

## Sutton: What it takes to be a Corporal of Marines

Contributed by R. Randy Sutton  
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They were talking at a party. The woman replied that, yes, she had heard about a man who was coming back to the community from a time in the service. She flipped her head and with scorn in her voice she said, "He was just a corporal you know."

An older man calmly asked her to tell what she knew about what a corporal was? Did she know what it took to become a Corporal of Marines? Could she please tell what she knew about what a Corporal of Marines did? Would she please share with them what she thought a Corporal of Marines had seen, had done?

She said she "didn't pay much attention to things like military ranks." She went on to say that she knew that "War is never the answer. And it does not matter where the man had been, what he had seen or done, when the point is that war is never the answer!"

The older man felt pity for the woman even as he realized that his blood was beginning to boil. He wondered how anyone could judge someone as unworthy at the same time they were admitting that they did not even know about the person they were condemning. He remembered that when the Nazis were attacking Great Britain that during a radio show that George Orwell had said: "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf." But he did not say any of this out loud. Instead, without ever interrupting, he listened to the woman go on and on that she knew exactly how to fix the world.

Then he slowly and with conscious gentleness told her that to become a Corporal of Marines that first a young man or woman must enlist by signing a contract committing to serve for a fixed time. Say four or five years. During which time he or she would give up the right to live in the place of their choice, to work in a job of their own choosing. Giving up the right to awaken when they wanted to wake up, to take a weekend off, to call in sick because they just did not feel like going to work that day. Giving up the right to choose whom they would associate with. Giving up even the ability to choose what clothes to wear or what to eat that day. Giving up the right to be with their families, to be with their loved ones.

The old man said that when a man or a woman signs their enlistment papers they know are signing a blank check to give their country any amount required, up to and including their life.

He said that one of the first things the young man or woman who was to become a Corporal of Marines must do is to enter Marine Boot Camp as a "recruit." In boot camp the "recruit" must pass numerous tests &ndash; physical tests, intellectual tests, emotional tests &ndash; in order to graduate. Many do not pass those tests. The ones that do may become "privates." Then they must pass more tests, demonstrate competency in a series of increasingly more difficult, more complex, more demanding tasks, perform more duties satisfactorily, avoid disciplinary actions that could prevent promotion to the rank of "Private First Class." This must be accomplished yet again to be promoted to the rank of "Lance Corporal."

The older man then explained that these had all been "enlisted ranks." He said that the next rank was a step up to be a "non-commissioned officer." That a Corporal of Marines was trained to be, and did become, and must be a leader of Marines in all the enlisted ranks. That far from blindly doing only whatever they were told, that a Corporal of Marines must accomplish tasks not of their own choosing, charged with deciding how best to do so quickly, efficiently, without the resources they may desire, constantly adapting to unpredictable conditions that can change in a moment, all while minimizing risk to civilians and other troops. Because if the corporal was found to have unnecessarily endangered either troops or civilians then the corporal may spend a long time in prison.

The old man shared with the woman the experience he had on a flight sitting next to a Marine Lance Corporal returning from duty overseas to his family in Oklahoma, how the young Marine had been seriously wounded and how they had talked about the different kinds of nightmares they had. Nightmares about what had happened. Nightmares about what almost happened, could have happened. How they instantly knew the difference between these two types of nightmares.

They talked about how sometimes at first they would have clear recall of an event, then later when they tried to think about it again, they would only be able to find a "memory of the memory," because their minds would find it too painful to go back to the original memory.

Then they talked about nightmares at night that you wake up covered in sweat. Nightmares in the daytime that you stuff away and do your best to realize that you are not there anymore and act as if everything is OK so that you do not upset other people.

They talked about how they did not talk with family members, girlfriends or wives about what they had seen, heard, felt, because one of the reasons they went to war was so that the family members, the wife, the girlfriend, would never have to have those terrible experiences.

The old man talked slowly and gently. He asked a question of the woman who said she did not know and did not care what a Corporal of Marines was. He asked her how many people she had known in her lifetime who were capable of doing everything it took to be a Corporal of Marines?

The woman was silent. She did not answer. The old man apologized if he had upset her. He politely gave his leave and walked out into the night.

When he got outside he quickly stepped to the side so he would be silhouetted by the door light for as short a moment as possible. He scanned the tree line for any shape, any movement that was out of place. His hands felt empty without his rifle. He drove home to another night when he would wake up again and again listening for any noise that did not seem right.

In the morning after a total of a few hours of sleep in a cool room the sheets on his bed were soaked with his sweat.

And he wondered if the woman at the party would remember anything at all about what it was to be a Corporal of Marines.

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