

Retired Marine Recalls Service in Nyack

by Gerald F. Merna

Nyack played an important part in my life. From 1950 to 1952, I proudly recruited for the U.S. Marine Corps in Nyack and was promoted there.

We met many wonderful people in Nyack and I was fortunate to enlist some of Nyack's finest citizens to serve our Corps and country.

Before we married, Dot took the daily Rockland bus from Piermont to Main Street to her job as a long distance operator for the Nyack Phone Company. I was living in Piermont then too. We often took the bus to Nyack for the theater, ice cream at Eagle's store, and to Charley's bar and restaurant for his famous turkey and roast beef sandwiches, and of course, an occasional cold beer.

In 1951, Dot Sedlack and I were married at St. John's Church in Piermont. St. John's was later destroyed by fire but rebuilt on the same site in 1964.

Following our honeymoon, we moved into the old Graycourt Apartments in Nyack at 127 South Broadway. As fate would have it, that building also burned down. Friends jokingly blamed us for this fire because we were newlyweds.

One day while walking down Main Street in my Marine dress blues, I encountered an attractive woman walking two fairly large dogs. Perhaps my uniform caught her attention. We chatted briefly. This gracious lady turned out to be Helen Hayes, "The First Lady of the American Theatre," on her way to the five and ten cent store as we used to call both Newberry's and Woolworth's on Main Street.

Years later Dot and I saw a play in Washington, D.C. that Ms. Hayes also attended, drawing a large crowd of course. We were privileged to meet her after the show. She indicated she remembered our meeting in Nyack, but whether or not she did or was just being kind, it didn't matter. It was great to see her again.



Mernas' wedding reception at the St. George Hotel. The recently well-restored complex of office suites at 48 Burd Street represents the last vestige of Nyack's great hotel industry. The St. George Hotel was built in 1885 by George Bardin, a very successful hotelier and restaurateur. It was the overnight stop for visitors arriving by steamer from the City, destined for Suffern, Tuxedo and other interior locations. The hotel was famous for its dining room and grand breakfasts of flaming rum omelettes which were served to guests before boarding stagecoaches to continue their journeys.

My recruiting tour was very successful, enlisting many Rockland youths, including several from the Nyacks. I enjoyed talking to high school seniors throughout the county, including my own Tappan Zee High School. (There were no protests against military recruiters in those days.) Here I was, a TZHS dropout, telling students to finish school, attend college, and then join the Marines!

Several youths from my alma mater, St. Agnes Home and School for Boys in Sparkill, were among my recruits. St. Agnes's legendary Coach Jim Faulk, a World War II Marine, often referred young men who he thought were beyond even his strict discipline and could greatly "improve" by undertaking boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. As an article in *The Journal News* attested, Coach Faulk was "Mr. Everything" to the boys.

Calling on prospects' parents to obtain their written consent for their son to join the Marine Corps was a very daunting challenge, considering the war in Korea was in full force at the time. I don't recall enlisting any women in Rockland

County, but did so years later on a second recruiting tour in Owensboro, Kentucky. The real proof of my success was being promoted to staff sergeant in May of 1951.

I also attended and occasionally spoke about the Marine Corps during civic meetings, luncheons and other events. One such occasion was a Cub Scout ceremony at St. Paul's Methodist Church where Tech Sergeant Gross and I carried in two large candle-lit cakes.



Sergeants Gross and Merna at the Rockland Theatre for the 1951 showing of "Flying Leathernecks." The theater was one of the great movie palaces of the era from about the 1920's to the 1950's, ending in the late 1960's. Many Broadway tryouts were staged there. During its early years, African-Americans were restricted to the balcony. Torn down in 1978 after being closed for 11 years, the theatre was on the west side of North Broadway where Victoria Mews, an apartment building with offices, now stands.

Upon my return from Korea in 1953, I decided to make a career of the Marine Corps, and ended up serving for 22 years. And, on my way to Vietnam in 1966, I was commissioned as a second lieutenant after having served in every enlisted grade from private to master gunnery sergeant.

My memories of Nyack are deep and warm. Recruiting in Nyack affected not only our memories, but greatly influenced our lives, including my future assignments.

The author is a retired first lieutenant, United States Marine Corps. He holds B.S. and M.S. degrees from George Washington University. For more of his memories, visit the Web site of his Alma Mater, St. Agnes School, www.stagnesalumni.org

Photo captions by Bob Goldberg, producer of "When Nyack Meant Business" and many other John Scott Armchair Walking Tours.