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Field Med School

Where They Earn the Title
Of FMF Corpsman

Bloody Saipan—
Necessary Step
To Tokyo

Col Ray Kelly:
Stock Boy to
NYC's "Top Cop"

Drums Along the
Chesapeake:
Marines Stand Fast
In the War of 1812



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Fleet Marine Force Corpsmen Train for Mass Casualties

Story and photos by LCpl Sullivan Laramie

The calm of the medical aid station faded as a quick reaction force returned with seven “casualties.” It shattered completely when Marines began shouting, “Corpsmen!”

Marines and sailors with 2d Medical Battalion, Combat Logistics Regiment 25, Second Marine Logistics Group rushed to remove Marines with simulated injuries from a humvee and a 7-ton truck during a field exercise held in late March and early April at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The task of moving the casualties for treatment did not go as was anticipated, just as it has been since the birth of the Navy Hospital Corps 116 years ago on June 17, 1898. Corpsmen always have been in the thick of the fight, so staying sharp through all types of training, including the recent mass casualty exercise at Lejeune, ensures they are ready when called.

“The quick reaction force called in five casualties, said they had six when they arrived, and showed up with seven,” said Captain Michael Sokolowski, USN, the commanding officer of the battalion. “[Corpsmen] who have been deployed downrange know that’s a real thing. These are things we have to prepare for, and the only way to get prepared is doing this.”

Some of the simulated casualties were unconscious, while others were cooperative. One Marine attempted to flee the scene and had to be restrained before the corpsmen could treat his injuries—an



HM2 Fabian Andrini, a hospital corpsman with 2d Medical Bn, CLR-25, 2d MLG, speaks to a sailor with a simulated injury to gauge his alertness and keep him conscious during a medical field exercise aboard Camp Lejeune, N.C., April 2, 2014.

occurrence familiar to medical personnel in combat environments where confusion and psychological trauma can set in.

“I used to work at a clinic, and this is more urgent than I’m used to,” said Hospital Corpsman Third Class James Pollock, a native of Clearwater, Fla., and hospital corpsman with Bravo Surgical Company, 2d Medical Bn. “Here, people

come in with amputations and more severe injuries, but at the clinic it’s more appointment-based. You don’t know who’s coming in [from combat]. You just get the patient and treat him from there.”

The unit is scheduled to complete similar exercises on a regular basis to better prepare both corpsmen and Marines to care for and treat large numbers of casualties. During an upcoming regimental field exercise, 2d Med Bn plans to receive and treat approximately 15 casualties at once.

“The setup we have right now is what we would use in a deployed environment,” said HM2 Geoffrey Polizoti, a hospital corpsman with the battalion. “We’re using it to find our strengths, weaknesses and what we can work on as far as training our corpsmen for future deployments.”

Leathernecks who have deployed said the scenario enacted during the exercise was similar to some of their experiences overseas, and treating role players helps them understand not only how to treat injuries, but the nature of the medical emergencies themselves.

“The tempo changes all the time,” said Polizoti. “It can be very stressful at times, and other times it can be steady, but as Marines and sailors, we should be ready to do our jobs at all times.”

Author’s bio: LCpl Laramie is a combat correspondent currently assigned to the 2d MLG, II Marine Expeditionary Force, MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C.

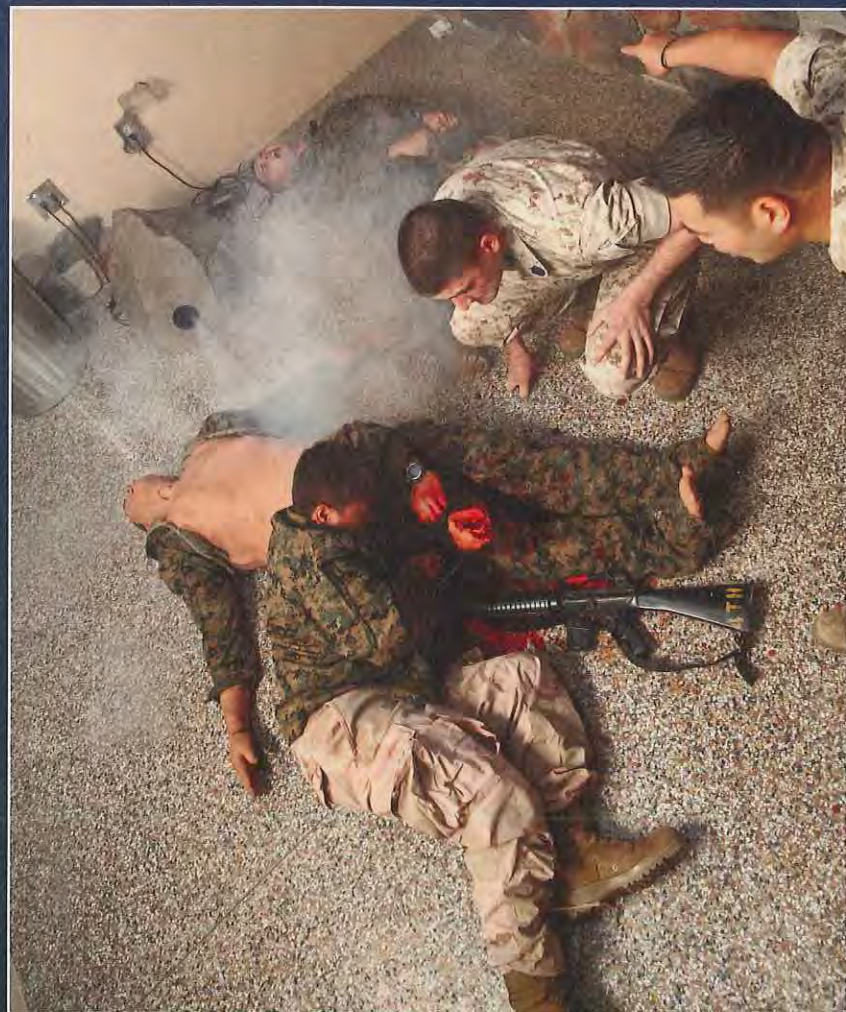


A Marine with a simulated injury is restrained by hospital corpsmen with 2d Medical Bn, CLR-25, 2d MLG during a medical field exercise aboard Camp Lejeune, April 2.



Hospital corpsmen with 2d Medical Bn prepare a Marine with a simulated injury for surgery during a medical field exercise at Lejeune on April 2.

HM2 Jayden Sandi, student, 1st Platoon, Field Medical Training Battalion-East (FMTB-E), under simulated combat pressure, participates in a moulage training exercise at FMTB-E aboard Camp Johnson, N.C. The training was conducted to better prepare the sailors for future combat operations in the most realistic way possible.



Corpsman Up! Blueside to Greenside

"We Make FMF Corpsmen"
at Field Medical Training Battalions East and West

Story by CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret)

Photos by Cpl Bryce J. Burton

"I turned to my sergeant guide, as we lay there in the sand, and asked him where his men were. He started to point and right before my eyes his hand dissolved into a bloody stump. He rolled over, screaming 'Sailor! Sailor!' (This was our code name for a corpsman. Bitter past experiences of the Marines had shown that the Japs delighted in calling 'corpsman' themselves and then shooting anyone who showed himself.)"

—Capt John C. Chapin, USMCR

(From his firsthand account of the 1944 World War II Marine attack on Roi-Namur)

Marines often quote a droll adage: "It's hard to be humble when you're among the world's finest."

Ask any Fleet Marine Force (FMF) corpsman and he or she will probably tell you the same thing. After completing eight weeks of arduous training to earn the title FMF corpsman serving alongside Marines, it's just very hard to be humble.

FMF corpsmen—informally known as "greensiders" as opposed to "bluesiders" who are corpsmen serving in Navy commands—have shared a common bond with their Marine partners since the Navy Hospital Corps was established formally 116 years ago on June 17, 1898.

Just as Marines are "made" at East and West Coast boot camps, so too are FMF corpsmen made at two Field Medical Training Battalions (FMTB): one at Camp Johnson in Jacksonville, N.C., and one at Camp Pendleton in California. They share a common program of instruction that transforms basic U.S. Navy sailors (Navy Enlisted Classification Code 0000, or blueside) into FMF corpsmen (NECC 8404, or greenside).

"It takes a lot of work to get that FMF qualification badge, so I guess greenside corpsmen are a bit more cocky," asserted Hospital Corpsman Second Class (FMF) Daniel Lowderman, an instructor at the East Coast school. Graduating from FMTB is only the first in a long line of steps involving study, tests and practical applications to earn the Navy badge bearing the eagle, globe and anchor of the Marines.

"But in our defense, when you're greenside, you have to be a jack-of-all-trades because when you're deployed, you're it," he emphasized, adding that when he was deployed he often didn't see a medical officer or chief for weeks or months at a time.

"All Navy corpsmen complete basic corpsman school and then they get orders to go greenside or not, based on availability of those billets," explained Master Chief Hospital Corpsman Harlan Patawaran, the command master chief at the Pendleton school. "We do have some basic corpsmen who volunteer to go greenside and we also get fleet returnees who were on the blueside and choose to switch for their own personal reasons, but either way, they'll all be trained from day one to be FMF corpsmen."

Lowderman can speak about the short learning curve from personal experience. He was a "pipeline" student at the East Coast FMTB school in 2007; this means he went from Navy boot camp to his 16-week basic corpsman school and then right to FMTB.

"Two weeks after graduation I was with 2d Battalion, 6th Marines [2/6], boots on

the ground, in Fallujah,” he recounted. “Two weeks after that I was on patrol with my platoon and we were hit with our first bicycle bomber and ended up with mass casualties—16 Marines injured plus the guy who blew himself up. I was it, there were no other docs there, and it took four hours to get help because they couldn’t land helicopters where we were and the quick reaction force sent out to pick the injured up was hit by an IED [improvised explosive device].”

That sort of baptism under fire, plus above-and-beyond actions such as extending with 2/6 to go on another deployment, is why dedicated, combat-tested FMF corpsmen such as Lowderman fill the ranks of instructors at the schools.

“We started a screening process several years ago to ensure we’re getting the best and that they’re coming here for the right reasons,” remarked the East Coast school’s commanding officer, Captain David T. Clontz, USN.

“Every corpsman here has had multiple combat tours. The caliber of our staff is consistently high. I don’t want anybody here as an instructor who doesn’t want to be here,” said Clontz, who was an FMF corpsman 34 years ago as a 19-year-old sailor and notes, “I am still very proud of that.”

Each school’s relatively small staff of about 50 includes Marines serving as instructors there, to help initiate sailors into the realm of the Corps. Both are Marine Corps schools under the Marine Corps Training Command headquartered at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

The programs of instruction (POI) at both schools are identical, explained the executive officer of the East Coast program, Lieutenant Commander John G. Meeting, who also was an 8404: “Our POI is derived from terminal learning objectives that are directly related to tasks found in the Navy/Marine Corps Training and Readiness manuals.”

“The schools are mirror images, pretty much the same, just with regional differences due to terrain or facilities available,” said Navy CAPT Dan Cornwell, commander of the West Coast school, who enlisted in 1975 and earned his 8404 code at the same school. “But the end products, the FMF corpsmen we produce, are virtually identical.”

Keeping the training relevant to operational reality is central to the instructional philosophy at the schools. Course content review boards made up of operating force Marines and sailors meet on a three-year cycle to determine how the tasks in the training and readiness manuals will sync with training.

The East Coast school has the distinction



Above: HM2 Eddie R. Rodriguez, right, an instructor at FMTB-E, evaluates students during a tracheotomy class aboard Camp Johnson.

Below: HM2 Alejandro Calzada, left center, an instructor at FMTB-E, describes the procedures for performing a tracheotomy.



of being the only place where female FMF corpsmen are trained; they get exactly the same training as males. They do the multiple hikes totaling 20 miles, they do the Marine Corps PFT, and they do the special obstacle course that includes a litter drag through mud. They earn the same badge; they serve in combat service support roles in artillery units and in the headquarters units of a Marine division. They are embedded in training teams and in female engagement teams.

“A lot of people, even on this base, don’t know that this school exists,” said HM2 (FMF) Maqueda Mouton, a female in-

structor at the East Coast school. “When I tell people I’m a corpsman at Camp Johnson, they think I’m an instructor at one of the other Marine schools. I have to break it down for them and explain how we go through this process to make an FMF corpsman.”

Mouton said she started as a blueside corpsman and obtaining the 8404 distinction was not one of her goals.

“I vowed I’d never do two things—serve with the Marine Corps and work in a dental clinic; I spoke too soon,” she recalled, as the needs of the Navy overrode her plan. “I got orders to field medical



SSgt Joseph Medina, an instructor at FMTB-E, gives corpsmen a period of instruction on leadership as part of their training.

school, and after I graduated I was assigned to the dental battalion," she said, retelling the story she said always gets a laugh from her students.

Providence proved to be in her favor though, as now she affirms, "I wouldn't change it for the world. I've had the time of my life since I put on this uniform," she noted, looking every bit the Marine as those she cares for. "Call me crazy, but I love it. When I came here as a student, I wasn't all that squared away, I didn't have that much pride. I think the Marine Corps helps a lot in showing that sense of pride. Navy boot camp was nothing compared to Field Med School."

The realistic Marine Corps infantry training is provided by experienced infantry Marines who are full-time staff instructors teaching the basics of being Marines.

"Yesterday was the first day we 'woke' them up," said the East Coast's Staff Sergeant Joseph Medina, an 0369 infantry unit leader turned instructor. He referred to the morning wake-up process for about 200 new students who had just checked in for training, noting that it is a little like phase one of boot camp.

"During the entire first week or so we march them everywhere, calling cadence, teaching them the basics of Marine Corps life," he said, his enthusiasm for the job clearly showing. "You can see the difference in a few days. They're starting to march as a unit."

While it's not considered a special duty assignment for Marines, it still is a critical instructor billet. "This is a teaching billet you have to request, and the selection process is tight," confided Corporal Hudson Nall, an 0311, infantryman, instructor at the West Coast school. "I got interested in it due to interaction I've had with FMF corpsmen in the past, so I went looking for my chance to have an influence on the corpsmen going into the field."



Field training, wearing camouflage and the gear worn by a Marine in the operating forces, is a central aspect in developing new FMF corpsmen. HM2 Jayden Sandi, a student with 1st Plt, FMTB-E, is pictured in the field during a training exercise.

"I went looking for these orders," asserted Medina. "All the corpsmen I've served with, except one, have been phenomenal people, superior personnel, absolutely amazing. This assignment is my way of giving back to the Corps and to my corpsmen because, quite honestly, I wouldn't be here today, and a lot of my Marines wouldn't be here, if it wasn't for our corpsmen."

Medina explained that he and fellow Marine instructors teach corpsmen how to walk, talk, act and essentially be Marines. They teach them the basics of Marine Corps infantry tactics, patrolling, what to expect when they're with Marines, handling a weapon and basics such as properly wearing the Marine uniform and "falling in" for formation.

"Their welcome to the Marine Corps is close order drill, Marine Corps history, leadership and uniform regulations," agreed Nall. "Then it goes into more depth of patrolling, field training, land navigation, shooting and marksmanship, how to deal with IED encounters, and five-paragraph orders. It's really similar to what is taught at MCT [Marine Combat Training Battalion, School of Infantry], what is expected of every Marine—a rifleman."

A recent graduate from the West Coast school concurred. "The first couple weeks they do have complete control over us, showing us how to march and all that," recalled HM3 Chris Regh, who graduated in March and was scheduled to report to Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif. "But as long as students show instructors the respect they deserve, they don't need to go full boot camp on you."

Perhaps the superlative description Medina uses when talking about FMF corpsmen he has known offers a glimpse of the respect that Marines have for their medical warriors.

"I remember once in Twentynine Palms, I'm carrying all my gear, plus an AT-4 [shoulder-fired antitank weapon] and an M16 with six or eight loaded magazines, and my corpsman has his pack, a rifle plus all his med bags, and I'm dying, but he's running back and forth checking on Marines," he remembered. "In Afghanistan, I'm making an entry into a building and I'm thinking a Marine is standing next to me and it's my corpsman."

As critical as FMF corpsmen are to Marines in battle, very few know much about where their corpsmen come from.

"I think you'd find that maybe 5 percent of the entire Marine Corps, regardless of rank, has a clue what goes on at FMTB," said Nall. "Before I came here, the extent of what I knew was what I'd heard from



Above: HM3 Brian A. Nielson, center, a student with 1st Plt, FMTB-E, ties a tourniquet during a simulated combat training exercise.

Below: HM3 Christopher D. Marchetta, a student at FMTB-E, participates in a simulated casualty training exercise aboard Camp Johnson as new corpsmen train to be named FMF/greenside corpsmen.



not stand out as an identifiable target.”

But even being a Marine look-alike can't hide the fact that when Marines are resting, FMF corpsmen keep moving and working.

“When we're on hikes and Marines take a break, corpsmen keep going, moving up and down the line, checking feet, making sure everybody is hydrated,” Conant observed, adding that this fact is why he and other instructors emphasize physical training (PT) at the school.

“I preach PT a lot to students, but it's not just physical fitness to stay fit; it is

physical fitness so you don't get mentally fatigued,” remarked Lowderman. “I [push] my students and when they're dead tired, that's when I go into casualty assessment, to see how they react when they are physically tired, because that's when it's important. In my experience, the bad guys don't shoot at you when you're fresh out on patrol; they do it when you've been out three hours and you're on your way back, when you're tired. So if you're struggling through it and you're too tired, you're not going to be a good enough corpsman to do what you need to do. We link PT with real-world scenarios.”

Describing combat situations from the relative comfort of a classroom can sometimes lose its impact, according to Conant, who noted, “It's hard to turn on that switch so that students believe everything the instructor is preaching. It is one thing to hear it and another thing to see something where you have to react—you're the only person on scene, and once they say ‘corpsman’ or ‘doc,’ all eyes are immediately on you, so you either react or don't react. You have that freeze moment or you will respond. Every person here will have their own tale of their first real moment, that scare when they say you're up, it's not pretend anymore.”

Realism is central to effective training. Both schools use live role players who can portray anyone from a victim to a villain. Very realistic moulage kits (mock injury) made of plastic, wax and paint are used to simulate the type of battlefield injuries students will encounter.

The schools each have simulation labs (Sim Lab), state-of-the-art indoor facilities where students are evaluated on all the basic skills of a corpsman under simulated combat conditions, using computer-controlled mechanical mannequins that are so eerily realistic they're like something out of a Stephen King novel.

“You can make these things bleed wherever you want them to bleed, you can stick needles in their chest to decompress them, you can intubate them, you can trach them, you can do almost anything you can do to a human on these dummies,” said Lowderman with obvious professional zeal. “You can also simulate administering any medication to test the corpsman's ability to properly administer it.”

Conant agreed, adding, “They can breathe, cough, their mouth moves, the chest rises and falls—they can basically do anything you can imagine besides get up and walk to you.”

The mannequins can even talk to students, via computer-controlled programmed audio or through instructors at a separate central control board who can tap in with their own voice.

FMF corpsmen I served with. But I think it is important for the general population of infantry Marines to know what is expected of a corpsman to graduate from here and what they are expected to know when they reach the fleet.”

“We've had multiple general officers come through here, and they are amazed at what we do and are glad to get that perspective because before coming here they just didn't know,” confirmed Marine Capt Cory Vaselenko, the logistics officer at the West Coast school and the senior Marine there. “On the officer side, when you're coming up through schools, they focus you on Marines; you know you're going to get a corpsman and you're glad for that, but you're just focused on other things at that point.”

“I've seen it from both sides,” said Chief Hospital Corpsman (FMF) Lawrence Pacheco, course chief on the West Coast, who has served as an FMF corpsman from the platoon to the regimental levels. “I've been that chief at an infantry battalion getting corpsmen just out of field med school, and now I came here to do my part in training them to be ready to report to the fleet. I take my job seriously and I expect my corpsmen to take it seriously. The Marines will take care of teaching them about the Marine part, but when it comes to taking care of Marines and making sure they get home safe, that's my job.”

Looking like a Marine is more than a point of pride for FMF corpsmen; it can be a lifesaver. “We intentionally try to blend in as best we can,” explained East Coast instructor HM2 (FMF) Charles Conant, who said that he went into the Navy to be an FMF corpsman. He tells his students, “You want to look just like Marines and

The Sim Lab is set up like a bazaar using a series of concrete stalls with a mannequin in each stall. Virtually every element of a chaotic battle scene can be brought to bear on the students—sound effects, gunfire, smoke and even an instructor standing over them shouting instructions. And it records visually and factually everything the student does so that afterward students can review the recordings, learning from their own mistakes.

The West Coast school has an additional feature to add even more realism—an outdoor combat town for MOUT (military operations in urban terrain) training dedicated to the school's use where students go for their final exercise, or FINEX; and, they bring in live actors to role-play as combat casualty victims.

"We are using hyper-realistic training that appeals to all their senses and puts them into a lifelike situation," said Nathan Lis, a veteran Marine and now civilian chief of academics at the Pendleton school. "The outcome is that when they get on the battlefield and experience it for the first time, they've seen something very close to it in training."

Lectures and demonstrations are held in classrooms, but practical application occurs in the field. Up to half the course is spent in the field.

"This school is not a place meant to sit down in the chair all day long; that's not what we do as corpsmen," said Conant. "We're out, we're adaptable, we are in the elements, so that's how we train them."

"For the FINEX, we hire a private contractor who brings in pyrotechnics, moulage and actors—some who are actually veteran military amputees—so we have live kicking and screaming victims in the MOUT town," explained Pacheco. "Students have to use everything they've learned. They go through a patrol scenario, they endure simulated explosions, and they have to treat two to four living casualties at a time under fire. Think of it as the Marines' Crucible. It's their final test. All the training, sweat and tears they've put into the course is wrapped up in this final test."

Once a Marine, always a Marine—and so it goes with FMF corpsmen. Docs carry the 8404 as a badge of honor with them forever. Some carry it visibly, like Conant who had "8404" tattooed on his right forearm. Others carry it beyond the Navy.

Dave Bray graduated FMTB-E in 1995 as platoon "Top Dog," meaning his fellow platoon members and instructors chose him as the student with the most motivation, professionalism, leadership and assistance to other students.

"FMTB was motivational, for me," said Bray, now the lead vocalist with a unique



Personal defense is a necessary skill for FMF corpsmen, and here HM2 Charles P. Conant, an instructor with FMTB-E, motivates students during Marine Corps Martial Arts Program training.

patriotic grunge-rock band "Madison Rising." He started on the blueside working in hospital emergency medical services but said, "The clinic setting didn't float my boat. When I went to field med school, I knew that was more my speed, more like I grew up, with guns, camping, getting up early, being in the woods, getting dirty. I adapted very quickly. I realized I probably should have been a Marine."

He spent four years in the Navy, saying that he served half the time with Marines. "I wish I'd stayed in," he reminisced. "I miss it. You never quite get back that kind of camaraderie. It keeps you young and on your toes."

Corpsmen have been part of Marine

Corps history for more than a century, but HM2 (FMF) Alejandro Calzada of the East Coast school's staff pointed out that the opposite is true as well. "Corpsmen have served alongside Marines from the beginning," noted the corpsman. "That is a part of our FMF corpsman history too."

Editor's note: Happy 116th Birthday to the U.S. Navy Hospital Corps.

Author's bio: The author, CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret), was a combat correspondent as an enlisted Marine and later a public affairs officer. He retired from active duty in 1996 and now is a contributing editor for Leatherneck.



Leatherneck—On the Web

See more photos of the U.S. Navy's Field Medical Schools and the training of corpsmen at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/corpsmen