



## The Days of Ruby Red Lipstick

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Marine Corps News|by LCpl Meg Varvil

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. - During the past 31 years, the role of females in the Marine Corps has changed drastically. One female Marine has experienced those changes firsthand.

"It's been an awesome ride, good and bad," said Master Gunnery Sgt. Pamela Smith, motor transport chief, II Marine Expeditionary Force. "The bad only made me stronger, smarter and tougher."

Smith grew up in Tuckerton, a small town on the coast of New Jersey.

"My father is a mechanic, so at a very young age I worked with cars," Smith said. "I was sitting on his lap driving a four-speed car when I was 5 years old."

Smith rebuilt her first engine when she was only 12.

When Smith decided to join the Marine Corps during 1977, she and her younger brother visited the recruiter together because they wanted to go through recruit training at the same time.

The movie "Convoy" was a popular film during Smith's adolescence. This and her early experience with repairing and driving vehicles influenced her job choice in the Corps. So, while looking at occupational options, she saw tractor-trailer operator, thought of the movie and her love of vehicles and knew it was what she wanted to do, she said.

Smith stepped on the yellow footprints at Parris Island, S.C., March 8, 1977.

The transitional training for Smith to become a Marine was considerably different than what female recruits experience today. In boot camp, the females' physical training gear was light blue denim shorts, pale blue collared shirts, white ankle socks and canvas shoes with flat soles, Smith said.

Females were also required to wear makeup any time they were in uniform. "We were issued makeup kits," said Smith. "No matter who you were, you got sky blue eye shadow, ruby red lipstick and blush." During boot camp, she envied the training males recruits received, she said.

"I saw the males with their rifles, and I just wanted to fire a rifle," Smith said. "A gray haired female colonel with bright red lipstick overheard another recruit and me talking about the weapons, and I distinctly remember her saying, 'My female Marines will not lay in that prone position.'"

After boot camp, Smith was sent to Camp Lejeune.

"When they found out I was going to 2nd Marine Division, my drill instructors sent me to the building where males were issued uniforms to get sateen utility uniform," Smith said. "They didn't have boots small enough to fit my feet, so I had to wear four pairs of socks." Several months after checking in to her first duty station, Smith married, and shortly after, became pregnant with her first child.

"Back then, you weren't allowed to be pregnant and be in the Marine Corps," Smith said. "You didn't have a choice. They discharged you." Although Smith was now a civilian, she longed to be back in the Marine Corps. It was not long until an opportunity for re-entry arose. "I went back in right when they started allowing women with children in the Marine Corps," Smith said. "I had to write an essay to rejoin."

She was required to address why her husband wouldn't be a burden on the Marine Corps and why she wanted to re-enlist.

"The recruiter said I must have been a pretty good writer because he didn't think they would let me back in," Smith added.

She had to begin her Marine Corps career once again as a private first class with zero time in grade and zero time in service, as if it was her first enlistment.

After Smith re-enlisted, her first proficiency and conduct marks didn't reflect the work she had done, both in her first enlistment and the beginning of her second, Smith said.

She recalls when she asked why her marks were so low, a staff sergeant in her shop told her it was because women didn't belong in the Marine Corps.

By the time Smith was promoted to corporal, she had proven herself in the motor transport field. The same staff sergeant who said she didn't belong in the Marine Corps recommended her as the best mechanic in his shop.

"It took a long time to gain his respect," Smith said. "You have to wear thick skin and give 150 percent all the time."

Shortly after, Smith was meritoriously promoted to sergeant.

During 1984, Smith went back to Parris Island as a drill instructor. There, she witnessed the metamorphosis of females in the Marine Corps.

"I was a drill instructor when women started drilling and qualifying with rifles," Smith said. "I volunteered to be the first female primary marksmanship instructor."

She was also on the drill field when females began throwing hand grenades.

"They gave us a class and then asked for a volunteer to throw the first grenade," said Smith. "Everyone took a step back, but I said I would do it. I grew up with all brothers, so I was always the 'Mikey will do it' kind of person."

Even as the years and the Marine Corps progressed, Smith remained a female Marine of firsts.

When Smith was promoted to master gunnery sergeant in 2004, she was said to be the first female master gunnery sergeant in the motor transport maintenance field.

Smith said she's excited about the huge leaps females have made since she first joined in 1977.

"There are a lot of women in the Marine Corps willing to strap on the same weight, run the same run, and do the same things. We just had to wait for the Marine Corps to let us," Smith said.

The recruit training and Marine Combat Training females now go through mirrors the training males receive. Female Marines are constantly deployed all over the world, including operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It's hard to believe how drastically things have changed for us," Smith said.

Smith has no plans to retire anytime soon. She has enjoyed the changes and wants to witness more of the progression of equality.

"I guess I'll get out when they kick me out," said Smith. "This is not my job, it's who I am, and these Marines are my family."

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