

The Vintage Veteran Barber of L.A.



Once known for his haircuts on board USS *Cleveland* (LPD-7) Marine veteran Esgar Reynega now owns a vintage barbershop in Los Angeles called Leathernecks.

Now 42, the veteran corporal who served as a mortarman in the Operation Iraqi Freedom era opened his shop in 2019 with the idea that it would be more than a barbershop that specializes in military haircuts. “My business philosophy is that my shop is a place where veterans feel at home when they’re here,” Reynega said.

Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, Reynega participated in Devil Pups as a boy and Junior NROTC in high school, and said, “Like most Marines my age, I was inspired to join the Marine Corps after 9/11.” He enlisted on an open contract and served in 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, where they deployed to Hit and Al Qa’im in Iraq, as well as Egypt, Guam and Okinawa. After honorably separating in 2008, he worked as a medic, attended college, and considered a career in law enforcement. But Reynega missed the camaraderie of the Marine Corps.

“It was my wife who convinced me to use the haircutting skills I taught myself in the Corps to graduate from barber school and become an entrepreneur and be my own boss,” he said.

With his clientele ranging from recruiters and their teenage poolees to retired colonels in their 90s, Reynega’s shop is frequented by veterans of all military branches, but the ambiance is decidedly Gyrene. Leathernecks Barbershop houses a mini-museum of authentic Marine collectibles including an original Korean War-era guidon, a set of World War II-era bunks, and dozens of recruiting posters

going all the way back to the Spanish-American War.

Perhaps the most eye-catching item on display is a 10-by-7 foot Marine Corps flag from World War II, which cost more to frame than to purchase. His most expensive item is the famous 1917 World War I Howard Chandler Christy recruiting poster depicting a “Christy Girl” (a successor to the “Gibson Girl” illustrations) in dress blues with the slogan, “If You Want to Fight, Join the Marines.”

Reynega began his Marine Corps collection while working at a veterans’ homeless shelter in Hollywood, where he noticed a vintage movie poster for sale from the 1951 World War II film “Halls of Montezuma” for \$20. Since that first acquisition, Reynega has amassed hundreds of genuine Marine Corps items. “I have only about half of my collection on display in the shop. The rest is at home,” he says of his collection. He also has a

By Ty A. Ford

Esgar Reynega knew he was no ordinary “barracks barber.”

While deployed on USS *Cleveland* (LPD-7) with the 13th MEU in 2005, his tonsorial skills were so renowned that not only did he cut more than 100 Marines’ hair regularly but his battalion commander flew weekly from the USS *Tarawa* (LHA-1) for a haircut. Reynega’s haircutting reputation was such that his commanding officer even jokingly asked him, “What are you going to call the barbershop you’re going to build someday?”

Eighteen years later, Leathernecks Barbershop in the Canoga Park district of Los Angeles is not only a shop where active and veteran L.A. Marines keep themselves looking sharp, but it’s also a veritable Devil Dog sanctuary showcasing Reynega’s amazing collection of historical Marine Corps memorabilia.

COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA

LEATHERNECKS

BARBER SHOP

EST. 1775



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Esgar Reynega served as a mortarman during Operation Iraqi Freedom and left the Corps as a corporal in 2008. (Photos courtesy of Esgar Reynega)



Below: During his Marine Corps service, Esgar Reynega deployed with 2/1 to Hit and Al Qa'im in Iraq.



COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA



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Adorned with vintage barber chairs (above) and Marine Corps memorabilia, from World War II and before, Leathernecks has become a hot spot for Marines since opening in 2019.



COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA

The author's dog, Buck, sits on one of the WW II-era bunkbeds in the barbershop.



COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA

Navy ship door in his business office, an authentic Zodiac inflatable boat, vintage copies of *Leatherneck*, and a recently acquired Vietnam-era recruiting poster of near-billboard size that he plans to adorn the entire back wall of the shop.

Cpl Reynega has always been skilled at finding whatever he is looking for. One of his Gunnys joked, “Only you could find ice in Egypt,” when he did exactly that while on a deployment, to relieve Marines’ swollen feet. But Reynega’s collection is far from complete, and he scours websites and flea markets constantly for heirlooms for his ever-growing menagerie.

“What interests me most are Marine Corps historical items from World War II and earlier. My goal is to collect an original of every Marine Corps recruiting poster ever made. I have around 200 so far.” He’s always on the lookout for rarities like signed items by the legendary Lieutenant General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller and Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, the latter of which he recently narrowly lost an online auction for a signed letter.

Besides the Marine Corps memorabilia, all of the furnishings at Leathernecks are authentic relics. “All of my barber chairs are at least 100 years old that have been restored. I have an antique cash register and a saloon bar that are also over 100 years old,” he said of the old West tavern furnishings that serve beverages to all customers with a cut. Reynega, who is also a competitive shooter, woodworker, and artist, designed the barbershop logo himself, inspired by the blackjack and the crossed-rifles insignia of 2/1 and prominently displayed on the storefront.



COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA

Reynega estimates that 90 percent of his barbershop patrons are either active-duty, veterans, or retired military, and that an equal percentage of his clients maintain military regulation haircuts. A few of his clients faithfully get a haircut every week, just as they did in their Marine Corps days. All of the barbers at Leathernecks are former Marines, and, through word of mouth, Leathernecks’ clientele has grown to include civilians and even celebrities like actor J.D. Pardo and Cooking Channel celebrity chef Brad Miller.

After business hours, Leathernecks Barbershop has grown to become a gathering place for area Marines. “We sometimes use the shop as a meeting place for our detachment of the Marine Corps League. We’ve hosted holiday parties and fundraisers for disabled veterans here in the barbershop,” Reynega said of the MCL’s Los Angeles West Valley Detachment No. 1490 of which he is a founding member.

“I want my barbershop to be part of the veteran community in the Valley,” Reynega said. “It’s not just a business for me. I want to give back to veterans. Vets don’t trust just anybody, and I want my shop to be a place of comfort for them, a place where they feel at home.” Judging by his loyal following, for many Los Angeles Marines, Leathernecks Barbershop is just that place.

Author’s bio: Ty A. Ford was a Mustang Marine who served at Camp Fallujah as a judge advocate during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He currently works as a litigation attorney defending Los Angeles Police Department officers in civil lawsuits.



COURTESY OF ESGAR REYNEGA

For Esgar Reynega, Leathernecks is not just a business, but a haven for military veterans of all generations.