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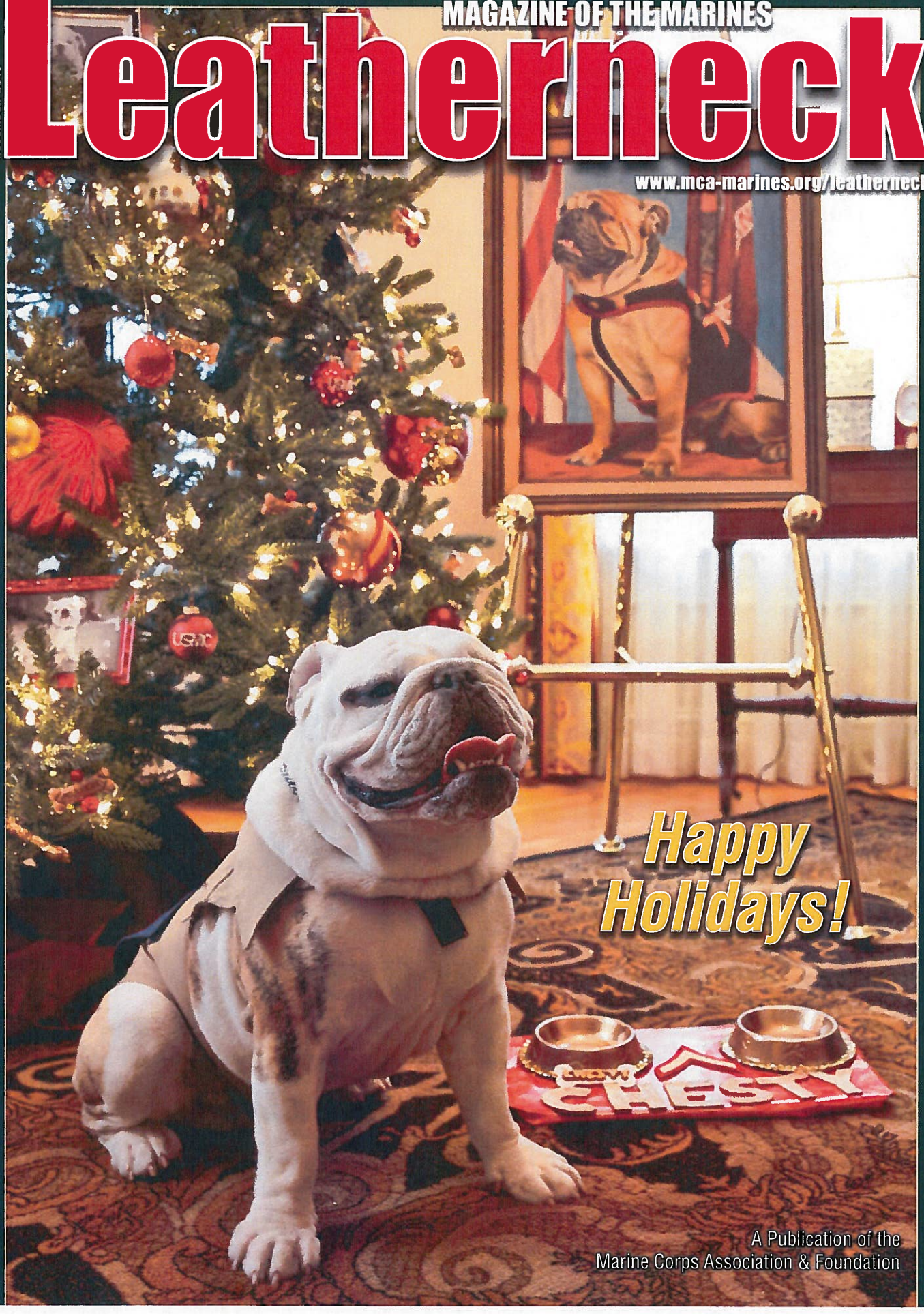

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Marines on Capitol Hill

By BGen David J. Furness, USMC
and the staff of the
Office of Legislative Affairs

As forward-deployed Marines around the globe stand watch and fight the nation's battles to ensure that our country and our citizens are safe and our way of life remains secure, another type of conflict is waged—a struggle that has persisted for decades on the American home front.

On this front, the terrain is complex and must be navigated with the utmost care—but only after thorough intelligence preparation of the battlespace. This is a campaign that demands constant vigilance, strategic messaging and firm resolve. Many of the battles in this struggle are not measured in minutes or hours, but in months and years.

This is a relentless campaign that demands coalition building and is subject to shifting alliances. It requires key leader engagement and a nuanced cultural understanding of a wide range of stakeholders. Without the support of the American people, this campaign is doomed to failure, and although this struggle is centered on military capability and capacity, it demands a whole-of-government approach to be effective.

This is the struggle for resources—fought principally in the battlespace of the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill by the Marines who stand their watch in Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps (HQMC). Virtually every battle fought has strategic implications that can last for a generation.

Within the Pentagon, the battle for resources is fought between the four military services, the Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense staff. As part of our nation's smallest service, the Marine Corps staff often is outnumbered. Nevertheless, what it lacks in numbers, it makes up for with initiative, ingenuity, hard work and a mindset that knows only mission accomplishment as the acceptable end state. Every day, the HQMC staff fights battles against entities that throughout the Corps' history have at times threatened our very existence.

There is one ally that the Marine Corps has been able to rely upon in the fight for resources: the U.S. Congress. Within HQMC, there is one office—the Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA)—whose sole mission is to interface with Congress in order to help the Commandant and the Corps prevail in the daily, monthly and annual resource battles that garner the necessary means to man, train and equip the Corps' operating forces and supporting establishment.

OLA has a unique mission with many functions, and the role the office plays in the legislative process ensures that the Marine Corps not only endures, but remains true to its congressionally mandated role as America's premier crisis response force—the force that is most ready when our nation is least ready. Today, there is tremendous pressure to reduce the size of the military in order to save money

LCPL ANTWAUN L. JEFFERSON, USMC

Capt Erin Ashford, left, the visits officer for Officer Candidates School, and Capt Carla Gerlach, second from left, plans and policy officer, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., escort congressional chiefs of staff on a tour of OCS during the Navy and Marine Corps Caucus Staff Delegation visit on Dec. 12, 2012. Maj Kenneth Jones, legislative liaison, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, second from right, and Maj Janine Garner, Office of Legislative Affairs, far right, also participated in the tour.

during a time of fiscal austerity. To the Marines who served during and immediately after World War II, these conditions might seem remarkably familiar: In the two-year period following WW II, the Marine Corps was reduced from a wartime high of more than 485,000 personnel to 90,000. There were calls for a further downsizing of the Marine Corps or possible absorption into the Army in order to gain efficiency and to eliminate a "second land army."

Because of the Corps' outstanding reputation as America's "911 force," and most recently, superb performances in Iraq and Afghanistan (all while continuing forward-deployed Marine expeditionary units and performing "Phase Zero" shaping operations across the Western Pacific), the question is no longer one of existence, but one of ensuring the Marine Corps' continued relevance and effectiveness. Those can only be achieved by ensuring that Congress, the provider of funds and authorities for the military, understands the Corps and its roles and missions as part of the joint force. This can only happen if the Marine Corps cultivates a healthy relationship with elected representatives and their professional staffs.

By providing timely accurate information and frank, open feedback to Congress as they execute their constitutionally mandated roles in authorization, appropriation and oversight, the Commandant is able to gain the funding and authorities necessary to provide ready, trained Marine forces to the combatant commanders.

The mission of interfacing between the Corps and Congress falls to the Marine Corps Office of Legislative Affairs within HQMC. OLA coordinates with all Marine Corps agencies to inform Congress on Marine Corps matters, responds to congressional inquiries, supports the preparation of key leaders for testimony and supports congressional travel.

OLA was created in 1952 to establish and maintain a relationship between Congress and the Marine Corps with particular emphasis on constituent matters. The Constitution of the United States clearly articulates the role of Congress in governing the Armed Forces, and OLA's primary mission is to ensure Congress has the information required to do that. As such, OLA is directly responsible to the Commandant in order to ensure that the CMC's priorities and perspectives are understood on the Hill.

During the past 30 years, as the needs of Congress and the Marine Corps have changed, so too has OLA. The organization now has Marines stationed in the Pentagon, on Capitol Hill and in Legislative Affairs Offices within various Marine Corps organizations throughout the country. Approximately 50 Marines and civilians constitute the OLA staff under the direction of a brigadier general—whose title is legislative assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. He and his staff are the "face" of the Marine Corps to the legislative branch. They meet with congressional members and their staffs several times a week and routinely attend congressional hearings and provide information requested by congressional members.

In the current era of fiscal constraint, OLA must work harder than ever to ensure that CMC's priorities are understood on Capitol Hill. To facilitate this communication, OLA uses various functional "lines of operation" (LOO) that include Pentagon, House and Senate Liaison (with their respective liaison officers), specially trained Congressional Fellows, congressional engagement events and dedicated written congressional correspondence. Each LOO provides a unique function.

Much, although certainly not all, of OLA's work deals with providing information to the members and professional staff of the Armed Services Committees of both the House and Senate. Congressional liaison Marines provide an escort function to members and professional staff as they execute their oversight visits. Member travel is called a congressional delegation or "CODEL," and professional staff member trips are known as "STAFFDELs." The professional staff writes the bill language that becomes law; they are very hardworking and important members of the congressional defense establishment and should always be treated with the same level of respect as a member of Congress. By investing the time to develop close personal relationships with members of Congress and their staffs, OLA can help them make informed decisions that benefit the Marine Corps.

GySgt Jason Dean, a Department of Defense fellow for the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, speaks with Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska at the Russell Senate Office Building during the committee's Toys for Tots drive on Dec. 3, 2014. (Photo by Cpl Sarah Luna, USMC)

House and Senate Liaison Offices

The Legislative Liaison Offices are the Marine Corps' ambassadors to Capitol Hill in both the House of Representatives and Senate. These small offices are located in the Rayburn House Office Building and the Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill. Each liaison office is directed by a colonel, who leads a hand-selected team of enlisted and officer liaisons. These Marines provide a critical set of services to the Corps and Congress. They work with HQMC offices to facilitate information flow to and from member offices and the offices of the many congressional committees.

Lines of communication are vital to maintain in any operating environment, and OLA is no exception. When Congress asks HQMC for the critical resources it needs—timely and accurate information—they get it—so they can make good decisions to provide the Marine Corps the critical resources it needs.

Liaison Officers

Understanding the progress that our key investment programs (e.g., for procurement, research and development of weapons systems and capabilities), personnel initiatives and family support programs are a key part of congressional oversight. In order to support Congress in this effort, OLA uses several liaison officers who come from a variety of mili-

tary occupational specialties and a variety of career experiences that represent the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. This hand-picked core group provides OLA the opportunity to leverage its collective expertise in order to create a shared understanding of CMC's priorities to Congress. These include the Marines in the Capitol Hill liaison offices and those in the Pentagon and offices around the Corps.

OLA liaison officers are the primary interface between Congress and HQMC for all Marine Corps programs and requirements, to include aviation platforms (both manned and unmanned), amphibious ships, ground tactical/combat vehicles, ground equipment, weapon systems and personal protective equipment. Other liaison officers focus on cyberspace, intelligence, facilities sustainment, military construction and personnel initiatives. In short, if a Marine wears it, rides in it, fires it in combat, or his or her family needs it, OLA liaison officers are actively engaged to ensure that Congress clearly understands the Marine Corps' requirements, the current and projected status of the program and the funding necessary to support it.

Immediately following the president's annual budget submission, OLA's liaisons coordinate program briefs for House and Senate Armed Services Committees and their staff members. Provided by Marine program managers from Naval Air Systems Command and Marine Corps Systems Command, these briefs articulate and justify funding requests by outlining system capabilities and development/procurement profiles throughout the five-year budget plan. These briefs are a key tool in ensuring Marine Corps programs receive their required funding in the yearly budget cycle and arm congressional staff members with the knowledge needed to make recommendations to their members of Congress on how to use finite resources to satisfy many different needs.

Prior to passing the yearly budget laws, Congress calls key senior leaders to testify to various defense-related committees and their subcommittees to brief senators and congressmen on the state of our Corps and answer their questions. These hearings help Congress understand why requested resources are needed. OLA liaison officers assist and prepare the Commandant, the Assistant Commandant and Deputy Commandants for this congressional testimony, most frequently in support of the annual budget request. As questions arise throughout the legislative process, liaison officers also coordinate key engagements on Capitol Hill, linking Marine Corps subject matter experts with professional staff members or members of Congress.

Finally, OLA liaison officers coordinate travel for members of Congress and their staffs who visit various Marine Corps activities and units to observe fielded systems in operation in order to get user-level feedback on actual system performance. They also visit test ranges and production facilities to gauge the progress of developmental systems working their way through the acquisition process. Some trips are international and allow legislators and their staffs to visit forward-deployed Marines in all parts of the world and observe them as they perform operational missions.

LCPL JACOB BOZIC, USMC

BGen David J. Furness, Legislative Assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Italian Ambassador, Claudio Bisogniero, speak with a guest at the Sunset Parade reception at the Women in the Military Service for America Memorial in Arlington, Va., July 15, 2014. BGen Furness and his Marines interface with Congress on a daily basis to ensure its members and professional staffers understand the Corps' roles and missions.

Congressional Fellowship Program

Personal communication and the development of strong relationships on Capitol Hill are essential in order for OLA to effectively educate and inform members of Congress, their office staff, and professional committee staff members on Marine Corps warfighting capabilities and mission requirements. Another essential component of achieving success is the Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP), which offers a unique opportunity for officers, staff noncommissioned officers and civilian Marines to serve in a congressional office, represent the Marine Corps and gain an intimate perspective and understanding of the legislative process.

Marines have served as fellows in the offices of either congressional members or committees for more than 15 years. Today, the Department of Defense establishes the policy for the Legislative Fellowship Program and tasks the secretaries of the military departments to manage their individual programs and maintain overall compliance with DOD intent. The assistant secretary of defense for legislative affairs determines which members of Congress and committees are best served with the assignment of a DOD fellow and works with each branch of the Armed Forces to assign fellows to an eligible legislative office. Fifteen of the 100 authorized congressional fellows who serve each congressional year are Marines.

Historically, OLA solicited interest in the CFP through release of a Marine Administrative Message as an independent Special Education Program (SEP). In June 2011, the Commandant of the Marine Corps approved changes to combine multiple SEPs into the Commandant's Professional Intermediate-Level Education Board (CPIB) and the Commandant's Career-Level Education Board (CCLEB)—so it is through these boards that congressional fellow candidates are identified.

Nominees for the fellowship program are not expected to be experts in the legislative process but must possess the intellect, drive and temperament to succeed in the dynamic and high-profile Capitol Hill environment. After initial selection via the CPIB/CCLEB, all applicants are subject to a final interview by an OLA panel to gauge disposition and the ability to effectively communicate and

CPL KATHY NUNEZ, USMC

Congressional staff members enthusiastically participated in static displays during OLA's annual Marine Day, May 15, 2015, at MCB Quantico, Va. Marine Day is dedicated to teaching congressional staffers about the Corps' history, ethos and warfighting capabilities.

represent the Marine Corps. Marines selected trade their Marine pattern digital camouflage for the "congressional camouflage" of business suits for 12 months with their assignment to the office of a representative or senator. Following their fellowship, they have a two-year tour in HQMC. This arrangement leverages the knowledge and experience gained by each Marine's time on Capitol Hill.

Each member's office is a unique environment and each fellow's experiences will vary based on the needs and desires of the congressman or senator they serve. As members of the congressional office, fellows typically work on multiple portfolios (e.g., defense, veterans affairs, trade, foreign affairs, homeland security, intelligence, transportation, environmental/space science, technology and/or welfare/Social Security), coordinate travel, draft correspondence for proposed legislation and meet with constituents and concerned interest groups. To help prepare for their assignments, fellows undergo Marine Corps specific training that includes briefs on current and future programs and policy, DOD structure and individual service roles and programs (to include National Guard and Reserve), and legislative seminars offered by the Congressional Research Service and Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University. As a past fellow has commented, the CFP provides a truly exceptional opportunity to "view the legislative process from within."

CPL LENA WAKAYAMA, USMC

Ty R. Littau, a congressional staffer for Senator John Thune of South Dakota, fires an M240B machine gun during Marine Day on May 15, 2015.

Correspondence Section

Due to the large number of congressional inquiries that OLA receives from Congress, a correspondence section was set up within OLA to deal with this specific aspect of congressional interaction. This section's primary role is to ensure that members of Congress receive the information they need—expeditiously. At any one time, the OLA correspondence section may be handling hundreds of inquiries dealing with everything from awards issues for WW II Marines to helping transitioned Marines receive educational benefits.

A major task in this section is to research each subject and try to get to the heart of the problem to accurately provide the inquiring Congress member with correct information so he or she can respond to his or her constituent with a quality and satisfactory answer. The correspondence section works hard to meet each assigned timeline and maintain a well-respected relationship with legislators and their

staff. Composed of uniformed and civilian Marines, the members of the OLA correspondence section are professionals, many of whom have handled thousands of cases over many years of experience.

Special Events

Relationships with legislators and their staffs are essential if the Marine Corps is to build a strong foundation of trust with Congress. OLA actively seeks opportunities to demonstrate the capabilities of the operating forces for congressional members and their staffs. These events range from capability demonstrations to observation of exercises to participation in larger-scale annual events such as a Fleet Week or Marine Day. As a result, members of Congress and their staffs are able to meet Marines, learn what they do and get a close-up look at the Corps' capabilities.

Each year OLA hosts a Marine Day and invites more than 400 professional and personal staff members to attend. This year's Marine Day included a visit to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va.; an opportunity to shoot Marine Corps weapon systems on a range at nearby Marine Corps Base Quantico; and a flight in an MV-22 Osprey. The event allows congressional staff members to learn about the equipment Marines use and better understand the importance of properly resourcing the Marine Corps' operational needs.

Other OLA-sponsored events include smaller activities such as congressional breakfasts with key Marine leaders and ceremonies that allow members of Congress to witness cherished Marine Corps traditions. Perennial favorites include Sunset and Evening Parades, as well as the OLA-hosted Marine Corps Birthday ceremonies held in the House and the Senate on Capitol Hill.

The "Payoff"

The end result of all these efforts is an educated and informed legislature that understands the present needs of the Marine Corps (in the case of the budget, resources for the next fiscal year) as well as those required future capabilities essential to maintaining its status as the nation's premier force in readiness. There are two key activities that Congress performs each year in order to give the Marine Corps the resources it needs. First, Congress authorizes funding and other needed authorities for the Marine Corps portion of the defense budget via the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA); second, Congress appropriates funding via the annual Defense Appropriations Bill. These two key authorizations dictate how much the Marine Corps is allowed to spend, what that money can be spent on and how much funding actually will be received.

The NDAA is one of the biggest and most significant bills OLA facilitates. Based on the president's annual budget request, the NDAA is a federal law that specifies the budget allowed for DOD. This bill also authorizes salaries and benefits and includes guidelines for funding the development and procurement of warfighting systems such as aircraft, weapons, ships and vehicles. It is the NDAA that authorizes the hundreds of millions of dollars needed for things like ammunition and construction of facilities. In some cases, such as the Joint Strike Fighter and the Amphibious Combat Vehicle, these authorities account for billions of dollars. In a given year, Congress authorizes approximately $25 billion to man, train, equip and operate our Marine Corps.

USMC

Gen Alexander A. Vandegrift, 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps, in his famous "Bended Knee Speech" to the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, May 6, 1946, stated, "The Marine Corps, then, believes that it has earned this right to have its future decided by the legislative body which created it." His efforts ensured the future of the Corps and laid the foundation for the healthy relationship between the Corps and Congress today.

Conclusion

In order to counter efforts to downsize the Corps after WW II, General Alexander A. Vandegrift, 18th Commandant of the Marine Corps, in 1946 gave his famous "Bended Knee Speech" to the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, stating: "The Congress has always been the nation's traditional safeguard against any precipitate action calculated to lead the country into trouble. In its capacity as a balanced wheel, this Congress has on five occasions since the year 1829 reflected the voice of the people in examining and casting aside a motion which would damage or destroy the United States Marine Corps. In each instance, on the basis of its demonstrated value and usefulness alone, Congress has perpetuated the Marine Corps as a purely American investment in continued security."

Gen Vandegrift's speech had the desired effect. Congress, which at the time had more than 50 Marine veterans serving in the House of Representatives and the Senate, established by law the Marine Corps as an independent service within the Department of the Navy, protecting the Corps by mandating its force structure and unique mission into Title 10, United States Code.

In this legendary speech, Gen Vandegrift concluded, "The value of the Marine Corps is so obvious that its destruction is unthinkable." With these words, Gen Vandegrift saved the Marine Corps. The lessons learned from that experience cannot be forgotten. By ensuring the Marine Corps is properly understood and supported by Congress, it will likely never have to face a similar fate in the future.

As the smallest service with a unique set of missions, the Marine Corps has had to continually demonstrate and justify its relevancy. The Corps has been "the first to fight" throughout much of the 20th century and continues to do so in the 21st. In the past year, Marines have answered the nation's call in Africa against the scourge of Ebola; in Iraq, training Iraqi soldiers to defend their country and to defeat ISIS; and in Nepal, assisting with disaster relief following a devastating earthquake. It is this versatility and responsiveness that endears the Marine Corps to the American people and continues to reinforce what Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak famously declared when he said: "America doesn't need a Marine Corps; America wants a Marine Corps."

In today's challenging and dynamic fiscal environment, interacting with a Congress that has a mandate to rein in federal spending, OLA continues to promote open lines of communications between the Corps and Congress in order to create a shared understanding of the Commandant's priorities. Through OLA, the Marine Corps can maintain strong relationships with members of Congress, their staff and those who work in and around Capitol Hill. In doing so, OLA helps to guarantee that Marines are positioned to fight and win when called upon, ensuring that Americans will always want a Marine Corps.