

SPIES, MARINES AND GREAT MUSEUM EXHIBITS

- *National Museum of the Marine Corps*
- *Operation Spy, an Interactive Adventure at the International Spy Museum*



by Marion Hixon

National Museum of the Marine Corps

Open since November 2008, the National Museum of the Marine Corps, situated on some 135 acres of land in Quantico, Virginia, honors more than 231 years of U.S. Marine Corps history. The museum strives to bring those years to life, from its central exhibits commemorating the work of Marines in World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War, to the recent addition of the "Global War on Terrorism Gallery."

Lin Ezell, the museum's director, says the facility's most important message is that "it takes every Marine to accomplish a mission." Ezell's hope is that the collected Marine Corps artifacts displayed proudly in the museum (tanks, aircrafts, weapons, uniforms and more) will act as a tool in telling a larger story about Marines uniting to complete a mission and defend their country. Along the way are high-tech multimedia displays, large-format color photographs, Marine testimonials, and posed scenarios that place visitors in the middle of the action.

At the heart of the museum is the Leatherneck Gallery, which perfectly executes the museum's mission of presenting events from a Marine's perspective. Guests can walk among a depiction of Marines moving from ship to shore. Similar to the architectural formation of the museum itself, a 210-foot stainless steel spire rises from the ground in the gallery, meant to evoke images of the well-known Iwo Jima flag, or the raised rifle barrel or sword.

The most dramatic statement in the gallery is made by the four aircraft hovering over visitors'

heads as they pass through: a Curtiss "Jenny" aircraft from the 1920s, two Corsair fighter planes from World War II, an AV-8B Harrier jump jet, and a Sikorsky HRS-2 helicopter disembarking a unit of Marines in the Korean War. Eight Marine portraits grace the surrounding walls of the Leatherneck Gallery, reinforcing the fact that the museum is truly a representation of both individuals who have served, and the singular force into which they evolve.

Another key gallery defining the museum houses the Making Marines exhibit, with its larger-than-life depictions of Marine training courses and in-your-face drill instructors. Guests walk past a Marine rappelling down the wall, and absorb harrowing depictions of recruits and officer candidates struggling to complete rope obstacles, practicing marksmanship, and organized into military formations. Visitors walk through each step of the training process from the initial

bus ride to graduation, and are encouraged to practice their own marksmanship skills at the M-16 laser rifle range.

Providing a transition between galleries and traveling exhibits, the Legacy Walk takes visitors through 200 years of Marine history with pictorials, maps, and cast figures. The vivid storytelling is perfect for visitors with limited time, or guests wishing to recapture their trip.

Another peaceful space lies in the three-acre Semper Fidelis Memorial Park, designated for remembrance and reflection of all Marines who have served. The pathways are lined with bricks donated by family members and friends of Marines.

Lieutenants and privates often shout a spirited "Ooh-rah!" in exclamation, and that seems to be what the museum is embodying by keeping



TOP: Operation Spy guests work their way out of a tunnel. BOTTOM: A scene from the National Museum of the Marine Corps



Marion Hixon is communications coordinator at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) where she serves as the departments editor for FUNWORLD magazine and assists in public relations and media needs for the association. Founded in 1918, IAAPA (www.IAAPA.org) is a nonprofit association that works to help attraction owners run their businesses smoothly & profitably. Hixon earned her Bachelor's degree in journalism and public relations from Baylor University and went on to receive her Master's degree from the University of Kansas in magazine journalism.

Marine history alive and staying active in the military community. It has played host to a Medal of Honor recipient, housed the second flag raised by Marines in Iwo Jima in 1945, and welcomed Marines as well as their families and friends, who come to exchange stories and pay homage to those who have fallen. The museum serves as a strong testament to the courage, passion, and bonds formed between comrades in arms: A message that shines through awe-inspiring artifacts and becomes the central focus of the people and efforts behind museum operations.

Operation Spy

Espionage. Top-secret documents. Polygraph tests and video surveillance.

These are factors encompassed in "Operation Spy, an Interactive Adventure at the International Spy Museum," located in Washington, D.C. This intense immersion experience invites visitors to undertake a series of physical and mental challenges while searching the office of a high-ranking official and discovering secret information. But this is no child's game and it's about as interactive as one exhibit can get without having to put participants on the CIA payroll.

The accuracy of the exhibit can be attributed to Board members of the museum, some of them ex-field agents, who acted as advisors on the

project. Their most intriguing scenarios working as spies, and the interesting skills and gadgets they used, were incorporated into "Operation Spy." In fact, Peter Earnest, executive director of the museum, who previously worked in the CIA for 35 years, says the experience is so true-to-life that his contacts in the intelligence community feel confident bringing guests to the museum.

Rather than portray a fantastical James Bond-type existence, the exhibit aims for the facts. "We're all about the real world of espionage," says Anna Slafer, director of exhibitions and programs at the museum. "We've selected the most exciting and active components of a spy's life and woven them into the experience."

In 2007, after four years of operations, International Spy Museum founder Milton Maltz felt that the museum had established enough credibility to support the special experience. "Once we decided to create a more innovative experience, the conceptualizing and the script were done entirely in-house," Earnest says. The plot line of the mission is loosely based on the experiences of A.Q. Kahn, father of the Pakistani nuclear program and reputed black marketeer of nuclear materials, now under house arrest.

Guests make decisions that carry repercussions later in the game, and move through a series of diverse environments such as a video surveillance

room, where guests track a spy's path across hotel grounds on video panels, to motion-simulators that evoke the feeling of traveling underground. "The sets are wonderful," Slafer says. "We wanted to create an exotic environment. As soon as you walk into the space, you feel as though you're in India, Pakistan, or Morocco. You're definitely not in Washington, D.C. anymore."

Fitted for groups of up to 15 people to travel through, the experience lasts one hour from start to

finish and is run continually throughout the day. A large cadre of guides is critical to a successful outcome at "Operation Spy," as their performance and interaction contributes greatly to guests' belief in the authenticity of the experience. "They're posing as spies in the field, so we make a point of recruiting people who are drawn to performance or are theater majors," Earnest says. "Then we give them information on how an overseas spy would work and we sensitize them to audience questions."

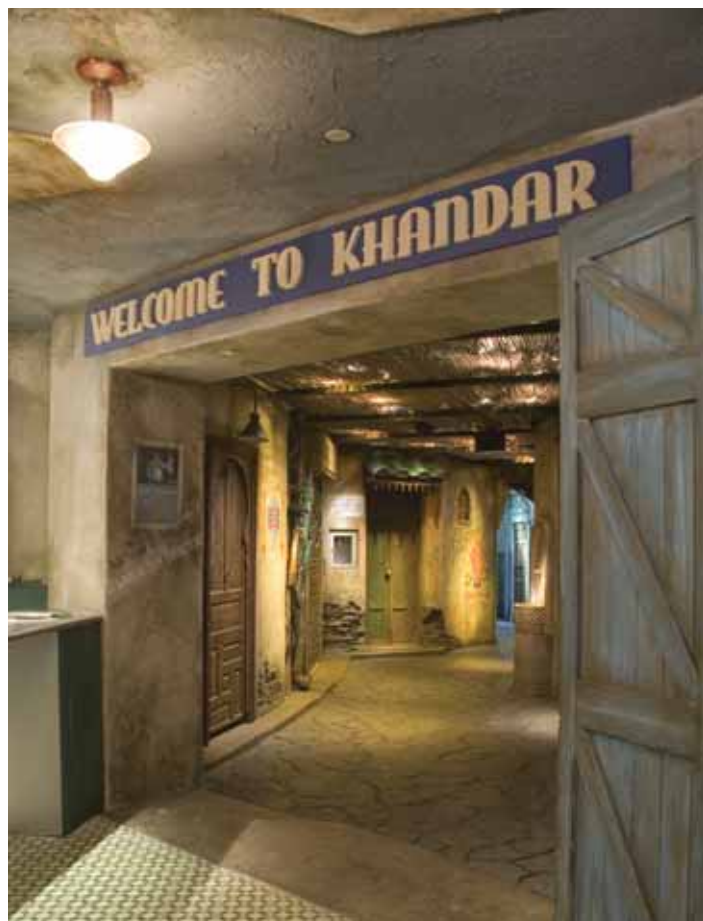
And while IT staff work hard to make sure things run smoothly, the guides get their occasional chance at improvisational acting if a technical aspect of the exhibit does break down. "They're so good at turning it into a spy-related problem," Earnest says. "Oh, he must have extra security around here, that's why this door won't open,' or 'a mole did it.'"

What truly stands out about "Operation Spy" is the way in which it takes experiential learning to the next level, giving people more than mere reading-knowledge of scenarios.

Slafer relishes that intellectual teamwork aspects of the challenge are paired with affective learning aspects in the exhibit, both prompting guest involvement. "Guests have to make a choice in the end as to what action they will recommend in the mission," she says, "taking either a diplomatic or a paramilitary approach. People will discuss among themselves and sometimes start arguing. They have to make up their minds very quickly. I like that we've created this murky gray, real-life situation that requires people to think seriously about the challenges of being a spy."

She credits the wide-ranging popularity of the exhibit to the fact that its activities are designed for different kinds of learners. One challenge may be computer-oriented, while another has guests piecing together mysterious pieces of information. The payoff comes at the end, in the form of a performance ranking from the station chief.

Earnest and Slafer acknowledge exploring the ideas of utilizing the exhibit for corporate training sessions, or opening sister locations that would feature original plot lines. But for the moment, they have achieved exactly what they set out to accomplish: creating a compressed setting for a guest to act, think, and feel like a true intelligence officer in the field, and incorporating fun and education along the way.



Operation Spy, an Interactive Adventure at the International Spy Museum