

The Greater Royal Gorge Region

# CAÑON CITY DAILY RECORD

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[HOME](#)

Publish Date: 11/11/2009

## News

[Local/Region](#)  
[Nation & World](#)  
[Business](#)  
[Sports](#)  
[Obituaries](#)  
[Community](#)

## Opinion

[Editorial](#)  
[Speaking Out](#)  
[The Civil Exchange](#)

## Marketplace

[Classifieds](#)  
[Public Legals](#)  
[Print Ads](#)  
[Real Estate Preview](#)  
[Real Estate Page](#)  
[Auto Preview](#)  
[Bride's Guide](#)

## Entertainment

[Entertainment News](#)  
[Comics](#)  
[Puzzles](#)  
[Horoscopes](#)

## Kids

[Homework Help](#)  
[Kid Links](#)

## Customer Service

[Subscriptions](#)  
[Contact Us](#)  
[Employment  
at Lehman  
Communications Corp.](#)

## Search

  


## Marines gather to celebrate 234th birthday

*Debbie Bell  
The Daily Record*

With an impressive 79-year age difference between the oldest and the youngest, local Marines celebrated the 234th birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps on Tuesday.

"This is a night of tradition, comradeship, brotherhood and honoring the Corps," said Jr. Past Commandant Ron Bates of the Royal Gorge Detachment 1318 Marine Corps League. More than 180 celebrated during the Marine Corps Birthday Ball at the Abbey Events Center.

Bates and two other detachment members, Jerry Gill and Will Purdue, were honored as Marines of the Year by Commandant Herm Lateer with medals sanctioned by the U.S. Marine Corps. The three were instrumental in forming the local detachment.

"About 17 or 18 months ago, three Marines in this community got together and said we should have a Marine Corps League in the southern part of Colorado," Lateer said. "They are Marines of the Year for establishing the greatest branch ever of the Marine Corps League.

"As I look out, there is every rank and probably 10,000 stories," Lateer said of those present. "Gentlemen, on behalf of the Marine Corps League 1318, God love you."

Five World War II veterans were honored, Harvey Opfer, Bobbi Alger, Rob Peters, James Wildman and Jim Woods. The youngest Marines, twins Christopher Burrows and James Burrows, also were recognized.

Performing a solemn tradition, Lateer cut a three-layer Marine Corps birthday cake with a ceremonial sword before Opfer and Alger offered the first two slices to the Burrows brothers, while Katie Abbott sang the Marine Corps Hymn.

"The oldest Marines giving cake to the youngest Marines signifies passing the experience, tradition, comradeship and brotherhood to the youngest Marines in the Corps," Lateer said.

The other four branches of the military – Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard – also were honored during the evening with a toast. Carlos Crull and the Atomic Fireballs saluted each branch by performing their respective fight songs.

Cañon City native Lt. Col. Bill Waters, who served as guest speaker for the night, reminisced about his time in the Marines. In addition to other duties during his 24 years in the Corps, he served as a presidential helicopter pilot, which provided him with two favorite memories.

The first came in 1969, when Waters picked up President Richard Nixon at the airport in Colorado Springs and flew him to the Broadmoor one day, then from there to the Air Force Academy the next. The second came when he flew Apollo 11 astronauts, including Neil Armstrong, to meet with the president.

"The first thing Armstrong said to me was, 'Boy, you guys in helos sure go slow'," Waters said. "Those times were the biggest thrill of my life."

In addition to the solemn ceremonies of the night, Marines happily reminisced about old times throughout dinner and the dance that followed. Shouts of "Semper Paratus" and "Hoo Rah" echoed throughout the evening.

The Royal Gorge Detachment will visit the Bruce McCandless State Veterans Nursing Home in Florence today to celebrate Veterans Day.

"Don't forget to honor our veterans," Waters said.

For more information on the local Marine Corps League, visit [www.royalgorgemcl.com](http://www.royalgorgemcl.com).



Commandant **Herm Lateer** slices a U.S. Marine Corps birthday cake with a ceremonial sword Tuesday during the Marine Corps Birthday Ball.  
**Debbie Bell/Daily Record**

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