Marines On His Canvas: The Art of Charles H. Waterhouse

Sole Artist in Residence, United States Marine Corps

By Mary D. Karcher

If prominent Marine Corps artist Colonel Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) were to paint one picture of his Marine Corps memories, it would include Marines from nearly every decade and skirmish in history.

It is not unusual for a Waterhouse painting to capture a dramatic scene, filled with more than 50 distinct people, but even one of Waterhouse's detailed canvases could hardly contain all the characters and the drama in this Marine's life. Art is what attracted Waterhouse to the Marine Corps, and the Marine Corps has been the inspiration for much of Charles Waterhouse's art.

As a young boy, Waterhouse loved to draw. He filled both sides of the pages in his sketch pads with pictures of cowboys, Indians and even the comic strip hero Flash Gordon. In fact, initially he wanted to become a comic book artist. But the artwork and stories that then-Captain John W. Thomason portrayed in his classic book of World War I Marines, "Fix Bayonets!" created the allure of the Marine Corps for Waterhouse, and more and more often Marines would show up in his sketch pad. "Thomason treated Marines like they could walk on water, and I wanted to be one of them," Waterhouse said.

Today as Charles Waterhouse speaks about the Marine Corps, his voice reflects that same enthusiasm that he felt as a teenager, and his blue eyes dance with adventure. In The Colonel Charles Waterhouse Historical Museum in Toms River, N.J., he moves from painting to painting—and among the 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st centuries—explaining some aspect that ignites his imagination in each one.

As he comes across the painting titled "Ripley at the Bridge," he describes the intensity of explosions surrounding the Dong Ha bridge north of Hue City, Vietnam, and the surrounding ground, including the old French pill box on the far bank of the river. He marvels at then-Capt John Ripley's ability to swing hand-over-hand, hanging from the bridge, to an abutment 100 feet from shore to plant demolition charges to destroy the bridge and slow the approach of the

advancing North Vietnamese forces. In the painting, the face of the young Marine wears a grimace of determination and exertion as he performs the formidable task.

Each of Waterhouse's paintings evokes a story, and through his art, the Marine Corps story continues to inspire Marines of every age.

Looking back at his 21 years of Marine Corps service—three years as an enlisted Marine, 18 years as Artist in Residence, United States Marine Corps—as well as the years he spent as a civilian combat artist, Waterhouse describes walking dusty roads and withstanding variable climates to sketch in the midst of disagreeable conditions, usually while dodging the enemy. His museum displays the body of his work, and in so doing, traces the history of the Marine Corps itself.

PFC Waterhouse Reports for Duty

Waterhouse did fulfill his dream to enlist in the Corps, entering in 1943 during WW II. By 1945, he was participating in one of the most pivotal battles in Marine Corps history: Iwo Jima. In his book "Marines and Others," Waterhouse describes his view of Iwo Jima from the sea as a member of an assault demolition team in Company C, Fifth Engineer Battalion, 28th Regimental Combat Team, Fifth Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, just before landing on the left flank of Green Beach:

"Out on the water where the landing craft are circling and forming the next assault waves, the sun is bright and shining and the sky a gorgeous blue, the ocean calm and picture perfect. Everything seems a theatrical event arranged for our special viewing. Battleships and vessels of every description are hurling screaming tons of shells and rockets ashore. Carrier planes streak overhead, adding to the fury. The smoke and rumblings from shore echo the earsplitting broadsides. And then the word comes; the first waves are on the beach."

Suddenly his description changes along with the weather and with his own participation in the attack on the beach:

"The wind has just switched, breaking the sky over Suribachi into herringbone shapes. Then it is our turn, and we are transported to a different world. The mortars and machine guns follow us in. Suribachi looms gray, threatening and ugly. Everything is painted in a gray value scale of smoke, devoid of color except for violent flashes of light and flame, sound and fury blended into one continuous roar. And the sun does not shine."

His words are as descriptive as his paintings, utilizing his senses to note the sounds, the hues of the sky, and even the mood of that defining moment when he landed on Iwo Jima. His experience as a Marine, from boot camp to war, would have a profound influence on the artwork he created.

From his participation as a Marine and his perspective as an artist, Charles Waterhouse forged a unique vantage point that would forever enhance his art. As an artist, "It is important to experience war because you know how things feel when you wear them, what happens, and you try to impart some of the terror and some of the good things at the same time," he observed.

Waterhouse experienced both terror and good things as a Marine. During the fighting on Iwo Jima he was wounded, injuring the nerves in his left arm. He earned a Purple Heart and an Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, as well as other appropriate WW II service and campaign medals. But as a result of his wartime experiences, Waterhouse also met many men who made a lasting impression on him. To this day Col Waterhouse still sees the Marines with whom he served, most recently attending events in Washington, D.C., marking the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Michael W. Hagee, and his wife, Silke, listened intently as Waterhouse described the painting "Marines, Mud and Misery" during a visit to the Charles Waterhouse Historical Museum in April. (Photo by Sgt Christopher T. Tirado)

According to Waterhouse, those veterans "*did* do all the things that Thomason talked about, and they *could* walk on water. They left the impression that you guys are worth fighting for. That's what the Marine Corps is; they fight for each other. They left examples that are pretty hard to follow. I have been in awe of them ever since—and the whole Marine Corps."

Waterhouse's strong bond with the Marine Corps is a powerful force in his art, and he says that these emotions are what make a good picture. Art curator for the Marine Corps Charles Grow agrees. He said, "I think that his identification with Marine ethos and ideals add to the success of his works."

Addressing Iwo Jima veterans in February before the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Va., the Marine Corps Commandant, General Michael W. Hagee, asserted, "We [Marines] use history to educate us, to inspire us and to set that standard against which we measure our performance on a day-to-day basis. The Battle of Iwo Jima is surely one of our most important touchstones." Gen Hagee expressed the belief that those who fought with such uncommon valor at Iwo Jima would be proud of the Marines fighting today in Afghanistan and Iraq. He said, "In fact, I would argue that there is a bridge. There is a bridge that goes from Iwo Jima through Okinawa, through Khe Sanh, through Hue City, all the way to Baghdad and Fallujah—a bridge that is represented by service and dedication."

That bridge of service and dedication flawlessly epitomized by the Iwo Jima Marines had its

origins in the first Marines who secured the birth of our nation. Waterhouse's historically researched paintings portray this "small Marine force which promptly challenged Great Britain's control on both land and sea," as described by Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret) in the introduction of the book "Marines in the Revolution."

Among Waterhouse's paintings in that collection are the first Marine amphibious landing at New Providence, Bahamas, 1776; the Marines with Gen George Washington at Princeton, 1777; the Whitehaven raid in the Irish Sea with Navy CAPT John Paul Jones, 1778; the assault at Penobscot, Maine, 1779; and Marines fighting aboard the Continental frigate *Alliance* against British sloops of war, 1781. These Marines experienced both triumphs and defeats, all the while accruing vital experience for future Marine expeditions.

Waterhouse's paintings of Revolutionary War Marines captured the spirit and defined the appearance of the first Marines. Still a prolific artist at the age of 80, Waterhouse and his art continue to honorably reflect the Marine Corps' history from the American Revolution to Operation Iraqi Freedom, a history that does inspire and set the standard for Marines.

Civilian Combat Artist in Vietnam

After Waterhouse served in the Marine Corps, he attended the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Art in New Jersey thanks to the GI Bill. He studied the style of Howard Pyle, often called "The Father of American Illustration." As a teacher, Pyle influenced Harvey Dunn, W. J. Aylward (one of Waterhouse's teachers) and N. C. Wyeth, collectively known as "The Brandywine School" of artists. Dunn and Aylward happened to be two of the eight official combat artists with the American Expeditionary Force in France during WW I.

Waterhouse particularly admired his own teacher, Steven R. "Joe" Kidd, a student of Harvey Dunn's. Kidd illustrated stories in the New York *Daily News* and the *Chicago Tribune*, and also served as a combat artist in WW II. Waterhouse admired Kidd's draftsmanship and the mood

created in his illustrations, as well as his sheer energy and enthusiasm for art. Many of the habits that contributed to the success of Waterhouse's art most likely stemmed from the discipline and inspiration instilled by his mentor.

Having built a reputation as a successful illustrator for stories, magazines and book covers, Waterhouse was subsequently selected for membership into the Society of Illustrators and the Salmagundi Club. These prestigious art organizations sponsored Waterhouse as a civilian combat artist in Vietnam on three separate trips, in 1967, 1969 and 1971. During his first trip, he made 473 drawings, which he emphasizes were not just rough sketches, but finished ideas.

The sketches made in Vietnam reflect the business of war, both for those who fight it and for those who try to maintain some semblance of everyday life despite it. Picking up "Delta to DMZ," his book of Vietnam art, Waterhouse flipped open to a drawing of a woman who was in a warehouse-turned-hospital waiting to receive treatment. He explained, "When I look at my sketchbook, I remember. I was in a hospital in a place called Rach Gia. This little lady was sitting on a cot and her son was sleeping underneath."

Children gathered around him to see what he was drawing, as if they had never seen an artist before. One little boy noisily insisted on interrupting his work, pointing out that he had neglected to draw a button. "I turn that page and I know what it smells like and I hear the kid hollering in my ear," said Waterhouse. Every picture evokes a tale of the circumstances surrounding it as Waterhouse returns to the day he created it, recalling the sounds, smells and story behind the image.

"I have experienced from Tun Tavern up. I've been everywhere mentally. I've been all over the world in my studio. Mentally, when I'm working, I'm in China. I smell stuff cooking and dogs yapping and everything else." He adds, with a chuckle, "Someday, maybe I'll go too far and won't come back!"

But he certainly did come back to the Marine Corps.

The Corps Calls the Artist Back to Duty

The reputation Waterhouse had built as a civilian illustrator, coupled with the fact that he had served as a Marine, brought him to the attention of Major John T. "Jack" Dyer, USMC (Ret), Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. Maj Dyer recommended Waterhouse return to active duty through a specialist's commission specifically to create art. So at the age of 47, Waterhouse was called back to the Corps, becoming the first and only Marine Corps artist in residence.

This offered him the rare opportunity to travel through time with Marines. His artwork transported him to the Willing and Morris wharves of colonial Philadelphia where a ragtag bunch of recruits assembled to receive orders to guard Continental ships and supplies, which he depicted in his painting "The First Recruits—December 1775." As the Marine Corps' artist in residence, Waterhouse also would sail with Marines aboard ship in his "Marines in Frigate Navy" collection and traverse the hills of California alongside Marines in his "Conquest of California" series of paintings.

The body of his Marine Corps work resulted from the need for an artist for a special project at the Marine Corps History and Museums Division. In 1972, in anticipation of the country's Bicentennial in 1976, the Marine Corps wanted to produce a coffee-table book that would reconstruct the role Marines played in the fight for independence. Up until that point, there were very few pictures recording the Marines of that period. "Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783" would fill that void with detailed historical paintings, which would be accompanied by a painstakingly researched history of the exploits of the first Marines.

BGen Simmons, who was the director of Marine Corps History and Museums Division at the time,

The Combat Art Program

explained that he was looking for an artist with very specific qualities. It was important that the artist could create paintings with exacting detail of historical events, "not just the right buttons, but the right insignia on the buttons," said BGen Simmons.

Additionally, the artist's renderings of history would be based not simply on research the artist himself would be expected to perform. The artwork also would be subject to the erudite review of writers, researchers, editors and designers for the book. The paintings to be created also would need to meet certain size and layout stipulations so that they could be used as wrap-around covers for the journal *Marine Corps Gazette*.

Of course, all of the artistic and historical parameters were of paramount importance. But on a practical level, it was critical to find an artist who would be able to meet the high expectations of the Marine Corps and still complete the work in time for the book to be published for the Bicentennial. This is where Charles Waterhouse's 28 years of experience illustrating stories, book covers and magazine articles proved instrumental.

Charles Grow said, "I believe the Historical Division sought Charles Waterhouse because he is a talented

Art accomplishes several things for the Corps. It showcases individuals and units in a tangible and tactile manner. It provides a body of work scholars, students, trainers, authors and producers frequently use in support of their projects. It gives the Corps a collection of images that are routinely used to illustrate articles, books, documentaries, television specials, historical monographs, and yes, even the occasional recruiting poster. The combat art program provides an avenue for combatants and observers to visually record their experience in a unique manner.

When viewed in its entirety, the vast majority of images in the approximately 8,500-piece collection generally focuses on the human aspects of dealing with harsh climes and places. Many

painter who identified with Marines and has the persistence and work ethic to complete a gargantuan project on time. Col Waterhouse's contribution to the art collection and the historical effort represent the very ideals espoused by the Corps' leadership."

So in October 1972, Waterhouse received a specialist's commission as a major in the Marine Corps Reserve specifically to create artwork for the book. He reported to active duty in January 1973, and the book had to be published by 1975 for the Bicentennial. For Waterhouse, that translated into completing 14 major paintings done on 60-inch-by-40-inch masonite panels, 70 finished drawings and four 18-inch-by-24-inch smaller paintings in just over a year.

visitors, especially those from academia, marvel at the fact that the art is generally of good quality, makes a significant statement about the human condition, and provides an even-handed psychological profile of American Marines over time.

—Charles Grow
Marine Corps Art Curator

The reception of Waterhouse's paintings was remarkable and led to the Marine Corps extending his original duty assignment over and over until his retirement as a colonel after 18 years as artist in residence of the Marine Corps on Feb. 19, 1991, the 46th anniversary of the landing on Iwo Jima. At Waterhouse's retirement ceremony, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Alfred M. Gray, awarded Waterhouse the Legion of Merit. Col Waterhouse also received the Distinguished Service Award of the Marine Corps Historical Foundation.

The Waterhouse Style

A historical painting primarily appeals to most people aesthetically, not as a collection of minutely researched historical facts. Although Waterhouse prepared for his paintings through considerable research—reading hand-written diaries and manuscripts, talking to experts with differing opinions, visiting museums, walking the land where the event had occurred and

consulting fellow artists—he always composed his paintings with an emphasis on drama. Unlike a photographer, an artist can control a picture, taking pieces of scenes and putting them together for a dramatic impact.

To do research for a painting, Ken Smith-Christmas, curator, National Museum of the Marine Corps, explained that they had to decide upon an exact moment of history and investigate minute facts about items in the painting. For the painting "Marines in Panama, 1885," the details were numerous: What kinds of monkeys live in Panama? What train engines did Panama use at that time? How were the trains armed? What did the homemade armored train cars look like? How many Marines manned each gun? Where were the guns situated on the train car?

Through it all, Smith-Christmas emphasized, the focus was on having a great piece of art; the historical record was secondary. He added, however, that the historical division tried to be as historically accurate as possible and even threw in a few details that history aficionados could appreciate.

Waterhouse wrote in his book "Marines and Others": "It is the historical artist's function to create a moment in time, or an event in history. The final result should not only depict what it might have been like, it should be so visually captivating and compelling that the viewer feels, 'Wow, that is what it was like.' If the viewer of the painting says, 'Gee, look at that gun,' or those buttons, or that uniform—if he is distracted from the mood, the color, and the design impact of what's going on—then the artist and his creation have failed."

Since accurate historical details are less likely to detract from the impact of the art, the historians and the artist had a healthy working relationship that respected each other's goals. Waterhouse was willing to make changes when the historical review deemed it necessary, as long as his painting did not lose its dramatic impact.

Waterhouse is "a special breed," according to Jack Dyer, because throughout this process, "He maintained his integrity and did not lose himself as an artist."

The story, the dramatic concept, remains first and foremost in a Waterhouse painting. As BGen Simmons said, "Every corner of his painting tells a story." His canvases are full, with large numbers of Marines, sailors, townspeople, Indians, or horses in full motion. Waterhouse loves to paint scenes filled with activity. He infuses his paintings wherever he can with everyday details from dogs to children to give the paintings a human quality.

"It doesn't take long to recognize that he paints them [Marines] with humanity, an understanding of their blight, and a sense of humor that adds greatly to the story he tells visually," Grow said, adding, "He has taken a collection of historical data that might get pored over by a historian and turned it into a body of work that thousands of Marines and civilians see every day."

Waterhouse has created hundreds of paintings showing Marines in every clime and place, showing their character, honor, courage, cockiness, affection, faith, humor, brotherhood and sacrifice with undeniable authenticity. His love for the Marine Corps goes into every painting, and his life's work personifies the phrase Semper Fidelis. In typical Marine fashion, he sees it the other way around, that it is the Corps that has been faithful to him: "Everything that I am, I owe somehow to the Marine Corps."

Editor's note: Leatherneck *appreciates the support of Col Charles Waterhouse throughout the years and recommends a visit and tax-deductible donation to The Colonel Charles Waterhouse Historical Museum on 17 Washington St. in Toms River, N.J., (732) 818-9040. To view or purchase Waterhouse paintings online, visit www.waterhousemuseum.com.*

Waterhouse Comments on Popular Image

The proof [above left and on the cover of the book "Marines and Others"] was the first version created for a series of 10 rather large posters for the Marine Corps Bicentennial, titled "Since 1775—MARINES."

It is perhaps the most widely reproduced image of all I have painted. *Leatherneck* used it at least twice; the January 1976 cover was a decorative number with a very small image tucked into the design. It was used for recruiting posters, Bicentennial posters, covers and page illustrations in many military and civilian publications, plus a large number of book jackets.

It was first used as an iron-on for T-shirts, and later in many sizes reproduced on T-shirts and jackets. The advertising agency for the Marine Corps borrowed my color separations for several years. It's been used on fancy carved clocks and an assortment of mugs and ceramics. An astronaut was taped in space doing push-ups while wearing a T-shirt with the image. A sign painter made a copy three stories high on the side of a building in Subic Bay, and the design has been carved in wood.

The current version, titled "Bridging the Generations" [above right and on *Leatherneck*'s June 2005 cover], was created to attempt to bring the image up to date. I painted it as the war in Iraq started. I had the modern Marine in desert camouflage utilities, but the Marines wore the green ones up until Baghdad, so I painted the utilities over. Then people insisted they had to be digital utilities, so this is the third and final result. I hope you like it and that it becomes as popular as the first version. It will be a high-quality giclee digital print and available from our museum.

I was 47 when they asked if I would consider coming

on active duty again and was 66 when I retired on Feb. 19, 1991. I am 80 now and still paint, draw or play with clay every day. I spend four days each week at my home studio and three at my museum studio. I am in a slack period now—only four major canvases underway and a large clay—but I have two or three ideas I'm kicking about.

—Charles "The Colonel" Waterhouse