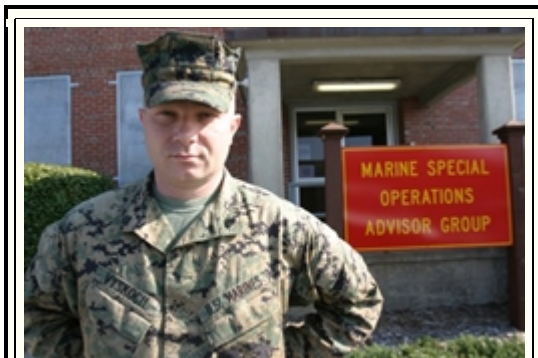




## Face of Defense: Marine Looks Back on Long Journey to Corps

By Lance Cpl. Joseph R. Stahlman, USMC  
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MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C., March 5, 2008 – Although the American dream means different things to different people, one Marine with U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command believes he is living his version of it.



*Marine Corps Cpl. Marek Vyskocil, training noncommissioned officer for Marine Special Operations Advisor Group, says he has everything he could ask for in life. Although he believes he is living the American dream now, his journey began far from American soil. Vyskocil's journey to the United States, the Marine Corps and MARSOC began in his home country of Czechoslovakia. Photo by Lance Cpl. Joseph R. Stahlman, USMC*

Cpl. Marek Vyskocil, the training noncommissioned officer for Marine Special Operations Advisor Group, said he has everything he could ask for in life, but that his journey began far from American soil.

Vyskocil's journey to America, the Marine Corps and MARSOC began in his home country of Czechoslovakia. He grew up in Havirov and learned to speak several languages due to the diversity of people in his community. Although Vyskocil said he lived a normal Czech childhood, there weren't many jobs or opportunities for self-advancement as he got older.

Upon graduating from high school at 18, Vyskocil was drafted into the Czech army.

"At the time, we had no choice but to serve a mandatory one year in the army," explained Vyskocil, a 31-year-old husband and father of three.

Vyskocil said he believes the army helped him mature and made him more independent. "If I hadn't joined the army, I probably wouldn't be where I am at today," he explained.

After getting out of the Czech army, Vyskocil worked a few odd jobs to support himself. During this time, a friend came up with the idea to visit America for spring break.

“I really liked the idea, because I always wanted to visit America,” Vyskocil said. “I started to save up enough money for a plane ticket and some extra spending money.” He arrived in America in 1998 with one change of clothes, a small bag and no ability to speak the English language.

“I didn’t have a lot of money, and I didn’t expect to be in America for that long,” he recalled. “When I got to Tampa Bay, Fla., I fell in love with America.”

It didn’t take long for Vyskocil to decide he wanted to stay in the United States. “I fell in love with the culture and the freedom everyone had,” said Vyskocil. “Even though I could not speak English, I still had a great time.”

Although Vyskocil was able to speak five different languages at this point in his life, English was not one of them.

“I spoke Czech, Slovak, Polish, Slovenian and Russian, but I couldn’t speak English or understand some of America’s customs and courtesies,” he said.

“I once sat in a fast-food restaurant for 45 minutes trying to order a large soda with the last of my money,” he said with a chuckle. “When I thought the cashier finally understood me, she came back with my order and handed me a vanilla ice cream cone instead. I was so frustrated I threw the ice cream away and left -- thirsty.”

After staying in Tampa Bay throughout spring break, Vyskocil was offered a job in Tennessee. He accepted the job offer and made the trip from Tampa Bay to Pigeon Forge, Tenn.

“I worked for housekeeping at a hotel for my first year when I started dating my now wife, who was the hotel manager,” he said. “I then started to learn more and more English until I could finally speak it fluently.”

According to Vyskocil’s wife, Karen, her husband has always been polite, even when he didn’t speak English.

“When I first met him, he would always ask me the meanings of words,” said Karen, who is now learning Czech. “When he moved up to the front office, his English just took off. After about a year, he stopped asking me questions and English turned into second nature to him.”

After five years working at the hotel, Vyskocil became the hotel manager.

“I loved the fact that I could work from the bottom to the top on my own drive and determination,” he said. “That’s another reason I love America; if someone has the drive and willpower to do something, they can do it.”

After taking another job as a salesman at a car dealership, Vyskocil realized he wanted to put his language skills to good use.

“I wanted to join the FBI, but I had to either have college or have a military background,” he said. “With my paycheck, a wife and a son, I figured college was not the route to go.”

Vyskocil’s wife and family convinced him to join the U.S. Air Force. Vyskocil went to his local Air Force recruiter and was waiting outside when a Marine Corps recruiter walked up, introduced himself and invited Vyskocil into his office to discuss a future in the military.

“I knew about the U.S. Marines growing up in Europe,” Vyskocil said. “I was a little uneasy at first, but I noticed his professionalism and attitude about the Corps and decided to join.”

Vyskocil learned to speak English and caught on quickly by listening to others speak, but the reading comprehension portion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery proved challenging.

“I failed the ASVAB twice, and decided the military might not be for me,” he said. “My recruiter kept calling to make sure I was studying my words. He wouldn’t let me give up on myself, and on the third try, I finally passed the test.”

After 11 months of study and effort, Vyskocil shipped to Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C. After graduating from boot camp and the School of Infantry in 2005, Vyskocil deployed to Iraq with 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force, later that year.

Upon returning from deployment, Vyskocil became an American citizen.

“It felt great to finally be a part of America,” he said. “I lived here for so long, and now I was really a citizen.”

Vyskocil then searched for ways to put his language skills to good use for the Corps. During his search, Vyskocil discovered MARSOC.

“I spoke with a (staff noncommissioned officer) with MARSOC, and he offered me a chance to become a part of it,” he said. “I jumped at the chance to join.”

Vyskocil received orders to MARSOC in 2006 and is now the S-3 training NCO at MSOAG. He hopes to one day put his knowledge and language skills to good use by being on one of MSOAG’s special operations teams.

Vyskocil, like so many people before him, was born and raised in a foreign country and came to America as an immigrant looking for a better life and greater opportunities. Like many others, he overcame language and culture barriers and earned everything he has through hard work and determination. Now he gives back to the United States by serving his country in a time of war as an American citizen and protecting the very freedoms he longed for before coming to this nation.

“I’m proud that I’m a Marine and honored to serve this country,” he said. “I came to this country with basically nothing, and after 10 years, I have a family and everything I’ve ever dreamed of before coming to the United States. I’ll never take the freedom America gave me for granted.”

(Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Joseph R. Stahlman serves with Marine Forces Special Operations Command.)