

“Gyrenes,” “Jarheads,” and “Grunts”

BLUF: The United States Marine Corps’ culture is unique in that it helps Marines develop a very thick skin. Several terms were meant as insults to Marines, but the Corps and its members embraced them. Three such words are “gyrenes,” “jarheads,” and “grunts.” Their times of origin and usage differ somewhat, but each has the same role in the Marine Corps culture. They have become a source of pride for all Marines.

SETTING THE STAGE: As the Marine Corps became a global force, the Marine Corps’ role expanded. With its direct ties to the U.S. Navy, Marines interacted with sailors more and more. This interaction generated an expanded rivalry between the two branches, which created a verbal bantering that satisfied each service’s juvenile instincts. Insults were traded between Marines and sailors as they jockeyed for their place of importance in the military. Like two brothers squabbling in words and actions, insults were exchanged to blow off steam in tight quarters. However, just like two brothers fighting, caution is advised to any outsider who stepped between them to break up the fight.

THE STORY: The term “gyrenes” was first used by the British Royal Marines in the 1890s. Like the phrase “esprit de corps,” gyrene was adopted from Marines’ exposure to foreign military forces around 1900. Some sources, however, place the period between World War I and World War II. Other sources place its time of origin during World War II. In reality, the term appears during the Global Expeditionary Era from American sailors’ diaries and papers as a derogatory word directed toward Marines. A Royal Marine was called a gyrene if he had not crossed the equator. The gyroscope instrument may have given root to the “gy” in gyrene.” This term seems to have been accepted by American sailors around 1900. The phrase also became identified with the term “landlubber” or “pollywog.” During World War I, it became more common for Marines to refer to themselves as gyrenes, usually when referring to their fierce warfighting skills. After the U.S. entered World War II, the term “G.I.” became an everyday slang for soldiers representing their “government-issued” status. The Marines did not like being called G.I.s because it lumped them in with the other military branches. Thus, a gyrene was a “G.I. Marine,” which created a clear separation for the Marines. This expression is a very convenient play on words. Still, the existence of the term “gyrenes” and its application to Marines predates World War II by nearly fifty years.

The phrase “jarheads” is also a slang phrase used by sailors when referring to Marines. The term first appeared as early as World War II and referred to Marines’ appearance wearing their dress blue uniforms. The high collar on the uniform and the Marines’ head popping out of the top resembled a Mason Jar. Since World War II, the term has been applied more widely to Marine Corps recruits with their “squared head” appearance because of the close-cropped haircuts. Some Marines refer to the “high and tight” haircut as a “Jarhead cut.”

According to Marine Corps Maj. H. G. Duncan, a grunt is best defined as “*a term of affection used to denote that filthy, sweaty, dirt-encrusted, footsore, camouflage-painted, tired, sleepy, beautiful little son of a bitch who has kept the wolf away from the door for over two hundred years.*” In short, a grunt is a Marine Corps infantryman. During the late 19th century, the word originated to describe a military duty considered menial or a punishment. During World War I, the term was used by Marines as they complained about tasks as “grunt work.” In World War II, the term “Mud Marines” was more likely used to describe the lowly functions of the Marine Corps infantrymen. However, during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Marines returned to the status of grunts. In Vietnam, it was sometimes replaced by the term “boonierat.”

QUESTIONS

1. Why is the use of slang in the Marine Corps an essential part of its culture?
2. In what ways have Marines turned insults into a source of pride?
3. Why is it so difficult to narrow down the origins of Marine Corps slang terms?

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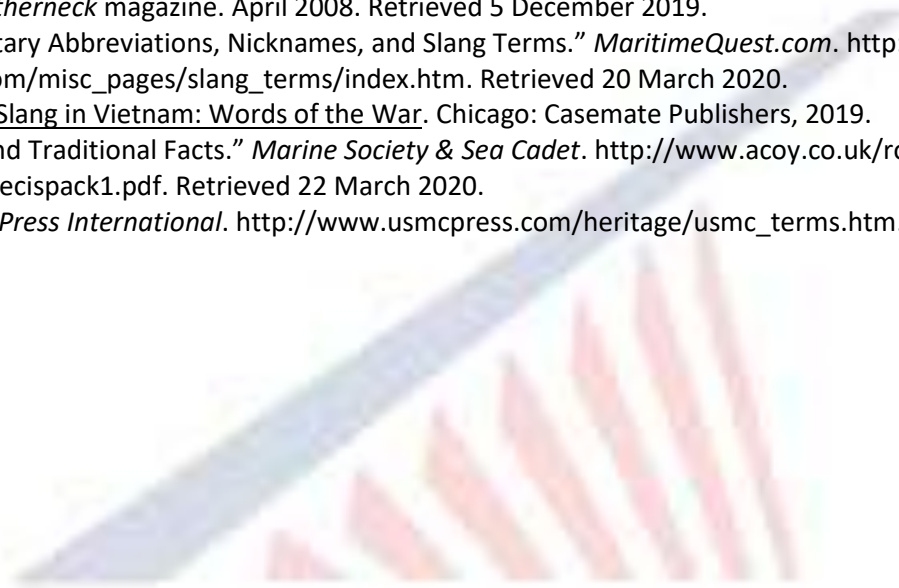
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