

The Blood Stripe Myth

BLUF: According to Marine Corps lore, the red stripe worn by Marine Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) represents the blood spilled by Marines in 1847 during the Battle of Chapultepec. Although this belief is firmly embedded in the traditions of the Marine Corps, it has no basis. The use of stripes in the Marine Corps predates the Mexican-American War, which lasted from 1846 to 1848.

SETTING THE STAGE: The Mexican–American War was an armed conflict between the United States and Mexico from 1846 to 1848. It followed in the wake of the U.S. annexation of Texas, which the Mexican government did not formally recognize. The Mexican government disputed the validity of the Treaty of Velasco after the Texas Revolution a decade earlier. For almost ten years, Texas was an independent nation that was struggling for existence. In 1845, newly elected U.S. President James K. Polk, who saw Texas's annexation as the first step towards further American expansion, sent troops to the disputed area and a diplomatic mission to Mexico City.

After a border clash between the Mexican and American forces, the U.S. Congress declared war. American forces quickly occupied the regional capital of Santa Fe de Nuevo México along the upper Rio Grande and the Pacific coast province of Alta California. From there, under MajGen. Zachary Taylor (USA), they moved south. The Americans captured Mexico City despite stiff resistance. They marched west from the port of Veracruz on the Gulf Coast under MajGen. Winfield Scott (USA), where the Americans staged their first-ever large-scale amphibious landing.

The Marines made their famed assault on Chapultepec Palace in Mexico City, which would later be celebrated as the "Halls of Montezuma" in *The Marines' Hymn*. Most of the troops who made the final assault at the Halls of Montezuma were Army soldiers, not Marines. Winfield Scott led the American forces, organizing two storming parties totaling 500 men, including 40 Marines under Gen. John Quitman (USA). The Marines suffered nearly 90% casualties during the assault, with seven Marines killed.

THE STORY: In 1834, uniform regulations were changed to comply with President Andrew Jackson's wishes that Marine uniforms return to the green worn during the Revolutionary War. The wearing of stripes on the trousers began in 1837, following the Army practice of wearing stripes the same color as uniform jacket facings. Colonel Commandant Archibald Henderson ordered those stripes to be buff white. When President Jackson left office, two years later, Colonel Henderson returned the uniform to dark blue coats faced with red. In keeping with earlier regulations, stripes became dark blue, edged in red. In 1849, the stripes were changed to a solid red. Ten years later, uniform regulations prescribed a scarlet cord inserted into the outer seams for noncommissioned officers and musicians. Officers wear a scarlet welt instead. Finally, in 1904, the simple scarlet stripe was adopted as it appears today.

So, what is the origin of the myth? Like most myths, the origins are difficult to pin down. Archibald Henderson served as Colonel Commandant of the Marine Corps from 1820 to 1859. During his tenure, many traditions were created, especially as they related to clothing. Since the Marine Corps has always been a small, tight-knit unit, it has been easier to develop and spread stories that have been adopted as truth. In the case of the "Blood Stripe," there is no evidence to support the Battle of Chapultepec story.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the supposed origins of the "Marine Corps Blood Stripe" story?
2. Why has the tradition carried forward for such a long period?
3. Why is it important to know the true story of the "blood stripe" and the myth?
4. In what ways does the myth positively impact Marines?

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