

# Marine Corps Basic Training History

**BLUF:** The United States Marine Corps Recruit Training, commonly known as "boot camp," is a 13-week initial training program that each recruit must complete to serve in the United States Marine Corps. All enlisted individuals entering the Marine Corps, regardless of eventual active or reserve duty status, will undergo recruit training at one of the two Marine Corps Recruit Depots (MCRD): Parris Island, South Carolina, or San Diego, California. The training and standards are identical between the two bases, though some training events differ from the east coast to the west coast. Male recruits from the 8th, 9th, and 12th recruiting districts, areas west of the Mississippi River except for Louisiana and including parts of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, are sent to MCRD San Diego. All recruits from the 1st, 4th, and 6th recruiting districts and all female recruits are sent to Parris Island. Those desiring to become officers attend training at Officer Candidates School at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia.

**1775 to 1917:** In the earliest years of the Marine Corps, training was performed by the individual Marine barracks where the individual was recruited. Marine non-commissioned officers were responsible for instructing privates in discipline, drill, weapons handling, and other skills. Commandant Colonel Franklin Wharton established a formal school for recruits at the Marine Corps Barracks, Washington, D.C., in 1808. There are no records of whether this was a central training post, and the training regimen remained inconsistent and elementary due to manpower shortages and lack of funding. When the Civil War began, recruits training at the Washington Barracks were quickly marched to the First Battle of Manassas in July 1861.

Following the Civil War, funding and training became more inconsistent. By 1880, as the Marine Corps mission was upgraded with more funding for the Navy, recruit stations were established at various U.S. Naval Yards. New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, D.C., were the most extensive training facilities. Recruit training was between six and eight weeks, depending on the global needs of the Marine Corps. Recruits were still trained on the general working of a ship since all Marines were still shipboard Marines.

In 1911, Commandant General William P. Biddle standardized a mandatory eight-week recruit training schedule. The training included drills, physical exercise, personal combat, and marksmanship qualification. The training was established at four "recruit depots" built explicitly at Philadelphia, Norfolk, Puget Sound, and Mare Island. In 1915, the Norfolk depot was shifted to Port Royal, South Carolina. The Philadelphia and Puget Sound depots were closed, with Philadelphia merging with Port Royal and Puget Sound merging with Mare Island. As the U.S. entered World War I, the number of trained recruits surged from 835 to a peak of 13,286, while follow-up training was provided at Quantico and in France.

**1917 to Present:** By the end of 1917, Port Royal was referred to as the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island. During the summer of 1923, the West Coast recruit depot was moved from Mare Island to its current location in San Diego, and the training program was modified to include three weeks of basic indoctrination, three weeks on the rifle range, and the final two weeks were occupied in bayonet drill, guard duty, general drill, and ceremonies. After Congress authorized recruit increases in preparation for World War II in September 1939, the syllabus was halved to four weeks to accommodate the influx of recruits. After standards and marksmanship plummeted, the seven-week schedule returned, and additional training was given at Camps Lejeune or Camp Pendleton for Marines.

**Drill Instructors:** Recruit Depot instructors are referred to as "Drill Instructors." To intentionally refer to them by any other term is considered to be a grave insult. The only other acceptable address of a drill instructor by a recruit is "sir," "ma'am," or "(senior) drill instructor (Rank) (last name)." At Officer Candidates School (OCS), recruits are

referred to as "candidates." They are instructed by Drill Instructors, who have already served a tour at one of the Recruit Depots. Officer candidates address their instructors as "Sergeant Instructor" (and rank and last name) or "Platoon Sergeant" (and rank and last name). The OCS Platoon sergeant is comparable to the Senior Drill Instructor in an enlisted recruit platoon. In the initial training phase, officer candidates are trained in the same manner and by the same people, as enlisted Marines, with slight differences reflecting the difference between the candidates' responsibilities as second lieutenants and those the recruits will have as junior Marines.

Drill Instructors hold the rank of either Staff Sergeant (E-6) or Gunnery Sergeant (E-7), and they also train naval officer candidates at the Navy's Officer Candidate School at Officer Training Command Newport, Rhode Island. This aspect is a holdover from when they trained prospective naval aviators at the former Aviation Officer Candidate School (AOCS) at Naval Aviation Schools Command, Pensacola, FL. Class Drill Instructors train officer candidates alongside Class Chief Petty Officers who have experience training Navy recruits as Recruit Division Commanders (RDCs). Unlike Marine Corps recruits, Navy officer candidates must address Drill Instructors by their rank, "Staff Sergeant" or "Gunnery Sergeant."

In the Marine Corps, candidates for Drill Instructor School are both volunteers and designates. The Headquarters Marine Corps, Special Duty Assignment Team, creates a list known as the *HSST List*. This list has Marines' names that have been slotted for the different B-Billets and Special Duty Assignments. Once a Marine's name comes up on this list, they must either serve the duty or prove unfit for the assignment. The tour of duty is three years and demands the highest moral character and strength. It is the job of the Drill Instructor to pass these characteristics on to the future of the Corps. This task is referred to as "Making Marines" and is the essential duty of a Drill Instructor. A drill instructor is directly involved in shaping the future of the Marine Corps. Candidates report to Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island in South Carolina or Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in California, where they are assigned to Drill Instructor School. Upon graduation, they are assigned to one of the Recruit Training Battalions. Female Marines now serve on both depots as Drill Instructors. Since Spring 2016, Female Drill Instructors serve at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in a limited capacity. Service as a Drill Instructor is considered a Special Duty Assignment in the Marine Corps, or "B" billet, which considers a Marine's eligibility for promotion. A Marine assigned to DI School must have at least a Sergeant's (E-5) rank or have been selected for promotion to Sergeant.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why were Marine recruits originally trained at Naval Yards?
2. Why did recruit training go through changes after 1911?
3. What is the role of a Drill Instructor?
4. How is recruit training different at Officers Candidate School?

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Champie, Elmore A. *A Brief History of the Marine Corps Base and Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. 1891–1956.* Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, United States Marine Corps, 1958.
- Popaditch, Nick. *The Ultimate Marine Recruit Training Guidebook: A Drill Instructor's Strategies and Tactics for Success.* El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2009.
- Powers, Rod. "Marine Corps Drill Instructor Duty." *About.com*. 24 September 2018. Retrieved 24 November 2019. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/marine-corps-drill-instructor-duty-3332753>
- Ricks, Thomas E. *Making the Corps*. New York: Scribner Publishing Co., 1998.