THE POST-VIETNAM PERIOD

World War II had firmly established the Marine Corps as a significant member of the nation's Armed Forces with unique expertise in amphibious operations, and Korea validated the need for that expertise in the Cold War. In Vietnam, after demonstrating its capability to serve as an amphibious force-in-readiness and projecting American power ashore in 1965, the Marine Corps was relegated to the role of a "second land army," a role for which it was not well-suited.

As Marine withdrew from Vietnam, the Marine Corps sought again to position itself as the world's premier amphibious and expeditionary force. Testifying before Congress in early 1970, Marine Corps Commandant General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., stated, "Our existing plans and programs are directed toward a hard, lean, fully combat ready and professional force with emphasis upon expertly trained and highly motivated personnel."

As America withdrew from Vietnam, peacetime economics again took effect as they had after previous conflicts, and by the end of 1975 the Marines' active-duty strength dropped to 195,951. This reduction allowed the Corps to eliminate personnel who did not meet the highest standards of the service, and, as always, budgetary restraints required creative solutions to fulfill its mission.

During the previous 10 years the contribution of the Corps to the Armed Forces had risen to 29 percent of the total manpower provided, while its share of the defense budget had increased by only 8 percent. To "pull our heads out of the jungle and get back into the amphibious business," reestablish rapport with the American public, and deal with overdue base construction and modernization imposed serious financial pressures on the Corps, but it would be done. The first task would be to counter the invidious drug abuse and racial turmoil permeating the service, with Camp Lejeune at the epicenter of the disharmony.

In 1971 the Corps initiated innovative human relations/equal opportunity training and drug abuse/exemption programs with gratifying results. By 1972 racial strife had been contained. Blatantly discriminatory practices in the selling and rental of off base housing were effectively eliminated by base commanding general H. Lloyd Wilkerson, acting in conjunction with city and county officials. Internally, the Marine Corps pursued the sustainable remedy of obtaining more proportionate representation in the ranks of its officers and senior staff NCOs. The number of African-American officers consequently rose from 48 in 1964, to 155 in 1967, and then to 282 in 1973.

Life at Camp Lejeune

During the 1970s the 2nd MarDiv, supported by air combat units and Force Troops, continued its arduous training and deployment schedules at Camp Lejeune. Combat support units also returned to the division. In 1975 Force Troops was co-designated as Force Troops/2nd Force Service Support Group (FSSG), and in 1978 the name was changed simply to 2nd FSSG. By mid-1975 Camp Lejeune was housing over 40,000 Marines. The landscape of Camp Lejeune continued to change as a consequence of new construction, particularly as a result of extensive Corps housing programs. If operational readiness was the

first priority of the Marine Corps, enhancing the "quality of life" of Marines and their families was a close second.

The draft was discontinued in 1972, and with the "All-Volunteer Force" concept embraced by the Department of Defense, quality of life improvements were essential to acquire and retain the desired number of top-notch Marines. New construction of family housing and improved bachelor accommodations were part of the solution. Watkins Village, dedicated in honor of Medal of Honor winner Staff Sergeant Lewis G. Watkins, was opened on 5 August 1977 adjacent to Berkeley Manor, adding 250 townhouse-style quarters to the base's 4,205 family units. There had been a reduction in the number of family units at the base because many of the substandard trailers were phased out. And, following the example of French Creek in 1968, 31 new, motel- style Bachelor Enlisted Quarters (BEQs) with one- to three-man rooms sprang up around the base during the 1970s at Courthouse Bay and in the regimental areas and the Industrial Area at Hadnot Point, MCAS(H), with additional units at French Creek.

Significant military pay raises were enacted to make the all-volunteer military more attractive and survivable, especially for the lower pay grades, which enjoyed spectacular raises of almost 400 percent. This newfound affluence had several immediate effects on the base and surrounding communities. Young Marines could now afford a car and a family and live off base, reducing the need for quarters on base.

Increased mobility brought more money to local merchants and more vehicles to Camp Lejeune. By 1976 there were more Marines and more cars on base than ever before. Over 40,000 Marines were assigned to the base, along with 32,000 dependents, 4,000 civilian workers, and 10,000 retired Marines. Of the 60,000 vehicles that came on base, 45,206 were privately registered and 3,500 were government vehicles. About 85 percent of the base's population had cars. Compared to the 1940s, when the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, and First Sergeant might have vehicles, or about three vehicles per 200 Marines, in the late 1970s there were 170 vehicles for every 200 Marines and one million vehicles were passing through the base's gates in a week's time. Traffic became so untenable at the main gate that the state constructed a State Route 24 overpass in February 1975. This in turn required that 30 buildings at Midway Park, accounting for 40 units of housing, be relocated to the eastern part of the project, the section of the development formerly known as "Dog Patch."

Other inducements to recruit and retain volunteers and enhance the quality of life at Camp Lejeune seemed almost trivial but were effective. For example, soft drinks were made available in mess halls, waitresses were hired for enlisted clubs, and motorcycles were permitted aboard the base. In 1973 the base also began to hire civilian attendants to replace Marines on mess duty.

Training

In November 1972 ITR at both Camp Lejeune and San Diego were reduced to Infantry Training Detachments after Congress questioned why it required more time to train a Marine than enlisted personnel in the other services. Less than a year earlier Camp Lejeune had completed the construction of 16 new open squadbay barracks, arranged in quadrangles of four barracks each, for the trainees. Infantry training was consequently placed in the eighth week of the

recruit depots' syllabi and also conducted in the joining units. In August 1978, however, the ITRs were reactivated as Infantry Training Schools (ITS).

On 19 April 1974 Montford Point Camp, the previous location of the Marines' only boot camp for African-American Marines and then home to MCSSS, was rededicated as Camp Johnson. The camp was named in honor of Sergeant Major Gilbert H. "Hashmark" Johnson, who had been one of the original Montford Point Marines and who had served as a guiding force in the successful integration of the Marine Corps.

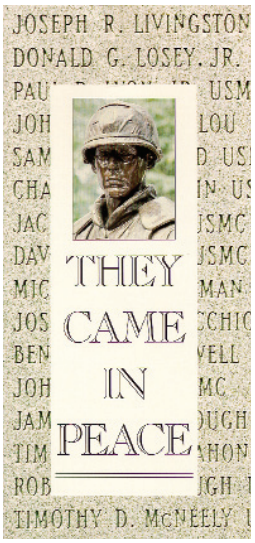
MCAS New River

In 1972 MCAS New River was named McCutcheon Field in honor of General Keith B. McCutcheon, who is considered to be the father of Marine Corps helicopter aviation. The helicopter designation remained in force until 1 June 1985. Also in 1972, HMTG-40, which had been formed at the air station in 1969, was deactivated and reborn as MAG-29. MAG-29 joined with MAG-26 to provide direct helicopter support to II MEF. Both groups retained tenant status at New River as components of the 2nd MAW. By 1975 MCAS New River, which at the time was the third busiest air station in the Marine Corps, had become home to eight helicopter squadrons; HMT-204; VMO-1, a fixed-wing observation squadron, which flew OV-10 Broncos; a traffic control unit; four H&MS and MABS squadrons; and the station's Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron. During the height of the Vietnam War these 16 aviation units, consisting of 5,000 Marines, were involved in over 10,000 aircraft training landings a month at New River.

Life in Jacksonville

During the late 1970s Jacksonville, advertising itself as "The City on the Go," maintained its improved prosperity, primarily because of its proximity to Camp Lejeune, which was the largest regional industry and provided about one-fourth of the county's total economic activity. The city's economic center crept slowly eastward toward the base. By 1980 the city's population was 23,068.

Not all economic growth was welcomed, however, at least not by base officials and those of the city and county. Court Street's notorious adult business area flourished and expanded, profiting from its increased accessibility and the newfound wealth of its Marine customers, and inevitably attracting a criminal element that soon made the area the focus of prostitution, robberies, and assaults. The "Second Front," a commercial strip that had developed during Camp Lejeune's early years, reawakened across from Camp Geiger to provide the same attractions and share in Court Street's prosperity. Efforts to control, or at least contain, Court Street's infamy by creating an adult business "combat zone" there in 1982 proved of little value. Finally the city banished adult businesses to the county in the 1980s, to the benefit and appreciation of the Second Front, which enjoyed its success until the drinking age was raised to 21 in 1986. The Second Front lingered until the North Carolina Department of Transportation began buying the inclusive properties for construction of the State Route 24/U.S. Route 17 bypass, which was started in 1998.



Detail from Beirut memorial erected at Camp Lejeune in 1986.