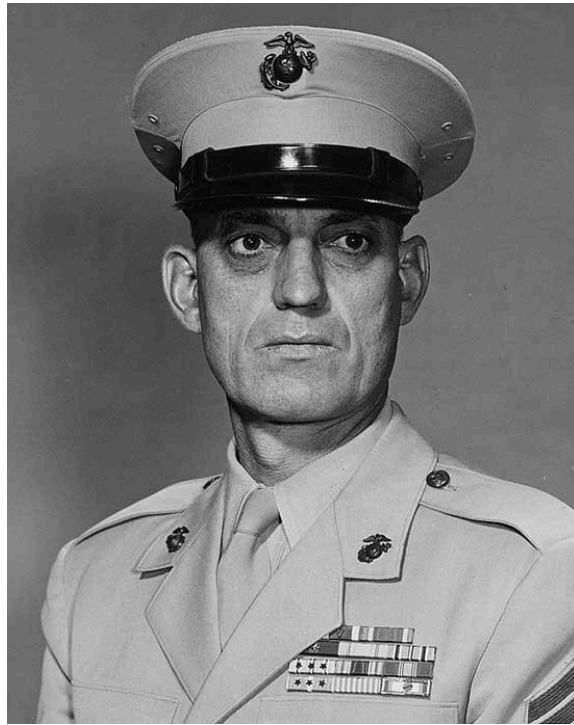# Wilbur Bestwick: First Sergeant Major
of the Marine Corps

The first Marine to be appointed Sergeant Major is Archibald Sommers, who enlisted in the Corps in June of 1799. He was promoted to the rank of Sergeant Major on January 1, 1801 and left active duty in the Marine Corps in June of 1802. The office of Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps did not exist when Sommers was promoted, but since he was the first Sergeant Major *in* the Marine Corps, some people regard him as the first Sergeant Major *of* the Marine Corps (which, one may suppose, he was).

After SgtMaj Sommers, the rank of Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps had something of a fitful path. In 1833, Congress established the rank of Sergeant Major as a permanent rank in the Marine Corps, and by 1899, five Marines held the rank. The rank was abolished in 1946 and re-established in 1954. In 1957, the assignment of Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps was created to

be the senior enlisted advisor to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. On May 23, 1957, SgtMaj Wilbur Bestwick became, officially, the first Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, serving until his retirement on September 1, 1959.

Wilbur Bestwick was born in Sabetha, Kansas on November 27, 1911. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1934, going to San Diego for basic training, and by 1943, he was a Sergeant Major. SgtMaj Bestwick saw combat during WWII in Bougainville and Guam, serving with the 3rd Marine Division. Returning to the United States in December of 1944, he served in various capacities including Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina. SgtMaj Bestwick later served as a division Sergeant Major in Korea with the 1st Marine Division, receiving the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V." In June 1956, he was transferred to Headquarters Marine Corps to serve as Sergeant Major to the Secretary of the General Staff, which post he held until taking up duties as the first Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps. SgtMaj Wilbur Bestwick died on July 10, 1972 at Stanford University Hospital. He was 60 years old.