



More On The Youngest DI

Story by Eugene Alvarez, Ph.D.

Mr. O'Brian, who was more-or-less appointed by the magazine as the youngest DI. At that time it seemed as though the matter was put to rest.

Mr. O'Brian (Hugh C. Krampe) enlisted in the Marine Corps in February 1943, and became a San Diego drill instructor immediately upon completion of his recruit training at the age of 18 years, two months, and 11 days of age. He states that he "had four platoons of boots," recalling, "I believe three of them were honor platoons." Following World War II and service in the Pacific, O'Brian, or Krampe, was discharged in 1947 to embark on a successful acting career. He is best remembered for the role of television's legendary western marshal, Wyatt Earp.

Although no one seriously challenged O'Brian's status in *Leatherneck* until 1983, the magazine did continue to receive inquiries on the subject. For example, as late as the March 1983 issue it was stated on page 30 that "There may be challengers, but until proof is offered, we'll keep repeating that Krampe (O'Brian) was the youngest" DI.

"Records are made to be broken" is a

common expression that applies to athletic events and even for youngest DIs. For instance, in the May 1983 issue of *Leatherneck*, Mr. Richard W. Nash of Neodesha, Kan., informed the editors that he was the youngest DI. Nash stated that he was born 5 April 1924, and that he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps on 5 August 1941. His letter added that "soon after the war started" in 1941, he was separated from the Range Detachment, Camp Headquarters, Camp Elliott, Calif., for "temporary duty as a drill instructor," at the age of 17 years, eight months, "and some days of age." This assertion, based on his recollections, would have made him a younger drill instructor than Mr. O'Brian by approximately six months, and would have assured his claim as the Corps' youngest DI until some "16-year-old comes along." *Leatherneck's* editors requested that Mr. Nash offer more evidence that "might help establish your claim."

Although 16-year-old recruits have not been uncommon in the Corps, a 16-year-old DI would be difficult to record. Yet, that almost occurred. During the time in which *Leatherneck* printed two articles

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Since 1945, or earlier, it is likely that certain inquisitive Marines have questioned who was the Corps' youngest DI? Being interesting lore and trivia, the matter persists in letters to editors and in articles concerning Marines.

The question most certainly attracted a following after *Leatherneck* Magazine printed a letter from Cpl Mark W. Burkholder in its February 1977 issue that was entitled, "Youngest D.I.?" The Parris Island drill instructor inquired, "Is there any way that *Leatherneck* could find out for sure who the youngest drill instructor now on the field is? I would really like to find out. I think that some Marines would be surprised at the age and ability of some of the younger drill instructors."

The corporal's observations concerning young drill instructors was correct. *Leatherneck's* editors informed Burkholder (who speculated that he was one of the youngest current DIs) that it would be difficult to determine who was the most junior, past or present, without a tremendous amount of research. Moreover, the editors suggested that "maybe our readers have some ideas on the subject," and it was not long before the magazine received several replies.

One reason that ignited the search was a letter from Mr. Keith Oliver of Nicholasville, Ky., which appeared in the May 1977 *Leatherneck*. Mr. Oliver stated that he did not know who the youngest past or current DI might be, but that actor Hugh O'Brian had been a World War II drill instructor at the age of 18. The editors responded that "it is doubtful if there has ever been a younger DI" than



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on Mr. O'Brian in the March 1983 issue, and Mr. Nash's letter appeared in the May issue, the author corresponded with former drill instructor Mr. William C. Foster of Dearborn, Mich., concerning the existence of a Parris Island Drill Instructor's School during World War II. In his reply, Mr. Foster addressed the question and offered a brief biographic sketch of himself. Inadvertently, he recorded that *he* was the Corps' youngest DI.

William C. Foster was born on 2 November 1924 and enlisted in the Canadian Army paratroopers during the summer of 1941. Following 10 weeks of training it was discovered that he was only 16 years of age, for which he was "honorably discharged due to falsifying age." Foster then resumed his high school education until he turned 17, and with "some convincing of my parents," enlisted in the Marine Corps on 27 November 1941.

Foster arrived at Parris Island on 29 November 1941 and was assigned to the 1st Recruit Training Battalion as a boot in Platoon 189. When Foster completed his marksmanship training late in December 1941, he and an S.R. Shull were prematurely graduated from their platoon and were assigned to become junior drill instructors with Platoon 187. That platoon, which was two numbers junior to Foster's recruit platoon, was commanded by Sgt Merenna, its senior DI.

Foster recalls that he joined Merenna's platoon on 29 December 1941, and that the platoon's graduation photo was taken on 5 January 1942. Merenna and Privates Shull and Foster were photographed with the platoon, but the photograph is simply dated "Jan. 1942."

During the "second week of January" Foster was assigned to his second platoon, number 223, which was commanded by a Cpl Hicks. Yet, once Platoon 223 arrived at the rifle range, Foster was reassigned to become a senior drill instructor of a platoon of Class IV Reserves, still under 18 years of age. Foster recalls that these men were required to have had prior military experience, with a minimum age of 35 and a maximum age of 45 years. "With this assignment I earned my first stripe."

It could be added that he was half the age of some of his recruits. Most significant, however, is that when Foster was assigned to Merenna and Platoon 187 he was 17 years, one month, and 27 days of age. That bettered O'Brian's 18 years, two months, and 11 days by at least 13 months, and Nash's 17 years, eight

months, "and some days of age" by approximately six months. Yet, Foster's young age and its accompanying problems did not cease when he unknowingly became the youngest known Marine Corps DI on 29 December 1941.

By the time that Foster had four months of Marine Corps service, and was a senior DI, he was promoted to the rank of private first class, although he was not yet 18, a situation "unheard of at that time." During the processing of his promotion papers, a platoon sergeant (Fish) detected Foster's age and reported it to a GySgt Bennett. Bennett, in turn, reported Foster's age to BGen Emil P. Moses, who commanded the Parris Island recruit depot from 1941 to 1944. The 17-year-old was promptly transferred from the drill field and was reassigned to tour with LtCol Francis Drexel Biddle, demonstrating bayonet, knife, and Punji fighting for two weeks. Following the tour he was reassigned to Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Va., "for a crash course in special weapons," until he was sent overseas. That time in Foster's life was from 1 May 1942 until November 1945. In the meanwhile he had served in the First, Second and Third Marine Divisions, was wounded twice in two landings, and earned three battle stars. He received a "merit" commission in 1946 to second lieutenant.

Foster remained in the Marine Corps until May 1949, and in the Marine Corps Reserve until 1951. During the 1950s he worked for several chemical and power companies, and operated his own restaurant in Daytona Beach, Fla. From 1959 to 1964 he worked with missile companies in the United States and in NATO countries, and at Kwajalein Island, returning to the Pacific once more. Since 1964 he was employed with Ford Motor Company in Livonia, Mich.

When Mr. Foster, who is "a very private sort," learned that he was the Corps' youngest known DI, he replied to the author that he was surprised to find that anyone had ever been curious over such a claim. To him, "there was never any doubt, thus no curiosity. I was aware of it from day one."

Perhaps William C. Foster may have to vacate his place as the youngest DI to a candidate who can present his credentials, as Foster has done. Yet, if that should be the case, Foster's Marine Corps career is nevertheless enlightening and a lesson in Corps' history when drill instructors were not so selectively chosen, yet they nevertheless produced basic Marines who won battles in what will most likely be the golden years of the Corps.

