

James (Jim) Kipfer Yates interviewed October 8, 2007
Corporal, US Marine Corps, October 1979 – October 1982

Jim graduated from High School in 1978 and began working as a house painter before following his long-time ambition to join the military. When he was eight, his Dad had taken him to see *The Green Berets* in the movie theater, and from then on he knew he wanted to be in the Rangers or Marines. When it



came time to chose, the Marine reputation won out and he enlisted.

Once he signed the papers, Jim began to work out in preparation for boot camp. His recruiter had told him about the physical tests he would be required to pass. Jim had scored nearly 100% on his Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test which made him eligible for any job in the service. Jim wanted to become a combat engineer and his recruiter said there wasn't a problem with this plan.

On October 3, 1979, Jim's recruiter picked him up and took him to Philadelphia where he spent the day with paperwork and tests. He wasn't sworn in until evening and before giving the oath, the recruits were given one last chance to back out, no one did. From there, it was a flight to Savannah, GA and then a bus trip to Parris Island, SC. They arrived around midnight, Jim thinks the timing is deliberate, and were greeted by a Drill Instructor who came onto the bus and yelled "GET OFF MY BUS!! YOU HAVE 3 SECONDS TO GET OFF MY BUS!" They had to line up on yellow footprints that had been painted on the ground. Next, it was off to eat and then hair cuts and the issuance of uniforms and dog tags. Then, they were put into temporary quarters while they waited for more recruits to arrive to fill out the training platoons. Because basic training wouldn't start until the platoons were full, they were in limbo for about a week. The time was passed by studying the *Handbook for Marines* that told them about basic military information: who to salute, what the various ranks were, history, first aid, etc....

During this limbo time, they were lower than recruits since they hadn't even started training. They would be up at 3 am and eat breakfast before everyone else. They also had to go to bed at 4 pm. Jim remembers this as the worst time; lying in bed at 4 pm and watching the sun go down on the first day and asking himself "What did I get myself into?" Jim wasn't the only one thinking this, within the first few weeks, some of the recruits employed some creative methods to get out of their Marine Corps obligation. One had a friend kick him in the knee hard enough to get him a medical discharge. Another man pretended to be insane. They found him sitting in the shower room with the water running, and he was rocking back and forth and babbling. Once he was discharged, he sent a letter to one of his friends still in training saying that he had been faking and "Adios, suckers."

Training Begins...

Meanwhile, boot camp had begun and Jim found out that it wasn't possible to adequately prepare ahead of time for the training they went through. First, they were moved to a different part of the camp. The barracks had open showers and open bathrooms. There wasn't privacy anywhere. The drill instructors would love to see the recruits receive cookies or other items in the mail and would pick up on this and give the recruit a hard time because these things were not allowed. Jim's friends would send

him letters addressed to “General Yates” and this would cause the Drill Instructors to make him do the equivalent of push-ups as a result.

Basic was divided into three phases. Phase I was classes on the subjects in the *Handbook for Marines*, drill and marching with and without a rifle. Phase II was the rifle range. Phase III was hand to hand combat and practicing squad tactics. By the time they got to Phase III, the recruits had gained the respect of the Drill Instructors. They could get a little down time to write letters and relax. Jim remembers that attending church each week was a welcome break that he looked forward to.

Three days before graduation from boot camp, the men were given their first assignments. Jim’s orders told him to report to Field Artillery School in Fort Sill, OK. When the drill instructor asked if there were any questions, Jim raised his hand and said “My recruiter told me I had combat engineers.” The instructor smiled and said, “Welcome to the Marine Corps.”

Graduation was a big affair and by that time, they were called Marines instead of Recruits by the Drill Instructor. Jim remembers a group of officers saying “Good morning Marines” and that made him feel good. Graduation was just before Christmas and the Marine Corps even set up a temporary store in a gym where the men could buy Christmas gifts (Marine Corps T-shirts, etc...). Basic training was actually cut short by a week because of Christmas.

They were given two weeks off before reporting to Camp Lejeune where they gathered before heading to artillery school at Fort Sill. While they were waiting for more Marines to arrive, they spent time with the artillery men who were stationed there. This gave them a head start on their Fort Sill training. Once it was time to head to Fort Sill, the men were issued plane tickets. Jim and some friends decided to cash in their plane tickets and drive out. One of the guys had a pickup truck with a cap on the back and they took turns riding in the back during the drive out to Oklahoma. Because it was February, it was very cold in the back of the truck and they kept warm in sleeping bags.

At Fort Sill, Jim learned how to be a Fire Direction Controlman (FDC). The FDC is the link between the cannon and the forward observer and makes the calculations to adjust the shots based on information from the forward observer. The two month course was conducted mostly in the classroom and they were off at

4 pm each day and had weekends off. Jim was determined to do well because the higher you finished in the class, the better your chance of getting your duty station. Jim wanted to be stationed at Camp Lejeune on the east coast so he could be closer to his girlfriend, Sharon, who was attending Virginia Tech. When the class ended, Jim was ranked second and was assigned to Lejeune.

What he didn’t know was that even though he had been assigned to his choice of duty station, he wouldn’t spend much time there. There is always a re-enforced (includes helicopters, artillery and amphibious assault) battalion of Marines in the Mediterranean attached to the 6th Fleet. Camp Lejeune is responsible for supplying those Marines and they rotate on six month floats (tours on ship). Jim’s ship for this float or “Med. Cruise” was the USS Barnstable County (LST 1197). This type of ship has a flat



USS Barnstable County (LST 1197). Jim Yates' ship for his first float.

bottom to run up on a beach and a ramp in front so that trucks and equipment can drive up out of the hold and down the ramp onto the beach. The back of the ship can also be flooded opened to allow amphibious vehicles to drive straight out.

During the float, they stopped in every country touching the Mediterranean except for Libya and Israel. They would train with the military of Italy, Spain and France to get experience working together. Sometimes, they would camp on one of the foreign bases. They rarely travelled very far from the port. Before arriving in a port, the men would be issued military travel guides that would tell them about the monetary system, local customs, sites to see and places to avoid. Their stays were often less than one week unless something was wrong with the ship and needed repair. They were in Toulon, France for one month while the ship was being repaired. The port cities would often attract the undesirables of the local population, drawn there by the foreign ships and the money they carried. While the sailors wore civilian clothes ashore when off duty, they were easily identifiable as US military. For the most part, they were treated like paying customers ashore. Sometimes, they could barter for things like the time they rented mopeds for three days in Spain for a pair of aviator sunglasses. They would often try to seek out Americans and in Spain, they made friends with the English owners of a pub that catered to visitors from England. The important part was that English was spoken there.

A Close Call...

The Marines would practice landing on the beaches with all of their equipment. Often, an advance party would go ashore to scout out the terrain and begin to set things up for the rest of the force. Jim participated in a number of these advance parties and in these cases; they would be picked up by helicopter and flown to the landing site. One time, they had set up their advance camp and covered their truck with camouflage netting. Along came a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter that began to land on their position. The helicopter couldn't see them because of the camouflage netting. Jim and the other men were waving their arms, but couldn't be seen because of the netting. The netting was sucked up by the helicopter and they were afraid the netting would be tangled in the rotors and the helicopter would crash down on top of them. Fortunately, the pilot was able to veer off without crashing. This was the only incident where Jim felt his life was in danger.

One memorable part of the float was a trip through the Suez Canal. The staging area before entering the canal was filled with container ships as far as the eye could see. Once through the canal, they headed to Kenya. Despite the dirty water in the Port of Mombasa, the local children swam out to the sides of the ship so the men could throw them things. On shore, they discovered that the natives would barter for American T-shirts that had something written on them. Everyone went through their clothes to find shirts to barter in exchange for carved animal figures, masks, etc...



USS Saipan (LHA-2). Jim Yates' ship for his second float.

There was also the attempted rescue the American hostages in Iran while Jim was in the Mediterranean. The helicopters involved in the failed rescue flew from Jim's group although the men were not told about this for a few days. This was one time when Jim thought the US might go to war.



Jim Yates, 1979.

Finally, it was time to head home. Upon return, the men were given a few weeks of leave and then had to report back to Camp Lejeune where they were promptly put on a month of air alert. This means they had to be ready to go anywhere in the world in 24 hours. Men could not travel further than 50 miles from the base and had to leave a phone number of where they would be when they were off base. Next, it was off to 29 Palms, CA for three weeks of desert training. The final week of which was live fire and the last day was a mass assault. Jim was able to watch from a hill while helicopters and jets attacked the target. After that, it was off to the Mediterranean for another six month float.

This time, they sailed on the USS Saipan (LHA-2) which was a helicopter carrier that also had the ability to flood the rear of the ship so amphibious vehicles could drive out of the hold. The ship was also large enough that it couldn't always pull up to the docks, Sometimes it had to anchor in the harbor and use boats to shuttle men and supplies from shore. Jim really wasn't looking forward to this float. Many of his friends had rotated out of the Marines and everything was new and unfamiliar. This float would be at a different time of year than the first one, but the routine was the same. The main difference was that they didn't go through the Suez Canal this time.

Christmas Day, 1981, was spent on ship docked in the harbor. The men couldn't get off because conditions were too rough for shuttle boats to shore. They made a Christmas tree out of camouflage netting and decorated it with marksmanship badges and ornaments crafted from foil out of C-ration boxes. Jim was the only one in the group who had presents to open thanks to Sharon who had sent him cookies and a shirt she had made. New Year's 1982 was spent near a ski resort in Andorra, a small "city-state" like Monaco, in the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain. Some of Jim's buddies on the ship put the trip together and Jim agreed to go along even though he had never skied. As they rode the lift up the mountain, they would get off and change lifts to go to the next higher level. At the top, his friends took off down the hill leaving Jim and another non-skier friend to work their way down the slope. Jim ended up walking down to the ski lift and riding it down to the bottom where he spent the rest of the day.

When the Saipan returned to the States in February 1982, Jim only had six months left in his enlistment. In the spring, his unit went to Fort Bragg, NC for their semi-annual training there. Fort Bragg was large enough that they could fire the artillery there. As a "short timer," Jim was given a little more leeway and did not have to do some of the more unpleasant duties which were now assigned to the newer Marines. Jim's discharge was a low-key affair. There was a mention of it in the morning formation, Jim was called to the front and congratulated, it was all a bit disappointing, but most of his friends were out by that time and his unit was leaving that day for Fort Bragg for more training. Jim was given his last pay and he jumped in the car and drove straight home, arriving at Sharon's house at 2 am.

Life then picked up where it left off. He returned to the same painter he had worked for three years earlier. Jim still had some reserve obligation and he travelled to Philadelphia for a few months as an active reserve, but then decided it wasn't worth it and he became an inactive reserve until he received his honorable discharge in the mail in 1985. Jim looks back on his military career as a great experience

although it didn't seem that way at the time. The brotherhood of the Marines is real and Jim still feels a part of the Corps even today.