

Traveling with Tots

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE

Semper Fi! The National Museum of the Marine Corps

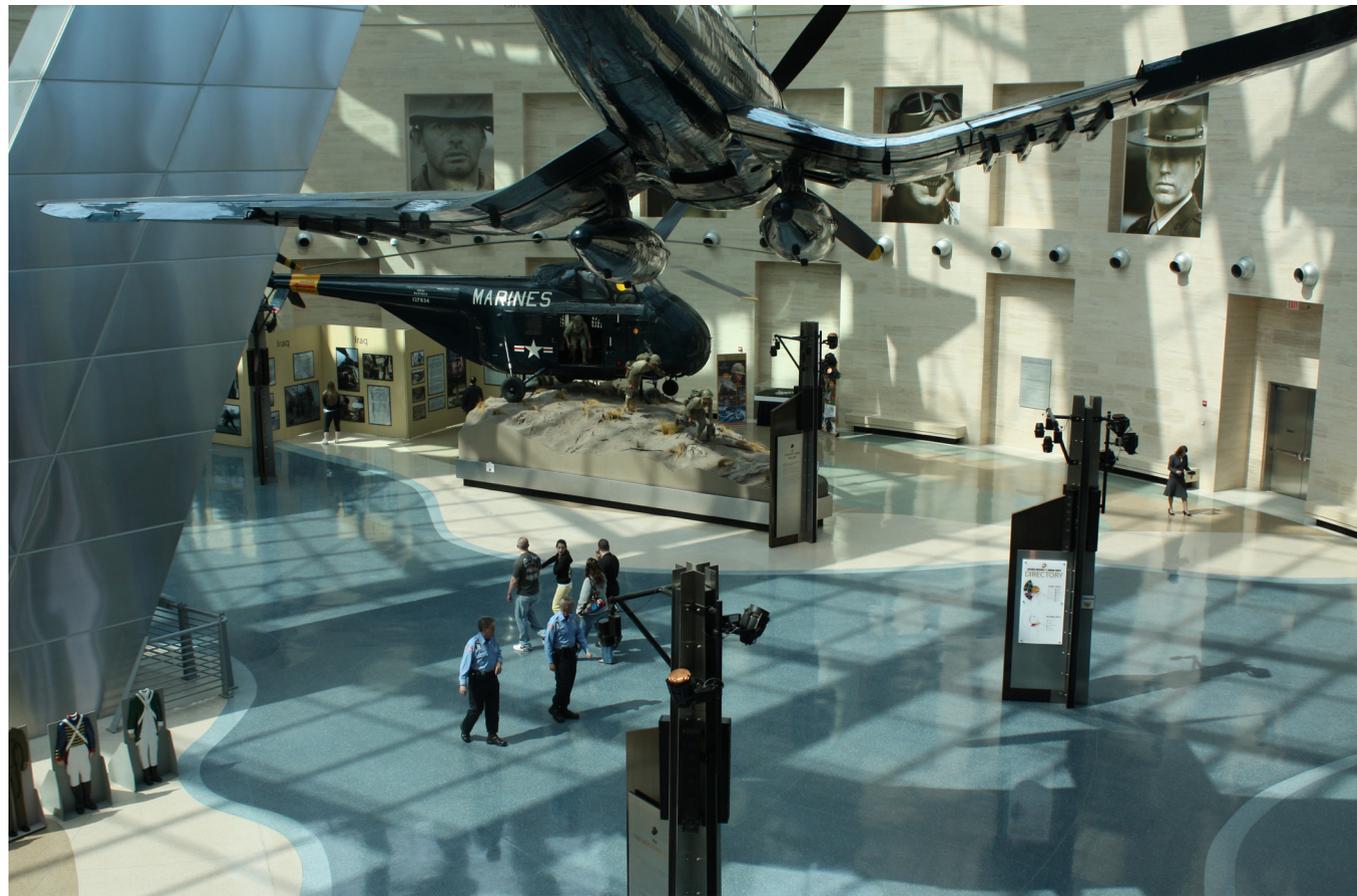


Photo courtesy of the National Museum of the Marine Corps

Looking for an interesting and educational way to beat the August heat? Head north to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in its easily accessible location alongside I-95. In my opinion, this is hands-down one of the finest American history museums in existence as well as one of the best designed. It also offers the unique perspective of tracing the Marines back to their start in 1775 during the American Revolution.

A visit to this impressive world-class museum is a winning proposition for just about anyone. Even families who aren't really "into" the military scene will come to appreciate the Marines' significant contributions as a premier fighting force with their unmatched esprit de corps. Whether you are a toddler or an octogenarian, it is impossible to emerge without being a bit more proud to be an American. It also inspires gratitude that Marines fight for our side and not our enemies. There are some other bonuses — both admission and parking are entirely free, and it is well air-conditioned.

Beckoning tourists, the museum's dramatic design is highly visible from I-95. The focal point of the building is a soaring, 210-foot tilted mast atop a 160-foot glass atrium lobby. This distinctively angular shape evokes the famous image of the flag raised over Iwo Jima during some of the fiercest fighting of World War II.

Since opening in the fall of 2006, the museum has welcomed nearly three million with rave reviews from Marines and civilians alike. Situated on 135 sprawling acres next to the Marine Corps Base Quantico, the 120,000-square-foot building is nothing short of mammoth. Currently it contains more than 1,000 artifacts and 1,800 photographs, letters, and illustrations. There is no way to take it all in during a single visit.

The exhibits immerse visitors directly into historical settings, simulating all but the actual line of fire. (Phew!) First, there is the typical boot camp experience at which kids can qualify on an M-16 at the laser-rifle range. The next step is to follow the footsteps of Marines into conflict.

Visitors literally feel the ground shaking while landing on Iwo Jima in 1945, experience the freezing cold air of a North Korean battlefield, and get the rush of exiting a helicopter in Vietnam. By thrusting visitors into the middle of the action, the exhibits force them to see, feel, and appreciate what it means to be a Marine.

The museum is wonderfully interactive for kids using state-of-the-art technology, multi-media exhibits, and thousands of artifacts. The combination of 3-D projections, audio recordings of Marines telling their individual stories, and life-sized figures cast from actual Marines creates a truly unique learning experience. Upon entering the immense atrium, visitors see four aircraft key to Marine history suspended from the ceiling. There is also a real amphibious tractor from WWII and Sikorsky HRS-2 helicopter from the Korean War.

The museum sponsors "Family Day" on the second Saturday of every month, each on a specific topic relating to the Marine Corps. These are fun, educational and free events

for kids of all ages involving arts and crafts, puppet shows, movies, and hands-on learning activities.

The next Family Day will take place Aug. 11, with activities and crafts relating to Civil War battlefield medicine. Another special event at the museum is the fourth annual "Dog Days of Summer." Visitors will have the opportunity to meet working dogs from Quantico as well as birds of prey from the Raptor Conservancy of Virginia on Aug. 25.

The facilities also have an outdoor interactive children's playground with three levels on which to swing, jump, and climb. If you are interested in hiking trails, cabins, or camping, the nearby Prince William Forest Park is the largest nature area in the Washington area with more than 12,000 acres. **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee is a writer, lawyer, and former Army JAG Officer who can't stop raving about the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Want to Go?

Visit: www.USMCMuseum.org and find it on Facebook.

Cost: Admission and parking are free. The M-16 A2 rifle range cost \$5.

Address: 18900 Jefferson Davis Highway, Triangle, Virginia 22172

Directions: From I-95 N take Exit 150. This is also the exit for the main entrance to Quantico. It takes about an hour and 15 minutes to make the 76-mile drive.

Hours: Open every day of the year from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. except Christmas Day.

Dining: Don't be afraid to come hungry because the museum features two high-quality restaurants with kids' menus — the cafeteria-style Devil Dog Diner and the Tun Tavern for colonial pub dining.

Gift Shop: It is an activity in itself with a wide range of items pertaining to Marine Corps life. Don't miss the massive Lego structure of Iwo Jima in the center of the store.