

# Sheriff Simon L. Leis Jr.— STILL A MARINE

By Jack Ruppert

**S**heriff Simon L. Leis Jr. has been the face of law enforcement in Hamilton County, Ohio, for more than 40 years. In the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department (HCSD) everything from uniforms to physical conditioning to weapons training is the "Marine Corps way." Akin to a Marine battalion, an organization of 800 people with an annual budget of \$59 million requires planning, discipline and control.

"Si" Leis, 76, is trim and solid, evidence of his daily 4 a.m. workouts. You notice two things about him—an engaging smile and a piercing gaze. His eyes might remind you of your drill instructor at Parris Island, S.C., or San Diego.

His story, while unique in its specifics, is shared by untold numbers of Marines who pursue their careers and personal lives according to Marine ethos, training and traditions. Their faithfulness to those Marine values is the thread that links their lives of service.



Pvt Simon L. Leis Jr.

Sheriff Leis is arguably the most successful and influential office holder in southwestern Ohio, undefeated in 10 campaigns for public office since 1967. His department serves nearly 1 million people who live and work in Hamilton County.

The department's table of equipment includes two helicopters, three patrol boats,

an armored tracked vehicle and other gear required to command and support explosive ordnance disposal, Special Weapons and Tactics officers and dive teams in their missions. All the equipment, including a new training academy, was funded with drug-forfeiture funds and involved minimal taxpayer expense.

The sheriff's connection to the Corps is deeper than equipment and numbers. Some of the high-profile conflicts he has fought over a long, distinguished and controversial career are revealing.

A native Cincinnati, Leis graduated from Xavier University. "Despite the influence of the Jesuit fathers, my college years may have been a bit on the wild side, but then the Marines straightened my [butt] out very quickly. The Corps taught me commitment and how to work." Sound familiar?

During his senior year of college, he was accepted for Officer Candidates School. After successfully completing OCS at Quantico, Va., Leis was assigned to Class 2-57 at The Basic School. Upon gradua-



Hamilton County, Ohio, Marine recruiters meet with Sheriff Simon Leis and his deputies after touring the county Justice Center facilities. From left: Deputy Larry Henderson; Sgt Joe Thomas, USMC; Sheriff Leis; SSgt Adam Beightol, USMC; sheriff's department Lieutenant Tom Butler; and SSgt Ken Jacob, USMC.

tion, he was posted to 3d Platoon, 2d Battalion, Second Marine Regiment, Second Marine Division, Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., where he served as an infantry platoon leader and later as the battalion operations officer, S-3.

In 1957, religious and political conflicts in Lebanon led that country into chaos. The United Nations authorized use of military force to stabilize the situation, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered Battalion Landing Team 2/2, Leis' unit, forward deployed in the Mediterranean Sea with the 6th Fleet, into Lebanon. Leis recalled, "As I was climbing down the cargo net into that 'Poppa' [LCVP] boat I was thinking, 'Well, here I've been married for two months, and I'm about to get myself shot.'" The battalion swiftly accomplished its mission and returned to Camp Lejeune where Leis completed his active duty in 1960.

Returning to Cincinnati, he entered Salmon P. Chase College of Law, a night school, studying law. Leis worked days as a court constable. Then tragedy struck his family when his 18-month-old son died in an accident. Leis became depressed and withdrew from school. He tried to return twice—unsuccessfully.

In his grief, he recalled an incident from OCS. "I had the fire watch one night before a long hike up and down Quantico's firebreaks. I was tired; [I] hadn't had much sleep. On top of that, I was assigned as a BARman, and I was lagging behind my platoon on the march. Sergeant Benedict came up behind me and planted his big boot in my rear end. 'Get it in gear, candidate!' is all he said. That snapped me out of it. I got it in gear and finished. From that point forward, I knew I wouldn't quit OCS. Later on, following my son's death, that memory, that wake-up call, drove me. I wouldn't quit law school. I wouldn't quit anything. I remember that day like it was yesterday!"

### A High-Profile Prosecutor

Passing the Ohio Bar in 1966, he joined the Cincinnati prosecutor's office and moved through positions of increasing responsibility. Leis was first assistant to the local U.S. Attorney when the Hamilton County prosecutor's job opened, and Leis was appointed to that post.

Marines are offensive-oriented warriors. With that same attitude and vigor that reflected his Marine training and experience, Leis attacked the prosecutor's job. "There are two kinds of prosecutors. One is passive. He waits for law enforcement to bring cases to the prosecutor. I chose to be an activist prosecutor. I didn't wait for law enforcement to bring us cases. If I saw something that needed action, we led the way."



**Above: Sheriff Simon Leis (center) aboard one of three patrol craft belonging to the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department. The HCSD has a land, air and water capability. (Photo courtesy of HCSD)**

Under his leadership, the prosecutor's office gained a reputation for fearless prosecution of high-level elected officials and civil servants, including an investigation of prostitution that led to the forced resignation of TV personality Jerry Springer from the Cincinnati City Council; the conviction of a popular former Cincinnati Chief of Police for falsification of financial records; and the conviction of another Cincinnati city councilman, also for falsification of financial records.

**Below: First Lt Simon Leis, operations officer for 2/2 in Beirut, Lebanon, 1958. (Photo courtesy of Sheriff Simon Leis)**

### Larry Flynt and *Hustler* Magazine

Leis' most widely publicized prosecution was the 1976 Larry Flynt case. Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine, had opened a retail store in Cincinnati, offering magazines, videotapes and other material that a grand jury decided was obscene.

In a six-week trial, Flynt was tried on obscenity charges. In a dramatic final argument, Leis drew a line on the floor across the full width of the jury box with a piece of chalk. Turning to the jury, he asserted, "There's no such thing as moral neutrality." Holding a copy of *Hustler*, he told the jury, "You must act to protect this community. You must draw that line."

The jury agreed, and Flynt received a seven- to-25-year sentence. That sentence was overturned on a technicality by an appeals court, but Leis had made his point. The case was the basis for a 1996 movie, "The People vs. Larry Flynt." James Carville, President William J. "Bill" Clinton's closest political advisor, played the role of Simon Leis. It was a classic case of miscasting—the only thing the two men had in common was male-pattern baldness.

The ACLU and other elements in the country disliked Prosecutor Leis, his high-





Above: Sheriff Leis exits one of the HCSO's two helos. With a county larger than 2,000 square miles, the sheriff's department uses the helos for fast response as well as in high-speed pursuits and crowd control.

Below: Lt Tom Butler (left) and Deputy Larry Henderson are two of 120 Marines on the HCSO staff. There are 200 HCSO deputies with military backgrounds.



and-tight haircut, his conservative politics and dress, and his unwavering belief that the people in Hamilton County held strong moral convictions and elected him to defend those values. He served for 13 years, longer than any prosecutor had. Then, in 1982, he won election as a judge in the Common Pleas Court.

### Not Enough Action— So Back to the Streets

It didn't take long for Judge Leis to realize that the bench was too far-removed from the action-filled front lines of law enforcement for his liking. When the serving Hamilton County sheriff announced his intention to retire in 1987, Leis advised GOP leadership that he wanted that job. As a top vote-getter in the county, he was appointed sheriff at an opportune time.

A proponent of the discipline, values and traditions he assimilated early in life, Leis was the right man for rebuilding a department that had become a "good ol' boy" fraternity. He saw too many overweight, out-of-shape deputies. Uniform and appearance standards were ignored or nonexistent, as were physical-fitness and firearms-proficiency standards. The local jail was a dilapidated, crumbling monstrosity, which needed a major operational overhaul.

Sean Donovan, Chief Deputy since 1997, described the hurricane force with which Si Leis swept into the sheriff's job.

"I've had 31 years in the department and was working at the Cincinnati Workhouse [built in 1866] when Sheriff Leis came into office. At the workhouse, I had seen new hires come to work at 8 a.m.

and quit the job at 10 a.m.; the working conditions were so bad.

"Sheriff Leis changed things very quickly, and, with each change, he met resistance. Some deputies actually brought lawsuits against him. We had a guy who couldn't fit behind the steering wheel of his cruiser; he was so overweight! The sheriff installed an annual physical-qualification test *everybody* [including Leis at 76] must pass—same with firearms qualification. New recruits go through a 16-week training course that includes tough physical training. He instituted weight limits. Everyone gets weighed once a year and must be within limits. We have installed excellent workout facilities at each of our posts to help our people maintain good condition.

"When the sheriff declared that everybody must wear the same style of shoe, we had people try to sue about that. But think about it. You see deputies who have different color shoes on. What impression does that give? Appearance is very important in building respect with the public."

Things changed, significantly. In 1991, the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department was recognized by the National Association of Uniform Manufacturers and Distributors as the "Best Dressed County Sheriff's Office in the USA."

### A Tight Ship

What does the sheriff's department look like today? The best sources of information are the people in the field.

Deputy Larry Henderson is a 20-year veteran of the department and a third-generation Marine. A corporal, he was a TOW antitank missile gunner when he left active duty. His father fought in Vietnam, and his grandfather, Raymond D. Parker, was awarded the Navy Cross on Guadalcanal in World War II.

About 200 HCSO deputies have military backgrounds, and more than half of those are Marines like Henderson. Soft-spoken and all business, he has earned some impressive additional assignments. He is the department's Taser-training instructor; an instructor on the tactics, techniques and equipment usage on the dive and heavy-weapons teams; and a self-defense expert. Henderson also is assigned as a bodyguard for the University of Cincinnati's football and basketball coaches.

Lieutenant Tom Butler is the commander of Patrol Substation 53, a bright, clean, well-equipped facility in the northern suburbs of the county. He is Henderson's boss, and they share Marine backgrounds. Butler served in Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 169 at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., during his four years of active duty.

Asked to describe Sheriff Leis' leadership, both answered, "Lead from the front." Is it any wonder why Marines are attracted to this outfit?

### The Next Big Case

In 1990, the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati exhibited photography by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. A grand jury determined that seven photographs might be obscene. Sheriff Leis' job was to close the exhibit. He found himself at the center of another community-values firestorm that was the basis for another movie, "Dirty Pictures," with actor Craig T. Nelson as the sheriff.

The jury decided that the pictures were not obscene, and Si Leis became an even larger target. Among other things, an artsy bistro "dedicated" a urinal to the sheriff, indicative of some of the political and social opposition in Greater Cincinnati toward Leis.

Yet, that opposition has not defeated Leis. He has been re-elected five times since that trial. Voters may like him or hate him, but they know where he stands and why. Coupled with solid law-enforcement results, that is his success formula.

Court cases earn headlines, but effective law enforcement is the mission of the department and is exemplified by its leadership in regional drug enforcement. The Hamilton County-Cincinnati Regional Narcotics Unit (RENU) has broken important narcotics dealers. An example is the bust and conviction of a cocaine-distribution organization based in Mexico and operated from Hidalgo County, Texas.

After a two-year investigation, RENU officers led coordinated operations with agencies in Texas, Indiana and Ohio. They arrested suspects in those three states, charging them with supplying 1,500 pounds of cocaine a year to the Cincinnati area alone.

## It's Tough to be a Deputy In the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department

Want to join this outfit? The requirements are:

- Multiple interviews
- A lie-detector test
- Driving, gambling, alcohol, credit and drug-usage tests/histories
- Strict weight, body-fat standards
- A demanding physical-fitness test
- No visible tattoos
- A tough, 16-week training course
- A three-year commitment

Those are the requirements for consideration as an HCSD deputy. Should the prospective deputy pass that screening, one giant hurdle remains. Sheriff Leis insists on interviewing every applicant who makes it to the final stage. It's a brief, impactful moment.

On the sheriff's office wall is a plaque bearing the words "Honor, Courage, Commitment—Duty." Sheriff Leis will ask, "Do you believe in these values, and will you conduct yourself and live by these values as a deputy in this organization?"

With an affirmative response, the candidate is assigned to the next Patrol Training Academy course. That's it. Those four words will guide the deputy's behavior and performance over a career.

Simple, effective, familiar.

—Jack Ruppert

Human enterprises reflect their leadership. Carol Roeller, Leis' secretary for 31 years, has followed him from the prosecutor's office to the courtroom to the sheriff's department. She will tell you, "I can't imagine working for anyone else. You always know where you stand. His honesty and integrity are second to none." Is there a better endorsement a leader can receive?

It's been a conflict-filled, high-profile career for Si Leis. As prosecutor, judge and sheriff, he has won many and lost a few, but he has remained true to the USMC values that "straightened my [butt] out" 60 years ago in the boonies of Quan-

tico, Va. He wouldn't have it any other way. That's the Marine Corps way.

*Editor's note: Jack Ruppert is a retired Procter & Gamble sales and marketing executive who served in the late 1950s as a platoon leader in 1st Bn, 2d Marines, 2dMarDiv. His current affairs/humor column, "The Cincinnati Dutchman," ran in the Cincinnati Suburban Press for several years after his retirement. In 2003, his book, "One of Us: Officers of Marines—Their Training, Traditions, and Values," was published by Praeger Publishing.*



Always looking to improve capabilities, Sheriff Leis negotiated with the U.S. Army to obtain this armored vehicle—free to the local taxpayers.