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Marine Rifleman: Forty-three Years in the Corps (review)

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Marine Rifleman: Forty-three Years in the Corps. By Col. Wesley L. Fox, USMC (Ret). Washington: Brassey's, 2002. ISBN 1-57488-425-5. Photographs. Glossary. Notes. Index. Pp. xv, 395. \$27.95.

Wesley Lee Fox grew up the son of a bricklayer on a farm along the Shenandoah River in northern Virginia. He was a proud Southerner, whose forefathers had bled for the Confederacy, fighting against "Yankee aggression." At age eighteen, in 1950, he left the farm and rode a Pullman car to the sand flea-infested recruit depot at Parris Island, South Carolina, where his dreams came true: The Marines made him a rifleman in the infantry and sent him to Korea. When he retired forty-three years later, he wore the eagles of a colonel. The Medal of Honor crowned the ribbon bar on his service uniform. Befitting his character, Fox chose a humble and unpretentious title for his memoirs, the book under review.

His combat assignments included duty with a rifle squad in 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, Korea, 1951, where he fought in the Pohang Guerrilla Hunt, Operations Killer and Ripper, and the advance to the Punchbowl. "Shock troops do not make good line troops," he observed. He was an infantry advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps (1967–68) and returned to Vietnam in 1969 to command a rifle company in "The Walking Dead," 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. "That name doesn't bother me, Captain," Fox said, later reflecting, "If 1/9 was the unit most likely to have contact with the communists, then I could not have a better assignment." Fox did well. For his actions during Operation Dewey Canyon, he received the Medal of Honor.

Sixteen years he served as an enlisted man. He was a military policeman, recruiter, and drill instructor. "The power that a DI [drill instructor] enjoyed in the early fifties was not healthy for the Marine Corps," he writes. Events proved Fox correct. Six recruits died in April 1956 after a drill instructor marched his platoon into Ribbon Creek. Fox was also an expert diver and parachutist and served multiple tours in force reconnaissance units. In the twilight of his career, he commanded officer candidate school in Quantico (1989–92).

The shortcomings of this book are predictable. Fox is a fighter, not a literateur or academic historian. Littered with jargon and acronyms, the salty talk of Marines, his prose will confuse lay readers and grate on academicians. Though he rose to colonel, readers will not find any high-level discussion of the evolving mission of the Marine Corps since 1950. *Marine Rifleman* is not scholarship or history per se. It is autobiography, a prism of the physical, intellectual, and moral makeup of its author. Fox was, and still is, the Marine all of us wanted to be when we marched past him at the reviewing stand in Quantico on graduation day. This book explains why.

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