

Attracting “The Few” and “The Proud”

J. Walter Thompson, MCRC Chronicle Their Long-Standing Advertising Partnership

Story by Sara W. Bock

Photos courtesy of J. Walter Thompson

In a remote location, amidst a monochromatic landscape, stands a dusty, sand-colored wall that seemingly extends for miles in either direction.

“Walls are barriers. They divide; separate; segregate. We’ve seen walls before. They’ve always fallen,” rumbles a deep and compelling voice as Marines breach a portion of the wall.

After the dust settles, they charge through their newly carved point of entry, armed and ready to take on the unknown that faces them on the other side. An M1A1 main battle tank advances in the rear as helicopters and MV-22B Ospreys fly overhead.

The scene promulgates the Marines’ ability to overcome both figurative and literal barriers, and while it may look like it, it’s not exactly one of their typical missions. This one was crafted

with a different purpose in mind. It’s the Corps’ newest recruiting commercial: a simple, 30-second clip with a powerful impact, released in March 2015 as part of its “Home of the Brave” marketing campaign.

The creative force behind this campaign, and every other Marine Corps recruitment advertisement since 1947, is the acclaimed J. Walter Thompson Agency, which is hailed as the world’s premier marketing communications brand.

Even before taking on the Marine Corps as a client 67 years ago, the agency had ties to the Corps. Its founder, James Walter Thompson, born Oct. 28, 1847, in Pittsfield, Mass., served as a Marine in USS *Saratoga* during the American Civil War. After the war ended, Thompson was employed by the Carlton & Smith Advertising Agency in New York City. He purchased the agency from Carlton and Smith for \$500 in 1878. He aptly renamed it the J. Walter Thompson Agency and in 1899 opened an office in London, which made his namesake company the first international advertising agency in history.

Nicknamed “the Commodore,” Thompson was not only the captain of his own yacht, but also was revered as the captain of the advertising industry.

Many consider him to have been in-

strumental in laying the groundwork for modern-day advertising. Through innovative ideas and injection of creativity into his campaigns, a new kind of advertising was born, and companies began to steer away from in-house advertising in favor of ads created by writers and artists—the types of people who were employed by Thompson’s agency.

Thompson, who passed away in 1928, didn’t live to see his agency partner with his Marine Corps in 1947.

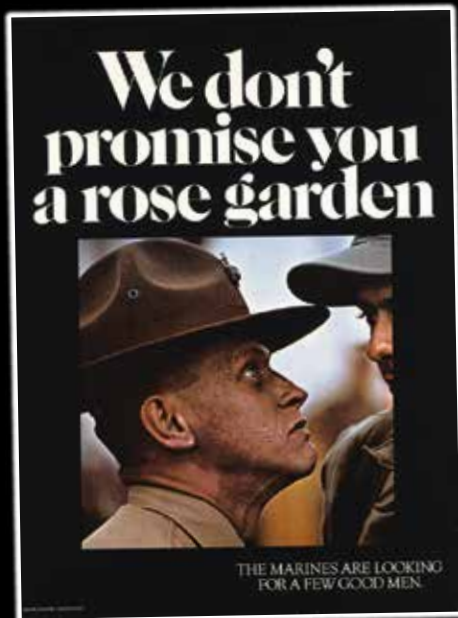
Since the dynamic partnership began, J. Walter Thompson has supported Marine recruiters and reinforced the Marine brand, according to Sean McNeeley, J. Walter Thompson group account director.

“Every day, J. Walter Thompson brings a driven, loyal and proud team ready to accomplish the mission. While the operations of recruiting are day-to-day and month-to-month, brand-building is a ‘long war.’ We couldn’t be more proud of our history with the Marine Corps and the work that we do for Marines,” McNeeley said.

A large hurdle to recruitment presented itself in 1973 with the expiration of the Selective Service draft. The Marine Corps and the other military services became an all-volunteer force. In partnership with J. Walter Thompson, the Corps focused on appealing to the segment of the population that was not interested in the military as a path to social advancement, but in earning the title Marine and the respect that accompanies that title, said Randy Shepard, senior partner and director of strategy at J. Walter Thompson.

By accentuating the exclusivity of the Corps and its virtually mythological status in America’s history, recruitment advertising has successfully portrayed the USMC as the nation’s elite fighting force and helped ensure that only the best become Marines.

In 1974, the iconic recruiting commercial “We don’t promise you a rose garden” featured Sergeant Charles A. “Chuck” Taliano Jr., a Marine drill instructor, and emphasized the challenge of earning the acclaimed title. If they wanted to become a Marine, it



Above: One of the most widely recognized ads from the modern era of Marine Corps advertising is the 1974 “We don’t promise you a rose garden” ad featuring Sgt Chuck Taliano Jr.

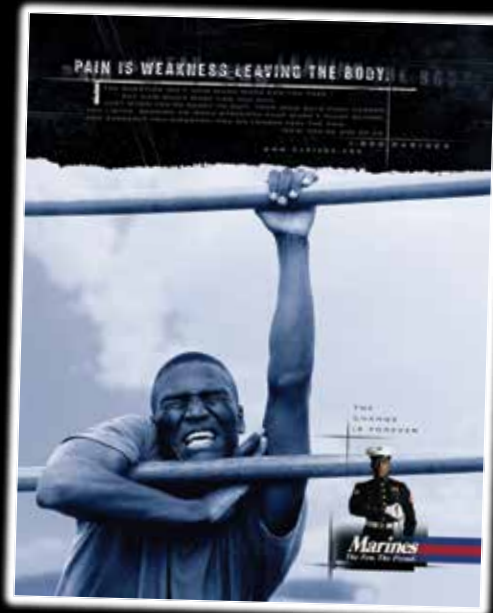


Right: The 1990 “Chess” campaign portrayed Marines as knights battling the enemy in a life-size game of chess.



Left: Civil War Marine veteran and advertising legend James Walter Thompson purchased the agency for \$500 in 1878.

Below: In 2005, the J. Walter Thompson Agency and MCRC began the “Pain Is Weakness” campaign, which emphasized the physical challenges of becoming a Marine.



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wasn’t going to be an easy road—and the commercial didn’t sugarcoat that.

“If everybody could be a Marine, we wouldn’t be Marines,” Taliano said in the ad. That type of approach was designed to attract those individuals who wanted the challenge more than any potential personal benefits, like college money, which the other Armed Forces were offering at the time to boost recruitment numbers.

To further promote the Corps’ elite status to prospective recruits for an all-volunteer force, the slogan “The Few. The Proud. The Marines” was created in the 1970s. While other branches of the service have experimented with different advertising slogans over the decades, “The Few. The Proud.” has remained the easily identifiable slogan of the Corps and a fundamental part of its organizational culture.

To this day, the Marine Corps remains the only branch of service represented by the elite agency. The USMC is vastly different from J. Walter Thompson’s other longtime clients, like Shell, Kraft, Nestle,

Ford and Kimberly-Clark. It’s an organization that sells a “warrior ethos”—the opportunity to earn a title and the qualities that come with it—rather than a tangible product.

According to Shepard, the Marine Corps is specifically concerned about the degree to which its prospects are a reflection of the demography of the United States as a whole.

“Most of our clients’ products are marketable by design, but the Marine Corps is not,” said Shepard. “For that reason, we don’t target demographics based on sales potential. We are more concerned about a consumer base that looks like America.”

In addition to the demographic challenges Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) and J. Walter Thompson face in recruitment advertising, there are increasingly complex cultural challenges that must be taken into consideration in order to effectively market the Marine Corps experience to America’s youth.

“Think of the ‘longer Marine Corps story’: we make Marines, we win our nation’s battles, we develop quality

citizens,” said Master Sergeant Bryce R. Piper, MCRC Public Affairs Chief. “For decades we only talked about the ‘making Marines’ chapter, but as time moved on, we are telling more and more of the whole story to deal with the exogenous factors—war, the economy, American political culture—that impact youth interest in the military.”

Telling the “whole story,” said Piper, provides America with a greater understanding of the Marine Corps’ contribution to the nation and its culture. He added that bringing these additional chapters of Marine Corps history to light helps make the Corps more attractive to today’s youth who MCRC and J. Walter Thompson believe have greater propensity to contribute to community and culture.

Economic, political and cultural changes have abounded in the nearly seven decades since the partnership between the USMC and J. Walter Thompson began.

“In our history with the Marines, we



After struggling to climb a treacherous sheer cliff face, a young recruit reaches the top in the 2001 “Climb” television commercial. “The passage is intense, but if you complete the journey, you will find your destiny among the world’s greatest warriors,” the voiceover says.

have seen the Corps endure some of the most daunting challenges faced by any brand or organization,” said McNeeley. These challenges are not limited to the expiration of the draft in 1973—most recently, they are due to the repercussions of more than a decade of sustained combat operations and significant budget constraints, he added.

To combat these challenges, it is vital that MCRC and J. Walter Thompson collectively are constantly re-evaluating the Corps’ target audience through extensive research of demographics and cultural shifts.

Since 1987, J. Walter Thompson has received more than 100 advertising awards for the work they’ve done for MCRC. Most recently, they received gold awards from W3, a major competition that recognizes creative excellence on the Web, for the USMC’s YouTube brand channel, Semper Fi Bowl and Marines.com, including the “Best in Show” award for Marines.com. In 2009, they won an advertising Silver “Effie” award in the “Sustained Success” category.

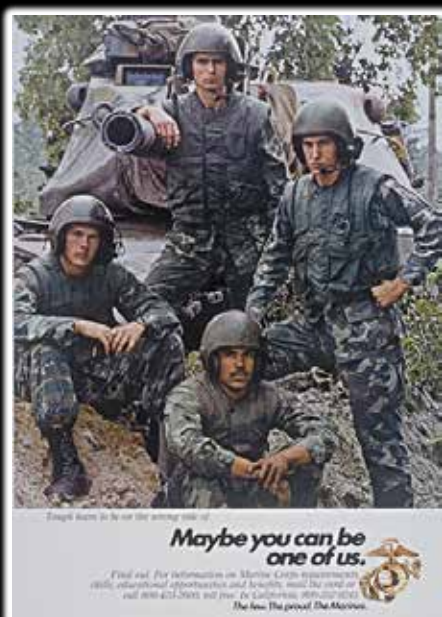
The Marine Corps advertising team at J. Walter Thompson also received the 2012 Jay Chiat Gold Award for Research Innovation for their report titled “How the U.S. Marines Brought Rambo and Bono Together Through Research (And Why).”

It addresses what Shepard calls a “fraction-ness” among young people in today’s society.

“You see a lot less commonality and a growing diversity of people’s interests, which makes it harder to recruit a Corps reflective of the nation,” Shepard said.

The report describes how research designed through a cultural lens helped “this venerable American brand”—the Marine Corps—“envision a way to

J. Walter Thompson helped the Marine Corps devise a way to appeal to two distinct groups they identified through research: a “blood and soil” patriot culture, which they termed the “Rambo” culture and a “global citizen” culture, deemed the “Bono” culture.



The 1980 print ad “Maybe you can be one of us,” like all other modern-day Marine Corps recruiting ads, emphasizes that the Marines are an elite fighting force.

overcome seemingly intractable divisions within the country it faithfully serves.” In the face of demographic and cultural change, J. Walter Thompson helped the Marine Corps devise a way to appeal to two distinct groups they identified through research: a “blood and soil” patriot culture, which they termed the “Rambo” culture and a “global citizen” culture, deemed the “Bono” culture.

“In order for the title ‘U.S. Marine’ to continue to confer prestige on youth who join and ensure that America continues to ‘want one’ [a Marine Corps], the Marines can’t afford to belong to one America but not to the other,” the report concluded. Based on that statement, recent recruitment efforts have attempted to appeal to both sub-cultures—those are more motivated to serve their nation in armed struggles and those who are more interested in playing a role in humanitarian assistance both at home and abroad.

J. Walter Thompson doesn’t just provide support to the Corps at the national, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps-level. The agency also offers direct support to the more than 3,600 recruiters and 75 Officer Selection Officers (OSOs) who “work to fill the ranks of tomorrow’s Marine Corps,” said McNeeley. He explained that J. Walter Thompson maintains a district representative program that provides direct support to the Corps’ recruiting districts and regions in what he calls “field-level communication.”

The district representative program provides assistance to recruiters and OSOs through training; annual planning; budget management; local market translation of national-level strategic messaging; and audience targeting and activation using social media.

J. Walter Thompson’s director of digital

The Earlier Years of USMC Advertising: Collector's Treasure Trove Preserves a Bygone Era

Before the J. Walter Thompson ad agency took on the Marine Corps as a client in 1947, the U.S. Marine Corps Recruiting Publicity Bureau, established in 1911, was responsible for producing some of the most acclaimed recruiting advertisements in American military history. Renowned artists like Howard Chandler Christy, James Montgomery Flagg and J.C. Leyendecker, among many others, created impactful illustrations to aid in America's World War I effort.

For Lieutenant Colonel John Williams, USMC (Ret), of Fairfax Station, Va., these posters are a vital piece of the Corps' history—so much so that he has made a hobby out of collecting them for more than 50 years.

Williams, an infantry officer who served in Vietnam with the Military Assistance Advisory Group at Quang Tri City from 1964 to 1965 and later with III Marine Amphibious Force from 1968 to 1969, retired from the Marine Corps in 1989 after serving as the assistant base inspector, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

He always had an interest in antiques, he said, and began collecting original copies of WW I Marine recruiting posters around the time he was commissioned in the Marine Corps in 1962. He became more serious about collecting them in the early 1980s when he was assigned to Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. Another Marine there had a Marine Corps



LtCol John Williams, USMC (Ret) visits the *Leatherneck* office and shares a portfolio of his unique, extensive collection of Marine Corps recruiting ads from the WW I-era.

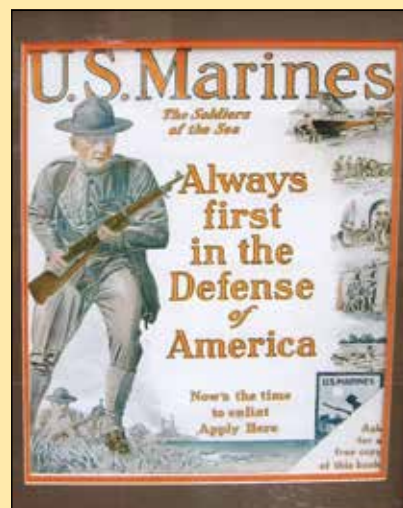
Reserve recruiting poster that Williams really wanted, and after a little bit of pleading, he said, his fellow Marine gave it to him. After that, he considered himself a full-blown collector and started going to “ephemera” shows featuring paper antiques and other advertising and antique shows. It's become quite a hobby for him, and he's particularly interested in the history behind his items.

Today, his USMC collection includes more than 125 items—mainly posters, but also other recruiting materials. He also has quite a few WW I-era advertisements for tobacco products featuring Marines, as well as Marine advertisements in original copies of *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Leslie's Weekly Illustrated* and *Harper's Weekly*. Not only has he had most of his collection restored by a restoration specialist, he took a class on framing and has custom-framed nearly all of his items.

If you ask Williams what it is about Marine Corps advertising that sets it apart from the other Armed Forces, he says it's “the aura and prestige” of being a Marine.

From the early 1900s until today, despite numerous changes, that one central theme has remained central to the Corps' recruitment advertising efforts.

—Sara W. Bock



Taken from his portfolio, Williams' collection of posters features a variety of work from notable artists whose goal was to assist the Marine Corps' recruiting efforts during WW I. (Images courtesy of LtCol John Williams, USMC (Ret))



A 2007 print ad from the “America’s Marines” campaign shows Marines in dress blues spanning the nation from coast to coast. Other spreads from this campaign read “From the coastline to the heartland” and “From the natural wonders to the ones man made.”

strategy, Todd Copilevitz, views social media as the dominant channel by which today’s prospective recruits learn about current events and participate in what motivates them. The Marine Corps was the first to recruit on social media—first with MySpace in 2006 and today using YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Tumblr.

Use of social media for recruitment, Copilevitz said, presents a challenge in that it has required MCRC to take steps to assure the integrity of the brand survives the undisciplined environment of social media. He believes that despite the changes that have come with the rise of social media, the overall goal stays unchanged.

“No matter how many platforms the Corps is on, the objective remains the same: getting the nation’s best and brightest young men and women the information they need to raise their hand and ask for a meeting with a Marine Corps recruiter to learn more,” said Copilevitz.

Since the onset of the global war on terrorism and the heavy involvement of the Marine Corps in both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the Corps’ advertising campaigns have undergone a few changes.

In 2007, they launched the “America’s Marines” campaign, which “reminded people that for more than two centuries

Marines have responded to whatever battles their nation asks them to win,” said MSgt Piper. “The narration reiterated the cause Marines enlist to support, sustained by an unbroken line of Marines in dress blues spanning the nation from coast to coast.”

In 2012, “Toward the Sounds of Chaos” became the Marine Corps’ next campaign.

Use of social media for recruitment presents a unique challenge in that it has required MCRC to take deliberate steps to assure the integrity of the brand survives the undisciplined environment of social media.

It took a direct approach and didn’t downplay the Corps’ force-in-readiness role, Piper said. The video commercial for the campaign ended with the question “Which way would you run?”

“It portrayed the reality of a chaotic world and how Marines answer a call to counter it for the protection of others,” he said.

Earlier this year, the “Home of the Brave” campaign launched, featuring “Wall,” which shows that Marines break barriers, designed to reach those who aspire to be quality citizens. The message is that joining the Marine Corps is a viable way to fulfill the role of “quality citizen,” said Piper.

Although the Corps’ ad campaigns have changed over the years to appeal to the right audience at the right time, there are certain elements that have remained integral and unchanging: the legends and traditions of the Marine Corps; its elite warrior ethos; and the exclusivity of the title “United States Marine.”

As the 17th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Micheal P. Barrett told *Leatherneck* earlier this year, despite the current reduction in force the Marine Corps is undergoing, recruiting and retention have never been better. Thanks to the partnership between MCRC and J. Walter Thompson and the hard work of Marine recruiters and OSOs from sea to shining sea to enlist America’s finest young men and women, the Marine Corps of tomorrow will be as strong or stronger than the Marine Corps of yesterday, ready to take down the next “wall” that lies ahead.

