Marshall Tuck

Nicole Williams

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The Marine Corps: A Sense of Challenge

*“Marines are made, not born. 12 weeks of the toughest training in the world transforms citizens into members of the United States’ most noble brotherhood”* (Making Marines Overview).

Embedded in American, if not worldwide, lore is a preconceived notion of the United States Marine Corps (USMC). Due to the predominance of folk-like stories about Marines in movies and advertising, Americans have come to see the Marine Corps in a certain way. Accordingly, the USMC uses this idea of what a Marine should be to recruit, through an appeal to personal challenge, masculinity, and sense of brotherhood, those not yet in the Corps. An immaculate portrayal of these appeals comes in true form through the advertisement titled *The Climb*, a USMC recruiting commercial widely aired at the earlier part of this decade (The Climb). Through this specific text, a certain audience is targeted to join the Marines. Although some recruiting videos have addressed the families of the recruits or the financial merits of joining a branch of the armed forces, this video is distinct in the fact that it concentrates on the individual person. Moreover, what is more interesting than the unique method of advertising is the effectiveness of the text.

The similarity, or dissimilarity, of the portrayal of the USMC in this specific text to the actual USMC is immaterial to the case of advertising effectiveness. For the purpose of argument they will be one and the same. The 60-second advertisement starts and finishes with an ongoing visual of a man climbing a rock. Although extremely simple and superficial to the casual viewer, upon dissection, many layers of the text unfold. Initially, one notices the stormy weather, the rolling clouds, and the thunder. The scenery of red clay mountain formations seems to be something from the Western part of the country from Arizona or possibly Monument Valley in Utah. At this point, the three main points of the advertisement begin to become manifest to the viewer. The combination of location and weather makes it very clear that the journey is extremely tough, but, like a storm in the desert, is *unique*.

The commercial then shows a man (the Recruit), in nondescript athletic clothes, looking upward at a towering rock face emblazoned with the image of what is logically a former or current Marine, but more importantly, a Marine that has completed the challenge. The journey to become a Marine, although already established as difficult through the scenery, is now viewed as *attainable* through this Marine’s presence. The Recruit then starts his climb. As he rises farther and farther up the cliff, the viewer can see shadows of what are assumed to be former Marines also making the climb. Combined with the lack of climbing security, the true nature of becoming a Marine is revealed to the viewer, that a certain element of the USMC is internally driven through being individually strong, but that there also exists external support from other Marines.

The Recruit’s entire climb up the rock face is marked by images of what either is or is perceived to be true Marine life, from a Marine doctor checking on a patient to a drill sergeant yelling at a group of unseen Marines. Near the top of the rock face, the Recruit loses his grip on a loose rock, and almost falls to what can only imagined to be his death. However, the Recruit regains his composure and summits the rock face with help from an ethereal outstretched hand to a voice-over saying, “The passage is intense. But if you complete the journey, you will find your destiny among the world’s greatest warriors. The Few. The Proud. The Marines.” This closing remark, along with the former Recruit’s transformation into a Marine dressed in all related garb, commits the final message of the advertisement to the viewer’s memory, that the journey is *worthwhile*.

The three layers of the advertisement, notably difficulty, attainability, and the sense of worth, all can be seen as challenges to the recruit. Andrew Bernard, a student here at Virginia Tech in the Marine Corps of Cadets, states most clearly that, “The Marine Corps is, from my knowledge, the most challenging of all branches of the Armed Forces. You join the Marines to kill.” Sean Grindlay, another student at Virginia Tech who is in the Air Force Corps of Cadets, although being careful to not downplay his own Corps branch, testifies that “The Marines do some crazy stuff, man.” The idea of the Marines, from inside and outside the USMC, is most certainly accompanied with an idea of pure masculinity and bloodthirstiness. These testimonies can only confirm the public image of the Marine Corps. Although some may be unsure of exactly what Marines do, most know they are a subsection of the Navy and tend to be the fiercest of all United States troops; this idea is both instituted and confirmed by the portrayal of the Marine Corps in advertisements such as “The Climb.”

As the Marines is the smallest of any branch in the Armed Forces, very few people have personal experience in the Marines. My experience with the Marines is limited to my relation with my grandfather Clayton Marr, a United States Marine in the Pacific in World War II. Having received the Purple Heart for injury in battle after being shot in the leg twice, my only idea of the Marines really comes from battle stories from him. He is a self-described killing machine, supported by his testimony of being wounded yet still continuing to kill attacking enemies after propping himself up against his weapon. Bringing both a horrified yet admiring look on my face, my reaction to his storied is, in some ways, a microcosm of the public’s reaction to the USMC: generally horrified yet positively respecting.

The USMC official Motto, *Simper Fidelis* (shortened often to *Semper Fi*) furthers the dynamic nature of the Marines and increases the appeal to brotherhood of a recruit. Translated from Latin to “Always Faithful,” the Motto of the Corps supports the first and third facets of “The Climb,” being *unique* and being *worthwhile*. The Motto was adopted in 1883, and is relevant to the entire Corps as, in the long history of the Marines, there has never been a mutiny (Marine Corps Common Skills Handbook 31). The term “first-to-fight” of the USMC also props the appeal to *difficulty* explained in the advertisement. At the forefront of every American War since its inception, it is clear why the USMC is seen as the fiercest and most reliable of any branch.

No sincere opposition to the USMC exists, to my knowledge, either within the Corps or outside of the Corps. Within the USMC, any form of dissent is seen as a serious breach of Marine conduct, with penalties resulting from court-martial to expulsion from the Corps to punishments for treason. Outside of the Corps, it is also difficult to find any reaction to the USMC as anything other than pure reverence. Although some may disagree with American war efforts or the presence of the United States Armed Forces in general, no Marine-specific objection exists, mainly for the colloquial and anecdotal view of the Marine Corps in society.

Appealing to mainly a potential recruit’s inner qualities but also touching on the physical challenge of becoming a Marine, the advertisement labeled “The Climb” is very successful in attracting recruits and explaining the culture of the USMC. Effective on many levels but summarized in three terms, the commercial clearly lays emphasis on the fact that the challenge is *unique, difficult, and worthwhile.* The unique nature of the journey and the worthwhile aspect of its end result are clearly aimed at peaking a non-marine’s interest in self-betterment, while the difficult nature portrayed in “The Climb” focuses on the physical challenges. Whether the portrayal in this advertisement encourages the nature of the Marines or the inherent nature of the Marines reflects the nature of the commercial is debatable; however, indisputable is the ability of this advertisement to make the viewer respect and want to be in the United States Marine Corps.

Marshall this is, as you told me today in your conference, a very successful piece. It is your best work of the semester. You do a fantastic job of interweaving your summary and analysis together. You also build a strong argument and support it with examples, research, and interview. One thing I would have likes to see is some visuals.

I would love to submit this to the review board to possibly be included in the Compositon at Virginia Tech textbook. It is a great chance to be published and if you are selected you receive a $200 gift certificate to the book store. Let me know.

Works Cited

Bernard, Andrew. Telephone Interview. 3 Nov 2009.

Grindlay, Sean.. Personal Interview. 2 Nov 2009.

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*The Climb*. U.S. Marine Corps. Web. 3 Nov 2009. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wi8RTlFxcUI>.