The first director of Marine Corps Division of Public Relations, BGen Robert L. Denig, USMC

"Denig's Demons"

Marine News Reporters, Artists, Radio Personalities and Photographers in World War II

Story by Rob Taglianetti · USMC photos

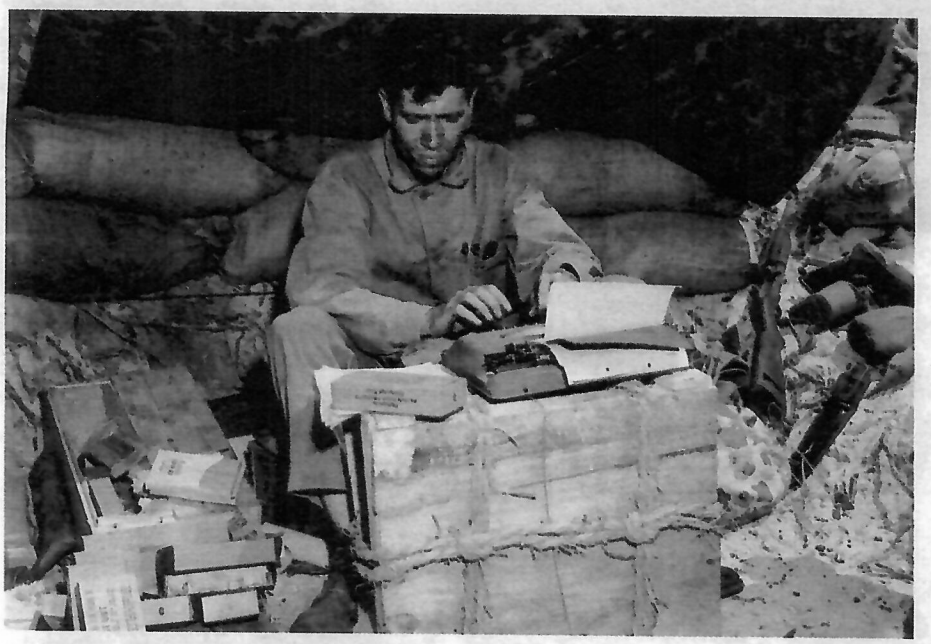
Most can remember how patriotism prevailed over all political differences when after 11 Sept. 2001, just about everyone was united in striking back at the perpetrators of the attack on United States civilians and the economy. However, in comparison, the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 Dec. 1941 was like 9/11 on steroids, as far as its national impact.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor opened a floodgate of patriotism far exceeding anything we have seen since. Everyone did what they could for the war effort, and most of America's finest entered the military. One unsung group who answered the call to duty included newspaper reporters, artists, radio personalities and photographers. They lined up at the recruiting office of a special man in the history of Marine Corps public relations, Brigadier General Robert L. Denig, not asking Denig for permission to tag along with a deployed unit, but wanting to join the Corps and more than willing to complete recruit training.

On 30 June 1941, BGen Robert L. Denig, a Marine with 36 years service, was brought out of his one-day retirement to head the newly formed Marine Corps Division of Public Relations (DPR). On 1 July, BGen Denig, with no prior experience in running a public relations office, was given a former gear locker at Marine headquarters and told to run public relations for the Marine Corps. A bright young Marine, First Sergeant Walter J. Shipman, was assigned as his first sergeant, and Reserve Major George Van der Hoef, a former head of screen and radio for the Federal Housing Administration, was his executive officer.

Before the war was over, BGen Denig's division numbered 268 officer and enlisted staff, news reporters, artists, radiomen and photographers, spread throughout the Marine Corps, who all worked like demons to accomplish one mission: inform the American public about the Marine Corps' role in the war.

First Sgt Walter J. Shipman (left, standing) was the senior enlisted advisor to BGen Denig, and also the top recruiter of experienced public relations talent–talent that would deploy to record the actions of individual Marines at war and then file stories, photos and artwork from field locations (below) to tell the Marine Corps story.



Before Pearl Harbor, BGen Denig focused on recruiting. The role of the DPR changed just prior to the Japanese attack when the division became the agency for reviewing and censoring news items, film and even advertising. This new role played a significant part in the direction BGen Denig moved the division within the days and months following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Seeing a need and an opportunity, between Pearl Harbor and the spring of 1942, BGen Denig requested and was authorized to undertake a totally new public relations recruiting program.

BGen Denig wanted to swiftly create a combat correspondents (CC) program staffed with seasoned civilian media specialists who could do a much better public relations job than Marines out of recruit training or from other duties. In order to recruit the best men, 1stSgt Shipman donned his dress blue uniform and proceeded to empty out the newsrooms of Washington, D.C.'s best newspapers.

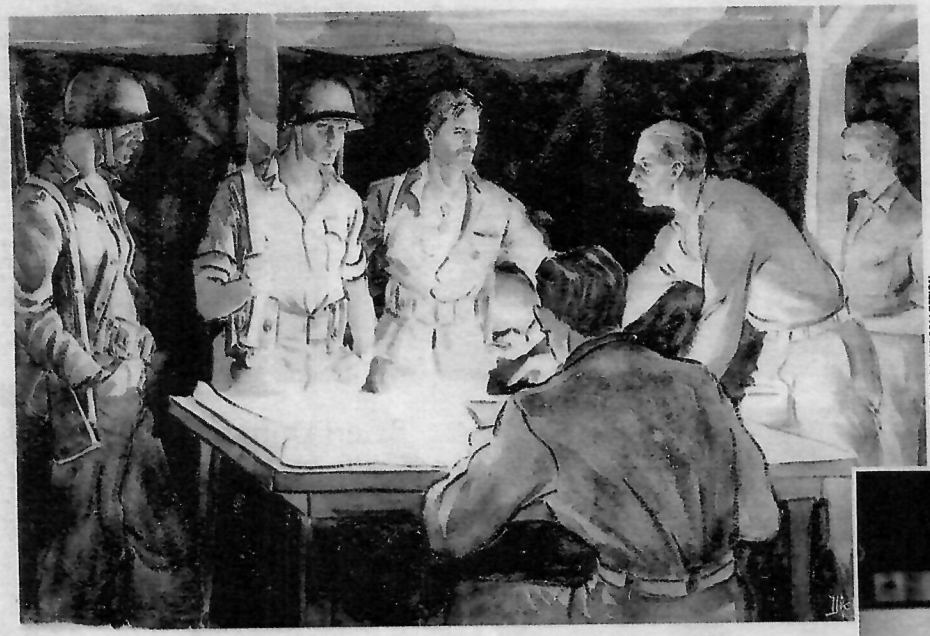
BGen Denig wanted to swiftly create a combat correspondents (CC) program staffed with seasoned civilian media specialists.

Given permission to talk to employees, Shipman quickly gathered crowds of eager newsroom staff. With the promise of a guaranteed rank of sergeant and of front-line combat duty, applications flooded Denig's office. One newspaper that lost numerous reporters was the Washington *Times-Herald*. Owner Cissie Patterson complained to President Franklin D. Roosevelt who told the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Lieutenant General Thomas A. Holcomb, and BGen Denig to cease recruiting in D.C. and focus on other cities.

Those who applied during the beginning of the program had to have at least five years of experience working in their field, and all applicants had to go through the same training as any other recruit—

including eight weeks of Marine Corps boot camp. Since the CC program was so new and guaranteed rank was so rare, these men were advised to keep quiet about their orders while in training. BGen Denig was certain that knowing their future assignment would have moved their drill instructors to make their stay at recruit training a little more challenging.

After the first group of CCs went through boot camp, the first to check in at division headquarters in Washington, D.C., was Hugh Laidman, a combat artist. BGen Denig had foreseen a need for combat art and recruited proven artists from the very beginning of the CC program.



MARINE CORPS ART COLLECTION

Then-Capt Donald L. Dickson, a prolific combat artist who became a long-serving editor of *Leatherneck* magazine, painted "Instructions to a Patrol" (above) during the Battle of Guadalcanal in 1942. Dickson and other artists, like Elmer Wexler (inset), used their artistic talents to tell the Marine Corps story in a different medium.

These artists wasted no time putting their talents to work for the Corps, and soon vivid portrayals of combat returned from the first Pacific operations on the island of Guadalcanal. Marine artists Donald L. Dickson, Vic Donahue, Elmer Wexler and Hugh Laidman were in the field recording visual history. Marine Corps art soon appeared in newspapers, magazines and exhibits across the United States.

Artist-turned-active-duty-Marine Tom Lovell was assigned to *Leatherneck* magazine, and his work remains some of the most extensive Marine Corps visual history of World War II. Other well-known Marine artists include Paul Ellsworth, Ralph Tyree, George H. Harding and John Clymer. Marine Corps combat art exhibits soon were sponsored in premier galleries and museums in New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and London.

BGen Denig also specifically recruited photographers for the CC program. His aim was to deploy reporter-photographer teams to the units in the field. This concept didn't work out until the end of the war. It took time for the rest of the Marine Corps to recognize this assignment of photographers outside their traditional role in intelligence and reconnaissance. Public relations photographs eventually made it back to the States, as those working for BGen Denig managed to get them to him however they could.

Recruiting broadcast radiomen for the Corps was another example of BGen Denig's unique vision and a tremendous lost opportunity for the other services. At one point during WW II, the Library of Congress approached each of the military branches about taking some bulky recording equipment out to the field to record the sounds and songs of native islanders and some of the war from the front lines. The Marine Corps jumped to accept the offer.

BGen Denig sent Alvin Josephy, a former civilian radio personality, to train with the Library of Congress to use the equipment. However, the Marines reversed the priority of recordings set by the Library of Congress. When they began to use the equipment in the field, the sounds of war came first.

Benis Frank, Marine Corps historian and founder of the Marine Corps' Oral History Program, wrote a history of the Marine Corps combat correspondents in 1967 to mark the 25th anniversary of the program.

Regarding the CC radio broadcasters, in his work "Denig's Demons and How They Grew," Frank summed up their impact: "One of the first combat recordings, which aired on CBS radio, was by Marine Jim Hardin and reported on combat operations on Bougainville. More reports came in by Howard Biggerstaff and Donald Circle from Piva on Bougainville; Fred Walker and Keene Hepburn from Kwajalein; Larry Hays and Hepburn from Saipan; Al Flanagan rigged up a recorder next to a walkie-talkie and reported from the front lines on Peleliu."

Alvin Josephy recorded from the beaches and front lines during several Pacific Islands campaigns, including Iwo Jima. Many other combat radiomen recorded interviews and the sounds of combat on other islands throughout the war.

However, BGen Denig's Marine news reporters made up the bulk of his Division of Public Relations. These reporters, often in teams of two, were stationed all over the world wherever Marines were located. Benis Frank credited Master Technical Sergeant Jim Lucas as having written the most combat stories, with Sergeant Sam Stavisky, who joined the Corps from *The Washington Post*, as the runner-up.

Herbert Merillat and Jim Hurlbut made splashing headlines with the first combat reports to come in from Marine Corps operations on Guadalcanal in the Pacific. Jim Lucas was made famous by his superb portrayal of Marine operations on the island of Tarawa, and his work appeared on the front pages of most newspapers in the United States. Other "Denig's Demons" who were well-known news

hometown newspapers with Marine "Joe Blow" stories frequently made their way to deployed WW II leathernecks.

and hundreds of other Marines CCs, wrote several thousand stories, as well as some headline news accounts. Many ded medals for bravery in

a CC left the States to join his was assigned to BGen Denig's ceive training, orders and spe- ctions.

Denig shared a bit of wisdom ews reporters that had a pro- ence on the success of the Corps Combat Correspondent "Write about everything that Make sure it goes through cen- that we don't say anything we be saying. Don't just write war that's going on, because all are going to do that and the es are going to cover that. the little guy to make the home know he's there and thing and he's a hero. If he little prize fight, if he wins a gets into a game and hits a that's news back home."

> "Don't just write about the war that's going on ... write about the little guy to make the folks back home know he's there and doing something and he's a hero."
>
> —BGen Robert L. Denig

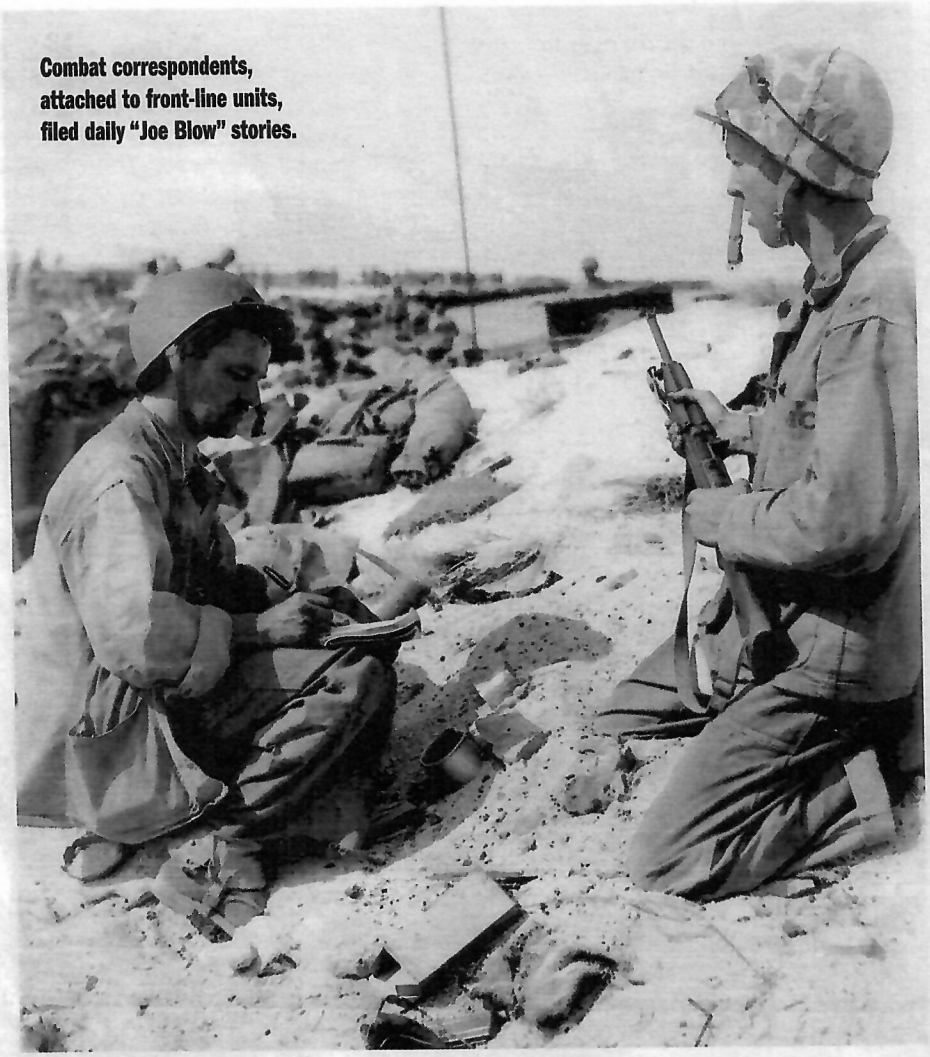
These personalized stories were commonly referred to as "Joe Blow" stories by Denig's Demons.

Perhaps the best known CC radio broadcaster, Alvin Josephy, recognized the value of these Joe Blow stories, not only to the morale of the families when they read or heard the stories on local radio or in their hometown or school paper, but also the Marines themselves as news got back to them.

Josephy related in his oral history that, "The men loved to get these letters from home, from their mothers, who'd say, 'I read all about you in the local paper.' " While he recognized what a letter from Mom did to a Marine's morale; no doubt such a letter from an adoring girlfriend multiplied that affect many times over.

Processing countless thousands of CC stories sent to the States from "Somewhere in the Pacific" and routing those stories directly to a specific Marine's hometown paper was a true public-relations miracle of the CC program. BGen Denig hired some seasoned civilian newspapermen who knew how to funnel a story to the right source.

In an oral history interview with Marine historian Benis Frank in the mid-1970s, the general revealed how this was accomplished. It is apparent from his description that this wonderful man was not a seasoned public relations officer, just a man with a brilliant idea, a common sense approach and one who surrounded himself with those who could make things happen. Frank related a typical conver-



Combat correspondents, attached to front-line units, filed daily "Joe Blow" stories.

Because these men mingled with the Marines and personalized most of the stories, the CCs affected the minds and hearts of the American people.

sation in the DPR's newsroom:

BGen Denig: "There came into my hand one day a book, and I said, 'What's that book over there?' [A clerk] said, 'Well, that's a book that gives you all the small newspapers in the country, high school magazines, everything.' I said, 'Let me see it.' And from that, why ... by pieces and stages, I suppose a story about Jim Jones would go: 'Where's he from?' He says, 'Well, he comes from a town that has a little bit of a paper here, and he went to this high school. They have a paper that is listed in this book.' "

Frank: "In other words, you set up a personalized distribution system on each story?"

BGen Denig: "Oh, yes!"

This personalized distribution system informed everyone in that town, city and state that the Marine Corps was getting the job done, and those stories made them proud of what their boys were doing as well as making the families feel a part of the war effort.

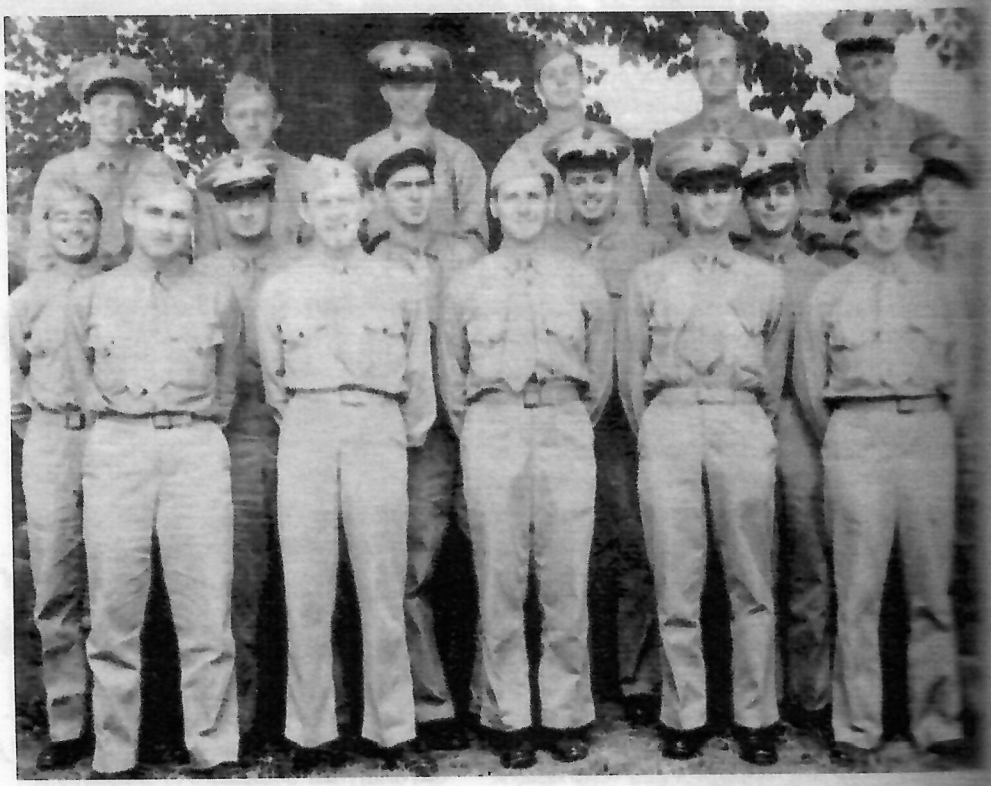
Interestingly, the Marine Corps Combat Correspondent program was not recognized as a legitimate element, as no correspondents were placed on the Marine Corps' official Table of Organization. When the earliest group of Denig's Demons arrived at their units, many were greeted with misunderstanding and assigned to menial jobs such as ditch digging.

As a Marine staff sergeant, Norm Hatch experienced a cold reception by a senior officer about his request to film the landing on Tarawa. Just before the invasion of Tarawa, Hatch was asked what he was doing and why he was in the unit. An officer barked, "I don't want any [blank, blank] Hollywood Marine with me."

Hatch replied, "I'm not a Hollywood Marine. I've got five years service. I've done all the training, and I know if I need a rifle all I have to do is bend down and pick one up!"

The officer replied, "All right, stay the hell out of my way."

Hatch's Tarawa footage, along with some of other enlisted Marine camera-



These reporters, recruited from Washington, D.C., newsrooms, were the first WW II Marine combat correspondents. They proudly claimed the title, "Denig's Demons."

men covering the battle, earned the Corps a 1944 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences award (Oscar) for Best Documentary, Short Subject: "With the Marines at Tarawa."

Although they had a tough time at first, the word began to spread that a CC could write up a story, and everyone back home would read about it in the local paper. BGen Denig related how it took almost a year, but the CCs eventually gained the respect of their various units and turned their plight around from red tape and ditch digging to red carpet and fine dining.

"Some bright boy in public relations wrote the story up about a first sergeant, and that got into the papers. And it got back to him, and he just puffed his chest out, and he walked around like a pigeon," said BGen Denig.

Combat correspondents eventually could show off what they did and easily attach themselves to various missions. "I loved ships," said Sam Stavisky. "Whenever I came on board, I was invited to the captain's table. I had wonderful food."

According to another surviving WW II combat correspondent, Cyril "Cy" O'Brien, some Denig's Demons were given a special pass to use if an officer didn't understand who they were or assigned them to another duty. "If a general said, 'I want you to get in that working party,' I had a card from Washington, D.C., that said, 'Sorry, General, but I'm a correspondent.' I still have it. You were one of the freest people in the world. I could go any place I wanted to. My job was to cover the 1st Battalion and the 2d Battalion of the 3d Marines."

There was a tremendous amount of wisdom that went into giving the CCs, many of them with college degrees, enlisted rank. As enlisted men, they could effectively converse with the majority of Marines who were fighting the war. Cy O'Brien said most Denig's Demons accepted this apparent demotion in status: "We could talk to the men. They would be in combat, and they'd say, 'Hey, Obie, get over here; I want to talk to you. Now, if I were a captain, I wouldn't have that rapport. They confided in you. They felt so good [that the story] would appear in their hometown [newspaper]. The Marine Corps was so wise. If they sent lieutenants or captains out, it would have curtailed their rapport immensely."

One of the greatest tributes to the value of the Marine Corps Combat Correspondent program was a comment someone made to Cy O'Brien that he remembers even now, 65 years later.

"Someone said it, and later it was proven to me: 'Obie, look, these [civilian] correspondents are writing about the big battle, the generals, the Jap resistance. (We weren't. We were writing Joe Blow stories.) What the correspondents are writing will be on the headlines today, but what you are writing will be in family Bibles for generations.' Civilian correspondents wrote about the MacArthurs; we wrote about the PFCs."

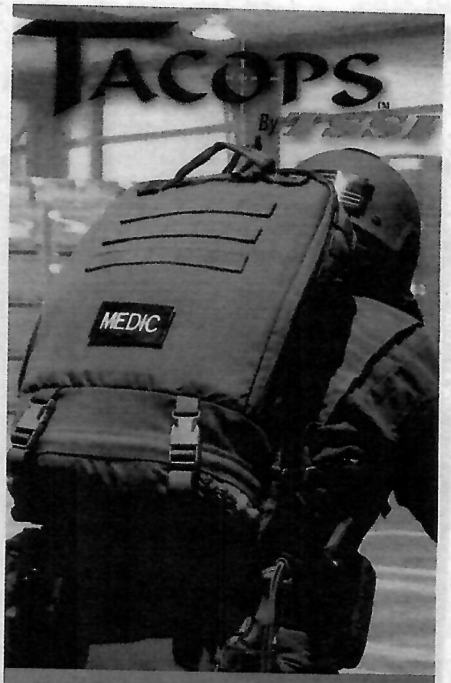
Because these men mingled with the Marines and personalized most of the stories, the CCs affected the minds and hearts of the American people. In that way, they played a major role in the war. Not only did they raise public awareness about the Marine Corps, but they also highlighted the need for an amphibious branch of the military and the need to keep the Corps alive. They counterbalanced bureaucrats and some politicians who attempted to unify the various branches of the military and eliminate the Marine Corps just after WW II.

Denig's Demons was a unique group of former civilian media men. Their selfless sacrifice and unique patriotic willingness to join the military stand out in contrast to the mind-set of some of today's media. Eight Denig's Demons gave their lives in the line of duty. The combat correspondents snapped photographs, created works of combat art, captured the sounds of war and wrote eyewitness accounts of battle that no civilian media personalities could have from their positions, often secluded behind the lines.

Marine CCs were up front where they could gather factual accounts as they freely mingled among the Marines because they were Marines who happened to be seasoned civilian media specialists. Certainly a world at war provided a unique moment in history, but unlike any group before or since, Denig's Demons informed U.S. citizens of the Marine Corps' role in the war. Their stories, paintings, illustrations and photographs boosted morale on the fighting front and at home.

As many have observed throughout military history, morale can make or break a man, a unit or an army. BGen Robert L. Denig and his Demons did a great deal to lift the morale of the men who fought the battles, and their efforts were essential to ultimate victory.

Editor's note: Mr. Taglianetti is an oral historian with the Marine Corps History Division's Oral History Branch. He holds a Master of Arts in public history and an M.S. in information science (archival administration) and currently is in charge of managing the Global War on Terror Oral History Collection.



M-9 Assault Medical Backpack

TSSI has developed a field ready M-9 Assault Medical Backpack, equipped with the necessary supplies for use by a Tactical EMT, Military Medic, or other skilled provider for "up front" treatment of patients in the tactical or combat zone. The slim, three-inch total bag thickness, design of the M-9 moves swiftly through narrow openings and vehicle or aircraft doorways to reach a patient's side.

For more information
Please visit or call us at...

DOD EMALL www.emall.dla.mil GSA Cage Code #: 0UW60 GSA Contract #: GS-07F-9123D

WWW.TACSURV.COM
TOLL FREE: 877.535.8774