

American Military Stereotypes

REFLECTIONS BY A FORMER US MARINE



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In the United States, there are a few things that make you ‘American’ in a sense. One, playing a sport like Baseball or Football during childhood and young adulthood. Depending on where you’re from, could dictate the sport you play, or even influence you to play both. In states like Texas, football fields are practically considered hallowed ground, whereas Arizona is crazy about Spring Training with professional baseball. Another very ‘American’ thing to do, is to join the military. It is part of the American culture and seen as being respectable and even admirable. From that moment whether it be between service branches, from fellow citizens or non-Americans, you become associated with different stereotypes that belong to the military as a whole, as well as your specific service branch.

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In the USA, answering the question “Have you ever been to war?” or any variant could snowball either way down the mountain so to speak, that you have been to a specific theater of operations, have or have not seen (direct) combat, taken someone’s life or saved one (or more), etc. When speaking about stereotypes, what must be taken into account, is the notion that there are both positive and negative generalizations that must be either owned or rejected where appropriate and that ‘if the boot fits, then wear it.’

My way

When the events of September 11th, 2001 unfolded, I was in a classroom in my home state of Florida. I was a mere twelve years old, and somehow, I knew that The United States was going to war by lunch time. From even before this massive event and as far back as I could remember though, I wanted nothing more than to be in the military. It was my dream and destiny to put on a camouflage uniform, even though I had no idea what one does in the military, with respect to Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). All I knew, was that I MUST be in the military.

Six years later on July 5th 2007, I found myself at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina, standing on its infamous ‘yellow footprints’ where many thousands of Marines before me had stood. I endured thirteen weeks of intense training through the quite literal blood, sweat and tears, and earned the title of United States Marine. Later, I received the MOS, 0621 – Field Radio Operator, where I specialized in tactical communications. In 2008 I was sent with my first unit on deployment to Iraq, where I spent four months. The next year I reported to Marine Security Guard School to gain the MOS, 8156 – Marine Security Guard.

Over the next two and a half years, I was posted to American Embassies and Consulates Karachi, Pakistan, Warsaw, Poland and Manama, Bahrain, tasked with providing armed internal security to protect classified material, property and personnel. At the end of my tour, I was sent back to the US and deployed once more, this time aboard a U.S. Navy ship for nine months. After returning, I spent my last year and a half with a unit at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps on June 19th 2015, having reached the rank of Sergeant and moved to Warsaw, Poland for me to attend the University of Warsaw and study International Relations.

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Fifteen Minutes Prior

It is a phrase often used in the military to depict being at an appointed place fifteen minutes prior to the actual stated time that an event begins, whether it is a business meeting or a date with someone. This translates into the notion that someone is punctual and prepared for whatever they are there for, as well as showing a degree of flexibility for change. For example, a coffee shop barista's shift begins at 2 o'clock, the barista arrives at work at 1:45 p.m. Why? The answer is simple: there may be information that needs to be communicated before the shift actually begins, a changeover and count of the register may need to be completed or help unloading a shipment could be required.

This is majority of the time communicated in the military but is almost never communicated outside, but more of a habitual action. Additionally, if we know that we will be 'late' for something we let it be known (well) in advance. Using the same example, the barista knows he/she will be late so he/she informs the appropriate person that they will be there at 1:55 p.m. But doesn't the shift begin at 2 o'clock? Yes, but for those in the military and military veterans, anything less than fifteen minutes prior considered as being late. During training or deployments, military members endure uncomfortable environments and long

hours of operations. We develop the ability to sleep in any clime or place. Reason being, is since we are subjected to sometimes harsh conditions, we have to make the most of what we have at the time. Could we fall asleep in the middle of a loud place? You bet. Two minutes or two hours, it will be quality sleep regardless.

While we are serving, the organization that we are engrained with eventually makes its way into our personal lives, not just the professional aspects. At the very beginning of your military service, you are taught to fold clothes, make your bed, prepare and wear your uniform, assemble and disassemble your service rifle, all in a certain way. Years later, due to constantly performing the same actions, it becomes routine. When it is no longer present in life, you find a way to bring it back. Thus, you begin folding your clothes the same way, you clean your place of living the same way, organize your closet the same way, everything has its place.

Order. Everything is "squared away" (meaning that everything is in good order or is exemplary). The jargon aren't only words, it also becomes a way of life. It is no longer 'kilometers' it is 'clicks', 'rack' not 'bed', 'Oscar-Mike' not 'on my way' or 'I'm coming', 'grape' or 'dome-piece' instead of 'head' (meaning a person's head), 'mike' instead of 'minute,' the list

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goes on. Although I am two years removed from the military, I still find myself saying something and then backing up to either explain what I said or retracting it altogether and saying it in a different way. Many of my former colleagues encounter the same. We aren't exactly stuck in the past, so to speak, but we have difficulty fully transitioning from military to civilian life. Many of us never do, it's just who we have evolved into over the years.

What makes the grass grow?

Stanley Kubrick's film, "Full Metal Jacket," contains a scene in which Senior Drill Instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman asks the recruits "What makes the grass grow?!" Their response is "Blood, blood, blood!" This scene implies that U.S. Marines and U.S. military in general, are brainwashed and turned into robots or join the military because they have a low level of intelligence or couldn't go to college. There are many more examples of negative and over-exaggerated assumptions throughout the film, as well as many other films and it unfortunately provides a negative perception to the general public about who we are

as a professional military, both in the United States and around the world.

It is a little difficult to truly explain to a civilian population that this is not exactly how it is, because while they are overall incorrect, some if not all are true, but only to a small degree. Are service members 'brainwashed' to some extent? Yes, in part because the 'fight or flight' response has to be exposed and pushed more into the direction of the former so that if or when the time comes and one is truly tested, they can come out of the situation as the victor. This would be an example of the idea to 'train like you fight.' Meaning, you practice everything as if it was the real thing. This then gives way to the notion that they have become robots, following orders no matter what, without thinking or analyzing the order or consequences of following or not following such order. When in fact, you have spent countless hours analyzing and learning how to set an ambush or conducting immediate action drills when your patrol comes into contact with enemy combatants.

Another incorrect stereotype is the notion that you join the military because you are unable to go to college, or lack intelligence. All Commissioned Officers must have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree and the

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senior and junior enlisted personnel are highly encouraged to complete college courses offered by select universities from around the United States, Professional Military Education (PME), where you complete different courses that are related to your specialty and in some cases are not at all. Each service branch has a selected reading list of books that are designed to teach lessons on leadership and other values that are stressed throughout our career.

In order to qualify for certain MOSs, you must take an aptitude test prior to your military service, which identifies strengths, weaknesses and potential paths within the military that would lead you to a successful career. Some MOSs require a higher score in a certain area than others, but are reasonably demanding in terms of intellect. One of the most influential military leaders of our time, sometimes referred to as ‘The Warrior Monk’ or ‘Chaos Actual’, most often called ‘Mad Dog’, Retired General and current Secretary of Defense James Mattis always sought to engage his subordinates’ minds, he stresses that “the most important six inches [15.24 cm] on the battlefield is between your ears.”

What size boot do you wear?

With competent and intelligent leadership who continuously encourages junior service members to strive for more knowledge, wisdom and experience, the negative stereotypes that are attached to them become more fictitious. Throughout my military career, I learned many life skills that you will not learn elsewhere and cannot be taught in a classroom, making for a better effective tool in various environments. I didn’t attend college (initially) because it simply was not my ‘calling’ and I wasn’t ready for it. Indoctrination would be preferable to brainwashing, the former being taught values, beliefs and fundamentals, and the latter wiping all that you knew and replacing it with potentially good or potentially bad information, almost like a state of radicalization. In everyday situations when speaking with colleagues, classmates, friends and family, ever present is the jargon that was involved with every aspect of my life for nearly a decade, I find myself rewording stories or explaining what I really meant. Everything still has its place, clothes folded in a specific way, food facing the same direction in the refrigerator or cabinets and sometimes things are in a state of ‘controlled chaos’ but it is an order nonetheless. I have slept

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comfortably in many uncomfortable places, what seemed like an eternity but was really only a short time in reality. I still try to be fifteen minutes prior to meetings and events, twenty if I am going to a new place, but over the course of a couple of years, I have managed to start making a slow and steady transition toward five or ten minutes prior so I can really become settled into a civilian lifestyle. Touching back on the snowball situation, have you ever been to war? Yes. Have you ever been in combat? No. Have you ever taken a life? No, but I have saved a few in different ways. Does the boot fit? Sure does.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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