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The Calling of a Marine: The Military Career of Sergeant Major Andrew Yagle



Are Marines predestined? Are they born? I'm sure both are possible, but after spending time with Sergeant Major Andrew Yagle, I am convinced that the man that I was speaking to was born to be a United States Marine. The way that Sergeant Major talks about his career and experience in the Marine Corps, it's almost impossible to imagine him doing anything else. His passion to serve his country, his fellow man, and the enlisted Marine is evident simply through the manner in which he articulates his story of doing what he considered to be a privilege: being a leader in the world's finest fighting force, the United States Marine Corps.

Sergeant Major Andrew Yagle is a native of Miami, Florida, where he received a Catholic education, and spent his time playing sports and being with his family. Throughout his upbringing, young Andrew Yagle always knew that his future rested in the Marine Corps. “There was just something about the Marine Corps...I don’t know what it was, but something drew me toward it,” stated Sergeant Major Yagle. “I knew I wanted to be a Marine, and I knew it from as early as my sophomore year of high school.” As a result of this calling, at the ripe age of 17 years old, Sergeant Major Yagle found himself in a delayed entry program to attend Marine Corps Recruit Training on Parris Island in July of 1979.

Despite starting boot camp in the full heat of a South Carolina summer, Sergeant Major Yagle excelled in his time at Recruit Training. During his time there, he served as a squad leader, a guide, and was eventually nominated as his platoon’s honor man. “That exposure I had at recruit training and the drill instructors I had did a lot to tattoo onto my heart and soul that I felt like I might be doing this for the long haul. It was a great experience for me,” he explained. Sergeant Major Yagle clearly learned a lot from recruit training and applied all of the basic leadership principles he learned there, such as hard work, looking out for his fellow Marine, and leading firmly but fairly, to his career in the Marine Corps.

After graduating from recruit training, Sergeant Major decided he wanted to drive trucks. As a result, he found himself in the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of Motor Transport. According to Sergeant Major Yagle, part of the appeal of his MOS was that he could be tethered to virtually any unit, ranging from infantry to support units, in any location. He considered his job a “windshield to the world,” and, at one point in his career, he had a license to drive essentially every form of rolling stock the Marine Corps had to offer. Sergeant Major Yagle found a lot of success in his MOS, and as a result, he was promoted remarkably quickly; he

became a Sergeant in under three years with the Marine Corps. “I had to earn it every day. I had to know my business, and know my stuff. Ultimately, I think that made me better more quickly because I had no recourse but to wrap my arms around my MOS and became very proficient at what I was doing.”

When a Marine is promoted past the rank of Gunnery Sergeant, a decision must be made between two ranks: Master Sergeant or First Sergeant. I find this decision to be very interesting, as it testifies as to what a Marine desires to accomplish throughout his or her time in the service. This is due to the fact that if a Marine chooses to become a First Sergeant, he will say goodbye his original MOS and essentially go wherever the Marine Corps tells him to go. “I think a lot of Marines as they come up, and if they know they’re going to make it into a career, know by the time they get promoted to Gunnery Sergeant what they want to be: Master Sergeant or First Sergeant,” he explained. Sergeant Major Yagle chose to become a First Sergeant instead of a Master Sergeant, which surprised me given how much he seemed to enjoy the Motor Transport MOS. “As much as I love my original MOS of Motor Transport, I knew I wanted to broaden my horizons, and learn some other things. I wanted to be exposed to more of the Marine Corps,” he told me. “When you become a First Sergeant, you are at the beck and call of the Marine Corps; you can go *anywhere*. You can go to an infantry unit, a support unit, an aviation unit... and that’s what I wanted to do. And in fact, I went to the infantry, where I spent all of my time as a First Sergeant. And then the natural progression is to become a Sergeant Major.”

Sergeant Major Yagle spent many years as a First Sergeant in the Infantry, where he was in charge of a company of Marines (a company in the Marine Corps is typically 80 to 150 people in size). This was not new territory for him, as he had worked with infantry units in the past. “I worked with the infantry a lot as a ‘Moto T’ (Motor Transport) guy. I had a company and did a

couple of deployments as a First Sergeant,” he explained. “As a First Sergeant in the Infantry, that means that you are doing everything that the Lance Corporals are doing: all the hikes, all the humps, all the field time, and you’re simply doing it as the senior enlisted Marine within that company.” Throughout our conversation, I could tell Sergeant Major loved his time in the Infantry. It’s obvious that he, alongside a majority of Marines, is a man that wants to be in the game—in the fight. I could tell he valued being in the Infantry because he enjoyed working for the protection and safety of his country and his men, and it was evident that he enjoyed the application that operating in the Infantry gave him.

Sergeant Major Yagle never chose to commission and become an officer in the military. I was very curious as to why he never chose to go down this path. According to strict military decorum, officers are in charge of the enlisted personnel, despite how long they’ve served or how much experience they’ve had. The military is unique that way; all senior enlisted personnel,



even if they’ve been serving for more than 40 years, are required to salute an officer and call them sir or ma’am, even if that officer has been commissioned in the military for less than 5 minutes. It goes without stating when one examines Sergeant Major’s career, and more importantly how he led throughout his career, that he would have excelled as an officer if he had

chosen to pursue it. “I just didn’t have a desire to do it,” he told me. He said that he is “much happier” having taken the path he did. He went on to explain: “I think my niche is with the young enlisted Marine ... My passion is with them, and I enjoy working with them and being close with them. And I knew that in the officer ranks, [I was] gonna get further and further away with the personal reaction with the young Marine ... and it just wasn’t something I wanted to pursue. I was asked many times to commission, and I was flattered they would ask, but I knew I had a goal in mind, and that was to one day to become a Sergeant Major.”

Throughout my time with Sergeant Major Yagle, I wanted to ask him questions that would allow people to see a more personal side of him in addition to seeing the ways that he served his country. I think that intuiting what a person values involves not only watching who he surrounds himself with, but also noting who he respects and longs to be like, so I asked Sergeant Major Yagle to discuss the individuals who most influenced him as a Marine, and furthermore, as a man. “There’s a bunch,” he began. “If you sit long and hard, you can probably think of several people who influenced the person you are today... However, I’ll go back to my first tour on the drill field. There was a First Sergeant who took good care of us, and I was a young Sergeant. I probably didn’t have much business being on the drillfield at that point. I had to get an age waiver—you had to be 21 years of age and a sergeant to be on the drill field—and I had just picked up Sergeant and was the ripe old age of 20... I thought I was ready, and I thought I had all I needed, but I lacked what I needed most, which was maturity.” He said all of this with a smile on his face. “With all of that being said, there was this particular First Sergeant, by the name of First Sergeant Riker ... I called him on my day of retirement from the depot and thanked him for what he had done for me ... If had not been for him, and the potential that he saw in me, and his help in getting over the rough spots of my early career, I probably would have EASed out

of The Marine Corps and not had a career. He stood in the way of a lot of officers that probably thought that Yagle should go home.” It was clear how much this man meant to Sergeant Major Yagle and how much he appreciated what he did for him in his early career. This experience has shaped Sergeant Major Yagle’s current belief that anyone can reach his potential if he has a person encouraging and motivating him to be the best individual he can be.

After such weighty discussion, I really wanted to be entertained by a story from Sergeant Major Yagle about the best example of leadership that he saw throughout his time in the Marine Corps. His response to my question was probably one of the greatest parts of the interview, and ironically enough, he didn’t even answer my question. As I sat back, waiting to be captivated by some epic Marine Corps war story. Instead, Sergeant Major Yagle blindsided me with wisdom that was so simple, yet so complex, that it will most likely take me a lifetime to fully digest: “That’s tough ... but I’ll tell ya, I think the best way for me to capture this, and it might not quite answer your question the ‘right’ way, but I’ve always said that everything that comes out of a young Marine’s mouth is important. There’s always something to be learned from the young Marine. There’s always a lot to learn from the generals and colonels, but I’ll tell ya, I learn just as much from the privates all the way up to the colonels, because it’s those folks that will give you the unvarnished truth in almost every case. You can’t drink your own Kool-Aid,” he stated with a grin on his face.

He went on to explain the importance of the young Marine, saying: “I’ve tried to never forget them and to realize that, at the end of the day, the only reason that any of us are around is for them. And sometimes I find myself, unfortunately at this campus, having to remind others that the only reason any of us are here is for you all,” he explained, gesturing towards me with a

double knife-hand. “The minute we forget that, we need to pack up. We’re not here for us; our race is run.”

At this moment, I knew I was blessed to have a man like Sergeant Major Yagle working with me. I know now that he’s the type of guy who will fight for me, and whoever his subordinates are, simply because he believes it’s the right thing to do, regardless of whether or not it’s unpopular. That’s leadership. It’s refreshing to see a man live out the ideals The Citadel tries to instill in its cadets.

To best capture Sergeant Major Yagle’s story about his career in the Marine Corps, I wanted to ask him some more personal questions about some of the more memorable events that happened throughout his service. I asked to talk about his best and worst day in his career. This is undeniably a difficult task; I was asking him to pick two days out of 31 years of service. Regardless, his memories articulate several important events that shaped his career and life. He began with the good by discussing the ceasefire of Operation Desert Storm, during which he was in Kuwait: “The day and the hour that the ceasefire hit, we weren’t out of danger yet, but we knew, ‘Okay. We’re probably done fighting bad guys at this point.’ And that was probably a highlight for me, obviously ... so that was a good day.”

“Probably the worst day—and I liken it to when people say, ‘Where were you when John F. Kennedy was assassinated?’—but I was on the drill field for my first time when the Beirut Bombings occurred in 1983. On that day we lost 241 Marines, and I think that took the wind out of our sails, for every Marine.” As Sergeant Major described this memory, it was clear to see that these events still upset him to this day. At the same time, it also enraged him; the fighting spirit of a Marine spoke through him as he articulated his memories: “What was probably more

aggravating for me at that time was that I was not in the operating forces at that time. And, as you can imagine, every Marine wanted a piece of someone after that happened.”

As Sergeant Major Yagle continued talking about both his worst days and his response to them, the focal point of the conversation transitioned to another infamous day in American history. “But another aggravating piece about that is if you fast-forward to 9/11, and again, was another one of those things that was devastating.” He went on to share his 9/11 story, and how it impacted the trajectory of his career and life: During this tragic time, he was promoted from First Sergeant to Sergeant Major. “Unfortunately—I say unfortunately—” he began, chuckling at himself, “I got picked up for Sergeant Major, and was preparing to go to another Infantry Battalion, to forward deploy.”

Beginning to understand the gravity of this, I surmised that Sergeant Major Yagle was inches from leaving to go lead a battalion of Marines, with the objective of taking the fight straight to Al-Qaeda, the instigators of 9/11, with the goal of converting the terrorist organization into a parking-lot. “I was *salivating*,” he told me. “I almost had the orders in my hand, but the Marine Corps had a different desire for me, and that was to be a recruiting station Sergeant Major in Albany New York. “Long story short, I got plucked from the Infantry. I went kicking and screaming, but I did what the Marine Corps told me to do... Three years later I got moved back into the operating forces, which goes to show that good things will happen if you wait long enough, but it was still frustrating to be removed from the fight so to speak.”

Sergeant Major Yagle went on to discuss how his career in the Marine Corps shaped him as a man. “What started it all was that the Marine Corps’ values aligned with my values ... so, like a lot of Marines, I built resiliency, confidence. I understood how important integrity is. Integrity is the hallmark of a Marine. And I saw that in all of the leaders ... I was surrounded by

so many influences that helped shape me. I had a good, solid base at home, and eventually marrying and had three sons of my own, two of which joined the Marine Corps—”

It was here that I interrupted him and implored him to talk about his family and how big of a role they played in supporting him throughout his career. “*Huge*,” he immediately responded, with a brilliant smile on his face. The one-word response to my question conveyed how deeply he loved and appreciated his wife and sons. Then he went on to describe their support of him: “I think that if it had not been for my wife, who ya know, she was in it to win it, I don’t know that I would have been successful, or had the career that I did. Not all Marines have that support unit at home, and I made it a point, as rogue as it may seem, to propose to my wife wearing my service outfit uniform,” confessed Sergeant Major Yagle, laughing at himself. “I wanted to make sure she knew, if you decide to marry me, this is what you’re marrying. And she’ll never let me live down the fact that I had the ring, in a ring box, but I had it in my sock, because it would create bulges in the pockets of the pants, and it would be unsightly. She’ll never let me live it down! I didn’t think anything of it ... Fast-forward, we had three boys ... one ended up becoming a Marine officer, he is now in the reserves as a Major, and my youngest one was a Marine Sergeant, he is now out of the Marine Corps ... so there was something about the Marine Corps that they wanted a little piece of, and a taste of what it was like,” he told me. “They were a huge influence, huge support, and without them, I would not have had the opportunity to enjoy the success I did, because they were with me every step of the way, and would pack a bag in a minute, and off we were to our next adventure.” As I look back on our interview, I don’t think there was another point in the interview where Sergeant Major smiled as much as he did when he was talking about his family.

To conclude our time together, I thought it'd be interesting to ask a man as experienced and wise as Sergeant Major for some life advice. As of right now, I am contracted to commission into the United States Air Force in May of 2020. I asked Sergeant Major what advice he has for me as a fresh Second Lieutenant and how I should approach leading enlisted personnel. "I think, first and foremost, you take your education here at The Citadel, and everything the Air Force, in your case, has taught you and will teach you, and as you go through your training pipeline, take it all in, and realize that you've probably got the most up-to-date knowledge base of what we bring to the fight. And you're gonna take that to your operating forces and be tethered to NCOs, such as myself ... and you learn from them." He emphasized his belief that Non-Commissioned



Officers (NCOs) should be instrumental in the teaching and mentoring of fresh officers. "But keep your eyes wide open, and take it all in. But at the end of the day, realize you're in charge, and the decisions are yours to make," he said.

After spending this time with Sergeant Major Yagle, I can say with confidence that he is a serviceman, leader, and man I want to be like. I realize how privileged I am to have a man such as him in the leadership of my college. His story is a story of lifelong service, honor, and dedication, and I am grateful to have been involved in telling it.

My charge to you, reader, is this: Be a person like Sergeant Major Andrew Yagle, who is so passionate about what he does that people ask themselves if he was born to do what he does.

Be a person who longs to leave the world a better place than you found it, and find yourself in service to something greater than yourself.