

Semper Fidelis Motto

BLUF: The United States Marine Corps has a long and glorious history dating back to its founding on 10 November 1775. Over the decades, Marines have picked up many nicknames and have adopted phrases that describe their dedication and devotion toward their mission. The term “Semper Fidelis” was adopted as the Marine Corps motto in 1883, though it was not the first phrase that defined the Marines.

SETTING THE STAGE: The Continental Marine Corps was formed very quickly in 1775 at the beginning of the American Revolutionary War. Though some traditions were established rapidly in the Marine Corps, no one term described its overall mission. Between 1800 and 1883, the Marines used three different slogans to define themselves.

The glorious victory over the Barbary Pirates in the first decade of the 19th century captivated the American public. The triumph added the phrase “*To the Shores of Tripoli*” to stir nationalist fervor toward the Marine Corps. The motto was inscribed on the Marine Corps colors until 1848. Following the Mexican-American War, however, the phrase was revised to “*From the halls of the Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.*”

Shortly after the U.S. declared war on Great Britain in 1812, the slogan “*Fortitudine*” began appearing in Marine Corps literature. The motto also appeared on the brass plate of the Marine shako hat that Marines wore during the Federalist period. When translated into English from its Latin roots, the term means “*with courage.*” The use of Latin phrases was widespread during the period because of the classical education roots.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, though, the U.S. Marine Corps used a familiar slogan, “*Per Mare, Per Terram*” or “*By Sea and by Land,*” on recruiting advertisements. This saying originated with the British Royal Marines in the 18th century but fit the U.S. Marine Corps’ expanding mission. The Marine Corps Commandant, Colonel Archibald Henderson, increased the land use of the Marines during the Seminole Wars of the 1830s and 1840s, which gave more meaning to the old phrase.

THE STORY: The Marine Corps adopted the motto “*Semper Fidelis*” or “*Always Faithful*” in 1883. The motto denotes the dedication that individual Marines have to “*Corps and country,*” and most of all, to their fellow Marines. It is a way of life. It is a part of the ethos of the Corps that is absolute and non-negotiable. It goes along with Marines’ pride in their mission and the commitment to complete the mission.

The reasons for the choice of the motto are unclear. Colonel Charles G. McCawley was the Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1883. He was a veteran of the Mexican-American War and the American Civil War. McCawley was instrumental in raising training standards, securing a quota for Marine officers from the Naval Academy, and enforcing Corps-wide uniform regulations. He also made the Marines early users of cutting-edge technology, like the typewriter and the telephone.

The period following the Civil War brought about many changes to the Marine Corps, beginning with Commandant Colonel Jacob Zeilin’s adoption of the “*Eagle, Globe, and Anchor*” as the official cap symbol of the Corps. During this period, the United States Marine Band began a resurgence under John Philip Sousa. This renaissance may have led McCawley to create a new definitive motto to accompany the many changes. Unfortunately, McCawley did not keep many personal notes. However, most Marine Corps historians firmly believe that he was looking for a “fresh face” for the Marine Corps during the Age of Expansion. “*Semper Fidelis*” projects a powerful yet simple message about Marines.

It should be noted that the Marine Corps shares its motto with England's Devonshire Regiment, the 11th Foot. The regiment is one of the senior infantry regiments of the British Army, whose nickname is "the Bloody Eleventh." They adopted the slogan in 1685, long before the birth of the U.S. Marine Corps.

QUESTIONS

1. Why has the U.S. Marine Corps had so many mottoes throughout its history?
2. Why was the period following the Civil War one of many changes in the Marine Corps?
3. Why is Col. Charles McCawley an important figure in this "Semper Fidelis" story?

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Col. Charles G. McCawley." *Who's Who in Marine Corps History*. History Division, United States Marine Corps. 8 May 2013. Retrieved 25 February 2020.

"Col. Jacob Zeilin." *Who's Who in Marine Corps History*. History Division, United States Marine Corps. 8 May 2013. Retrieved 25 February 2020.

Millet, Allan Reed, and Jack Shulimson, eds. Commandants of the Marine Corps. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2004.

"Semper Fidelis placed on the Marine Corps Emblem in 1883," *Marine Corps Seal History*. National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved 4 April 2020.

Szoldra, Paul. "23 terms, only Marines will understand." *We Are The Mighty*. 9 March 2015. <https://www.wearethemighty.com/articles/us-marine-corps-terms-phrases>. Retrieved 9 April 2020.

"The Marine Corps Motto." *Marine Corps University*. Research Branch; USMC History Division. Retrieved 2 February 2020.

"The Marine Corps Motto." *Military.com*. <https://www.military.com/marine-corps-birthday/the-marine-corps-motto.html>. Retrieved 9 April 2020.

