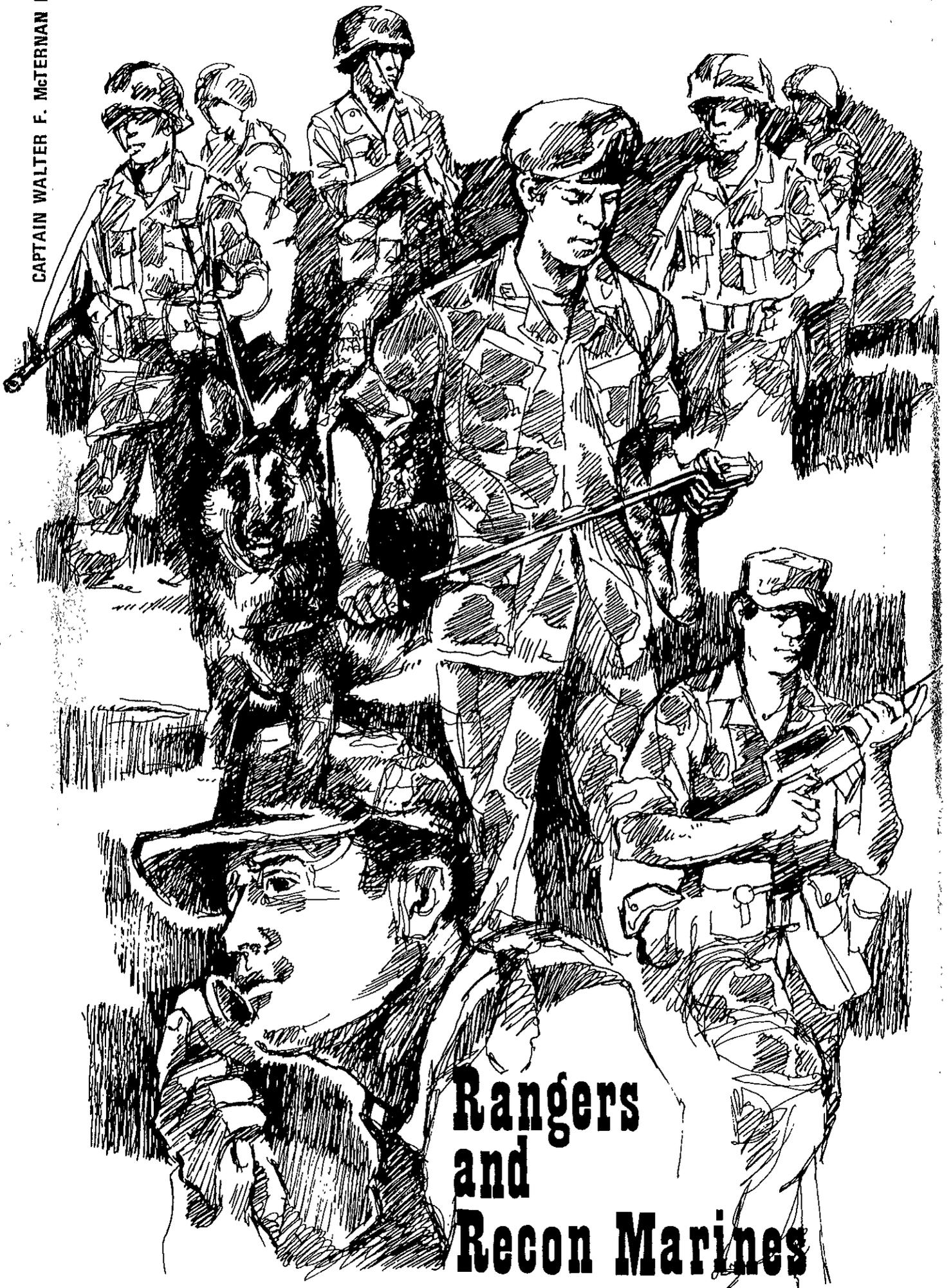


CAPTAIN WALTER F. McTERNAN III



Rangers and Recon Marines

Whenever U.S. Marines and U.S. Army soldiers get together to argue over which service is better, the argument is likely to include a discussion of the relative merits of Marine reconnaissance units and Army Ranger units. Whether they ever admit it or not, they may find that there are many similarities between these specialized units and few differences.

While many people in the Army know something about the Army's Rangers, they probably know little about the Marine Corps' reconnaissance units. Both types of units date from the World War II era, and both are considered elite units.

Rangers rank among the best-trained soldiers in the world. Many soldiers in all kinds of units are Ranger-qualified, but there are only two Ranger battalions, the 1st and 2d Battalions (Ranger) of the 75th Infantry, both formed in 1974.

The missions of these Ranger battalions include conducting decentralized and limited combat operations anywhere in the world — raids, special operations, and long-range tactical reconnaissance, going in by air, sea, or land.

Soldiers must volunteer if they are to serve in either of these battalions, but not everyone who volunteers is necessarily accepted. First, they must submit to a records check, an interview, and a physical fitness test. They have to score at least 350 out of 500 points on the Army's physical readiness test. Before reporting to a battalion, the soldiers who are accepted must complete the basic airborne course. Then, after reporting, the new members must undergo the four-week Ranger indoctrination program (RIP). In it, they are given intensive instruction in unit standing operating procedures, weapons, and other essential military subjects.

All noncommissioned and commissioned officers must be Ranger-qualified before they join one of the battalions. Those below the rank of sergeant are sent to Ranger School at Fort Benning after they have had some experience in a platoon.

Every Ranger receives comprehensive training in a wide variety of martial skills, and the members of the battalion's reconnaissance platoon are given additional training in SCUBA (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) and HALO (high-altitude, low-opening). All participate in an intensive physical training program that is designed to keep them in top condition.

Similar missions, similar training, and similar selection procedures apply to the Marine Corps' reconnaissance units.

The Fleet Marine Forces contain two types of reconnaissance units: force reconnaissance companies (Force Recon) and division reconnaissance battalions (Recon Battalions). Each of the Marine Corps divisions (three active and one Reserve) has a Recon battalion. Only two Force Recon companies are now in the force structure — one active and one Reserve. Consequently, to compensate for shortages in Force Recon capabilities, each Recon Battalion of the First and Third Marine Divisions has one "deep reconnaissance platoon." These platoons

are responsible for assuming the force reconnaissance mission in their operational areas.

Basically, the mission of both kinds of units is to conduct amphibious reconnaissance missions. The Marines define amphibious reconnaissance as "an amphibious landing conducted by minor elements, normally involving stealth rather than force of arms, for the purpose of securing information, usually followed by a planned withdrawal."

But there are minor distinctions in the missions performed by these two types of units. The primary mission of a Force Recon company, for instance, is to conduct pre-assault and deep post-assault reconnaissance operations in support of a landing force and its elements, while the primary mission of a Recon Battalion is to conduct ground reconnaissance and surveillance in support of a division and its supporting elements.

This difference can be important in terms of who is being supported by a reconnaissance unit. Theoretically, the landing force supported by elements of a Force Recon company need not be made up of Marines, though it usually is; it can be made up of U.S. Army or allied units, as well as Marines.

VOLUNTEER

To join one of these special units, a Marine, like his Army counterpart, must volunteer. The unit then screens his service record to determine his suitability, conducts an interview to ascertain his maturity, and administers a physical fitness test to evaluate his level of fitness and his motivation.

Selections are made from the volunteers on the basis of their physical and medical qualifications and a mental screening conducted at company level. This latter requirement is principally to evaluate attitude, temperament, and judgment. The decision to accept an applicant ultimately rests with the unit commander, whose principal concern is the Marine's resourcefulness, motivation, and maturity — all vital qualities in a man who must operate behind enemy lines as part of a small team.

Once accepted, a new Recon Marine begins a rigorous and intensive training program that consists of both basic and advanced individual and unit training. He attends the reconnaissance indoctrination program (RIP), in which he is introduced to basic reconnaissance skills and unit procedures.

Later, he normally attends the Amphibious Reconnaissance Course (ARC) at one of the Landing Force Training Commands. This course stresses basic individual and basic unit training. When he completes these two courses, the Marine becomes a member of a reconnaissance team, and back at his unit he and his teammates continue to receive extensive training in such subjects as scout-swimming, patrolling, intelligence, small-boat handling, communications, initial terminal guidance procedures, insertion and extraction procedures, and rough terrain mastery skills, such as rappelling and mountain climbing.

In addition, a Recon Marine may be chosen to attend such Army or Navy schools as Ranger, Airborne, Pathfinder, HALO, and SCUBA. Then he can share what he has learned in those schools by cross-training fellow Marines who have not had the opportunity to attend.

In the reconnaissance unit itself, a concentrated, demanding physical training program is conducted to see that the reconnaissance Marines are fit enough to operate independently and to move on foot over rough terrain carrying all their weapons, equipment, and supplies with them. The unit's PT program also emphasizes swimming (both surf and open water), running, and marching with heavy rucksacks.

FEW DIFFERENCES

It is apparent, then, that when Recon Marines are compared with Army Rangers, there are few differences and many similarities. Unlike its Marine counterpart, the Ranger battalion is designed to wage offensive combat, but its mission does include long-range tactical reconnaissance, which is the major task of the Marine reconnaissance unit. And subsidiary reconnaissance missions, such as the capture of prisoners, for example, are compatible with the missions of a Ranger battalion or elements of it.

Another minor difference is in training. Although the members of Army Ranger and Marine reconnaissance companies receive extensive training, the Rangers usually get more formal schooling than the Recon Marines do. Additionally, because of their wide-ranging missions, Ranger units receive a lot of specialized military training, such as cross-country skiing.

Formal schooling for the Recon Marines is more limited. Many members of a Force Recon company and a deep reconnaissance platoon are qualified military parachutists, and as many as possible are SCUBA-qualified as well. In the letter companies of the reconnaissance battalions, as many Marines as possible are also trained in

these special techniques. Although reconnaissance units use all available spaces allotted to them in courses that teach skills and techniques that are applicable to reconnaissance operations, these spaces are few in number. And because the Marine Corps does not operate its own special schools, it must rely on a necessarily limited number of slots in the special schools run by the other services, such as the Army's Ranger and Airborne and the Navy's SCUBA.

Actually, the similarities between these Army and Marine units are most striking. The men of both kinds of organizations are trained to operate behind enemy lines in the performance of their duties, and both use similar methods of finding the kind of men they need to fill their ranks, men with a high degree of physical stamina and presence of mind.

They also conduct similar training programs to prepare their men for their duties in the field. While their respective missions may differ, their methods of entering an objective area are often the same; members of both train to enter combat by parachute, by helicopter, by rubber boat, by foot, or by fin. The combat skills required are often the same as well. Both organizations are able to accomplish their missions because of their high state of training and because of the quality of their members.

Physically rugged volunteers, Army or Marine, these men have flair, esprit, self-confidence, and aggressiveness, and these traits will enable them to succeed at their difficult tasks on any future battlefield.

Elite is the word for them — Rangers or Recon Marines.

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