

Happy Birthday Leathernecks, and Goodbye to One Named Chick

Bob Hurley, The Greeneville Sun, November 10, 2000

You won't hear much about it in the rest of the media this evening, but today marks the 225th birthday of the United States Marine Corps.

In fact, I would just about be willing to wager next week's grocery money that you won't hear another single word about it unless you are somehow involved, like being married to an old Marine.

I have come today to wish the Corps a happy birthday. But more than that I have come to say goodbye to one of the guys who made the Marine Corps look very, very good on the streets where most of us live.

His name was Charles Ferrell, but you never heard him called that. Chick was the only name he ever needed. He was the only man in this town who could get by with just one name. His mail came addressed simply as "Chick." One word.

By the time I got to know him in the last 15 years or so, he was a pretty unlikely figure to be associated with the mean and lean leathernecks I've come to know in the past four decades. He didn't look a thing like the combat-ready Marines I've known as his shoes never shined. His hair never looked regulation. He had the kind of bushy mustache that would drive drill instructors mad. His jaw was far from square. And he smiled far too much to be a seasoned old Marine.



**Chick Ferrell:
U.S. Marine Corps**

In 1952, he was somehow able to survive a place called Heartbreak Ridge in Korea, but he was killed down on the interstate last month. He was wounded by the North Koreans on that ridge in some of the bloodiest fighting of that whole experience that most of us now simply refer to as "Korea."

But he mended quickly and returned to fight again, this time with a few scores to settle. The interstate did what the North Koreans and the Red Chinese Army had been unable to do: silence the voice of a warrior named Chick.

I've talked to a half dozen men this week who were his good friends. Most of them were old Marines. To a man, they all agreed on one thing: Chick Ferrell loved a good fight, from the football fields of East Tennessee to the battlefields of Korea. When word first came that he had been killed in an interstate accident, the first thing that hit me was how the same road had claimed another old Marine friend of mine.

His name was S.E. "Casey" Jordan, and he was really the meanest, leanest Marine I've ever known. He was not just a Marine: he was a recon Marine, the meanest of the mean and the cream of the cream. He survived hand-to-hand combat in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Then he came home and died on the road up from where Chick was killed.

"If I were a prisoner in China with just one phone call to make, that call would be to Chick Ferrell," said Claude "Bo" Austin, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps who grew up in Johnson City. "He would get it done, no matter what needed doing," Austin said. "Chick Ferrell would never quit until the job was done. If he told you he would get you out of a Chinese prison, then get your gear ready to move out because you would soon be leaving."

By the time I got to know him, Chick didn't impress me as being that kind of a man. He smiled all the time, and the mean Marines I have known were not exactly famous for smiling. By then, he was just the driver for Carol, his sweet wife, and the six kids he adored. "He never got over being a kid," Carol told me this week as we talked of the little boy that lived inside this old Marine.

"He just loved to have fun, and everything was fun to him," she said. By the time the grandchildren started arriving, "Papa Chick," as they called him, turned out to be one of the best and funniest playmates they could find.

Lt. Co. Austin was speaking in a Veterans Day program today at Science Hill High School in Johnson City. He told me how he planned to tell the students about a few old Marines he had known along the way. One of them was Chick.

"I've been around the world four times, but I have met only one Chick," Austin told me while preparing for today's speech to the students. "He was a super patriot, and I'm just very glad he was on my side. "He was not the richest man I've ever known, but he was certainly a millionaire when it came to the size of his heart. He has left a great legacy for all of us, and most especially for his family, because he was able to look at a world that is filled with problems and still be happy."

With a name like Chick to begin with, his oldest friends have always said it was very easy for him to specialize in fun. Actually he was "Little Chick" in the beginning, Carol was telling me.

"His dad was a railroad man in Johnson City, and he always took chicken for lunch," she said. "That is why the other guys got to calling him Chick I guess, which was changed to Big Chick after Little Chick started hanging around the railroad crews," she said. Still later, after Big Chick's death, Little Chick was shortened to just plain Chick.

"He was a great jokester," said **Delbert Marks** of Knoxville, another old Marine who was a prisoner of war to the North Koreans and Chinese for two years during the war.

"We grew up together there in Johnson City, and were more like brothers than friends," said Marks, a retired coach and athletic director at Knox Central and West High School in Knoxville.

"Chick was forever trying to pull something on you. I've seen him play dead on a golf course in order to try to scare his friends, and I've seen him play jokes on people who are fabulously wealthy. Nobody in the world except Chick could have gotten away with some of the stuff I've seen him pull."

Once, an old friend from boyhood arrived in Greeneville in a Lear jet. Chick had invited him to town to take part in a trip down the Nolichucky River on an inner tube and Chick made sure the old friend got the tube with a hole in it. "A few miles down the river, the tube went flat, and this poor guy disappeared under the water. But we pulled him out." Marks said.

Marks, who survived on turnips during his two years as a prisoner of war, was actually listed as being killed in action for five months, and that

too, was Chick's fault. "Chick saw a shell explode near my position, and he just knew I had been killed," Marks said. "Chick even told the folks back home I was dead, and they made up money to buy flowers for my funeral."

Even after the mother of Delbert Marks received a telegram from President Harry Truman that said her son has been killed in action, she refused to believe it. Just under six months later, the mother's faith was rewarded when Mark's name appeared on a list of prisoners being held by the Chinese Communists.

After both Chick and Marks returned home, they began what is still called "**The Delbert Marks Memorial Golf Tournament**" in Johnson City, and most golfers in the area are familiar with the story behind it. Chick and Marks dropped out of high school to join the Marines. Chick was a junior and Delbert Marks was a senior.

"We just wanted to get where the action was," Marks said. Once they got to Korea they served under the famous General "Chesty" Puller, and they were certainly not disappointed at the "action" they found there. "I left home at 190 pounds and came home at 120, Marks said, but the turnips the Chinese fed us were great compared to what the Koreans fed us." "But even in Korea, Chick was a happy guy. He was happy all the time."

To honor the memory of their happy friend, Austin and Marks and even Chick's family began a letter-writing campaign to state and federal lawmakers, urging them to do something about the speed of truck traffic on East Tennessee interstate highways. Chick was killed when his vehicle was struck by an out-of-control 18-wheeler in Hamblen County.

"We just think it is very important to get the big rigs slowed down on the interstates," Austin said. "And we think this is a fitting way to honor the man who brought us all a lot of happiness," he said.