reserve July 1,

1975, and resides in Virginia. Also, a special thank you to P. Dennis LeNard Jr., Office of Emergency Planning, Preparedness, and Operations, United States House of Representatives; and to Master Gunnery Sergeant Richard Moore, USMC, OLA, for their contributions.

Editor’s note: For more information on qualification requirements for the Marine fellowship program, see MCO1500.41A

w/change 1, “Scholarship Programs for Members of the Marine Corps” and the most recent MARADMIN on the Marine Corps Congressional Fellowship Program.

A member of the Marine Embassy Guard Association, Leatherneck contributing editor Ed Vasgerdsian frequently travels to visit Marine security guard detachments around the world, describing their duties and responsibilities for our readers.