

Return of the Marines  
All-American warriors in Iraq.

By W. Thomas Smith Jr.

Beginning this month, leathernecks from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force will return to Iraq, replacing elements of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division. The return of the Marines is surely bad news for those desperate to undermine the liberation of Iraq.

Not to take anything away from the U.S. Army - its soldiers have performed magnificently, and will no doubt continue to do so - but America's enemies have a particular fear of U.S. Marines.

During the first Gulf War in 1991, over 100,000 Iraqi soldiers were deployed along the Iraqi-Kuwaiti coastline in anticipation of a landing by some 17,000 U.S. Marines. Terrified by what they had been taught about the combat prowess of Marines, the Iraqi soldiers had nicknamed them "Angels of Death." The moniker - first published by Pulitzer-winner Rick Atkinson in his best-selling *Crusade* - carried over into the second Gulf war, last year, as the 1st Marine Division swept across the Iraqi plains. Attacking American forces were unsettling enough, but reports of the seaborne "Angels of Death" being among the lead elements were paralyzing to many Iraqi combatants.

Despite less armor than other American ground forces, the Marines were among the first to fight their way into Baghdad. And when intelligence indicated that foreign troops were coming to the aid of Iraqi diehards, Marine Brig. Gen. John Kelly stated, "we want all Jihad fighters to come here. That way we can kill them all before they get bus tickets to New York City."

Typical Marine bravado, some say. But it works.

Best-selling author Tom Clancy once wrote, "Marines are mystical. They have magic." It is this same magic, Clancy added, that "may well frighten potential opponents more than the actual violence Marines can generate in combat."

Fear of Marines is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Iraqi soldiers.

Established in 1775, the U.S. Marine Corps came of age in World War I during the 1918 Chateau Thierry campaign near the French village of Bouresches. There, Marines assaulted a line of German machine-gun nests on an old hunting preserve known as Belleau Wood. The fighting was terrible. Those Marines who weren't cut down by the enemy guns captured the nests in a grisly close-quarters slugfest.

The shocked Germans nicknamed their foes, *teufelhunden* (devil dogs).

"Marines are considered a sort of elite Corps designed to go into action outside the United States," read a German intelligence report following the battle. "They consider their membership in the Marine Corps to be something of an honor. They proudly resent any attempts to place their regiments on a par with other infantry regiments."

Twenty-four years later as the 1st Marine Division was steaming toward Guadalcanal, a Japanese radio propagandist taunted that which the Japanese soldiers feared most. "Where are the famous United States Marines hiding?" the announcer asked. "The Marines are supposed to be the finest soldiers in the world, but no one has seen them yet?"

Over the next three years, Marines would further their reputation at places with names like Tarawa, Saipan, and Iwo Jima.

That reputation carried over into the Korean War.

"Panic sweeps my men when they are facing the American Marines," confessed a captured North Korean major. It was a fear echoed by his Chinese allies. In late 1950, Chinese premier Mao Tse Tung put out a contract on the 1st Marine Division. The Marine division, according to Mao in written orders to the commander of the Chinese 9th Army Group, "has the highest combat effectiveness in the American armed forces. It seems not enough for our four divisions to surround and annihilate its two regiments. You should have one or two more divisions as a reserve force."

Though costly for both sides, the subsequent Chinese trap failed to destroy the 1st Marine Division.

U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Frank Lowe later admitted, "The safest place in Korea was right behind a platoon of Marines. Lord, how they could fight!"

Over a decade later, Marines were the first major ground combat force in Vietnam. Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who commanded all American military forces in that country, conservatively stated he "admired the *élan* of Marines." But despite the admiration, some Army leaders found their equally proficient units wanting for similar respect.

In 1982, during the invasion of Grenada, Army General John Vessey, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, telephoned one of his officers and demanded to know why there were "two companies of Marines running all over the island and thousands of Army troops doing nothing. What the hell is going on?"

The reputation of Marines stems from a variety of factors: The Marine Corps is the smallest, most unique branch of the U.S. armed forces. Though it is organized as a separate armed service, it is officially a Naval infantry/combined-arms force overseen by the secretary of the Navy. The Corps' philosophical approach to training and combat differs from other branches. Marine boot camp - more of a rite-of-passage than a training program - is the longest and toughest recruit indoctrination program of any of the military services. Men and women train separately. All Marines from private to Commandant are considered to be first-and-foremost riflemen. And special-operations units in the Marines are not accorded the same respect as they are in other branches. The Marines view special operations as simply another realm of warfighting. Marines are Marines, and no individual Marine or Marine unit is considered more elite than the other.

Consequently, newly minted Marines believe themselves to be superior to other soldiers, spawning understandable resentment from other branches.

But do Marines actually fight better than other soldiers? Rivals argue it's not so much their ability to fight - though that's never been a question - but that Marines are simply masters in the art of public relations. President Harry Truman once stated that Marines "have a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's." Fact is, while other armed services have lured recruits with promises of money for college, "a great way of life," or "being all you can be;" the Marines have asked only "for a few good men [and today, women]" with the mettle to join their ranks.

Not surprisingly, there have been numerous unsuccessful efforts - primarily on the part of some Army and Navy officers - to have the Corps either disbanded or absorbed into the Army or Navy. Most of those efforts took place in the first half of the 20th Century. But even after the Marines' stellar performance in World War II, Army General Frank Armstrong proposed bringing them into the Army fold and condescendingly referring to the Corps as "a small bitched-up army talking Navy lingo."

As late as 1997, Assistant Secretary of the Army Sara Lister took aim at the Marines. "I think the Army is much more connected to society than the Marines are." Lister said before an audience at Harvard University. "Marines are extremists. Wherever you have extremists, you've got some risks of total disconnection with society. And that's a little dangerous."

Of course, the Commandant of the Marine Corps demanded an apology. Lister was fired. And Marines secretly said among themselves, "Yes we are extremists. We are dangerous. That's why we win wars and are feared throughout the world."

Despite its detractors, the Marines have become a wholly American institution - like baseball players, cowboys, and astronauts - in the eyes of most Americans. Marines indeed may be extreme, but America loves them, extremism and all. And fortunately for America, her enemies in the war against terror will continue to shudder upon hearing, "the Marines have landed."