Good deeds mean stripes in this boys’ outfit where corporals are the kings

THE BOYS TAKE ORDERS from their corporals even when the non-coms are smaller than they are and can't fight as well.

Stripes not strength make the big difference when you're a member of the New Orleans recreation department’s Rangers. Organized a year and a half ago at John P. Lyons Memorial center, 621 Louisiana, the Rangers are a military-type outfit open to boys 9 through 12. The Rangers drill, do good deeds, go on hikes and try mightily to act like Marines. The organization now has four squads of eight "men," each headed by the much-envied corporals, who are privileged to bark orders, dress their men down and, best of all, drill them.

The man who outranks them all and is in charge of the Rangers is NORD supervisor James T. Garner, who works at Lyons center and is a former United States Marine sergeant. Watching his Rangers march proudly around the center yard in pith helmets too big for them, looking like lines of brown turtles, Garner smiles.

"Even kids who used to be problems take this thing seriously," he says. "It's the military part that gets them. Boys who wouldn't obey ordinarily will snap to attention when you call it Marine discipline."

"The boys come to weekly Tuesday night meetings on time, serve refreshments at Golden Age club functions, pick up trash around the center. They know that each Ranger gets points for every hour he puts in or things like this. These points add up to extra stripes. Right now I have five corporals, one for each squad, and a company clerk. But we're forming another platoon soon. That means more corporals, and I'll be needing a sergeant soon, too. The boys all know this and you should see them hop to it."

What being a non-com means is described by the serious-faced, 12-year-old corporal of the second squad, Robert Logrie.

"My men were chosen honor squad four times in a row," Logrie says. "You notice even when the others are talking or chewing gum and things, my squad is quiet. That's because I have discipline and give a boy a black mark when he talks or anything. Three black marks and you have to march in the back row. The best thing about the Rangers is that even the bigger boys listen to me."

Although the Rangers are too young an outfit to rate a sergeant yet, the idea for their organization is about eight years old. Lyons center director Murtagh Rupp explains how Rangers were born. "Johnny Brechtel and I talked over the idea for a NORD marching organization just a few years after the recreation department was organized but nothing came of it." (John Brechtel now deceased, was former executive assistant with NORD.)

About two years ago, Lyons center tried to organize the forerunner of the Rangers, a nature study group called "the Bird Watchers," which didn't go over.

"The name must have scared the boys away," Rupp laughs.

In November, 1954, Rupp brought up his old marching society idea. "I thought this would tie in well with Mr. Garner who was to head the group," Rupp says. "The kids were always asking him about his experiences with the Marines."

Although they have no official tie-in with the US Marine Corps, the Rangers pattern themselves after the Leathernecks. The Marine Corps Reserve and the Marine recruiting station in this area co-operate by sending representatives to speak with the Rangers and to help drill them.

Gradually the Rangers have become a good enough drill team to march in parades.

However, with boys the age range of the Rangers, Garner realizes that you have to have some play mixed in with the military.

One of the Rangers' favorite games is "dead Indian." A boy is blindfolded and given a dummy rifle. In front of him is a basket filled with bottle caps. Another boy is chosen to sneak up to try to steal the basket without the blindfolded boy hearing him and "shooting" him. If the second boy steals the basket successfully, he is given a turn with the rifle. If, on the other hand, he is caught, he must lie down on the floor where he was shot; another boy is chosen to do the sneaking.

To some of the boys this is more than a game.

One little Ranger who had piled up quite a lot of dead Indians with his rifle, explained: "This will come in handy if I ever have to do any night fighting."

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Staff Photos by Lee S. Delaune

At meeting, from left, Corp. Charles Childress; Corp. Fred Bassemier; James Garner, supervisor; Murtagh Rupp, center manager; 1st Sgt. William Keller, Marine Reserve; Corp. David Dow, Corp. Robert Logrie Jr.

Ranger captain Garner, a former Marine Corps sergeant, shows his boys how to hold their drill rifles. Lined up on Lyons Center field are, from left, Hunter Harris, Raymond Millet and A. J. LeBlanc

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