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Veteran Feature Article

A Marine with a Helping Hand

Brenn Ritchie felt the struggles many young men experience in twenty-first century America. Out of high school, Mr. Ritchie was unsure about his life and spent some years drifting, spending some time at technical school, doing odd jobs, and ending up at Walmart. He chose the Marines because “If I’m going to do this, I should go for the highest grade I possibly can.” And following his service, his pride in the Marines has only grown stronger.

Stationed in the Philippines, in East Timor, off the Coast of Burma, and in Okinawa, Japan, Mr. Ritchie was able to participate in humanitarian efforts, and it is in these efforts he found his calling. In a short time, Mr. Ritchie went from being an out-of-shape civilian to a sweating recruit on Parris Island to a combat engineer in Japan to training officer candidates in Quantico, Virginia, with many stories and other experiences in between. He left Quantico to return home and pursue a career in the civilian world, which eventually brought him to The Citadel with dreams of an international scale.

The Marines changed Mr. Ritchie’s outlook on life, his attitude toward work, and his self-confidence. His is a story of transformation: His start in the Marines was not an easy one. Coming in as an average Joe from the civilian world, Mr. Ritchie did not meet the physical conditioning requirements when he first arrived, so he was placed in the physical conditioning platoon. Already out of shape, Mr. Ritchie “contracted acute bronchitis which took [him] out of commission for a while.” He uses this as an opportunity to encourage other potential recruits: “even if you go into boot camp and face an adversity, there are still people who push and get through it.”

Mr. Ritchie came from a military family (his father spent 26 years in the Navy), but he didn't have plans to join the service when he graduated high school in Summerville, South Carolina. He attended Trident Technical College in Charleston, South Carolina, but didn't enjoy his studies so he spent some time doing odd jobs. Feeling like he was going nowhere, Mr. Ritchie looked into the military and thought, "well, you know what, if I'm going to do this, I should go for the highest grade I can possibly go for, because if I can do the Marine Corps, that means I can make it anywhere else." On completing basic training, he says, "I became one [a United States Marine], and my family was amazed that I could do that." Becoming a United States Marine, along with all the opportunities that has provided, has made Mr. Ritchie a more diligent and confident person.

Mr. Ritchie took part in a wide-array of deployments in East Asia centered on humanitarian aid and combative training exercises. He began in Japan with Combat Engineer Company, 3rd Combat Assault Battalion (The Iron Fist), 3rd Marine Division, gaining the experience of a rifleman and an assistant M240 gunner. Afterwards, he was attached to a helicopter company aboard the USS Essex as part of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). Beginning in January 2008 with the MEU, he went to the Philippines, East Timor, and Thailand, and also spent some time on the Andaman Sea off the Coast of Burma for Operation Caring Response awaiting further aid to be negotiated. When it did not, he returned to the U.S. in July of 2008 and became a Humvee driver and a Combat Marksmanship Coach. In January of 2009, he went back on the 31st MEU, this time attached to the Amphibious (tracks) Company of BLT 3/5, where he went to the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia. He was a fire team leader in his platoon, the Training NCO, and received training in a Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) course that involved operational and defensive training for the storage, handling, and

cleanup of hazardous materials. Mr. Ritchie participated in five training exercises: Balikatan in 2008 and 2009 in the Philippines, Cobra Gold in 2008 and 2009, and Talisman Sabre in 2009 in Australia. He then left East Asia to train officer candidates in Quantico, Virginia. In the interview, Mr. Ritchie discusses how his time at Quantico contributed to his decision to return to the civilian world in order to pursue his passion for service and aid, eventually deciding to attend to The Citadel to study International Relations.



Here Ritchie is aboard the USS Essex.

Mr. Ritchie speaks about his most extensive and worthwhile experience in the Marines – his time as a combat engineer in the Far East. Japan was a cultural experience that brightened his young American mind to other cultures. While there, he took part in the world’s largest tug-of-war contest, listened to a speech by Akihito, the Emperor of Japan, and visited Tokyo to celebrate the New Year. Most importantly, he found his calling while overseas – service.

When I asked Mr. Ritchie why he chose to study Political Science, he gave some very

insightful testimony as to his personality and to his time in the Marine Corps:

“I’ve never been interested in monetary gain, but being able to do things for others and implement change in the world is something that has always interested me and especially my time in the Marine Corps and being in East Timor or the Philippines or Thailand and

seeing how people can interact with each other. Being an ambassador for good will, and for America as a United States Marine ... has really helped guide me to be a political science major with a focus on international military affairs here at The Citadel.”

The Marine Corps showed him a different side of the U.S. military. Most importantly, his experience in the Marines gave purpose to his life.

On his future, Mr. Ritchie says: “The Marine corps... if it gives you anything it gives you purpose . . . that’s what part of the Marine corps is, you’re doing things not for yourself, you’re doing things for others – whether it’s for Marines, Americans, or for the civilians of another country.” Becoming a Marine has given him the courage and drive to chase after dreams that he thought were out of reach before. He’s now setting his horizons on a career based on service, and a career on a global scale. He’s given thought to joining the Peace Corps, specifically looking at a mission in East Timor, an island country in South East Asia in which he spent some time during his Pacific tour; working for an international non-government organization like ONE, an international campaign to end extreme poverty and preventable disease, which he has already began working with at The Citadel; or for the U.S. Department of State where he’d like to coordinate relief efforts.



Ritchie in the Philippines

Mr. Ritchie embodies a common experience from the Marines – a changed life. In the interview, he highlights the values that he now carries with his personal brand: “The core principles of the Marine Corps – honor, courage, commitment.” He says that he slacked off like many students in high school do and that he didn’t have much of a vision for his future afterwards. However, he has matured. He says of his time in the service, “First it made me a man, then it made me a Marine.” Becoming a Marine has brought the purpose and drive to direct his future. Mr. Ritchie’s experience proves that he gained something extraordinary from the Marines – he gained a desire to help. He concludes the interview offering advice for young people beginning their journey: “Go out and explore more; take advantage of as much opportunity as you can.”