

The Ezell Legacy

by Amy Spies Karhliker

When I went to the National Museum of the Marine Corps to visit Executive Director Lin Ezell BA '76 ENG, I had a couple of hours to look around before our meeting.

The artistry took me by surprise. I take that back: I was surprised there WAS art. And then for it to be so stunning, so visceral, so complete ... I was amazed.

Now, the art is not pretty or happy or nice. It's war — it's heartbreaking and heartwarming, it's terrifying and courageous, and it's in your face. After all, the museum, located in Washington, D.C., strives to depict through art and artifact the experience of a Marine. All politics aside, one must appreciate the talent and abilities of the artists and their messages, their intimate portrayals of us at our worst, and, despite the circumstances — or maybe because of them — at our very best.

While Ezell is steeped in Marine Corps lore, she isn't herself a Marine. Ezell is an historian of military and aviation technology, with expertise in manned spaceflight. Her first job, to which she arrived less than 24 hours after her last class at then-Sangamon

State University, was as a junior historian for NASA in Houston, where she worked for 10 years. She moved on to the Smithsonian Institution, where she spent 21 years in its National Air & Space Museum. There, she spearheaded two of the NASM's biggest projects: restoration of the Enola Gay, the B-29 Superfortress bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan; and the design and construction of the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center air museum and hangar at Dulles International Airport. Her work led her to write six books, including "Building America's Hangar" and "Out of Harm's Way: Moving America's Lighthouses."

Developing the Marine Corps' museum was the perfect step after building the Udvar-Hazy Center.



Lin Ezell

As part of her training to take on the job of executive director, the Marine Corps sent Ezell to one week of boot camp so she could understand in body, mind and spirit what *being* a Marine means. She participated in the rifle range and some of the physical training, but she also observed. And she was converted.

Ezell had gone to school in the height of the Vietnam War, when public perception of the military was poor. Her perception of Marines wasn't necessarily positive: "They get down and dirty and they fight." Her understanding now has changed significantly. She sees Marines as human, as honorable, as vulnerable and willing to do what's necessary at any given moment. "I have so much admiration and respect for today's modern Marine," she said. "They're facing many challenges, and they don't pick where they're sent."

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Ezell majored in English literature while at the University of Illinois at Springfield, but she took as many history courses as she did English. She is from Fulton County, Ill., originally and while she likes to come home to visit, “D.C. is my place,” she said. “I like the work I’m doing now. I feel *vital*.”

She also has a master’s degree in public administration from the University of Maryland, which might seem like an odd addition to English and history. “But,” she said, “no matter what field you get into — if you’re a doctor, a scientist, an engineer — you end up managing other doctors, scientists and engineers. You don’t get into management necessarily because you’re good at it. I saw that I was good at managing other people’s creativity. I think that’s something I do well.”

Ezell is strong, self-assured, confident. She’s smart, and she knows what she’s doing. She recognizes the advantages strength and confidence bring to her position working with military personnel — trying to bring the historic, the educational, the aesthetic together with the authoritative, the hierarchical and the rigid.

“I’ve been told by my military counterparts that I’m a ‘70-percenter,’” said Ezell.

“If you have to come up with a plan on the fly, you can’t wait to have 100 percent of it worked out. You might be dead. If you get a plan that’s 75 percent good, you gotta go with it.”

“I didn’t know I was doing that,” she said of her early days at the museum. “I was trusting my instincts and charging forward, even though I might not have had every

detail worked out.”

She says the team at the National Museum of the Marine Corps is leaner, more versatile and more fun — even more than the Smithsonian. There isn’t as much separation between leadership and the trenches, which means she’s involved in a good part of the decision-making from the purchase of toilet paper to the selection of artifacts and art.



Much of the museum’s art comes from Marines themselves. Ezell says the Marines have a long tradition of deploying soldier-artists and historians, who pack rifles, take care of themselves and their buddies and document their experiences as well. Combat artists can finish their military service at the National Museum of the Marine Corps by spending their last year finishing their artwork or writing in the studios. This work is important to get right: Contemplation of this work 20 years from now will result in an

understanding of a battle, of our history, based, in part, on the combat artists’ or historians’ work.

Ezell also wants to present the information accurately. “No matter how well you do your work, what you do in a museum affects future generations. Your great- great- great-grandchildren might see this.”

The museum itself is a stunning example of architecture, art and function. It just celebrated its one-year anniversary, just in time for the 231-year anniversary of the U.S. Marine Corps. The 200,000-square-foot facility ascends 210 feet at its pinnacle, evoking the dramatic image of the World War II flag-raising at Iwo Jima. Current exhibits document World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as boot camp and the current Global War on Terrorism.

The museum comprises three decks. On the first deck are the central Leatherneck (a nickname deriving from the leather stock used for Marines’ uniform collars) Gallery, four permanent galleries and two temporary exhibits.

Within the Pacific Theater exhibit of World War II are the first and second flags raised on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, in February 1945.

The mezzanine displays traveling exhibits and an up-close-and-personal vision of Harrier, Jenny and Corsair aircraft — all hanging midair by nearly invisible cables. In addition, there is a mess hall and a replication of the historic Tun Tavern, where U.S. Marines were first recruited for the Revolutionary War.



The third deck is an observation deck overlooking the hanging aircraft and the main floor.

The museum is responsible for collecting and preserving objects that represent Marine Corps history not only from 232 years ago, but also from 232 days ago, and from yesterday, said Ezell. The museum currently houses 60,000 artifacts, of which 1,000 are on display, with plans to eventually increase its exhibits more comprehensively to include the periods from 1775 through the Civil War, the Age of Expansion and World War I. So far, in its first year, the museum drew nearly 600,000 visitors with little marketing and 100 volunteers.

And there's still more to be built: The master plan has the next three galleries open by 2010; the second phase continues Marine history and art past the Vietnam era, and adds more bathrooms.

Ezell's next big goal is to ensure accreditation by the National Association of Museums, a grueling process that can't begin until the museum has been open for at least three years.

As a visitor, I cried through most of my walk through the museum. I do not understand why soldiers keep going up a hill when it's clear that whoever is at the top doesn't want them there and continues to shoot at every body that moves and even those that

don't. But while I wept, I also learned that the people who are Marines are honorable in ways I hadn't considered, and, even when filled with fear, move ahead anyway. Theirs is the mythic and epic warrior path.

And Ezell is determined to bring that path to the light of public awareness. "If I have any legacy," she said, "it's what I've done in the history of aviation and now in the history of the Marine Corps."

For more information on the National Museum of the Marine Corps, please visit www.usmcmuseum.org/. ■

Photos by Amy Spies Karhliker