

My black T-shirt was all I needed.

When friends invited us to dinner last Tuesday we accepted. Knowing that they lived just across the highway from hallowed ground in Arlington, VA I suggested that we top off our meal with attendance at the weekly Sunset Parade at the Marine Corps Memorial. Agreed. They had not seen this outdoor extravaganza.

The performance of the Drum and Bugle unit and the 100 six-foot-tall Marines in dress blues attracts hundreds of locals and tourists every Tuesday in July and August. It's free. Many bring blankets and fill up space at one end of the marching area. Invited guests arrive in buses and fill about 200 or more seats, front and center.

I arrived early and got the attention of a decorated woman Marine wearing silver bars on her shoulders. I said "Captain, I am a member of the Marine Corps Combat Correspondent's Association. I am also a two-timer from World War Two and the Korean campaign. I hope to find seating for a party of five for tonight's program."

(As for other credentials I was prepared to display my World War dog tag (#869858), the Semper Fi tattoo on my right shoulder, or mention the number (1022333) of my semi-automatic M1 rifle that I carried across the Pacific and of course my USMCCCA membership card.) "You don't look that old," she said, smiling. Then: "Come back around 1830 and I'll see what I can do. We have the ambassador of Malaysia as our honored guest tonight, along with many other special guests."

Later, at 1830 on the dot, she escorted me, my wife and our three guests to five empty chairs in the fourth row of the guest section. Straight ahead loomed the largest bronze memorial in the world, five Marines and one Navy Corpsman raising Old Glory atop Iwo Jima's Mt. Suribachi on Feb. 23 1945.

Now I know why I wore my T-shirt displaying the letters USMCCCA and the Marine Corps emblem.