

Piece of cake

Recalling birthday times in '59

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Cracking open the "Hawaii Marine" archives, a birthday present from the past emerges with stories of what times were like at Marine Corps Base Hawaii in 1959.

Fifty years ago, the 184th Marine Corps birthday base celebrations looked slightly different from today. It was a busy time for newspaper staff, said Jack Paxton, executive director, United States Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association. When the base newspaper was called the "Windward Marine," Paxton was a gunnery sergeant serving as editor. The base was also known as Marine Corps Air Station, Kaneohe Bay.

"At that time the 4th Marine Regiment was also based at Kaneohe and, as I recall, there were three Marine Corps birthday balls celebrated each year: one at the Officers' Club, Staff NCO Club and the Enlisted Club," Paxton said. "Our newspaper staff, as well as other Marines in the Informational Service Office, was tasked with birthday ball coverage."

In the Nov. 6 issue of the paper, the staff describes how cooks pulled out all the stops for the event. Instead of inedible showpieces, the large birthday cakes were made from scratch for service members and guests. A total of 2,476 pounds of decorated cake was prepared, which included 574 pounds of icing. Everything for the cakes was measured in pounds:

6 pounds of vanilla, 510 pounds of sugar and 255 pounds of eggs.

"Last year the cake decorating was done by a civilian pastry artist," wrote newspaper staff in 1959. "Since that time, a number of K-Bay cooks and bakers have been taking cake decorating classes during their off-duty hours at the YWCA and Waikiki hotels."

The cooking process took four days, as bakers spent each day baking, icing or adding the final decorations. The first of the cakes was served at the base's dining facility and the rest enjoyed at each of the birthday balls. Paxton recalls how some parts of the ceremony are still celebrated in the form they were in 1959.

"Then, as now, the tradition of celebrating the oldest and youngest Marine present took place; each receiving the first pieces of the traditional birthday cakes," he said. "As I also participated in birthday balls in 1960 through 1962 while at Kaneohe, I cannot remember much difference from year to year. I do know that each was a great remembrance of our heritage as belonging to the nation's finest military fighting force."

Additional articles reported the Marine Corps birthday pageant was performed at each evening ball, after cake cutting. Just seven reenactors were in the 1959 production, all volunteers from 4th Marines. Their uniforms ranged from the 1812 era to the 1950s modern-day aviator Marine. The 1st Marine Brigade Band along with the Drum and Bugle Corps



Taken in 1959, the photo shows six of the seven volunteers from 4th Marine Regiment who performed in period costumes for the pageant. In the modern-day ceremony in 1959, the period uniform pageant was performed at each of the evening birthday balls with live music from the 1st Marine Brigade Band along with the Drum and Bugle Corps.

provided live music for each scene.

The birthday balls were one of many events Paxton followed during his time on the base newspaper staff, with help from Marines he still keeps in contact with today. The former editor said he celebrates his 59th birthday ball in Tampa, Fla., and is honored to have served.

"I can assure you, I will still stand proudly as the 'Marine Corps Hymn' is played — as I did in 1959," he said. "I will still be filled with the same feeling of esprit de corps as I was at my first ball at Parris Island, South Carolina in 1950. As a Marine, this never leaves you."



This photo appeared as one of 14 in a full-page spread for the Marine Corps birthday balls in 1959. Lit candles decorate one of four cakes made from scratch for each of the base's birthday celebrations. Three balls were held on the same night at the Officers' Club, Staff NCO Club and the Enlisted Club.

