



RUNNING AND GUNNING

A MARINE GUNNERY SERGEANT'S STORY

GYSGT. EMILY LEVY



GYSGT. Emily Levy.

TOP: Levy during one of her deployments in the Philippines.

BY GRACE BRANDT

When Emily Levy joined the Marine Corps in 2005, her biggest goal was

to see the world. She didn't want to be like classmates from high school who stayed in their hometown their whole lives. Now, after 14 years in the Corps, Levy has three deployments under her belt and has traveled around the world to places as far-flung as Kuwait, Japan and Korea.

There was one place, though, where she never imagined she'd be stationed: Mankato, Minn.

Choosing the Corps

Levy grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming and came from a military background; both grandfathers fought in World War II, while her mother had been in the National Guard and her brother enlisted in the Army. She said growing up, she always wanted to follow that legacy.

"Growing up, I'd always imagined I'd be in the military," she said. "As a kid, I'd see movies like 'G.I. Jane,' or see the show 'JAG' with the Marine lawyers. I was like, 'Those women are so badass and strong.'"

But Levy was also a smart student in high school and assumed she would take the regular college track after graduating. She was accepted into prestigious universities along the West Coast, but her parents weren't able to help fund her tuition. She didn't want to take out college loans for tens of thousands of dollars, so she decided to attend a nearby community college



Levy at boot camp with her father.

instead—but she quickly realized that she hated it.

“I was there for a month, and I was like, ‘I hate this,’” she recalled. “I was not challenged. I was bored in class. I felt like [the classes] were useless. I just stopped going to class. I thought, ‘I have to do something with my life.’”

Levy decided to talk to her local Marine recruiter, whom she had actually first visited in high school.

“I’d talked to [him] in my junior year, and I actually stood him up,” she admitted ruefully. “I feel really bad about now that I’m a recruiter; I think, ‘Gosh, I was a brat.’ So I walked into the recruiter’s office and was like, ‘I want to be a Marine.’ My circumstances were what drove me to serve, but when I think about it, I wanted to follow in the tradition of my grandfathers and my family and serve my country too. So it’s a lot of things that really drove me to decide.”

Levy said her parents had mixed feelings when she announced her decision to enlist. Her mother was “all for it,” but her father was more hesitant—at first.

“He was really hesitant about it, because I’m his baby girl,” she said. “But he came around to it, and now they couldn’t be more proud. They’re my biggest supporters, my dad especially. He wears the Marine Corps shirts and stuff all over the place. I have to buy him new shirts all of the time.”

Becoming a Marine

Levy enlisted in October 2004, shipping out to boot camp in April 2005. Boot camp was 13 weeks long and located in Parris Island, S.C.. It included physical training exercises, learning

how to drill together, weapons training, classroom work and more.

Overall, Levy said it wasn’t nearly as difficult as people fear, mostly because she was too busy to worry about things.

“When I got on the bus at the airport to go to recruit training, I was like, ‘This is it... I’m finally here,’” she recalled, “but at the same time, I thought, ‘I hope this bus ride lasts forever. I just wanted to stay on the bus for as long as possible.’ But once you got off the bus, and you step on those yellow foot prints for the first time, it does hit you—‘I’m finally here’—but at the same time it’s so chaotic, and you’re tired and you’re moving so fast, you don’t stop to process things. And that’s how the majority of the training goes. It didn’t really strike me, the transformation I’d gone through, until the end, when I saw my parents again and they were like, ‘Holy cow, look at you. You’re a woman; you’re no longer our 18-year-old girl.’”

In order to complete boot camp, recruits are required to complete the Crucible, a brutal 54-hour field event that includes food and sleep deprivation and more than 45 miles of marching. Levy explained that once she made her way through that, she earned her Eagle, Globe and Anchor pin that signified she had earned the title of United States Marine.

“I had a drill instructor who used to call me stupid,” she recalled. “She’d always be like, ‘Levy, are you stupid?’ And I’d reply, ‘Yes, ma’am.’ And she’d kind of laugh about it. When she gave me my Eagle, Globe and Anchor, she set it in my hand and said, ‘I knew you weren’t so stupid,’ and she smiled and walked away. It sticks with me.”

LEVY’S THOUGHTS ON HER MARINE CORPS CAREER

“I’m very glad that I did join the Marine Corps. The experiences I’ve had, the people I’ve met, the things I’ve been able to do... Seeing people give up so easily on their dreams because they don’t have the opportunity to achieve them is so frustrating. I have a lot of friends who always said they were going to do this or do that, but they’re stuck back in Wyoming doing the same job they were in college ... I’m glad that that’s not me. I feel fortunate that I’ve had the opportunities that I’ve had to be able to grow as a person and as a Marine, and also see the world, do my job, and now be able to do this job where I can help others achieve their goals and dreams. [I’m grateful I can] help these young men and women who’ve always loved the idea of serving their country be able to actually fulfill that dream.”

GETTING TO KNOW GYSGT. EMILY LEVY

FROM: Cheyenne, WY

LIVES IN: Owatonna

MOS: Korean intelligence analyst

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Arts in organizational leadership from Colorado State University
Years of service: 14

FAMILY: Four dogs—Boozier, Brutus, Walter and Maggie

HOBBIES: Running half-marathons, reading fiction books, spending time with family

BUCKET LIST GOAL: Run a full marathon

PLANS AFTER THE MARINES: Levy isn’t sure yet, but possibly opening a doggy daycare, becoming a school counselor or working in her same field as a government contractor

ENLISTED RANKS

- E1 - Private
- E2 - Private 1st Class
- E3 - Lance Corporal
- E4 - Corporal
- E5 - Sergeant
- E6 - Staff Sergeant
- E7 - Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt. Levy)
- E8 - Master Sergeant/First Sergeant
- E9 - Master Gunnery Sergeant/Sergeant Major
- E9 - Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps (the highest noncommissioned officer in the Marine Corps)

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Serving overseas

After graduating as a Private, Levy went through about a month of Marine Combat Training before heading to school for her military specialty: Cryptologic Linguist. She said she scored well enough on her ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test) test that she qualified for the job, and she took it because they offered her a \$1,000 sign-on bonus.

Levy didn't know what language she would receive until she arrived at school in California. When she arrived, she was given Korean. After about a year and a half of training in California and Texas, she graduated and was sent to Hawaii in 2008.

Levy was stationed in Hawaii for three years, but didn't end up staying there very long. When she was checking into her new station, she met a Sergeant with her same MOS (military occupational specialty), who shared a troubling perspective with her.

"She laughed and went, 'Good luck, you're going to be stuck in someone's office making coffee for the rest of your career,'" Levy recalled. "And I was like,

'No. I don't want that.' So I went immediately to my supervisor, and I said, 'I want to deploy. I want to get on the first deployment. I want to go.' And he replied, 'I've got a spot for you.'"

Levy ended up deployed three times, twice to the Philippines and once to Kuwait. Her first deployment, which left out of Japan, lasted about six months. She and her fellow Marines floated around the Pacific coast, traveling to different Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, Korea and Japan—but not Burma.

"A big typhoon hit Burma, and we were stationed off the coast to go in and provide aid, but they wouldn't allow us in," Levy remembered. "We just stayed for 46 days, cutting squares in the ocean, waiting... and they refused to let us come help, so we sailed back away. That was not fun. That was the longest period we went without getting off the ship. Everyone was going stir crazy in the end."

When Levy returned to Hawaii, she volunteered for the next available deployment and was sent on Operation Enduring Freedom: Philippines. She was there for 10 months, and at one point was the only U.S. female military member on an entire island.



TOP: Levy on deployment in the Indian Ocean.
MIDDLE: Levy (on the right) receives an award.
ABOVE: Levy on deployment in the Philippines.



Levy with her fellow recruiters in Mankato.

It was around the time of her second deployment to the Philippines that Levy had to decide whether to reenlist after her initial four-year contract was fulfilled. She said it was a tough decision.

"I actually had someone tell me not to let the first four years of the Marine Corps make up my mind about the rest of my career, and to give it another shot before I decided if I was going to get in or stay out," she said. "I sat on that advice for a long time. I ended up reenlisting at the last minute, and I'm glad I did. I would not have changed it for the world. I don't know where I would be if I had gotten out. But I don't think I'd be as successful as I am now."

Once she reenlisted, Levy became an instructor in her former intelligence school in Texas for three years, and then she received orders to Korea. It was a one-year tour from January 2014 to the beginning of 2015. She had barely returned to California when she volunteered and was selected

for her third deployment, this time to Kuwait, where she was stationed for about six months.

"All your deployments are pretty much the same: you work your shift and then you go to the gym and then you sleep," she said. "Kuwait is generally pretty calm and safe. There was never any point where I felt in danger. The worst part was when the power went out and we didn't have AC in the summer for two days. That was awful."

Recruiting orders

While Levy was in Kuwait, she was given orders for a special duty assignment—recruiting. She admitted that she wasn't thrilled with the idea.

"You can deny orders or take them," she said. "If you deny, you'll not be allowed to reenlist. I was close to not taking it. I really liked my job, and my job is such that if you're out of it for three

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WHY THE MARINES?

Levy said when it came to picking which branch to join, a few factors influenced her decision. She knew right away that she didn't want to join the Air Force, after growing up next to an Air Force base.

"I grew up knowing a lot of guys who worked on the base, and they never really struck me as someone I wanted to hang out with," she explained. "They were really immature for what I imagined military guys to be. Plus, I didn't want to end up back home. I didn't want to enlist and be like, 'Yeah! I'm going to travel the world,' and be stationed back in Cheyenne."

Levy's brother, who had served in four back-to-back deployments in four years in the Army, convinced her not to join the same branch because of how difficult Army life was. She tried to talk to a Navy recruiter, but she had trouble getting through.

"I walked into the Navy office, and the guy was like, 'I'm kind of busy. Can you come back later?'" she recalled. "[But when] I walked into the Marine office, the recruiter stood up, shook my hand, introduced himself... He listened to me. He was professional. He was what I expected out of someone in the military."

MORE THOUGHTS ON BOOT CAMP

IS BOOT CAMP AS CHALLENGING AS EVERYONE THINKS?

"I don't think it was as challenging as what everyone expects it to be, because we build it up in our minds. When we actually experience it, it's not as bad as we thought it was going to be. There were some fun experiences, and there were some experiences that I remember going, 'Why am I here?' But those experiences don't last. They don't drag on the worst things forever. You continue to go from chow to chow from day to day."

WHAT WAS THE WORST PART OF BOOT CAMP?

"The thing I hated the most was drill, because I'm bad at it. We had to practice all the time. I especially hated it because you had to ask for permission to use the restroom, and then run all the way across the parade deck to go to the porta-potties, which were always hot and stinky. I absolutely hated drill. And I just remember going, 'Well, when it's over, we get chow. As long as I can make it to that chow, I'll be all right.'"

WHAT WAS THE BEST PART OF BOOT CAMP?

"My favorite part was getting to know the other females that I ended up graduating with. I'm still friends with a lot of them on Facebook. My roommate, Martina, was from Brooklyn. I remember thinking, 'I'm this girl from small town Wyoming. No way would we be friends in any other life.' But she and I had this unbreakable bond by the end. We could complete each other's sentences."

"You're always running around trying to open up your locks and foot locker and get everything ready in the morning, and [the drill instructors] are counting you down. We had it down tight so that we could both get each other ready and help each other out with different things without even having to say anything to each other. I knew that she could never get her rifle combination lock unlocked for some reason. We knew each other's codes, and I could get her weapon unlocked and she could get my foot locker stuff settled. We knew exactly what we needed to do. We didn't even have to say anything to each other about it."

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years, you lose a lot. Also, the idea of going back to high school and dealing with high school students was not on the top of my list



Levy having a bit of fun in the Philippines.

for career goals.”

Levy was sent to Mankato in July 2017, eventually becoming the supervisor of both the Mankato and Owatonna offices. She works with dozens of Marine recruits at both offices, helping prepare them for boot camp before they leave. That can mean creating enlistment packages to send to MEPS (the Military Entrance Processing Station),

organizing monthly training events, overseeing weekly physical training, visiting high schools and providing other guidance.

According to Levy, her time as a recruiter has helped her hone intangible skills such as critical thinking and communication.

“I did not want to be a recruiter, but now that I’m out here and doing it, I absolutely love what it’s done for me,” she said.

Levy said that she’ll be here another 10 months before moving on to her next station, and she isn’t sure what that will be yet. She’s thinking of applying for a master’s degree program in strategic intelligence studies but is also interested in working at the Pentagon.

No matter where she goes next, Levy said she’s grateful for her time in Mankato.

“As much as I was hesitant and didn’t want to come out for recruiting, I would take recruiting [all over]

just to be able to experience seeing people [achieve] what they want to,” she said. “It’s very fulfilling, because you get to work with a lot of young men and young women, and they have dreams and goals, and you get to help them achieve those goals. I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

Grace Brandt is a wandering reporter whose home base is Mankato.

CONTINUED SUCCESS

The Marine Corps recruiting office in Mankato has a reputation as one of the most successful stations in the Midwest, consistently sending more recruits to boot camp than almost any other office. Of those recruits, Levy said about 90 percent become Marines.

Levy said a big reason for her station’s success is how invested her Marines are with their recruits, not just during one talk but through the recruits’ whole year or even whole high school career.

“A lot of the newer guys think that what we do is we go in and find someone, we meet them for the first time, we make them sign paperwork, and they enlist,” she said. “Recruiting is a long game. We can talk to a student when they’re a sophomore or junior or even a senior, and they’ll take what they learned from us into consideration, as well as how we treat them, like adults. With respect. Not just hounding them and harassing them, actually having a conversation about what it is they want out of life and showing them how they can get it. It’s something for them to sit and chew on for a couple months or a year... I’ve had someone I met the first month I was recruiting walk in two years later and say, ‘Hey, remember when we met? I’ve been thinking about this, and I’m ready to do it.’ So I think that’s a huge secret to our success... making that introduction and getting the information out there and maintaining a good relationship with a perspective applicant. We have a positive impact all year round.”

GENDER ISSUES

The Marine Corps is made up of 92 percent men on the enlisted side. Have you faced much discrimination as a woman in such a male-dominated field? “On an individual basis, there’s always [people] who are jerks to you because you’re a female, [but] I’ve never really faced any huge discriminatory issues. There’s always someone who’s going to say something like, ‘Did you get promoted just because you’re a woman?’ No, they look at the same standards for me as they do for you to promote us. I just happen to be better at my job than you. That’s why I got promoted. But those are very few and far between.”

ARE YOU ABLE TO FORM CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS WITH OTHER FEMALE MARINES, OR IS IT DIFFICULT BECAUSE THERE AREN’T MANY AROUND?

“Sometimes, you miss out on

the female mentorship, because there aren’t as many strong females who can mentor you, depending on where you go or where you’re stationed. I’m fortunate that in the intelligence field, there’s a higher amount of females than in other fields. I’ve always thought it’s because we’re smarter, and that’s why we end up in intel. [But] it’s competitive. We’re competing against everyone else, and that means females, so it’s harder to be friends at work with a girl that you’re also competing with when it comes to promotions and spots on a deployment. So you’re kind of walled off a little bit from the other females.”

WHAT ABOUT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS? IS IT DIFFICULT DATING IN THE CORPS?

“When you meet a guy out in town, eventually you have to tell him you’re a Marine. And

then he’s either intimidated or he doesn’t want to deal with that because you work with 99 percent guys. We can have relationships, but all of them really revolve around the Marine Corps, or the military. Up until I moved to Minnesota, I didn’t date anyone outside of the Marine Corps. That takes a toll on your relationships because it’s cool because that Marine you’re dating understands that you’re a Marine, but also at the same time, they don’t get what you go through. [Plus], you have to leave, they have to leave... You know you’re never going to be together. I dated a guy who expected me to get out so that we could get married and I could follow him around. And I was like, ‘Why don’t you get out and follow me around?’ And it was like, ‘Well, that’s not how it works.’ Well, that’s how it should work, because I have a career. I’m not going to sacrifice

my career for you. If you won’t sacrifice your career for me, why would I for you?”

ARE YOU SEEING SOMEONE NOW?

“I have a very great boyfriend. I met him in Minnesota. He works for the Department of Corrections. Our relationship faces that same problem—I’m going to leave here, I’m going to go somewhere else, and he can either come with me or that’s kind of it... But he can’t give up his career to follow me around. He works for the state, and he’d end up giving up his pension. He’s been there for 12 years. I could not ask him to walk away from a career he’s built over 12 years just to follow me around, because I would not do that for anyone else. So we’ll see if it plays out long distance, if we can make it work... and if not, that’s the nature of the beast.”