

# Faith and Family, The Story of a WW II Marine Corps Couple

## Introduction

On a blustery February 21<sup>st</sup> in 1945, a priest married two service members at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia. The bride, a female Marine, was stationed at Quantico's Brown Field in an all-women's aviation unit. The Command had created their squadron during World War II. At the time of the wedding, the United States was in its fourth year of the war. The groom, a male Marine, was assigned to a different aviation squadron at the same base. Fog and rain marred the day, with temperatures that ranged from only thirty-five to thirty-seven degrees. The groom wore his tailored "Blues" (the Marine Dress Blue uniform) which offered him some warmth. The bride, however, chose a traditional white wedding dress instead of her uniform. Friends of the bride and groom attended the Wednesday ceremony.<sup>1</sup>



winter in Quantico

One of them was Private First Class (PFC) LaVonne "Bea" Phaneuf. She acted as the bride's Maid of Honor. The two women had become close friends, living in the same barracks and serving together in Aviation Women's Reserve Squadron #21 at Brown Field. Like the bride, Bea wore civilian attire, which she describes as an "ice blue, long dress." Another Marine in attendance was Sergeant Joe Walsh, a friend of the groom. Joe's observation squadron, VMO-8, was training at Quantico before its deployment. Few men pay attention to the details of what a woman wears, and certainly after seventy-one years, fewer still would recall such particulars. But Joe is an exception when it comes to remembering what Bea wore on February 21, 1945. With a smile that accompanied his memory of a moment so long ago, Joe describes Bea's outfit that day as "a baby blue dress." Obviously, the passage of many decades has not dimmed Joe's recollection of Bea on that wintery February day. When asked what it was about her that caught his attention during the ceremony, Joe readily admits it was her appearance, specifically her "blond hair and blue eyes."

At the reception, the male Marines in attendance must have mentioned in their conversations the major campaign that had just begun three days earlier on a small volcanic island some six hundred and fifty miles south of Japan--Iwo Jima. It became one of the most well-known battles in World War II, in part because of the famous flag raising photograph taken atop Mount Suribachi on the southern tip of the island. Marines planted the United States flag there the day after the wedding at Quantico. About a month remained, however, before American forces secured the island. Marine Corps losses on Iwo Jima added to the total casualties that measured the human cost of the war for Americans. In mid-November 1944, United States casualties totaled some half a million men. By the end of June 1945, that number reached one million. Heavy losses in the last months of the war in Europe factored into that dramatic eight-month increase. The



ferocity of the fighting by the Japanese in the Pacific, however, contributed even more to the growing number of American wounded, missing, and killed in action. On Iwo Jima alone, the enemy wounded or killed a Marine every two minutes. This was the theater of war that Joe shipped out to less than two weeks after the wedding. His squadron left the West Coast for the island of Guam, in the western Pacific, on the day the United States declared Iwo Jima secured.<sup>ii</sup>

The marriage that began at Quantico on February 21, 1945 did not last; it ended in divorce years later. But as noted above, the ceremony did bring together another Marine couple, Sergeant Joe Walsh and PFC Bea Phaneuf. Their wedding took place fourteen months later when both Joe and Bea, after their military discharges, were once again civilians. World War II had ended with Japan's surrender eight months earlier. Without that global conflict, and the national mobilization it brought, Joe and Bea would never have met. Their individual life stories are therefore directly related to the war itself, especially since each of them wore the uniform that explains their attendance at the February 21, 1945 wedding.

Two values that Joe and Bea hold dear are faith and family, both represented in the ceremony they attended on that winter day. But at Quantico, in the midst of the greatest war the twentieth century would experience, "faith and family" took on added dimensions. Like so many weddings on or near military installations during World War II, the singular act of matrimony spoke to a belief that there would be a future for young couples. Joe and Bea, who watched their friends exchange vows, did not question that the United States would survive the war, even triumph in it. Their faith in their country led them to that conclusion. And "family" at such ceremonies was represented not by blood relatives but by the bride and/or groom's military



friends. For both Bea and Joe, when they held up their right hand and took their military oath, they joined a new family. It was bonded not by ancestry but by the powerful esprit de corps so identified with the Marines. Joe understandably still relates to the Marine Corps, having been a part of it for nine years. Sixty-nine years after her discharge, a frail Bea Walsh quotes, in a strong voice, the truism "Once a Marine, always a Marine." Her reference explains how she feels today about the Corps. In spite of Bea's brief time in uniform, she still identifies with those two wartime years. "It's so strange," she adds, that after all these decades "you feel that [esprit de corps] for some reason." Perhaps the "reason" relates to how her service in the Marine Corps incorporated two values that shaped her life, as they have Joe's--faith and family.

Both Joe and Bea grew up as Roman Catholics. Born in 1919 on March 18<sup>th</sup>, Joe spent almost all of his early years in East Orange, New Jersey, a suburb outside of Newark. His full name--Joseph Thomas Patrick Walsh--testifies to his Irish Catholic heritage. Joe explains that because his birthday fell between St. Patrick's feast day on March 17<sup>th</sup> and St. Joseph's on March 19<sup>th</sup>, the names of those two saints became part of his appellation. His surname gives evidence of an Irish lineage; indeed, both of his great-grandfathers had emigrated from Ireland to the United States. While growing up, Joe regularly went to church services on Sundays and Holy Days. Even though it strained family finances, he attended Catholic elementary and high schools. In his youth, teachers at such institutions were nuns and priests, not lay persons as is the case today. In fact, Joe was raised by a mother who had herself considered becoming a nun. Together, home and school thus instilled faith as a central character trait in young Joe Walsh.

Bea made her appearance in the world on January 22, 1924. Her parents lived in Somerset, Wisconsin, not far from the western border the state shares with Minnesota. Her birth surname of “Phaneuf” testifies to her French-Canadian roots; her paternal grandfather emigrated from French Canada. A Catholic, he met his future wife in a church choir. One of their sons became Bea’s father. According to Bea, her own mother was born a Lutheran, but after marrying Bea’s

Bea’s 1<sup>st</sup> Holy Communion



father, she agreed to raise their children as Catholics. Like Joe, Bea attended a Catholic school, but only through the eighth grade. While she graduated from high school, it was a public, not a parochial, one. Bea deeply embraced her Catholic faith even though she had less formal instruction in it than Joe had. It could very well be that without their shared religious identification as Catholics, their marriage might very well have not taken place after they met at the February 1945 wedding. In their adult years, the faith they had been introduced to as children had taken deep root. Because of this, one could argue that neither would have married someone outside of their faith. When asked if he would have still pursued Bea if she had not been a Catholic, Joe was honest enough to answer that he is not sure. Joe’s mother, in writing about her decision to marry Joe’s father, observed that “We had many things in common as Catholics.” The same would be true for her older son when he met a certain Woman Marine at a wartime wedding in Quantico, Virginia.

Aside from their shared Catholicism, Joe and Bea also strongly believed in family. In their lives before World War II, it was their respective families who stepped in at times of crisis. Both suffered a parental loss in their childhood years, although of very different natures. For Joe, his loss involved his father, and for Bea, her mother. Before Joe turned five, his father “disappeared.” That is the word Joe uses. In reality, his father abandoned his young family; he did not reappear for another twelve years. From the time Joe was about five years old to when he was seventeen, his mother raised three young children as a single-parent. Those years included the ones known as the Great Depression when the economy spiraled downward and unemployment soared. Joe’s mother received several forms of help from her own family. Aside from emotional support, relatives opened their homes to her and the children. But her primary financial support came from her own earnings. Those derived from a rooming house she opened and later from a job in a doctors’ office. When she lost that position, relatives again could be counted on.



Joe (on right) with his siblings

Her mother’s death when Bea was only eight fractured her childhood. After suddenly taking ill, perhaps from exposure to the polio virus, Bea remembers how her mother became “completely paralyzed.” She died the next day, as Bea recalls it. The children had been sent to the homes of various relatives when the illness first struck. Bea ended up with an aunt. The memory of the moment when she knew she would never see her mother again is still a clear one for Bea. “I was sitting on the couch when the phone rang. I knew what it was.” Again in Bea’s words, her father “went to pieces.” At that point in time, he could not deal with raising four young children on his own. They, therefore, lived with others. Bea stayed with an aunt and her family. “I grew up with relatives,” she explains, meaning, not ones from her immediate family.

In describing her father's decision, Bea once used the phrase "He abandoned us." To a child, it obviously appeared that way. When Bea was around twelve, her father remarried. Bea went to live with him and her stepmother. But the household also included three children from her stepmother's first marriage. Bea thus continued to miss the intimacy of the family she had known four years earlier, before her mother's death. Perhaps because of how splintered Bea's family had become after she lost her mother, she thoroughly loved a phrase a Marine used when she arrived at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for boot camp in the spring of 1944. She repeats it with obvious delight after all these years--"It is no longer 'I.' It is 'we.'" The "we," of course, was the United States Marine Corps (USMC).

As noted earlier, Joe's military service spanned nine years. He first enlisted in April 1938, seventeen months before World War II broke out in Europe. Just as the Great Depression explains Joe's interest in joining the military, the World War I experiences of "Uncle Harry" explain why he chose the Marine Corps. After graduating from high school in June 1937, Joe continued working in a grocery store, a job he had while still in school. Because of the high unemployment rate, better-paying positions simply were not an option. In Joe's opinion, "nothing [was] available." He therefore considered enlisting in the military. Joe's interest in the Marine Corps originated with Harry Stone who was married to a friend of Joe's mother. He had



become like a father to Joe. "Uncle Harry," as Joe called him, had fought in France during World War I, as a Marine. He shared stories of what was called "the Great War" with Joe when he was growing up. The courage of Marines in battles with the Germans became part of the American popular culture in the years after the war, and Joe heard about some of those campaigns from a Marine who had been in them, namely Uncle Harry. With few job opportunities before him, and Uncle Harry's stories in his mind, Joe enlisted in the Marine Corps in April 1938, ten months after his high school graduation. Aside from one six-month period, Joe remained in the Corps until December 1945, sometimes as a member of the Marine Corps Reserve, and other times as a member of the Regular Marine Corps.

Two aspects of Joe's military service stand out from those of other Marines. One is the varied nature of his service, and the other is his combat participation in the opening hours of America's entry into World War II. Over 600,000 Marines served in the war, with most of them assigned to assault divisions. The amphibious landings of such units on enemy-held Pacific islands, such as Iwo Jima, spearheaded the war in the Pacific Theater. But Joe was not part of such infantry divisions. The Command assigned him to defense battalions and to ground support for Marine Corps Aviation. Relatively small numbers of Marines served in those two areas. (Approximately sixteen million men and women were in the United States armed forces during World War II. Less than 30,000 of that number served in the defense battalions and only about 150,000 in Marine Corps Air.<sup>iii</sup>) Joe's story thus introduces the reader to Marine Corps units that are generally overlooked in histories of World War II that tend to focus on Marine assault divisions.

As it turned out, Joe's 3d Defense Battalion became the first such unit to arrive in the Pacific in May 1940. From then until the spring of 1943, Joe set up seacoast and antiaircraft artillery guns on United States islands in the Pacific. While he was between such duty stations,

Joe ended up fighting in the first battle American servicemen fought in World War II. The place was the Navy Yard on the island of Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands. The date was December 7, 1941. Located near the entrance to Pearl Harbor, the Navy Yard was within sight of Ford Island where American battleships were docked. On that famous “date that will live in infamy,” Japanese aircraft attacked the United States Pacific Fleet and military installations in or near the



harbor. As enemy planes mounted their aerial assault, “it was all confusion,” as Joe characterizes the next two hours. His battalion fired anti-aircraft machine guns at the Japanese ships which zeroed in on their primary target, the battleships across from the Navy Yard. A few weeks after that momentous morning, the Command detached some members of the 3d Defense Battalion from the main unit. Joe was one of them. He shipped out with other Marines to Johnston Island where they built defenses. “We worked every damn day,” he explains. Joe’s stay on Johnston supports a conclusion drawn in the Corps’ own history of the defense battalions. Marines in those units “endured isolation, sickness, monotonous food, and primitive conditions for months...” After over a year on Johnston, Joe admits “I wanted off the island.” When the opportunity presented itself, he thus volunteered for Navy Air Cadet Training.

For at least the six months that Joe was in that aviation program, he describes himself as “a smart ass, a typical Marine.” Such an attitude undoubtedly contributed to an adversarial relationship that developed between himself and his instructor. That person was a civilian and a woman. Another serviceman told Joe that the female instructor “hated you Marines.” If this assessment was true, confrontations seemed likely between Cadet Walsh and his instructor. After Joe playfully buzzed a field one day, he found himself “washed out” of flight school. He returned to the Marine Corps. Probably because of his six months as a Navy Air Cadet, he found himself assigned to a Marine aviation unit in the summer of 1944. For the rest of the war, Joe served with observation squadron VMO-8, which was part of Marine Aircraft Group-21 (MAG-21). It shipped out for Guam in March 1945. If the Japanese had not surrendered in August 1945, after the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japanese cities, Joe would have been part of the invasion of the enemy’s home islands. “Thank God it never happened,” Joe observed in recalling the planned invasion which most assuredly would have resulted in heavy casualties. In following Joe’s military service from 1938 to 1945, one can map the progression of the war for the United States, from its defensive posture, to the opening hours of its involvement, and finally, to the peace. When Japan surrendered in August 1945, Joe described the moment he heard the news as ushering in, for him, “a relief unknown for years.”



Bea’s Marine Corps service may not have been as dramatic as Joe’s, but it also can serve to teach students of World War II about the historic role women played in the United States military during the country’s mobilization. Within fourteen months of America’s entry into World War II, all of the armed forces sought women inductees in order to, as the slogan went, “Free a Man to Fight.” The Army became the first branch to recruit women in May 1942. The Navy followed the Army two months later. In November 1942, Congress authorized women’s

enlistment in the Coast Guard. The Marine Corps became the last service area to induct women when Congress authorized their enlistment in February 1943. At their high points, some 100,000 women served in the Army, about 86,000 in the Navy, approximately 10,000 in the Coast Guard, and Women Marines numbered around 17,600.<sup>iv</sup>

Bea spent her two years of Marine Corps service in Quantico, Virginia. Altogether, women made up about two percent of Americans in uniform during the war. Like Joe's story of service in defense battalions and Marine Corps aviation, as well as his membership in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, Bea's experiences add to the history of another often overlooked group of World War II veterans. The Corps' recruitment posters urged women to enlist in order to "Free a Marine to Fight." Yet Bea and other Women Marines met criticism from some civilians and resentment from some Marines. The former questioned the motives of women who joined the armed forces as people envisioned stereotypes of women looking for a husband; some civilians even viewed women who joined the military as morally "loose." Some Marines also proved less than supportive of females who enlisted in a very male-oriented branch of service.



For Bea, her decision to enlist echoed the reason why so many other women signed up--"I wanted to do something to help [in the war effort]." After boot camp, Bea was assigned to Aviation Women's Reserve Squadron #21 at Quantico's Brown Field. She worked in Assembly and Repair (A & R). Her enlistment, Bea forcefully explains, was rooted in her patriotism. She did not see herself as a young woman in the vanguard of a watershed moment in women's history. Instead, Bea saw herself as a young American who wanted to contribute to the war. Without realizing it, though, Bea helped to change history. Just two years after her discharge, Congress passed legislation to permanently integrate women into the armed forces.

Perhaps more important than illustrating the progression of the war, Joe and Bea's stories offer two character lessons--faith and family--for the generations that follow them. In World War II those traits took on a civil and military meaning. When they reached adulthood, Joe and Bea still practiced the Catholicism that had been so central to their childhoods. At the same time, they embraced another faith, one in the public sphere. Like other Americans, they believed without reservation that eventually their country would triumph over the forces of evil. Joe and Bea unconsciously transferred the personal faith that had sustained them to a public faith in their country's war effort. Joe would serve in whatever unit the Marine Corps placed him in and for whatever length of time the national war effort demanded. Bea felt the same way.

Just as their faith took on new meaning during the war years, so did their definition of family. It came to embrace the military. Although Bea has long forgotten the particulars of her eight weeks in boot camp, she does recall one clear message drill instructors stressed to Marine recruits. As Bea repeats it, "We were taught that we were a family." As a Marine, too, Joe of course shared that esprit de corps. But decades later, he also came to identify with a special group of World War II veterans. Over forty years after the war ended, Joe became active in two chapters of the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association. When asked why he joined, his reply was a simple one--"for the guys." Understand that the chapter veterans he associated with were not men he personally knew during the war. Instead, they were sailors, soldiers, and Marines with

whom he felt a bond because of the experience they shared on December 7, 1941. Joe and Bea's beliefs in faith and family serve as examples to us all, whether they are practiced in our private lives or in the public arena.

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<sup>i</sup> Weather conditions for February 21, 1945 are taken from [www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KNYG/1945/2/21/DailyHistory.html?req\\_cit...](http://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KNYG/1945/2/21/DailyHistory.html?req_cit...) (accessed January 8, 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> Because of the International Dateline, dates in the battle for Iwo Jima are one day earlier when referring to locations on the eastern side of that dateline, such as Quantico, Virginia. For the casualty figures, see "Iwo Jima Cost A Man Every two Minutes," *Daily Times-Advocate*, March 17, 1945, p. 1; "Casualties Pass Half-Million Mark," *Daily Times-Advocate*, November 10, 1944, p. 1; "U.S. Casualties in Two Wars Reach 1,030,679," *Daily Times-Advocate*, June 29, 1945, p. 1. (The *Daily Times-Advocate* was a newspaper published in Escondido, California for communities in San Diego's North County. The foregoing newspaper articles quoted press releases from the War Department.)

<sup>iii</sup> Major Charles D. Melson, USMC (Ret.), *Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions in World War II* (Washington, D.C., 1996), p. 19 notes that at its peak, 26,685 Marines and sailors served in the nineteen Marine defense battalions, although that number "does not include the various replacement drafts that kept them at or near authorized strength." Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington, D.C., 1952), p. vii uses the 150,000 number. However, Benis M. Frank and Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *Victory and Occupation, History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* (Washington, D.C., 1968), p. 435 cite a "peak strength" of Marines in Marine Corps Aviation on January 31, 1945 as 125,162.

<sup>iv</sup> D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America, Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 20 gives the legislation dates for all branches. Women who enlisted in the Army joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). In June 1943 new legislation dropped the word "auxiliary," integrating women more fully into the Army. The WAAC now became the WAC, the Women's Army Corps. Navy women were known as WAVES, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. The SPARS became the female arm of the Coast Guard (SPARS comes from the Coast Guard's motto of Semper Paratus, "Always Ready"). Women who enlisted in the Marine Corps had no special name aside from the one they proudly carried, Women Marines. If Army and Navy nurses (47,000 and 11,000 respectively) are added to the "peak wartime enrollments" of the women in their service branches, a total of 271,600 women wore the uniform in World War II. That number increases to about 350,000 if, instead of peak wartime enrollments, the "total number who served at one time or another" is counted; by branch of service, that was some 140,000 WACS; 100,000 WAVES; 13,000 SPARS; 23,000 Women Marines; 60,000 Army nurses and 14,000 Navy nurses. (Campbell, *Women at War*, pp. 20, 256n.)