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JULY 2011

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# Sgt. Reckless

EXCEPT FOR THE MARINES WHO KEEP HER MEMORY ALIVE, FEW TODAY REMEMBER THE COURAGEOUS LITTLE MARE WHO BECAME A WAR HORSE HERO.



By Elizabeth Kaye McCall

**S**HE IS A FORGOTTEN HERO FROM The Forgotten War—a little sorrel Mongolian mare whose heroism during heavy combat in Korea was so monumental, the U.S. Marine Corps made her a staff sergeant. Called by the nickname of an antitank weapon with a ferocious back blast, Reckless joined the Marines to carry ammunition to the front lines for the 75 mm Recoilless Rifle Platoon of the 5th Marines. A true war horse, not of stage fame or fiction, she earned her stripes to rival some of history's greatest patriots.

"Marines passed stories up and down the line on the ridges. We'd heard the recoilless rifle boys had a horse, for crying out loud!" recalls Harold Wadley, of St. Maries, Idaho, a veteran of the 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. "They trained her to pack the rounds as well as the gun. That gun was

6 feet long and heavy; it took two guys to handle it. They would strap that on one side [of the horse] and strap ammunition on the other side to balance the load," says Wadley, who occasionally caught sight of the 14.1-hand pony-size horse on the battlefield. "You talk about baptism of fire!" Flooded with stimuli, the one-time racehorse was quickly desensitized to the weapons' thunderous roar.

Wadley vividly remembers March 26, 1953, when his infantry unit was holding Outpost Vegas about a mile from the front line. He'd gone to retrieve supplies forgotten by the reinforcement squad when the Chinese launched an assault. "The artillery mortars were unspeakable. It was horrific," Wadley says. Taking the wounded to the command post, Wadley noticed something extraordinary. "Well, here comes Reckless up that ridge where the recoilless rifle boys had a big foxhole. I couldn't believe it!"

One of only two men to leave "Hill Vegas" alive, Wadley remembers the day like it was yesterday. "Generally one Marine led Reckless and she brought up ammo. Some of the gun crew were wounded, so they didn't have an extra Marine. She made that trip all night long by herself. They would tie a wounded Marine on her and turn her around and she'd head down that ridge with all this artillery and mortar coming in. The guys down



**ABOVE:** Reckless poses in 1953 with her ammunition pack and one of the 114.5-pound, 6-foot-10-inch 75 mm guns she routinely transported amid artillery barrages during the Korean War. **OPPOSITE:** The only animal to ever achieve the rank of staff sergeant, Reckless displays her insignia.

there would unload the wounded off her and tie gun ammo on her and she would turn around right on her own and head right back up."

It was steady nerves, bravery, and a sense of duty beyond imagination—amid artillery barrages exploding at the rate of 500 incoming rounds an hour. "I remember in the flare light, looking back and seeing that little Mongolian mare heading up that slope without anybody leading her and going up to that gun pit," Wadley recalls. "She knew exactly what her job was. There's not another horse in war history that could even touch that mare."

Bought for \$250 by Lt. Eric Pedersen, commanding officer of the Marine's Recoilless Rifle Platoon (of the 5th Marines), from a racetrack in Seoul, Korea, Reckless carried grenades,

small-arms ammunition, rations, sleeping bags, and barbed wire; she even strung communications wire in addition to her primary duty of packing ammunition for the recoilless rifle. Trained to step over barbed wire, crouch down in foxholes, and head toward a bunker when incoming rounds hit, the little mare was beloved by the Marines, who took her inside their tents and used their flak jackets to protect her.

During just one day of the vicious Battle of Outpost Vegas, Reckless made more than 50 trips to the gun sites, carrying 386 rounds (more than 9,000 pounds of explosives). In all she trudged more than 35 miles across no man's land, through rice paddies, and up steep 45-degree mountain trails near the front lines. Wounded twice, she never stopped.



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TOP: Reckless is loaded up with 75 mm recoilless rifle rounds. She gained fame carrying ammunition and artillery for the Recoilless Rifle Platoon, Antitank Company, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division. ABOVE: Reckless at work on the battlefield.

Reckless' wounds weren't serious enough to get her a quick ticket stateside, and she saw more action in the war. Following the signing of the truce in July 1953, as her Marines began shipping home, she was still on active duty stringing communication wire. Government red tape threatened Reckless' trip to the States; she would eventually travel from Korea on a freighter as a guest of Pacific Transport Lines, first touching American soil on November 10, 1954, in San Francisco. A weather delay caused her to miss an appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (a prime time favorite of the day), but Reckless attended a Marine birthday ball instead, traveling up in an elevator to be the guest of honor and indulge her taste for cake.

After the war, Reckless retired at Camp Pendleton in California and was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant in 1959, an honor never bestowed on an animal before or since. Eight hundred pounds of pure inspiration, Reckless was decorated with two Purple Hearts, a Presidential Unit Citation with a star, a United Nations

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY MARINE TECHNICAL SERGEANT JOSEPH A. LATHAM, USMC (RETI)/LEATHERNECK MAGAZINE, COURTESY ROBIN L. HUTTON



TOP: Reckless is promoted to Staff Sgt. by Commandant Randolph McCall Pate in a ceremony at Camp Pendleton on August 31, 1959. ABOVE: Reckless' platoon challenges Native Dancer, a Kentucky Derby contender, to race Reckless at "The Paddy Derby."

Service Medal, a Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation, and other honors. In the 1990s, she was featured in the *LIFE* magazine collector's edition "Celebrating Our Heroes" as one of America's 100 greatest heroes of all time, alongside George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Mother Teresa.

"My dad always told me stories about Reckless from when he was in Korea," says Debbie McCain, secretary at Stepp Stables at Camp Pendleton. McCain met Reckless as a girl in 1956, when her father, a Marine Corps major, was stationed at the Marine Corps base. "As the years passed, I had a chance to meet all her babies [of four, Fearless, Dauntless, and Chesty lived] and grow up with her and see her through her golden years.

"She loved to eat anything — potato chips, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. One time they had to stop a poker game because she ate [the] poker chips. She would drink anything out of a can or cup, from coffee to beer. She would drink out of a canteen," says McCain. It was a habit she'd developed in Korea, where Reckless had drunk from

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY ROBIN L. HUTTON



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## Remembering Reckless



Navy Hospital Corpsman Sam Saba, the Marine 1st Provisional Demilitarized Zone Police Company corpsman, poses with then-Corporal Reckless.

The Official Sgt. Reckless Fan Club maintains an official fan site for Reckless. Dedicated to keeping the memory of Reckless alive, the group keeps a Facebook page that seeks to update people about new memorials in the heroic horse's honor. For more information, visit [www.sgtreckless.com](http://www.sgtreckless.com). To contact the fan club, e-mail [sgtreckless@yahoo.com](mailto:sgtreckless@yahoo.com), call 805.491.2661, or write to P.O. Box 1125, Moorpark, California 93020.

See the inspiring true story of Reckless in action in a 3.5-minute YouTube video (includes actual footage): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIo3ZfA9da0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIo3ZfA9da0).

—E.K.M.

Marines' helmets and eaten whatever was available, from scrambled eggs to C rations. "The Marines would give her whatever they had to eat," McCain says.

Even during retirement, Reckless kept a high profile as mascot of the 1st Marine Division. "She went to all their change of commands, retirements, promotional command functions. She went to birthday ball receptions. She went to civilian parades," McCain says.

Throughout the rest of Reckless' life, the soldiers' love and respect for the horse remained immense. "Here's the part that still gets me," says an emotional Wadley. "Knowing what that mare had done, the order was that there was never to be any more weight than a blanket put on that mare's back again—and that order stood." So, when Reckless went on her daily jog at Camp Pendleton, the Marine accompanying her went on foot.

When Reckless died in 1968 she was about 20. She is buried at Camp Pendleton, where there's a monument to her at Stepp Stables. Wadley thinks more is due the little mare with the big heart: "America needs a bronze statue of her back there on the Potomac."