

IDEAS & ISSUES (COMMENTARY)

Marines, Meet Your Congress

Carrying the Marine Corps message

by Maj Jason Berg

A few months ago a fellow Marine asserted that “Washington is too far detached from the lance corporal on the ground for them to understand what is really going on.” While that perception may be true from his perspective, I believe as Marines we have the responsibility to understand and appreciate the relationship between the Marine Corps and Congress. In that regard I applied for the Congressional Fellowship Program to gain a greater understanding of how Washington works. I wanted to understand how politicians make policy decisions that directly affect my Marines. Was this gear I received just an arbitrary decision? What was the process of deliberation? Now that my time on Capitol Hill has ended, and I have had the opportunity to receive a brief glimpse of the process, I believe that the responsibility to close this gap between perception and reality with respect to congressional engagement falls on Marines who have had this experience.

Each year Marines assigned to the Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) work hard to foster a shared understanding in Congress with regard to what the Marine Corps provides for the Nation. Topics of discussion derive from the Commandant’s priorities, are anchored by the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, and include familiar themes, such as “America’s force-in-readiness,” that Marines provide a forcible entry capability, and that Marines are adaptable across the range of military operations. Thus the purpose of this article is to inform the Corps about how OLA engages the U.S. Congress to tell our story.

>Maj Berg is a logistics officer and is currently a student at the School of Advanced Warfighting. He served on Capitol Hill from 2008–11 as a fellow for Congressman John Spratt (D-SC) and in the U.S. Marine Corps House of Representatives Liaison Office. He has deployed to both Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM.



Members of Congress speaking with soldiers. (Photo by author.)

How does the Marine Corps get its message across to Congress? Quite simply it is through the OLA’s honest, timely interaction. OLA falls under Headquarters Marine Corps and is led by the legislative assistant to the Commandant. OLA serves a multitude of congressional liaison functions, including processing congressional inquiries, preparing Marines for testimony before Congress, and reviewing congressional policy actions. However, the most important function of OLA is direct engagement with Members and

their staffs. This normally takes place through liaison offices located in the House of Representatives and the Senate office buildings. These liaisons are manned with 12 Marines, including 4 to 5 permanent Marines, and roughly 7 fellows each. The fellows program will not be discussed here, but interested Marines should refer to “The Congressional Fellowship Program” by Col Raymond Celeste in the May 2007 *Gazette*.¹ It is the full-time mission of OLA:

... to facilitate a shared understanding between the USMC and Congress in

order to ensure support for the Commandant's legislative priorities and requirements; and to maintain the Corps' unique role within the Joint Force as the Nation's premier force in readiness.²

It is this mission that guides OLA in its day-to-day interaction with Congress.

The Marines of OLA carry the message of the Marine Corps to the relevant members and staff on "the Hill" through several venues. The first is when our Corps' senior leadership, starting with the Commandant, visits the Hill to meet with members and to testify in committee hearings. Such topics as equipment, personnel, and operations are briefed to congressional committees; e.g., the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. Senior Marine leaders also make office calls to discuss various issues and brief Members on the "pulse of the Corps." Various hearings on Capitol Hill present an opportunity to testify on issues affecting the Corps and provide a valuable means for Members and their staffs to gain insight on the direction of the Corps. Another venue is facilitating congressional delegation visits around the globe, allowing them to see firsthand how our Marine Corps is deployed worldwide.

Each year the Corps conducts a "Marine Day." This event is hosted by OLA at Quantico, where congressional staffers observe the Marine Corps up close. They ride on equipment, fire weapons and, most importantly, speak to Marines, the best spokesmen and women for the Marine Corps. Marine Day is key to delivering the Marine Corps' message in that staffers see Marines doing their jobs. Most staffers remember their Marine Day experience forever.

Additionally, the message of the Corps is delivered through such events as the Marine Corps Birthday cake cuttings, new Members orientation, and briefings by returning deployed unit commanders. Each of these events places our Corps front and center on the Hill, enhancing their understanding of the Commandant's priorities and relaying the current status of the Marine Corps mission.

Despite the perception that Congress is not engaged with the Marine Corps,



Dinner in Afghanistan. (Photo by author.)

my experience has proven otherwise. Prior to arriving in Washington, I was one of those who did not understand how Congress looked after the Marine Corps' interests. This is not surprising given that the vast majority of Marines will serve out their careers without any congressional interaction. One of the more prevalent ways that Members learn about the Marine on the ground is through committee hearings and briefings. Hearings and briefings can be clas-

Hearings and briefings are crucial ways for Members to determine how to vote on a particular bill.

Members also conduct research on an issue or hear opinions from personnel on the ground through congressional delegation and staff delegation visits supported by OLA. Members travel around the globe, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and anywhere else U.S. interests are important. Visits are planned and executed to allow the Members a

Each year the Corps conducts a "Marine Day." This event is hosted by OLA at Quantico, where congressional staffers observe the Marine Corps up close.

sified or unclassified, as well as open or closed to the media, and usually focus on a single topic or issue and include witnesses from the Services, the Defense Department, and the private sector to allow for different perspectives regarding the issue being discussed. Witnesses can include senior leaders, subject matter experts, and personnel with recent experience overseas. Hearings allow for Members to query "experts" on the topic and explore perspectives on an issue, receive feedback, and develop policy.

firsthand perspective on challenges associated with the area. Additionally, they provide opportunities for Marines of all ranks to interact with Members. Armed with the knowledge gained from these trips, Members formulate and develop policy.

In addition to overseas congressional delegations, Members also spend much of their time in their home districts. These visits are crucial. Members meet with their constituents and often visit military installations. Many



Staffer wearing body armor. (Photo by author.)

districts have Marine Corps bases, stations, and Reserve units, and Members visit these facilities and Marines to discuss important issues, as well as attend deployment departure and arrival ceremonies.

One of the benefits of being able to take trips and hold hearings is the opportunity to hear firsthand from servicemembers about what they need. With this information in hand, Members can enact legislation and influence military policy. Congressional changes to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that directed additional funding were formerly known as “earmarks.” Earmarks have gone away, but the ability of Congress to set policy priorities for Marine Corps spending has not. The origin of funding for new

buildings and equipment is through the NDAA.

It is important to keep in mind that most of the hard work on Capitol Hill is accomplished by staffers. Each member has several personal staff members who assist him/her in different policy areas. In fact, on this personal staff, each member has a defense specialist called a military legislative assistant, or MLA. Some MLAs have served in the military, but some have no military background at all. Nevertheless, I have often been surprised at the depth of understanding of military matters by those who have not served. The amount of research they do is staggering, and in their research they speak directly with servicemembers and leaders in order to gain perspective so they can brief

their Members knowledgeably about the issues.

In addition to their personal staffs, Members have access to subject matter experts known as professional staff members (PSMs). PSMs do not work for a member on his personal staff, but rather for a congressional committee and its chairperson. These PSMs work tirelessly, speaking with servicemembers, executing staff delegations, and researching the issues to gain the insight necessary to assist in drafting legislation and formulating policy. Indeed, they are the backbone of the committees, and their work is invaluable to providing support for the Services. It is important to keep in mind that many of these committees have a direct impact on the Marine Corps.

In conclusion, the continuous turnover of Members of Congress, based on the election cycle, creates a dynamic wherein the Marine Corps must constantly engage with Members and their staffs to further a shared understanding of the Corps and its mission. It is important to know about and understand the hard work being done by the Congress to remain engaged and invested in the future of our Corps. Likewise, it is crucial to understand how OLA executes its mission to ensure that the Corps remains engaged with Congress. It is imperative for Marines to assist in promoting this shared understanding by educating themselves about their Congress and its actions as it relates to the Marine Corps, and contributing when the opportunity presents itself.

Notes

1. Celeste, Col Raymond, USMCR, “The Congressional Fellowship Program,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, May 2007.

2. The OLA mission statement is available at <http://www.marines.mil/unit/hqmc/cmclegalasst/Pages/home.aspx>.



Staffers at Marine Day. (Photo by author.)