

## YourCorps

# Capitol Hill Marines bridge gap between Congress, Corps

By Gina Harkins

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At a time when the American public's approval rating of Congress has dipped to just 10 percent, a handful of Marines on Capitol Hill are working hard to bridge the gap between its members and the Marine Corps.

These congressional fellows, officers and staff noncommissioned officers, are selected after a rigorous application process. Fifteen Marines were chosen to head to Washington during fiscal year 2013—12 officers, three enlisted. They are assigned to members of Congress during a year-long assignment that is unlike anything they're used to in the Corps.

And they work on some of the hottest issues of the day, researching and providing expertise on the Women in Service Review Board, the impacts of budget cuts on the service and sexual assault in the military.

The Marine Corps seeks applicants for the assignments each September. Those who have completed the fellowship say it's a tough process, but if selected, the opportunities are well worth the trouble. Each of the fellows interviewed by Marine Corps Times said they've always had a strong interest in politics, making the opportunity to spend a year on Capitol Hill an attractive option.

For Capt. Kelly Repair, the transition has been a bit more natural than that for most Marines on the Hill. She's a judge advocate, so her strong understanding of the legal system has allowed her to assist in drafting legislation that has made it to the House floor. She is assigned to the office of Rep. Michael Turner, R-Ohio, who sits on the House Armed Services Committee.

Repair said she worked the military sexual assault portfolio for Turner, and when they came up

with their idea for bipartisan legislation, she helped see the entire process through.

"As an attorney, instead of just sending our idea to legislative counsel and asking them to draft it into the legalese provision that we needed, I worked with the legislative counsel and was actually able to learn how it was drafted," she said.

She saw it all the way to the floor as a standalone bill, an exciting moment for someone in her field, she said.

Master Sgt. Kathryn Denham, assigned to the office of Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., has also been tasked to work on the issue of sexual assault in the military. As an aviation operations specialist by trade, she doesn't have much experience with the legal aspect of the issue, but she is still able to apply her own Marine experiences to her mission on the Hill.

"Sexual assault obviously was a major topic, and the senator is very much committed to figuring out a way to fix this," Denham said. "I have been a uniform victim advocate, so I take that into the room with me whenever the subject comes up."

Denham said she and Repair work closely together. Repair can provide the legal background Denham might need when working on a particular assignment. And Repair said Denham's knowledge as a uniform victim advocate has been



SGT. MARIONNE T. MANGRUM/MARINE CORPS

Master Sgt. Kathryn Denham, a congressional fellow working with Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., visits with Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Mike Barrett during his May trip to Capitol Hill.

invaluable as well.

## A new assignment

Capt. Micah Hudson, a comptroller assigned to the office of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said reporting to the Hill, donning a suit and having co-workers call him by his first name is a big change from the world he's used to in the Corps. The diversity between the 535 different offices on Capitol Hill means Marines have to remain flexible, he said.

"You kind of want to go in there, fit in with the office, help out where you can," he said. "And sometimes you've got to check your Marine Corps attitude at the door."

Master Gunnery Sgt. Julius Spain and Capt. John Schippert work in the Marine Corps' Office of Legislative Affairs, to which the fellows report.

"We look for proficient Marines who are good technically and tactically within their [military occupation specialty]," said Schippert, an infantry officer. "We look for good

critical thinkers, diligent workers and good communicators."

Hudson said the Corps invests a lot in congressional fellows to take them out of their MOSs for a year to put them to work on the Hill. That's why it's important for Marines who become congressional fellows to remain humble and not to think they're going to change the world in a year.

Still, it's a rewarding year, they all say. Their day-to-day knowledge of the way the Marine Corps, and the military in general, works helps those with no background in it understand it better. Hudson said he's been called on to explain everything from rank structure to how weapons work — and even what someone in the military might spend on haircuts to keep their high and tight.

All the fellows encourage Marines interested in learning about politics to apply for a fellowship. Repair added that it's a strong way for Marines to remain competitive during the draw down. □

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