

In the Beginning: The Congressional Marines Are Formed

by BGen Joe Bartlett, USMCR(Ret)

The Congressional Marines Group has been a Washington institution for more than 45 years. Here's the story on how it started and what it does.

If success, like victory, "finds a hundred fathers," then it is evident that the Congressional Marines Group is no orphan. It is an unusual organization that has achieved remarkable success. My purpose here is to record the history of its genesis and discuss what it has done over the years.

In the spring of 1953, soon after my return to the Capitol from active duty, I became increasingly aware that there were a number of members of Congress who had served in the Marine Corps at one time or another, and who, for the most part, did not even recognize one another as fellow Marines. I felt a keen desire to bring these estranged brothers together.

Enter then-Col James D. "Don" Hittle, the legislative assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps.* Through mutual friends, I had come to know Don Hittle quite well. He was a brilliant and eminently effective liaison officer who came by his talent naturally. His father had been a distinguished leader in the Michigan State Senate; he understood politics. Some of the most important members of Congress sought his personal counsel on defense matters. I thoroughly enjoyed and valued his friendship (and I still do).

Another part of Don Hittle's personality, however, revealed a bit of Tom Sawyer. It was sometimes hard to tell where his ideas left off, and yours picked up. He had a way of inspiring others to do what he wanted done. The first thing you knew,

you found yourself painting *his* fence, and thinking you were having fun. In a sense, this is how the Congressional Marines Group was conceived. Don and I had visited over the happy possibilities of cementing the comradeship among these diverse Marines in Congress. Before I realized it, I was standing there with his paintbrush firmly in hand, setting forth on the project with enthusiasm.

Touching base with some of the Marines, it became apparent that they did share an interest in getting together as Marines. Having obtained enough encouragement to convince us we could field a respectable number, Don then put me up to calling the Commandant, Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, to see if he would join the group for a breakfast get-together.

"Put me up to" was exactly what Don had done. He knew something I did not

"Through the auspices of the Congressional Marines Group, Marines in the Corps, and in the Congress, were enabled to relate to one another under casual and constructive circumstances.

I am confident this relationship has been helpful to both, and has served the best interests of our Country.

Of these meetings with these distinguished and patriotic public servants, my abiding memories are warm and gratifying, indeed."

*-Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., USMC(Ret)
23d Commandant
United States Marine Corps*

*BGen Hittle later served as an assistant secretary of the Navy and is now president-emeritus of the The Army and Navy Club in Washington, DC.

know. Only recently, the Commandant had attempted to get the same group to come to the Commandant's house for a steak dinner, and the event had been a debacle of absences. Flu may have been a factor, but the Commandant was not allowing for that.

So, when I innocently suggested that we would be highly honored if he would join these Marines for a "Dutch treat" breakfast, his response was very skeptical: "What makes you think you can get those fellows to come out at that hour and buy their own breakfast, when I can't get them to come down to my house for a steak dinner?"

Summoning all the confidence my apprehensions would allow, I assured Gen Shepherd we would have a good attendance. Even while we talked, I had visions of being hung from a yardarm for getting the Commandant out for another debacle. But he agreed to give it a try.

You may not remember, but in 1953 breakfast meetings were simply not a part of official Washington lifestyle. I ran into some powerful resistance to the very idea of an 0745 chow call. Cocktails at sundown was countered as a much more civilized arrangement. However, there was a lot of competition for the attention of congressmen at the cocktail hour, and little chance, then, of a conflict for breakfast. So we decided to go for it.

Without any difficulty at all, we were able to obtain the Speaker's dining room, a handsome little room on the first floor of the Capitol, that featured one wall covered with Speaker Rayburn's favorite painting of a vast field of Bluebonnets blooming in his beloved Texas. Oh, yes—the \$1 we collected, more than paid for a sumptuous breakfast and generous gratuities! (Ah, for the good old days!)

The Speaker's dining room was a splendid setting for the birth of the Congressional Marines Group, and that first meeting in July 1953 was a most gratifying success. The comradeship was spontaneous, and esprit de corps permeated the room and transcended all differences. The Commandant was elated. Don and I were enormously relieved. An institution within an institution had its beginning.

During this conceptual phase, I continued working closely with two of the most highly respected men in Congress, Representative Paul B. Dague of Downingtown, PA, and Senator Francis Case of South Dakota. I sought their guidance and approval on every detail, confident that if it passed muster with them, it would surely be acceptable to the other members. And it always was.



Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., 23d Commandant of the Marine Corps, was exceedingly popular with the Congressional Marines. This happy breakfast group includes (front row, left to right) Congressmen Barber Conable of New York, Paul B. Dague of Pennsylvania, General Greene, Clark Thompson of Texas, and (second row) James C. Corman of California, Robert McClory of Illinois, and Ed White of Texas. (The Gazette is running a contest to see who can identify the most active duty Marines shown in this picture.)

So, if we are trying to find the "fathers" of the Congressional Marines Group, we need look no further than these two magnificent men, Paul Dague and Francis Case. They not only gave first life and vitality to the fraternity, but Senator Case's abiding good influences kept us on course, while Paul Dague served as our inspiring "chaplain," and at the same time, our favorite storyteller. The bylaws, which were drafted in the closest consultation with these two "fathers," have never been amended since they were adopted in 1953.

Designated as "Charter Members" were the Marines then serving in Congress. In going over the draft, Congressman Dague added my name to the list. I was flattered, but I protested, "Wait a minute; my boss is a Marine, too. You'll get me in trouble." With that, Mr. Dague wrote in the name of the House Clerk, the Honorable Ralph R. Roberts. Again I protested: "What about Don Hittle? I could not possibly have put this thing together without him!" Mr. Dague's pencil returned to the draft and added the name of Col Don Hittle. And that is how we three plebeians got listed in such distinguished company, thanks to Paul Dague.

The Articles of Organization stated that all others attending would be identified as specific guests of a member, or "guests of the Chairman." The chairmanship rotated alphabetically for the monthly meetings. The Commandant and his legislative assistant were always to be invited (however, they always bought their own breakfast), but we were admonished most severely not to allow the number of Marine uniforms present to dominate the room, lest it appear to be a Marine Corps activity. For that very prudent reason, most ranking generals were programmed to attend once, or perhaps twice, a year. Needless to say, there were those who never understood why they were not invited each time.

Likewise, we were cautioned against allowing the obvious presence of any special interest. We monitored that pretty effectively over the years, I believe, but it was not easy to curtail such innocuous activities as promoting Boy Scouts or the Employment of the Handicapped, but we dared not make exceptions. After my years of service on the Hill, I hardly needed to be warned that if the members ever sensed that they were being used, in any way, they simply would not come again. And that would be the end of the Congressional Marines Group.

One instance comes to mind, however, when a spirited Marine Secretary of the Treasury, not sensitive to the situation, launched into an impassioned pitch for his pending tax bill. I saw hackles rising, and I got very uneasy. But, fortunately, our chairman that day was the old smoothie, Representative Barber Conable of New York, and he handled the matter masterfully.

What, then, you may ask, is the Congressional Marines Group? Misconceptions abound. Let me start by defining what the Congressional Marines Group was never intended to be. It was not a political action committee of any sort. It was not a clandestine clique to promote any parochial purpose. It was not an instrument for influence peddling. The Congressional Marines Group was intended to be a fraternal band of brothers who have in common the privilege of having served



Congressman Paul B. Dague of Pennsylvania (right) is pictured here with Joe Bartlett. Along with Senator Francis Case of South Dakota, Dague is credited with launching the Congressional Marines Group. A veteran of World War I enlisted service in the Corps, Representative Dague served as chaplain of the Capitol club and its favorite raconteur.

"The Congressional Marines' get-togethers renewed the spirit of esprit de Corps for a disparate group of good men, for whom the Corps was their highest common denominator.

They had learned their earlier lessons in achievement in the United States Marine Corps, and they went on to achieve the highest legislative office in the land. They continued to serve, faithfully, the noble ideals expected of Marines.

I found these Congressional Marines a source of pride and reassurance."

*—Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., USMC(Ret)
24th Commandant
United States Marine Corps*

two of America's greatest institutions: the Congress and the Corps.

I doubt very much that anyone who is not a Marine will fully comprehend the tie that binds Marines. Others have tried to imitate the Congressional Marines Group, and they have failed every time. Marines cohere by a unique and indescribable spirit of the Corps. Congressional Marines—like all Marines—are drawn together for nothing more complicated than comradeship, the sharing of sea stories, and comparing life in "the old Corps." Does the Marine Corps gain any benefit out of this

"When I made brigadier general and was assigned as legislative assistant by Gen Greene, the Marine breakfasts became the centerpiece of my duties. Not only was it a pleasant experience for me, but it was a way to meet with the Marine members of Congress and get to know one another better.

Later, when I became Commandant, I attended as many of the breakfasts as possible. I always enjoyed meeting with these Congressional Marines, no matter what their political persuasion, and talking about the 'Old Days'—you know, the days that never were, and never will be!

Although lobbying was not the mission, the Congressional Marines provided me invaluable support and cherished comradeship."

*—Gen Louis H. Wilson, USMC(Ret)
26th Commandant
United States Marine Corps*

alumni association? Of course, it does. But the process is a lot more innocent and subtle than others might suspect. There is nothing that ought to arouse paranoia.

The only time I can recall a general officer making a hard sell before the group was early in the Vietnam war. LtGen Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, who had been summarily retired but never really given to understand why, joined us as the guest of the consummate gentleman from Texas, Representative Clark Thompson.

Gen Puller implored the congressmen to "use (your) influence" to get him called back to active duty to settle the Vietnam mess. "There are 200,000 able-bodied retired Marines," Puller bellowed.

They will come back if I call them. And they will follow me! And we'll march right into Hanoi. And as soon as we get that place straightened out, we'll march right on to Peking. . . .

The moment was electric with his earnestness. It was pathetically poignant. Many of us were proud to have served with him, and all of us loved this great Marine. But he had already fought more battles than anyone should have to.

Most of our banter was of a lighter nature. Congressmen Don Jackson and Jack Brooks kept a California versus Texas exchange going on for years. All in good humor, these two bright minds regaled the group regularly.

Another of the original members who continued to perform distinguished public service as the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, the Honorable Michael Mansfield, was a former representative and senator from Montana, as well as Senate Leader. Mike was one of our most faithful members. He usually claimed the seat at the end of the table, puffed on his trusty pipe, and listened intently—when he was not, for some mischievous reason, trying to get a rise out of me.

The courtly former-Governor Bill Tuck of Virginia, was one of the Charter Members. I think he was a private first class in the First World War. Governor Tuck was one of the most popular men in Congress. He told stories in his indistinguishable, ultrathick, Virginia-border brogue. I was one of the many, caught up in his contagious mirth, who laughed uproariously even when we had not been able to understand much of the story. He was one of a kind and unforgettable.

Listed on our original roster was the former Representative from Minnesota, MajGen Melvin J. Maas. A personal idol and dear friend of mine, Mel had gone to-

tally blind while on active duty. Later he became chairman of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped. I frequently drove miles across town to pick Mel up just for the opportunity to visit with him en route to the breakfasts. He was a real inspiration, and I cherish his memory.

If Don Jackson was the most dashing of our members, Representative Jim Patterson of Connecticut, was surely the most dapper. He must have cut quite a figure in uniform, because he still turned the ladies' heads, and he loved it!

On the other hand, Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, changed minds. A student and defender of the Corps, Douglas continued to make his way to our breakfasts even after it was physically painful for him to get around.

Representative Jim Davis of Georgia was a source of strength. When an unexpected problem would arise, you could always count on "Judge" Davis to help bail you out. He was invaluable in the organizing of our group.

A Representative from Maryland to the Congress, and a national hero who personified the valiant defense of Wake Island, BGen James P. S. Devereux was one of our original band. We were mighty proud to have him aboard. Our esteem and respect for Jimmy Devereux was boundless. A modest, thoroughly decent, and thoughtful man, he was a sterling credit to the Corps, to the Congress, and certainly to the Congressional Marines.

Those, then, were the "fathers" of the Congressional Marines Group. During the years that followed, a most impressive parade of distinguished statesmen came along to join the ranks of the Congressional Marines Group, and to contribute to this enduring fellowship. I hesitate to start mentioning names, for there were so many splendid Marines and dear friends among that number who subscribed their support—and brought inestimable enjoyment to our little band of brothers during the 25 years that I had the privilege of conducting the affairs of the Congressional Marines Group.

The 25th anniversary of the Congressional Marines, celebrated on the grounds of the Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington, brought together a large number of this very special fraternity. They enjoyed a memorable breakfast "in the field," and posed for a historic picture in front of the Iwo Jima monument. Viewing that picture, and



The 25th anniversary of the Congressional Marines, in 1978, brought together a distinguished group of Marines and friends for a "field rations" breakfast on the grounds of the Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington.

The 26th Commandant, Gen Louis H. Wilson, was the guest of honor, shown posing here with numerous Members of Congress, including to his left, Congressman Clark Thompson of Texas, and Congressman Barber Conable of New York, who was chairman of this milestone meeting.

gratefully remembering the role that each had contributed to this quarter of a century of incomparable fellowship, immerses me in an overwhelming nostalgia. Few remain who were there at the beginning.

Since 1978, others have continued the march. They march, I am sure, to a different drummer. Yet their devotion to the Corps and to the Congress, abides—always faithful.

US  MC

>BGen Dorsey Joseph "Joe" Bartlett went to work for Congress as a page on 1 August 1941. Upon graduation from high school in 1944 he enlisted in the Marine Corps. As a "meritorious NCO," he was commissioned in the Reserve in 1950. He retired in 1978. In his congressional occupation he was six times elected by secret ballot to the position of senior Republican staff officer of the House of Representatives, from which he retired in 1979. He resides in McLean, VA.