

McKeon's attorney
S-17-70

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Once a Marine . . .

On a moonless night in April 1958, to "teach them discipline," S/Sgt. Matthew C. McKeon ordered a platoon of 78 Marine recruits on a training march through the swampy outskirts of the large boot camp at Parris Island, S.C. After an hour's trek, McKeon led his troop into the tide-swollen waters of Ribbon Creek, where they worked their way upstream against a strong current. Suddenly, cries for help pierced the darkness. The sergeant hastily tried to get his men out of the stream, but six of them, all under 21, did not get out alive.

The Parris Island tragedy focused nationwide attention not only on McKeon, a junior drill instructor, but on the Marine Corps's controversial training methods. Defended by flamboyant trial-lawyer Emile Zola Berman, Sergeant McKeon, an eleven-year veteran with an unblemished record, admitted having had several swigs of vodka during the afternoon before the march, although tests taken just afterward established that he was not clinically intoxicated. Berman, however, attempted to prove it was really the time-honored toughness of Marine discipline that was responsible for the six deaths. At the end of the most publicized U.S. court-martial in 30 years, McKeon was cleared of the major charges against



Associated Press



Lynn McLaren

McKeon with Berman in 1956 and today: 'I deserved what they gave me'

him—oppression of troops and manslaughter—but found guilty of negligent homicide and drinking on duty. Although he was sentenced to three months' hard labor and demoted to private, McKeon remained in the Marines until 1959 when he was honorably discharged because of a slipped disk.

Fit: Today McKeon, 45, lives with his wife, Betty, and their five children in a modestly furnished, brick house in West Boylston, Mass., where he works as a state inspector of standards. Still erect and fit, his graying hair close-cropped in the military manner, McKeon looks every inch the marine he remains proud to have been. "Once a marine, always a marine," says McKeon, his blue eyes twinkling. "We had some good fun in

those days." And he bears no grudges against his judges. "They didn't violate my rights," he argues. "In their system of justice you're guilty until proven innocent, which is just the reverse of civilian law. I didn't mind that. I deserved what they gave me."

Deserved or not, McKeon's conviction and disgrace were only a small part of the price he has paid for the Parris Island incident in the past fourteen years. A far crueller punishment, he admits, has been meted out by his own conscience. "The only thing I felt, and still feel, is losing those six boys," said McKeon last week with tears in his eyes. "I just keep thinking that those guys would be grown men now, with families of their own. You can never forget that."

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