

ASPECTS of Leadership

AN ENLISTED PRIMER ON LEADING MARINES



COLLEGE OF ENLISTED MILITARY EDUCATION



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AN ENLISTED PRIMER ON LEADING MARINES

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CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
<i>Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Carlos A. Ruiz</i>	
Editorial Note	xi
Select Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Terms	xiii
Introduction: Empathy Is Combat Power	3
<i>Master Sergeant Tara M. Highbaugh</i>	
AWARD WINNERS	
FIRST PLACE	
1. Not in History Books	9
<i>Master Gunnery Sergeant Miguel A. Gutierrez</i>	
SECOND PLACE	
2. From Silver Nuggets to Nuggets of Wisdom	12
<i>Master Gunnery Sergeant Isboset Rendonhoarez</i>	
THIRD PLACE	
3. Leadership in the Quiet Moments	17
<i>First Sergeant Chase McGrorty-Hunter</i>	
ESSAYS (no particular order)	
4. The Unseen Leader	21
<i>Corporal Aaron Keefer</i>	
5. Forged in the Fire: The True Meaning of an Enlisted Leader	25
<i>Sergeant Angel R. Rodriguez</i>	
6. Marine Corps Leadership: Honing Our Principles and Primary Duties	28
<i>Gunnery Sergeant Ryan Barclift</i>	
7. The Pedestal Is Not a Throne	33
<i>Sergeant Nicholas Anderson</i>	

8.	The Rank We Wear Is Temporary: The Impact We Leave Is Forever <i>Staff Sergeant Adalberto Jaramillo</i>	37
9.	From Follower to Leader <i>Sergeant Gregory Gagnon</i>	42
10.	The Weight and Worth of Leadership <i>Gunnery Sergeant Moise Barbier</i>	46
11.	Being a Leader of Marines <i>Sergeant Dajuan Adams</i>	49
12.	Keeping the Ship on Course: An Enlisted Leader's Perspective <i>Gunnery Sergeant Michael A. Brooks</i>	54
13.	Empathize or Realize How Worry Multiplies <i>Gunnery Sergeant Cord Burgan</i>	58
14.	Developing Leaders <i>Gunnery Sergeant Matthew N. Guelzow</i>	61
15.	Cultivating Builders: Investing in the Future of Those We Lead <i>Gunnery Sergeant Selena Benitez</i>	65
16.	Enlisted Leadership through a Continuously Adapting Organization while Maintaining the Customs and Courtesy of Marine Corps Tradition <i>Staff Sergeant Michelle A. Wynveen, PhD</i>	68
17.	Leadership Is Not Rank Deep, It Is Backbone Built <i>Sergeant Kavonte Jones Sr. (Ret)</i>	73
18.	The Core Elements of Leadership <i>Corporal Matthew J. Fritch</i>	77
19.	Know Yourself and Seek Self-improvement <i>Staff Sergeant David Estes</i>	81
20.	Leadership Forged in Service: The Enduring Traits of an Enlisted Marine <i>Gunnery Sergeant William E. Clark</i>	85
21.	Shaping Future Performance: The NCO's Responsibility <i>Sergeant Manuel A. Lopez-Chavez</i>	89

CONTENTS

22.	Leading with Precision: Leadership Lessons as a Production and Analysis Chief <i>Staff Sergeant Oakley D. Lewellen</i>	93
23.	Turning Military Discipline into Entrepreneurial Drive <i>Sergeant Major Christopher J. Thomas (Ret)</i>	98
24.	The Perspective of an Enlisted Leader <i>Gunnery Sergeant Justin Cavanaugh</i>	102
25.	The Standards We Live By <i>Gunnery Sergeant Lenae A. Parzanese</i>	105
26.	As Leadership Evolves <i>Sergeant Kayanah Brown</i>	108
27.	Empathy: The Marine Corps' Quiet Weapon <i>Sergeant Andres Ruiz Grijalva</i>	113
28.	Leadership Defined <i>Corporal Megan A. Hinzman</i>	117
29.	Marine Leaders <i>Lance Corporal Lexi Morgan</i>	121
30.	Moments of Leadership <i>Staff Sergeant Paul Nicholas Chang (Ret)</i>	124
31.	Leadership that Lasts: Living the 4 Es <i>Master Gunnery Sergeant Levingston D. Hodges III (Ret)</i>	127
32.	Leaders: Givers and Takers <i>Private First Class Miguel Angel Torres II</i>	131
33.	Resilient Leadership <i>Corporal Trey Sweeney</i>	134
34.	Persistency over Perfection <i>Staff Sergeant Joshua Edwards</i>	138
35.	Strength of Character: The Discipline behind Effective Leadership <i>Staff Sergeant Nicholas S. O'Connor</i>	141
36.	The Complex Battlefield of the Thinking Warrior <i>First Sergeant Ivan Linares (Ret)</i>	144
37.	The Work <i>Sergeant Matthew J. Pocklington</i>	149

CONTENTS

38.	Uncompromised <i>Sergeant Major Glenn R. Ray</i>	153
39.	If You're Going to Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk <i>Staff Sergeant Dennis Michael Benton</i>	157
40.	What Makes a Leader? <i>Sergeant Nicolas A. Raymundo</i>	161
	Appendix: Classroom Discussion Questions	165
	Recommended Reading	169
	About the Authors	173

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Across centuries, there has been one thing shared by all Marines: the title Marine. We are cut from the same cloth, we have earned the right to be called Marine, and we have the same Eagle, Globe, and Anchor etched on our soul. Though each of us is shaped by different fires, we are forged by shared hardship. There are millions of individuals who have served as Marines since 1775, but not a single one of them lived the same experience. Not a single Marine has the same story to tell. Some stories are fleeting moments of the past, while others changed entire trajectories. Just as no two Marines are the same, neither are the stories that shaped them.

Aspects of Leadership exists for this reason. This volume is a compilation of 40 essays relating to enlisted leadership. Forty enlisted Marines have allowed the world to glimpse into their past—just for a moment—to share their story, to give perspective, and to allow others to learn from their lessons. It is the most valuable insight we could ask for. The opportunity to step into 40 lived experiences of enlisted leadership is a rare and powerful privilege.

We all carry different perspectives from the Marine Corps, as our distinctly different paths have shaped us into the leaders we are today. As you read these essays, put yourself in the shoes of those who share your same purpose. Though some Marines wrote with decades of experience and others with only a sliver of that, each writer came with a shared goal of enlightening others.

I ask you to read these stories with an open mind, a mind willing to see a new perspective and one that wants to grow

in wisdom. Maybe something in your soul will feel the urge to transform after reading these essays. Let it. Give in to that feeling and accept that you can be changed by others' experiences. Maybe that means becoming more empathetic, or maybe it means taking accountability in a way you haven't before. It is okay to accept shortcomings when you understand that leadership is ever-evolving. We are never done learning how to lead.

Leadership is not what you read in a publication. It is what you learn, what you embrace, and how you put it into action. The value of these leadership lessons is only as strong as you allow them to be. Live them forward, and remember, though we are all on different paths, we share one purpose: to lead Marines.

Semper Fidelis,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'C' and 'R' in a stylized, cursive font, followed by a period.

Carlos A. Ruiz

Sergeant Major, U.S. Marine Corps

20th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps

EDITORIAL NOTE

It is a privilege to introduce this collection of essays from Marine Corps University Press's first Enlisted Leadership Essay Contest. This initiative was conceived to elevate and amplify the voices of enlisted Marines—those whose experience, insight, and daily leadership at the small-unit level remain indispensable to the strength and effectiveness of the Marine Corps. By inviting enlisted Marines to write, reflect, and share their perspectives, we aim to foster a professional dialogue that is grounded in lived experience and oriented toward the future of Marine Corps leadership.

The purpose of this collection is twofold. First, it serves as a platform for professional discourse, encouraging thoughtful examination of leadership challenges, opportunities, and evolving dynamics within today's Marine Corps. The essays reflect a wide range of topics, from mentorship and discipline to innovation, cohesion, and the human dimension of combat readiness. Each piece contributes to a broader understanding of what effective enlisted leadership looks like in a rapidly changing operational environment.

Second, this volume underscores the value of writing as a critical component of professional military education. The act of writing compels clarity of thought, intellectual rigor, and self-reflection, qualities that are essential to leadership at every level. By engaging in this contest, these Marines have demonstrated not only their commitment to personal and professional development but also their willingness to contribute to the institutional body of knowledge that sustains the Corps.

By presenting these essays, Marine Corps University Press

has made a deliberate editorial choice to preserve the authenticity of each Marine's voice. The essays are published as close to their original submission as possible. Editorial changes have been limited to minor corrections in grammar, spelling, and punctuation to ensure readability and consistency. We have intentionally avoided substantive revisions so that each author's perspective, tone, and individuality remain intact.

This approach reflects our belief that the strength of this collection lies in its authenticity. These are not polished academic treatises; rather, they are sincere, experience-driven reflections that capture the reality of leadership as practiced across the force. The diversity of viewpoints represented here is both a testament to the richness of the enlisted experience and a valuable resource for continued discussion and learning.

I commend the Marines who participated in this inaugural contest for their initiative and intellectual engagement. Their contributions exemplify the ethos of continuous improvement and professional excellence that defines the Corps. It is my hope that this collection will inspire further dialogue, encourage others to write and share their insights, and ultimately strengthen the practice of leadership throughout the Marine Corps.

Angela J. Anderson
Director
Marine Corps University Press

SELECT ABBREVIATIONS, ACRONYMS, AND TERMS

AI	artificial intelligence
AWOL	absence without leave
BCP	body composition program
CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear
CFT	combat fitness test
COPS	current operations
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DI	drill instructor
EAS	end of active service
EGA	Eagle, Globe, and Anchor
FOPS	future operations
GCSS	Global Combat Support System
HMLA	Marine Light Attack Helicopter unit
MAGTF	Marine Air-Ground Task Force
MCCLL	Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned
MCDP	Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication
MCMAP	Marine Corps Martial Arts Program
MCT	Marine Combat Training
MCTIMS	Marine Corps Training Information Management System
MOS	military occupational specialty
MRE	meals, ready-to-eat
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NCOIC	noncommissioned officer in charge
NGA	National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency
OCS	Officer Candidates School
OIC	officer in charge
PCS	permanent change of station

PERCS	political, economic, religious, cultural
PFT	physical fitness test
PME	professional military education
SNCO	staff noncommissioned officer
SPMAGTF	Special Purpose MAGTF
TDY	temporary duty
TO&E	table of organization and equipment
T&R	training and readiness



Aspects of Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Empathy Is Combat Power

by Master Sergeant Tara M. Highbaugh

Close your eyes for a second and picture a Marine Corps leader. Most people see the same image: campaign cover pulled low, knife hand out, voice raised, some version of the *Full Metal Jacket* archetype.¹ It is the cultural default; leadership that relies on volume, fear, and compliance. Bark, they jump.

But the essays in this volume tell a different story, one that is eye-opening at first because it does not come from generals in the Pentagon. It comes from enlisted Marines. The people who look young Marines in the eye every day and carry the consequences in real time. Strip away the stereotype and you do not find a guide on how to yell louder. You find something harder: vulnerability, empathy, connection, and integrity delivered with the edge of warfighting reality.

These writers grapple with a tension many of us feel but rarely name. Is the Marine Corps not supposed to produce hardened weapons? Does connection not sound like softness, something that could get Marines killed? Their answer is direct. Without deep human connection, the weapon malfunctions.

¹ *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1987).

Fear-based leadership might produce quick compliance, but it also produces fragility. It can look disciplined on the outside, yet fail under real pressure because Marines stop thinking, stop trusting, and start hiding problems until they become crises. In the modern operating environment, fragility is a liability.

A consistent theme across these essays is the difference between rank and responsibility. Rank may come with authority, but responsibility is the weight of being accountable for people when it matters most.

Gunnery Sergeant Moise Barbier puts that reality into words as he writes about losing his second daughter. Most people would step away to grieve. No one would blame him for it. Barbier returned to duty, careful not to frame it as toughness or having “moved on.” He admits he had not healed. He was still broken. But he recognized that his Marines still needed him. In his telling, servant leadership is not unbreakable. It is being broken and choosing to stand anyway because others are watching what you do with pain.

Gunnery Sergeant Michael Brooks offers another warning, especially for new leaders who feel pressure to prove themselves fast. He calls it the “first-mate mentality.” Imagine a ship at sea for months, battles fought, storms survived. Then a brand-new leader drops onto the deck mid voyage. The instinct is to bark orders immediately to establish authority. Brooks argues that is the fastest path to mutiny. You do not yet know what storms the crew has survived, who is close to breaking, or what course has already been charted. Before you speak, you owe your Marines the respect of listening.

That listening leads into what some consider the most controversial theme in these essays: empathy. The concern is predictable. Empathy sounds soft, like it belongs in a circle of feelings instead of combat preparation. But these authors argue empathy is tactical.

Gunnery Sergeant Cord Bergen frames it as preventive maintenance. Start with a simple question: does the Marine understand their purpose? If not, they enter “the drift,” quiet detachment, sarcasm, sloppy standards, mental checkout. The

leader then reaches the proverbial fork in the road: empathize and reconnect or ignore it and yell harder. Ignore it long enough and drift becomes breakdown. Bergen's point is blunt: you can order a Marine to dig a fighting hole or clean a weapon. You cannot order someone to heal from burnout, grief, or trauma. So empathy is not indulgence. It is readiness. It prevents drift from becoming breakdown and preserves combat power.

Connection without standards is not leadership. These essays return, again and again, to integrity, especially integrity in the dark.

First Sergeant Chase McGorty Hunter recounts Sergeant Sawvel confronting a watch-standing problem: Marines late to post. Sawvel sets the standard and the consequences. Then the next morning, Sawvel oversleeps and is late himself. In most workplaces, the boss jokes and moves on. Sawvel did the opposite. He admitted he failed and ordered his subordinate to write him up. He even reported himself up the chain first. That single act bought a level of respect no amount of yelling could ever earn, because the moment leaders excuse themselves, every correction afterward is compromised.

Sergeant Major Glenn Ray provides the dark counterexample: a senior leader performs zero correct pull-ups yet receives a perfect score while everyone watches. In that moment, Ray argues, the leader loses the unit. Small lapses in integrity rarely stay small. If someone will cheat publicly on the "little things," what will they do when the stakes are higher and no one is watching?

Finally, these essays push beyond maintaining a unit and into transforming people through mentorship. Staff Sergeant Adalberto Jaramillo describes taking over a job he did not fully know and empowering a disgruntled junior Marine by asking him to teach. He backed that belief with action, time, presence, and even a paycheck bet that the Marine would be promoted. Years later, that same Marine became a staff sergeant and asked Jaramillo to pin his rank on sacred ground in Nassau. Jaramillo did not "fix" a broken Marine. He saw value beneath frustration and helped it surface.

Taken together, these stories paint a modern Marine leader radically different from the stereotype: resilient, but not isolated. Disciplined, but not fear driven. Integrity makes standards credible, and empathy makes standards sustainable.

If empathy works in life-and-death environments, it matters everywhere. Are we leading from distance and volume or from presence and trust? Are we taking time to understand the storms our people have already survived or just demanding more?

Because the right kind of pressure does not have to create fragility. Under deliberate standards, real accountability, and human connection, the pressure can be refining, like a piece of coal that becomes a diamond over time. That is how Marines stop drifting, teams stop breaking, and warfighters hold the line.

U.S. MARINE CORPS

Leadership Traits

- Justice
- Judgment
- Dependability
- Initiative
- Decisiveness
- Tact
- Integrity
- Enthusiasm
- Bearing
- Unselfishness
- Courage (physical and moral)
- Knowledge
- Loyalty
- Endurance
- Empathy

Leadership Principles

- Know yourself and seek self-improvement.
 - Be technically and tactically proficient.
 - Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates.
 - Make sound and timely decisions.
 - Set the example.
 - Know your Marines and look out for their welfare.
 - Keep your Marines informed.
 - Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.
 - Ensure tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished.
 - Train your Marines as a team.
 - Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.
-

FIRST PLACE

ESSAY 1

Not in History Books

by Master Gunnery Sergeant Miguel A. Gutierrez

Afghanistan, 2009

The base was nothing more than dust, plywood, and concertina wire back then, a skeleton of what it would become. We worked under an expeditionary, prebuilt air control tower, the kind that looks more like a shipping container on stilts than anything permanent. The air was thick with the smell of diesel generators and the constant hum of helicopters.

In the middle of that noise, one of my Marines came to me, clutching a folded message in his hand. His little sister had been in a serious accident back home. He tried to stand tall, but the fear in his eyes said more than words ever could. In that moment, I felt it like it was my own family. Out there, half-way around the world, I could not fix it. I could not send him home. All I could do was stand with him under that makeshift tower and make sure he knew he was not alone. That is when I learned that leadership is not just about missions or checklists, it is about carrying the heartache of those you serve as if it were your own blood.

As enlisted leaders, we learn quickly that rank does not mean privilege, it means weight. The higher you go, the more

you carry. You do not just worry about gear, deadlines, or readiness; you worry about the Marine who is struggling quietly, the one whose spouse is halfway across the world with a newborn, the one who hides their problems until it is almost too late, like a hairline crack in a rotor blade, invisible until the moment it shatters mid-flight.

I have seen Marines carry each other through those moments in ways that changed me as a leader. None of these actions were my deeds, but watching them unfold left a mark on me that no training course ever could.

I remember a lance corporal during a long field exercise breaking his MRE portions in half and tossing them across a makeshift table built from stacked backpacks to the Marine beside him, the one who had lost his rations and taken the full brunt of discipline for it.¹ No one told him to, and no one else saw. He did not say a word, just ate in silence, carrying on the rest of the day with half the food everyone else had.

I think of a corporal who found out one of his Marines had failed their driver's course for the third time. Instead of shrugging it off, he stayed late with them every day for a week, walking the course, talking through mistakes, and pushing them past their frustration. When that Marine finally passed, the corporal's pride looked exactly like a brother watching his sibling succeed.²

And there was the time when a Marine in our unit became a single father just weeks after his wife gave birth, losing her to complications from the pregnancy. He was still trying to figure out how to be a parent while keeping up with the demands of the job. Without saying a word to leadership, a few Marines passed an ammo can around the barracks, quietly dropping in

¹ MRE refers to meals ready-to-eat. The U.S. Navy officially ended what was called the bread and water punishment for loss of rations on 1 January 2019. Article 15: Nonjudicial punishment such as captain's mast was used to address minor disciplinary infractions.

² Mandatory Marine Corps driving courses include Driver's Awareness Training, Driver Improvement Program, and Government Vehicle Operator's License training.

cash. By the end of the day, it was taped shut and left in his car with a note that simply read, "Family takes care of family."

None of these moments will ever be recorded in history books. They are not the heroics of legendary figures whose names echo through Marine Corps lore. But thousands of these quiet acts in the field, in the barracks, and on deployment stack together into something far greater. They become the living legacy of the Marine Corps, a legacy built not only by valor in combat, but by the relentless, everyday choice to take care of one another.

While none of these stories were mine to claim, they all shaped me. They reminded me that leadership is not built on what I do for my Marines, it is also built on noticing, valuing, and learning from what they do for each other. Those quiet acts of care and sacrifice made me want to be a leader worthy of the Marines I serve.

The Marine Corps has given me more than I could have imagined: skills, discipline, and a second family. But it has also taught me that leadership comes with a price. That price is heartache: late nights worrying, moments of doubt, and the quiet pain of knowing you cannot shield your Marines from every hardship. And sometimes, you know those hardships will forge growth and resilience in them, but in the moment, something still twists in your chest. It is the same feeling you get watching your child bite the dust trying to ride a bike without training wheels for the first time or seeing them crushed by their first heartbreak. You know they will come out stronger, but that does not make it easier to watch. Still, I would not trade it. Because in that heartache is honor, the honor of knowing you stood beside them, fought for them, and cared for them as if they were your own flesh and blood. And that, to me, is what it truly means to lead as an enlisted Marine leader.

SECOND PLACE

ESSAY 2

From Silver Nuggets to Nuggets of Wisdom

by Master Gunnery Sergeant Isboset Rendonhoare

When Spanish colonizers first arrived on the shores of the New World, they discovered an abundance of natural resources lying in plain sight, including tiny silver nuggets and other precious minerals. The colonizers' technological advantage over the indigenous people enabled them to exercise a system of coercion. Indigenous populations were forced to mine and deliver quantities of silver under threats of severe punishment. Historical accounts, such as those by Bartolome de las Casas, describe practices where indigenous people who failed to meet quotas had their hands amputated.¹ Faced with the choice between keeping one's hands and compliance, many of us would understandably choose compliance. And with that, the tactic of fear-based leadership took root; a method of control that exploited fear to enforce obedience.

Though the era of imperial conquest has passed, the mentality behind it still lingers (knife hand). Today, I can look back on my 28-year career and recall instances of leaders, including myself, who at some point relied on intimidation, punitive ar-

¹ Janet Burke and Ted Humphrey, "The New Black Legend of Bartolomé de las Casas," *Church Life Journal* (October 2023).

ticles, or constant pressure to achieve short-term compliance. However, this approach rarely inspired genuine commitment or loyalty. Much like the coerced laborers, the motivation to act—to gather silver—was not born out of desire, pride, or belief; it was born out of fear. This is the essence of extrinsic motivation—doing something not because you want to, but because you *have to* (or else).

In the Marine Corps, we pride ourselves on discipline, structure, and hierarchy. These traits are necessary for readiness and survival. But somewhere along the way, many leaders fall into what I call the “transactional trap,” or the belief that leadership is simply a matter of managing rewards and punishments: “do this or face consequences,” “complete this task and maybe you will go home early.” In this model, motivation becomes a currency, where tasks are traded for outcomes. Compliance is mistaken for commitment. And since this approach yields immediate results, these tactics become normalized; we adopt a task-oriented mindset, and we pass these habits on to our successors. Yet, extrinsic motivation is superficial, brittle, and short-lived. It is effective for immediate results, yes, but it fails at building loyalty or personal initiative.² As soon as the external reward disappears or the threat is removed, so does the motivation. Much like coerced indigenous laborers would flee or underperform the moment they saw the opportunity.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is the internal drive that inspires action. It comes from within, fueled by alignment with personal values, their identity, a sense of purpose, or a meaningful connection with their leader. Unlike extrinsic motivation, it does not rely on threats or rewards. Psychologists like Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, through their self-determination theory, argue that human beings are naturally wired to seek growth and purpose, provided the right condi-

² For more on extrinsic motivation, see David Burkus, “Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation at Work,” *Creative Leadership* (blog), Psychology Today, 29 October 2025.

tions are created.³ In leadership terms, this means that if you want people to be motivated from within, not just obey or comply, you must first create the environment that earns trust and supports people's psychological need for connection and purpose.

As a young staff noncommissioned officer, I found myself asking a critical question: *How do we, as leaders, create those conditions where intrinsic motivation can flourish?* That question became a compass for my leadership approach, and along the way, I gathered a few nuggets of wisdom; lessons that helped me move from relying on command-driven authority to purpose-driven influence.

Nugget of Wisdom #1: Strive to Unlock Intrinsic Motivation

I found that Marines follow character before they follow commands. I noticed that when a leader was consistent at modeling the values they preached—integrity, self-discipline, and ethical conduct—subordinates began to develop trust and admiration. Over time, this trust inspires them to emulate those traits, not out of forced compliance but out of respect for their leader. This is when I understood that true leadership was transformative, and it had to be built from within the leader first.

Years ago, while leading a troubled platoon (some may call it *toxic*), I tried something that at the time felt risky. I stopped trying to control Marines and started trying to connect. I held one-on-one meetings. I asked about their goals and families. I listened with empathy. I shared the *why* behind the mission. I began leading with understanding and asking for their input. It did not happen overnight, but with time the culture changed. On their own, they began holding each other accountable, vol-

³ R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, "Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.68>.

unteering for hard tasks, staying late, etc. They took pride in the unit, the mission, and growing into leaders themselves. At that point, I had earned their obedience as well as their trust. During this process, I learned that the essence of leadership lies not in rank or toughness, but in the ability to connect and inspire through genuine care.

Once I understood the benefit of intrinsic motivation, I noticed another force that could either build or break it—language—my next nugget of wisdom.

Nugget of Wisdom #2:

Choose Language that Gives Life, Not Death

I learned that words have power. Affirming someone's strengths, potential, or progress, conversely, lights a fire that punishment never can. For example, when I told one of my daughters, "I saw your room this morning, and I am proud of you. It shows you have high personal standards and discipline." That simple affirmation stuck with her. Her room stayed clean, not because I demanded so, but because she felt seen, valued, and motivated to sustain that standard. However, when I told my son to "stop living like a pig," predictably his room stayed messy. The difference? One message built identity and pride (words of life); the other triggered shame and resistance (words of death).

Affirmations do not mean "be nice," they mean recognizing when someone is rising to meet a standard and using that moment to reinforce their sense of pride and purpose. It is leadership that builds the person not just performance. As I observed how affirmations could shape behavior, I understood something deeper—the way people choose to follow. This leads me to my final insight on turning compliance into true commitment.

Nugget of Wisdom #3:

Aim to Build Authentic Followers

Building on the previous lessons, I noticed that when everything aligns; authentic leaders lead by example and make their

subordinates feel seen, valued, and empowered, something rare begins to happen. We give root to what can be called *authentic followership*.⁴ Unlike forced obedience, authentic followership is rooted in belief and mutual trust. It is in this environment where subordinates actions transform from mere compliance to genuine commitment. They truly care about their leaders and become personally invested in the mission and outcome.

In my experience, authentic followers consistently outperformed those who complied out of obligation, even when their skills and technical competence were identical. It is worth noting that authentic followership will be challenging whenever emphasis is placed primarily on task accomplishment rather than personal connection and trust.

The indigenous people who picked up silver nuggets under the threat of violence were not authentic followers; they were hostages of fear. Fear, though effective in the short term, has never been a sustainable foundation for leadership. We must lead from within, by staying true to our core values and avoiding transactional traps. With that, I encourage leaders to trade silver nuggets for something more enduring and valuable—authentic followership.

⁴ B. J. Avolio and R. J. Reichard, "The Rise of Authentic Followership," in Ronald E. Riggio, Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, eds., *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2008), 325–37.

THIRD PLACE

ESSAY 3

Leadership in the Quiet Moments

by First Sergeant Chase McGrorty-Hunter

When most people think of military leadership, they imagine the big, dramatic moments, the split-second decisions in combat, the speeches that rally Marines, the visible acts of courage. Those moments matter, but they are not what shaped me most as a Marine. The lesson that changed the way I lead did not come from a firefight or a grand gesture. It came from something quieter, more uncomfortable, and far easier to overlook. It came from a sergeant who chose to hold himself accountable when he did not have to.

I have told this story about Sergeant Franklin J. Sawvel many times to young Marines, because it stuck with me in a way no field manual or professional military education (PME) ever could.

In the spring of 2014, our unit was sent to an operation on an Air Force base in South Korea. Sergeant Sawvel was our senior noncommissioned officer (NCO), and I, along with a few other corporals, served as the small-unit leaders in his section. We had set up a combat operations center and were responsible for maintaining the communications network and manning a 24-hour watch. To make it work, we divided the platoon into eight-hour rotations. When Marines were not on shift, they had

more than enough free time to hit the gym, sleep, or get involved in other activities around base.

At first, it ran smoothly, then Marines started showing up late for their shifts. Usually, it was nothing more than poor time management, sleeping too long, or taking too much time at the chow hall. But on that installation, if you missed the shuttle that ran across base every 30 minutes, you were guaranteed to be an hour late. That meant the Marine standing post had to wait, frustrated and tired, until their relief finally showed up.

It became a pattern. After enough late arrivals, Sergeant Sawvel called all the corporals together. He was stern, direct, and made it clear he was not going to tolerate it anymore. He told us we were failing as a section, that he expected better, and that from then on any Marine who was late, no matter who they were, would be issued a negative counseling. Then he hit us where it hurt: the corporals, the ones who were supposed to be setting the example, were the worst offenders. He was right, and we knew it.

The very next day, fate stepped in. I was on the watch that was supposed to end at 1400. When 1400 rolled around, my relief had not shown. I stayed on, assuming it was another case of someone missing the shuttle. Then, at 1500, the door opened and in walked Sergeant Sawvel. The look of frustration shining brightly on his face told me everything I needed to know.

After I gave him a proper turnover on the day's operations, he pulled me aside. The conversation is one I will never forget.

"I'm sorry I was late, Grorty," he said. "I forgot to set an alarm and overslept."

I brushed it off, "It's no big deal, Sergeant. I was working on something anyway."

But he shook his head. "No, it's not okay, especially after I just corrected all the Marines yesterday on the same damn thing. I want you to write a negative counseling on me."

I thought he was joking. "What? Sergeant, I don't think I need to do that. You're never late. Everyone messes up once."

He stared right at me and did not flinch. "No. You're going

to write it, and tomorrow you're going to issue it to me, just like I said I would do to you guys."

That night, with no small amount of disbelief, I sat down and wrote a counseling for my sergeant. "On this date, Sergeant Franklin Sawvel was in violation of Article 86, Absence without leave, in which he was not present at his appointed place of duty for shift changeover."¹ I filled out the details, added a proposed corrective action, and brought it in the next day.

But before I had the chance to deliver it, Sergeant Sawvel told me that the night before while on shift he had gone to our staff sergeant and explained what happened, admitting his own mistake to our platoon leadership. After finding out Sergeant Sawvel's proposed plan of action to hold himself accountable, our staff sergeant rightly told him he was not going to be counseled by a Marine junior to him. Whether he was formally counseled at a higher level or not did not matter. What mattered was that Sergeant Sawvel had meant every word of what he had said. He was fully prepared to take the hit he had threatened us with only a couple days before.

That moment taught me more about leadership than any class or field exercise. Sergeant Sawvel did not just demand a standard, he lived it. He did not excuse himself because of his rank or reputation. He did not hide behind his authority. He showed us that ownership means taking responsibility when you fall short, no matter how uncomfortable it is, and no matter who is watching.

I went back and shared the story with every other NCO in our section, and you can believe it resonated. From that day forward, we knew Sergeant Sawvel was a man of his word. More importantly, we knew he would never ask something of us that he was not willing to do himself. That is a rare kind of credibility, and once you earn it, Marines will follow you through anything.

Looking back, I see three qualities that matter most in an

¹ Title 10 USC 886: Art. 86, Absence without leave, Uniform Code of Military Justice (5 May 1950).

enlisted leader: ownership, integrity, and consistency of standards. Ownership means you do not pass the blame when things go wrong. Integrity means your words and your actions line up, even when it costs you. Consistency means you apply the standard equally across rank, across friendships, and across situations. None of those qualities are flashy. They do not make for motivational posters. But without them, no Marine can trust the leader in front of them.

I have carried that lesson with me ever since. Years later, when I found myself as the senior NCO or staff NCO correcting Marines for small but important standards—uniform infractions, accountability, showing up on time—I remembered Sergeant Sawvel. And when I made a mistake myself, I remembered that leadership meant admitting it and owning it, not brushing it aside. To this day, now as a battery first sergeant and 10 years after the passing of my dear friend Sergeant Sawvel, I still tell young Marines this story, because they need to understand that leadership is not about the power of rank; it is about the credibility you earn by living the standard.²

True leadership is not always loud or dramatic. Sometimes, it looks like a sergeant standing in front of a corporal and saying, “Hold me to the same standard.” That is the kind of leadership that lasts, because it is not built on authority, it is built on character.

² Sgt Franklin J. Sawvel died on 21 November 2014 while serving in the Persian Gulf.

ESSAY 4

The Unseen Leader

by Corporal Aaron Keefer

Leadership is ingrained in every Marine; it is the foundation of our culture and way of life. There are 14 leadership traits and 11 leadership principles we are challenged to live by.¹ To pick one of them as the most important is as challenging as removing a single thread from a finely woven tapestry without unraveling the entire pattern. The ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu (or Laozi), puts it best: “A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”² For this to occur, it takes an overwhelming capacity for influence, unmatched vision, courageous action, and fearless responsibility. This is how empires have been built, how companies have generated billions in revenue, and how a Marine effectively leads the Marines under their charge when they are called to action. It takes only a single decision and a single action to achieve grandeur, just as

¹ *Leading Marines*, MCWP 6-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024), chap. 2.

² Laozi was considered the first philosopher of Chinese Taoism. See his work in *Tao Te Ching* [Classic of the way and its virtue], which was originally published in China, fourth century BCE.

it takes one of each to lead to chaos and disorder. Ultimately, this challenge reveals that a leader's true impact is often the result of unseen choices that guide, rather than dictate, success.

Nothing is more powerful than an influence so profound that you would swim the seven seas for someone, and the mere thought of disappointing them brings you great disgust. That is a leader's greatest asset: the ability to unleash greatness in others so they perform to perfection, whether you are present or not. This stems from your astounding example, your words, and actions being a testament to your integrity. After all, how can you ask your Marines to be something that you are not? In the Marine Corps, it is presented like this: "How can you demand attention to detail when your own uniform has Irish pennants all over it? How can you condemn a Marine for their physical fitness when you yourself are never seen on a run? How can you demand a clean rifle when yours is laden with rust?"³ A leader's words are a double-edged sword; they can cut a path to success or undermine a leader's credibility. It must not cut others down but instead guide and guard the path with a foundation of personal example. Influence stands as the pinnacle of all leadership traits and is as strong as the wind that moves the trees and inspires a person to be the best they can be.

What is the ocean without waves, what is a forest without trees, and what is a leader without vision? They say Rome was not built in a day, but if the vision was for Rome to be the greatest civilization to exist, then it does not matter how long it took to build. Rome was the vision. The capacity to translate vision into reality and foster growth is a leader's number one asset, and this is where a leader's influence truly shines. This vision provides direction and purpose, inspires collaboration, and fosters a shared understanding among the team. It goes without saying, a strong vision provides a framework for

³ The earliest known use of the term *Irish pennants* is from the British Royal Navy in the 1820s. It refers to a loose, untidy thread hanging from a uniform like the frayed end of a line or rope.

decision-making and the thorough completion of the mission. In the Marine Corps, we have countless orders, directives, and the commander's intent. As a small-unit leader, your vision lays out the task with pristine communication and the utmost attention to detail. In the end, a leader's vision is the very soul of the mission, giving it life and meaning where none existed before.

Empowering others to take ownership and responsibility is how you exist as a leader and how you will prosper in executing the vision. You give your followers the space to be courageous, allowing them to take the initiative to complete tasks as you would. As a leader, you should already embody all the leadership traits. The integrity and humility to let others take credit for success and the fearlessness to assume responsibility when things do not go your way, translates into courage. This is what the Marine Corps does best, allowing noncommissioned officers to take charge and lead in their own right. Courage is what lives in the heart of all leaders; it is the spark that drives men to the depths of the ocean and to the vastness of space. To stand in the front of fire and lead your Marines, that is when men feel the closest to our maker. To boldly stand in the face of uncertainty with a guided hand unfaltering is one's greatest achievement.

Humility is the quiet strength that underpins every other leadership trait. An unseen leader does not crave the spotlight; in fact, their greatest success is measured by the light they shine on others. This selfless act is a cornerstone of Marine Corps leadership, where the welfare of the troops comes before one's own. True leadership is like being the foundation of a building, you may not be seen, but without you, the entire structure would collapse. The humble leader understands that their personal credit is insignificant compared to the mission's success and the growth of their team. This powerful, silent act of putting others first is what allows a team to truly take ownership of its achievements and confidently say, "We did it ourselves."

Within all of us is the desire to be great and to achieve what

has never been achieved or to simply live a life well lived. Leading is not for everyone; some are afraid to lead but a few feel compelled to do so. Throughout history, we have seen leaders come and go, empires rise and fall, and CEOs innovate and adapt, from whom we have learned so much. The challenge still stands of picking the most important traits of a leader. The possession of decisiveness, contagious influence in inspiring others to reach their full potential, and courage through adversity are the foundation of a great leader. As a leader, you set the standard, and the standard will always be met so long as you hold steadfastly to that standard. A leader is teachable, and their greatest mentor is themselves. At long last, a leader's true success is not measured by their own fame, but by how well their team embodies the spirit of Lao Tzu's mantra: "When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

ESSAY 5

Forged in the Fire **The True Meaning of an Enlisted Leader**

by Sergeant Angel R. Rodriguez

Marines do not follow rank—they follow leaders. Leaders are not born; they are forged in the fire. In the Marine Corps, leadership is not given; it is earned in the heat of operations, in the grind of training, and in the quiet moments when no one is watching. People often claim “discipline” is the most important leadership quality; but in the Marine Corps, discipline is a given, it is survival, the bare minimum standard for any Marine. No Marine is applauded for being disciplined any more than they are applauded for breathing. The real differencemakers are the qualities people tend to overlook: initiative, adaptability, mastery, and a relentless commitment to their fellow Marines. These are not just traits; they are weapons in the hands of a leader who refuses to fail.

One of the earliest examples of these qualities in his career came when he arrived in the Fleet and began working under Sergeant Basaldua. She could have brushed him off as just another new Marine, but she did not. She did not belittle him for what he did not know, she taught him. She answered his questions, gave him resources, and pushed him to grow into the Marine she knew he could become. She adapted her leadership to his pace, challenging him when he was ready and step-

ping back when he needed space to figure it out on his own. He remembered late nights in the equipment lot, the smell of hydraulic fluid in the air, and her standing there explaining not just what needed to be fixed, but why it mattered. She did not just teach skills, she shaped character. Her investment in him without expecting recognition set the foundation for his future leadership. Her example ignited in him a hunger, not just to be good, but to be the Marine others could count on when everything was on the line.

Another defining example came while working under then-staff sergeant, now Warrant Officer 1 Dylan Kelley. The operation was brutal. Machines roared without pause, dust hung in the air like smoke, and operators pushed themselves past exhaustion. Marines were burning out, bodies running on fumes, eyes heavy from hours without rest. Without hesitation, Warrant Officer Kelley climbed into the seat of the equipment and went to work. For hours, he ran it like he had been born there, giving others the time they desperately needed to recover. He reorganized the flow of work midstride, keeping production high even as he pulled men off the site. His mastery of every piece of gear was unquestionable, but it was his message that hit hardest: "Your welfare comes first. Your fight is my fight." That single act did not just boost morale, it ignited it. Marines straightened their backs, tightened their grips, and pushed forward with renewed purpose. His leadership made them feel like they could give everything, because their leader had already shown them what it meant to give everything first.

He did not develop these qualities by accident; he forged them the hard way. Early on, he waited for orders. Now, he thinks two steps ahead of them. Where others see problems, he sees threats to the mission and moves to crush them before they spread. He thrives in uncertainty, changing direction without losing momentum when the plan falls apart. He refuses to settle for "good enough" in his military occupational specialty (MOS), because a leader who cannot execute flawlessly when it counts is a liability. He builds teams that fight as one, because in this line of work, no Marine fights alone. In

The Art of War, Sun Tzu says, “A leader leads by example, not by force.”¹ He lives that truth, each day, in everything he does. As First Sergeant Dale once said, “Great leaders create shade they will never see.”² Those words cut to the heart of leadership—taking the hard road so Marines can march farther, faster, and stronger.

These are not just words, they are the difference between success and failure, between Marines coming home or not. Initiative ensures they act before opportunity slips away. Adaptability keeps the mission alive when the plan dies. Mastery turns them into the ones everyone depends on when there is no room for error. And unbreakable commitment builds the kind of trust that makes Marines run toward the sound of the guns. This is the standard he carries—his personal creed. It is the standard he learned from the leaders who came before him, and the one he instills in the Marines he leads now. In the Corps, Marines are not judged by their intentions, but by their results. Leaders are not remembered for what they demanded, they are remembered for what they gave. And he will give everything. No excuses. No exceptions.

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

² 1stSgt Dale, speech, Corporal's Course Graduation, 3 February 2024.

ESSAY 6

Marine Corps Leadership Honing Our Principles and Primary Duties

by Gunnery Sergeant Ryan Barclift

Being a part of an organization as prestigious as the United States Marine Corps, you eventually realize that everyone from the newest private to the top general plays a pivotal part in success. At all echelons of the force, Marines are billeted to fulfill a specific military occupational specialty (MOS), which may or may not inherently include some additional collateral duties. While Marines are made to adapt and overcome or “grow where planted,” that does not justify prolonged unconsented exclusion from one’s MOS. There are occasions where a Marine may request certain collateral duties or special duty assignments that they knowingly leave their MOS field for, such as drill instructor, Marine security guard, primary military education school instructor, etc. However, as leaders, we must empathize when a Marine has a passion for their MOS and the urge to excel in or learn more about it. Two Marine Corps leadership principles stand out to me regarding this issue: “Be technically and tactically proficient” and “Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.”¹ From the Marines’

¹ *Leading Marines*, MCWP 6-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024), chap. 2.

point of view, being technically and tactically proficient includes increasing knowledge, becoming a subject matter expert, and developing relevant expertise in their MOS. From the leader's perspective, employing Marines in accordance with capabilities includes understanding their strengths and limitations, along with utilizing them appropriately to be effective and most efficient. That being said, to demand that a Marine permanently operate outside of their MOS' primary duties with no solid reasoning is an injustice to the Marine and becomes unjust leadership.

To explain this concept and demonstrate its importance, I will focus on one specific example that I have encountered during my time in the Marine Corps. The Marine Light Attack Helicopter (HMLA) community is a set of squadrons in Marine Corps Aviation. Aviation operations specialist is an MOS known by the code 7041. The majority of 7041s fill the billet of operations clerk and operations chief, normally assigned to an operations department, also known as the S3, G3, or J3.² In a standard HMLA operations department, it is comprised of flight operations (flight ops) and operations administration (ops admin). In flight ops, the aircrew assigned is subdivided into future operations (FOPS), current operations (COPS), and aircrew training. Ops admin is comprised of 7041s and usually a ground training officer. In most HMLAs, ops admin is often called "ground training," and regularly burdened with training-related tasks rather than aviation-related tasks. Due to the separation in S3, operations clerks/chiefs are not equipped with the proper level of experience in accordance with Marine Corps' training and readiness (T&R) requirements.³

Many HMLAs across the Marine Corps rely on the operations clerks and operations chief to be the sole foundation and

² S refers to battalion- or brigade-level staff; G refers to division-level staff; and J refers to Joint-level staff.

³ In the case of aviation, this refers to *NAVMC 3500.14E, Aviation and Training Readiness Manual* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1 September 2025).

coordinator of all Marine Corps' nonaviation-specific training, making 7041s the primary training coordinator and manager for all sections within the squadron. Due to the level of reliance on the operations clerks/chiefs to manage annual training, the 7041s are not allowed to achieve their full potential in their obligated duties within the unit's table of organization and equipment (TO&E) or T&R manual. Because ops admin is primarily tasked with ground training requirements, they cannot complete their required core and mission phase 7041 T&R events. This means that they are not fully qualified operations clerks and chiefs per T&R manual requirements. That in-turn, makes them noncompetitive in their MOS and breeds future leaders who lack the required knowledge of their official MOS duties, also hindering 7041 abilities at different units and other echelons of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) where the MOS is properly engaged with the T&R manual prescribed requirements.

A formal standard procedure needs to be established utilizing 7041s the way the Marine Corps T&R manual expects aviation operations specialists to be used throughout the command and the individual Marine's career. At a unit where the turnover rate is generally high and officers (pilots) handle the majority of aviation operations, operations clerks/chiefs need to be deeply involved in aviation operations to add efficiency to the operations department's turnover and provide continuity within the S3. The management and accountability of ground training should be handled at the shop level, as it provides the section's leadership situational awareness of delinquencies and discrepancies with their individual Marines. Department heads must enforce Marine Corps' annual training in their sections for it to be managed properly. This forces small unit leadership and gives the sections a flexible schedule to complete required training and create a plan of completion on their own terms.

At all HMLA commanding general inspections I took part in during my tenure as an HMLA operations chief, senior 7041s from higher echelons expressed concern in the fact that ops

admin was considered “Ground Training.”⁴ They explained and showed how that issue is hindering operations clerks/chiefs and that 7041s are not fulfilling their duties as operations clerks/chiefs in the squadron’s operations department. To remedy this, I recommended the HMLA operations departments work as one organism, primarily focused on aviation-related operations. Sections should be responsible for utilizing Marine Corps Training Information Management System (MCTIMS), Marine Online, Command Profile, and any other information tracking source available to ensure their Marines are properly trained. By doing this, and allowing the 7041s to fulfill their primary duties, they will become more effective and efficient in the Marine Corps’ total force design throughout the MAGTF. To ensure the operations clerks/chiefs can become fully proficient in their MOS, I recommend all HMLA 7041s conduct in-depth training and/or turnover with COPS and FOPS to take over their duties.

To ensure the unit does not fall short in Marine Corps annual training requirements, the operations chief and ground training officer can ensure that every officer-in-charge, staff noncommissioned officer, and shop-designated training representative have permissions that allow them to manage MCTIMS and submit appropriate training for their section. The ground training officer can facilitate any squadron-wide annual training requirement (e.g., Squadron Gas Chamber, Combat Pistol 1-Day Sustainment, Squadron Swim Qualification, etc.) and recruit assistance from the squadron gunnery sergeant and additional Marines when needed. If the specific HMLA requires a shop dedicated to managing annual/ground training, it should not be managed by aviation operations specialists who have designated duties to the Fleet Marine Force. This section should be managed by Marines who require or need collateral duties outside of their MOS. With this, the ground training officer would still have assistance in their duties while the 7041s

⁴ For more on inspections, see “Commanding General Inspection Program,” MCIEast.Marines.mil, accessed 30 January 2026.

are allowed to progress in their MOS. Whereas now, the majority of 7041s MOS prescribed duties are done by collateral duty holders (usually pilots in S3). Since there is no formal school for becoming a training representative, on-the-job training for all ground training programs can be handled at unit level and will not require any external measures to make collateral duty swaps.⁵

The reason this affects Marine Corps leadership is two-fold: by aviation operations specialists being constantly tasked outside of their primary duties, their leadership is doing them a disservice on their progression within their actual MOS; and by individual sections within the squadron not tracking and ensuring ground training is complete, they are lacking proper leadership of their Marines. The 7041s need to work with officers assigned to COPS and FOPS collateral duties and conduct in-depth training on task and mission skills relevant to their command. These changes demonstrate the importance of being technically and tactically proficient, as well as employing your command in accordance with its capabilities.

⁵ These training programs include the physical fitness (PFT), combat fitness (CFT), body composition program (BCP), chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN), Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), Range, professional military education (PME), and water survival.

ESSAY 7

The Pedestal Is Not a Throne

by Sergeant Nicholas Anderson

Leadership is often seen as the glorious position at the top of the food chain, the person with the power to make all the rules. To deny that would certainly be foolhardy, however the prevailing question throughout time remains: What aspects or qualities make someone a good leader? Throughout my lifetime, I have seen many great leaders in different environments; I have seen leaders in families, religious settings, the military, and societal and political spheres. The characteristics that bleed between all of them can be broken into three main characteristics: humility, developing those under their charge, and sacrifice.

Humility remains one of the most integral traits in the foundation of a good leader because it serves as a reminder that while the breeze at the top of the mountain is refreshing, the struggle and pain of the journey is still there for those following your path. We often forget once the pain has subsided that it was difficult to persevere and endure the climb up the mountain. To be a good leader, you must make the climb yourself; if you are unwilling to make the climb then you have no right to ask of another what you are unwilling to give. The separation of good and exceptional leadership is in the mindset of someone

humble enough to make the climb not once, but as many times as necessary to bring others to their level. It is easy to expect respect for being the one at the front of the pack, it is difficult to understand that just because you were first in line does not mean you are special for doing what many others have done and will do. Humble yourself and move past the internal focus and reflection; instead, move into the aspects of leadership that earn the respect of those you lead by helping others finish the climb. Do not exalt in your accolades, take pride and genuine joy when the job is finished; the person who discovers paradise does not have the same impact as the one who leads others to it. Impactful leaders are separated from the pack because they are strong enough to shoulder the weight of decision-making for the group; inherently with that trust and power should come the understanding that you are not supposed to be the focus. I have learned that at all levels of leadership, while you may have the burden of choosing the path, you also have the privilege of shaping those who want to support you when you falter or make a mistake.

Moving from understanding personal self and shifting focus more toward those around you is a key aspect of leadership that comes with maturity and responsibilities of the role. It applies to parents, noncommissioned officers (NCO), officers, religious and political figures, teachers, and community leaders. As the focus and priority shifts toward those being led, I have realized that being a leader means shaping those around me to be better than me. If I was the best person for the role and that never changed, then I would have failed in my duty to build a future more sustainable than the present. The role of leader will remain long after I am gone, so someone else will have to walk my path and forge ones I never encountered; leaders must have the foresight and humility to understand their role is transitional regardless of if they are the best person to be in it at that moment. You have the unique pleasure and solemn responsibility of shaping the future with the work you lay bare today; understand that the future is not in the path but the people who will be walking it. Perfection is not

attainable but if it remains the goal for you and your subordinates, excellence will always be an acceptable substitute. Goal posts will always shift to something new and if you train those below you to adapt with emphasis on accomplishing tasks the way good leaders are expected to you can build a legacy of success and dominance. Be the example you expect others to emulate, help them understand why something is done that way, and you will see profound impacts on the culture and success of those you work with. To truly develop the people under you though, it involves making difficult decisions, compromising, and working with them.

To me, the most important tenet of leadership is sacrifice; no other quality will define your career and impact on those around you like your willingness to ask for and commit to sacrifice. Sacrifice is ubiquitous with any hard decision, path, or set of consequences a leader will face in every facet of their life. No leader is spared from its reach and what defines true leadership is the ability to embrace and utilize its impact to inspire others. It is the greatest form of love and giving one can do for another, but it is also one of the most widely avoided aspects of life. When all eyes are on you to make decisions, those same eyes will cast judgment on where the onus of sacrifice is placed. As a leader, there will be times where you must place the sacrifice on those below you simply because you cannot bear it alone and succeed; if you take it for yourself, you may fail those you are supposed to prioritize. It will never be easy to have the power to choose whether you burden yourself or those around you, the challenge lies therein of making people comfortable sacrificing because it is necessary to endure that suffering for success. To earn that from someone, you must first show that you are willing to bear the burden in order to protect them. If you walk the hard road and protect those who follow you, they will be more willing to endure when you can no longer do it alone. Glory and legacy are the precious goals that many leaders strive for, however too often it is forgotten that those are paid for with the suffering and sacrifice of the people who attain it. You will fail; you may fail often however

the sacrifice of those around you who are willing to share the burden of your failures will carry you forward when your feet slip along the path. If their sacrifice will carry you during your failures, your sacrifices must carry them to success; you are in that role for their benefit not yours.

As a leader you are elevated to walk ahead of others, to be who others look to when no one has the answer. Remain humble; you are not better than others and the lowest level of work still applies to you. Develop others to be better than you, you have the knowledge and power to change the future of those you lead; the work you do will endure long after you are gone. Sacrifice is dirty and involves suffering, view it as the mud you must dig through to find the gold; do not shy away from it because glory will follow. The pedestal you are on is not a throne, it is a reminder to serve.

ESSAY 8

The Rank We Wear Is Temporary The Impact We Leave Is Forever

by Staff Sergeant Adalberto Jaramillo

When I left active duty and transitioned into the active reserve component, I thought I had seen the full spectrum of Marine Corps leadership. I was wrong. What began as a rocky introduction to reserve life at Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 452 (VMGR-452) in Newburgh, New York, turned into the most meaningful leadership experience of my career—and a lesson that leadership is not about authority, but about compassion, humility, and believing in Marines who no longer believe in themselves.¹

I checked in to VMGR-452 as a newly promoted corporal, recently approved for a lateral move into the intelligence field (0231). Despite being slated for military occupational specialty (MOS) school in the future, I had no formal training, only my background as a prior administrative Marine. Yet, on day one, I was told I would be the new intelligence chief and security manager for the squadron. No turnover. No mentorship. Just a briefing deck, a title, and a looming command meeting.

¹ The squadron was officially deactivated on 2 December 2022 at Stewart Air National Guard Base, NY, as part of the Marine Corps' *Force Design 2030* restructuring to transition toward new capabilities.

The sergeant I was replacing, Sergeant Vazquez, was scheduled to leave for Officer Candidates School (OCS) in two weeks. He knew I was a lateral-mover. He knew I had not been trained yet. Still, during that command meeting, he introduced me as his replacement and told me—on the spot—to brief the slides. I stood up, heart pounding, and attempted to brief the intelligence picture. I choked. I had no idea what I was looking at. I stood silent in front of the entire command. I could feel the room watching me fail.

After the meeting, Sergeant Vazquez pulled me into my new office and, in front of a lance corporal from our shop—Lance Corporal Austin D. Apotheker—he let loose and ripped me a new one, telling me how embarrassed and disappointed he was in me. I stood there at parade rest and took it, repeating “Yes, Sergeant,” like a boot fresh out of Marine Combat Training (MCT).²

When he stormed out, Lance Corporal Apotheker looked at me and said, “I’m sorry you had to go through that. He does that to everyone. He’s the reason I hate the Marine Corps and why I’m getting out.”

Those words stuck with me. Here was a junior Marine, clearly sharp and capable—but already counting the days until his end of active service (EAS). He told me he had no interest in staying in, did not even want to pick up corporal. He said nothing would change his mind.

I told him I would.

When Sergeant Vazquez left for OCS, the office was just me and Lance Corporal Apotheker. Two underqualified Marines—one a corporal with no intelligence training, the other a disgruntled lance corporal—tasked with maintaining security and intelligence operations for an entire squadron. It was not ideal, but we made it work. We learned together. I humbled myself

² *Marine Combat Training* refers to a 29-day course for standards-based combat skills training of all noninfantry Marines to ensure that every Marine is a fighting Marine, regardless of their MOS, including marksmanship, combat formations, and patrolling, as well as other combat-related skills.

and allowed him to teach me, despite our rank difference. I did not bark orders—I listened. I did not lead with fear—I led with trust.

When it was time for me to leave for MOS school, I got him on Active Duty Operational Support (ADOS) orders and told him he would be running the shop. I also told him to decorate the office however he wanted. He was stunned. “I’ve never been treated like such royalty,” he said, half-joking.

When I returned from MOS school, the office was unrecognizable—organized, clean, and efficient. His photograph was on the command deck’s wall labeled, “Intel Chief.” He even had a full mustache—within regulations, of course.³ His confidence had skyrocketed.

He started inviting me over for tacos and *Game of Thrones* nights. We became close friends, but I never stopped mentoring him. When the fiscal year was ending and we had remaining ADOS funds, I asked if he wanted to extend. I promised him good pros and cons if he did.

He laughed and said, “I’m not getting promoted.” I told him I would bet my next paycheck he would. He picked up corporal the next quarter. Later, when he was struggling to find stable employment and debating whether to end his contract, I told him I knew someone at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). If he reenlisted, I could help get him on ADOS orders with real work experience and he would also be eligible for a composite score bonus.⁴

³ *Marine Corps Order 1020.34H, Marine Corps Uniform Regulations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1 May 2018), 1-12. In 2025, the Marine Corps updated grooming regulations in *MARADMIN 124-25, Uniform and Grooming Standards for Medical Conditions* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 13 March 2025), to emphasize a clean-shaven appearance for all without medical waivers.

⁴ Composite score bonus refers to Marine Corps bonuses that provide up to 100 bonus points for referrals (20 points per applicant) who enlist or commission or for specific education/training achievements. These points directly boost scores for promotion to corporal/sergeant, provided the Marine is not in a restricted status. *MARADMIN 246/03, Composite Score Computation Change* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 22 May 2003).

After months of conversations and a lot of doubt, he finally reenlisted. The next quarter, he picked up sergeant. He texted me, “I hate you. I was never supposed to make it this far.”

I PCSd shortly after, but he kept going. He attended National Intelligence University with the NGA and earned his master’s in strategic intelligence. He served on ADOS orders with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), previously stationed in Mexico City, Mexico, and now stationed in the Bahamas.

In April of this year, he called me to let me know he had been selected for staff sergeant and he wanted me to pin him on. His mom and dad would be there, and out of everyone—his mentors, his family, his leaders—he chose me.

But what made it even more meaningful was where he wanted the ceremony to happen: Nassau, in the Bahamas—the site of the Marine Corps’ first amphibious landing in 1776. That location was not chosen at random. He wanted to be pinned in the same place where Marines first made history, where enlisted Marines set the tone for what it meant to lead from the front.⁵

As we stood there, on the ground where the earliest Marines launched their legacy, I placed the chevrons of staff sergeant on his collar, standing beside his proud parents and knowing he had asked me, not them, to do the honors. The symbolism was not lost on either of us. Just like those early Marines, we had fought our own battle—against toxic leadership, self-doubt, and complacency. And like them, we emerged stronger, more united, and ready to carry the legacy forward.

During his speech, he said, “He was the first leader that ever actually cared about my well-being, inside and outside of uniform. He wasn’t just my NCO. He became my friend. My mentor. My family.”

Leadership is not about issuing orders or the chevrons you wear. It is about believing in those under your charge, especially when they have stopped believing in themselves. It is about

⁵ *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2025), 6.

leading with empathy, knowing when to listen, when to guide, and when to simply be present.

I did not know what I was doing when I first stepped into that role, but I knew I did not want to be the type of leader who destroys confidence just to preserve their own image. I chose to lead differently. And that choice changed both of our lives.

We started as corporal and lance corporal. Today, we are both staff sergeants.

And I will never forget the Marine who once had a count-down calendar to his EAS standing beside me years later in the same place Marines once stormed ashore, laughing and saying, "I was never supposed to make it this far."

But he did. Because someone believed he could.

ESSAY 9

From Follower to Leader

by Sergeant Gregory Gagnon

Leadership is a fundamental aspect of Marines and their experience within the Corps, starting from Parris Island, South Carolina, and staying with them throughout their career and their life.¹ Throughout a Marine's earlier experiences, it is most important for them first to have ideal leaders and then good leaders throughout the rest of their time within the Corps.

From the very start, even if Marines do not know it, they meet those who are seen as leaders: recruiters. The assumption is that the recruiter is at least good enough because they got the signature. Importantly, they were able to disseminate their message to the recruit in a good enough way to convince them to give at least four years of their time to hear what the Corps has to say and offer. Once you arrive at the depot, you should meet the ideal: the clean, well-dressed, aggressively spoken Marine who knows the land and has the ultimate belief in truth and conviction of their mission. They teach you as if you know nothing because, in the beginning, we all know nothing; and while the teaching methods could be different or per-

¹ Parris Island is the site of the East Coast Recruit Depot; San Diego, CA, serves as the recruit depot for West Coast Marines.

haps kinder, the objective is to make a Marine who can handle the worst. There is not much worse than your drill instructor (DI) in the average day to day. After completion of those trials, you will have seen in a leader what conviction looks like, what dedication looks like, and to a lesser extent, what delegation means. All of these are important aspects in leadership.²

As our humbly unhumbled Marine returns home, little do they know that some of these traits have already been imparted to them. They typically try to maintain some form of schedule, see the childishness of their friends starting the process of departure, and unbeknownst to most, begin to take a break from work to prioritize themselves. Some of these actions are part of becoming an adult, while others are a requirement to remain a successful leader. Leaders need to care for themselves in addition to others around them, and scheduling helps to maintain structure and focus. Then our devil pup returns to their journey after their arrival at Marine Combat Training (MCT).³

At MCT, they are given their first dose of agency. While it is not much, the ability to even vaguely dictate your day while at work is new. The slow introduction of responsibility finally begins. Many young Marines do not handle it well, but this is still the time for learning. All leaders need to be able to dictate their day in some manner and act how they best see fit while accomplishing the mission. If one is unable to, then those above become bogged down in minutiae while those below degrade and die turning into drones being little more than a vessel of labor. After obtaining an iota of freedom, the Marine will shortly depart to their vocational home.

Once at their military occupational specialty (MOS) school, the Marine is finally able to see some semblance of what their

² "Recruit Training," Marines.com, accessed 5 February 2026. See specifically the four phases of recruit training.

³ MCT for noninfantry Marines takes place at the School of Infantry (SOI) at two main locations: Camp Pendleton, CA (SOI-West) for West Coast Marines, and Camp Geiger, NC (SOI-East) for East Coast Marines.

day to day will be like. They must endure long studious days while maintaining their physical fitness. Many schoolhouses are different in how their days are structured or how much is demanded physically, but the basic principles that are observed should be the same. The young Marine learns the two most important things while at their school: the rough environment required for their MOS; and the skills required of their MOS. Once the Marine learns how those around them speak, act, and to some extent learn, they can better disseminate the messages needed to those around them. Then if a leader is to be of worth, they must know what they are talking about. They may not need to know the specifics, but they need to know enough to delegate, which starts with the basics.

Finally, our Marine has made it to their first duty station, the place most likely to determine whether they stay for 20 years or depart after 4. This is where those in charge matter most. Where Marines accept their new life or reject it in full to reminisce about it many years down the line. Leaders must be kind, knowledgeable, and understand how those under their charge act. While kindness and knowledge are very much MOS-dependent, understanding how your subordinates act and think can sway them from harm and focus them more toward what the Marine Corps sees as right. Too many times have I seen leaders fail to give the correct knowledge to those beneath them. Too many times does it occur where a Marine has a harsh leader that they cannot respect nor laugh with and depart because of their undue hatred toward their leaders. If you cannot understand how your subordinates think, you will create friction and miscommunications that will weaken the group and likely lead to that Marine departing.

Of course, let us assume our young Marine makes it past their first duty station with glee and signs up for another. Leadership from here, I can only guess on, but seems very likely to be true. From here, it may change somewhat based on position but remains relatively the same. Further learn your job to become an expert, but depending on what field you are in you transition to a delegatory tasker or more of a product creator

and your spheres of influence slowly shrink from those at the bottom to those at the top. In many ways, the ability to lead primarily transfers to simply being a good Marine, a good citizen, and a good person.

You will be speaking with more than those in your MOS and cannot reliably use MOS-specific knowledge to accomplish the task. You need to use your interpersonal skills more in addition to your ability to write, speak, and disseminate information. The top is lonely as they say and you will interact less with the doers, if you will, and more with the background processes of the Corps. Your ability to communicate well will be the strongest asset you have as a leader; occasionally, you will be able to see problems and perhaps step in, but the likelihood you will be too far removed to notice is high unless directly brought to you. The best that can be done is to be friendly and open to communication, allowing those interactions to occur if necessary.

In closing, from the early stages, it is most important to show the ideal Marine leader, and as Marines progress, they should be shown more day to day leadership attributes. Then once Marines really make the transition from follower to leader, the most important qualities are knowledge, kindness/respect, and communication. Then when the Marine makes their final transformation from leader, to leader of leaders, their best qualities are the ability to communicate well, to be friendly or at least open to lower ranks, and to acquire more information as there will always be answers you do not know.

ESSAY 10

The Weight and Worth of Leadership

by Gunnery Sergeant Moise Barbier

Leadership is a responsibility, not a title. It is a burden that is carried with honor and not a privilege to all. I have experienced this truth across continents, through life experiences, grief and in the classroom. As a Haitian-born American citizen, a father, a United States Marine, and doctoral student in global security, my journey has taught me much about leadership. It is defined by service, forged through adversity, and measured by the numerous lives that it touches.

I was born in Haiti, a country that is filled with history and resiliency but often plagued with hardship. My family emigrated to the United States in search of new opportunities. A decision that is marked by sacrifice and the courage to do so. At an early age, I witnessed leadership in its purest form. Both of my parents worked long hours, we all had to learn a new language and navigate a new foreign culture while focusing on our vision. Their examples quietly planted the seed of leadership within me.

At the age of 18, I decided to serve the country that gave my family a second chance. I joined the U.S. Marine Corps driven by the desire to serve and lead. My career during the next 14 years was met by leading Marines in diverse and demanding

environments. I quickly learned that leading is not about being the loudest or barking orders, it is about building a foundation of trust, taking care of those around you, and modeling discipline. It is also about being a servant leader, which is the belief that my only purpose is to serve my team and not the other way around.¹ I found purpose in putting others before myself through helping Marines with their personal and professional challenges or ensuring my unit's mission was being completed daily. But leadership is most tested when faced with adversity.

Eight years into my career as a young sergeant, I faced the most devastating moment in my life, which was the death of my second daughter. The pain was indescribable and left a wound that will likely never heal. Yet through my grief, I still had Marines depending on me. I returned to fulfill my duties not because I overcame the situation and healed, but because I understood being resilient is a core tenet of leadership. In moments that I was filled with despair and sorrow, I chose to lead because showing up in the face of adversity was what my Marines needed. Servant leadership taught me that even broken and in pain, being present and putting the needs of others before my own can be the most powerful form of service. In short, being resilient became my fuel and service remained the true north setting on my compass to guide me in life.

As my career progressed, I transitioned from being a small unit leader to advising senior leaders. I became the liaison between the enlisted and command levels, becoming a voice for all who have served. In this new role, I enhanced the skills of being a reflective and empathetic leader, I learned about the quiet power of influence and that leadership is not always about being visible to all. It is mainly about presence, the calm in the storm and the person others confide in during chaos. It is being a servant first and a leader always.

With a minimum of five years left to serve, I realize that leadership does not end when I hang up the uniform. I recog-

¹ The concept of *servant leadership* was articulated in *Commander's Leadership Handbook* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2016).

nize that there are more evolving global threats, which is why I am pursuing a doctorate in global security. I believe that this academic journey will sharpen my analytical thinking, expand my worldly views, and reinforce my beliefs of being a servant leader. As a new scholarly practitioner, I aim to merge all my experiences with strategic thoughts.

The greatest lesson I have learned in my journey is that leadership is service. It is bound by sacrifice and a quiet decision to keep going even when no one is watching. Being a servant leader is not leading from the front to gain recognition but to uplift others so that everyone may rise. My unseen victory is the many young Marines who found courage by watching me continue to lead even while grieving. A leader listens more than they speak, they invest in people and understand that impacts are eternal while titles are only temporary.

My background as a father, Haitian immigrant, United States Marine, and doctoral candidate has shaped my understanding of what it requires to be a leader. It requires clarity in the face of uncertainty and compassion among the hardship. As my journey continues, I carry numerous lessons born in hardship and discipline that are forged through the core values of being a Marine. I chose not to lead because I know everything or I am unbreakable, but because I have been broken, and I chose to rise to the occasion. In my opinion, my experience is the essence of servant leadership and the heart of leadership itself.

ESSAY 11

Being a Leader of Marines

by Sergeant Dajuan Adams

Introduction

Leadership traits encompass everything expected of a leader in the Marine Corps whether you embody leadership already or aspire to improve, the thought comes across every Marine's mind at least twice. Once when you learn the meaning of JJDIDTYBUCKLE and again when it is time to step up and overcome adversity.¹ The way you maneuver being a leader influences the perception you exude and the battles you win. The road to becoming a perfect leader is filled with setbacks and riddles, which is why a Marine Corps leader should have tenacity, a Marine Corps leader should have wisdom, and lastly a Marine Corps leader should have humility.

TENACITY

The circumstances that give rise to the modern Marine may

¹ JJDIDTYBUCKLE refers to 14 leadership traits: justice, judgment, dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, enthusiasm, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and endurance. See "RP 0103: Principles of Marine Corps Leadership," in *CREST Manual* (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, 2008).

differ from individual to individual, but we all felt the burning in our chest when we received the calling. We knew the challenge this lifestyle would bring, and nevertheless, we chose to join the toughest branch we could find. The United States Marine Corps is not for the average individual—no Marine is average—and the title is not given but earned. Thirteen weeks of boot camp is an obstacle every Marine must face; we must all step out of our personal lives and become better.

In society, when it came to swimming, I was subpar at most. I could mimic swimming, but floating did not come to me naturally. This was the part of boot camp that would make or break me, and I knew it.² The first day was tough, I was taught to wave my arms and flap my feet in a fluid motion, which did not help me. I was sent back to the squad bay without passing along with all the other recruits and sat down by my senior drill instructor, who said, “You have three more chances.” These words followed me to my rack, to breakfast in the morning, then back to swim qualification. Here I was again on day two, same instruction, more practice, similar results. Fewer Marines came back with me this time. Again, those words followed me to my rack, to breakfast, then to day three. My second to last chance, I had it set in my mind that I would drown before I touched the bottom of the pool. Same teaching, more practice, but today was going to be different. During qualification on this day, I had a purpose. I waved my arms and flapped my feet with this purpose. It was not about swimming anymore, it was a fight with the water to hold me up while I get this qualification done. But my energy gave out halfway. Putting my all into it like that caused my emotions to be everywhere, telling the swim coach I failed was one of the hardest points in my career, and

² Marine Corps boot camp swim qualification (WSB or Water Survival Basic) is a graduation requirement focusing on water survival skills not competitive swimming. Recruits must demonstrate the ability to stay afloat and swim in full combat gear (i.e., utilities/cammies and boots).

only a few Marines failed at this point.³ I could not accept it. The thoughts that followed me to my rack were different, attempting to analyze every minute detail to no avail. Breakfast passed and I was back at the pool, we practiced, and then qualification. Looking at the end of the pool and waiting for the whistle was the moment I thought, "It's all or nothing." Same drill: I pushed as hard as I could, and the feeling of nervousness faded along with my energy. Halfway through, I ran out of energy again, but I could not go out like that. Every muscle in my body agreed, as I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, I felt a hard surface on the top of my head and the end of the pool. That was when it all came together; this is about more than trying, I had to put in everything I had to make this happen. Because that is how I overcome trials. Going forward, I would succeed by putting everything into the effort. That is what tenacity means to me.

WISDOM

Jobs in the Marine Corps can be as different as night and day. The similarities are the necessary components of leadership. Every leader also has a leader to report to and a mission to complete. As a leader, one must take criticism and learn from mistakes to improve their work product. Similarly, there are lessons to be learned as the one being led, and the Marines being led will eventually become the Marines leading. Essentially, all Marines should learn as if they are taking over for their leader, when conducted properly Marines are guaranteed wisdom.

Wisdom is the result of experiences and teachings and contributes to achieving the next rank. This way, the wisest Marine is the one in charge, and the newer Marine can pick up on the habits of the wise. In my job as a legal service specialist (4421), there are many such learning experiences. For example, being the newest Marine in a shop, I have had the privilege of prep- ping many post-trial documents in my time at Trial Services.

³ For more on swimming competence in the Marine Corps, see Hope Hodge Seck, "The Marine Corps Has a Swimming Problem. Is There a Plan to Fix It?," *Marine Corps Times*, 6 October 2022.

Initially, since this was an important process that could not be rushed, when given the opportunity I prepped everything as I received the disposition of the court-martial to hand to the chasers.⁴ This took a while, getting it checked, corrections made, then back out. The job was completed, but this is not the most efficient way to do this. I learned the most efficient way by watching my noncommissioned officer in charge (NCO-IC) prepare every document, only leaving out the pending disposition. In this way, we could get it prechecked so when the disposition came back from the court-martial it would be a quick edit before sending the information out. The modern Marine is a culmination of all the past experiences of our brothers and sisters in arms; in this way, it is my duty to teach the most efficient ways to ensure the future of the Marine Corps, this is what wisdom does for us.

HUMILITY

Often in the Marine Corps, personnel come in with different experiences, which has given rise to the hardest to interpret aspect. As you gain rank and establish yourself as a leader, there are still perspectives and even more efficient ways of doing things, which could be learned somewhere other than the Marine Corps. A good leader can use their wisdom to create an efficient work environment for the junior Marines; a great leader builds on their wisdom to create even more efficient work environments. To better access perspectives to create a more productive workplace, a leader should take in the perspectives and opinions of the Marines under their charge as well as above their rank. The Marine Corps often uses the mantra "one team, one fight," meaning we work together to achieve our goals.

Conclusion

The United States Marine Corps is the best fighting force in the

⁴ The term *chaser* refers to the security personnel, often enlisted Marines, who escort prisoners.

world. Not because of an individual but our collective experiences that built us up to the warriors we are currently. A Marine who embodies our leadership principles will thrive in any clime and any place. A Marine Corps leader will be tenacious in their drive to complete the mission, wise through their own efforts, and humble enough to take in other perspectives and adapt to the future.

ESSAY 12

Keeping the Ship on Course **An Enlisted Leader's Perspective**

by Gunnery Sergeant Michael A. Brooks

Imagine a ship at sea in the Age of Sail. Midway through the voyage, the ship's first mate disappears, and a new first mate magically appears on board. To best serve the captain and crew, the new first mate may ask many questions to gain the confidence to effectively lead: What port did this ship sail from? How long has it been at sea? Has the ship weathered any storms or enemy raids? Are we prepared in the event of another storm or attack? What is the disposition of the crew? Which crewmembers handle each task in the ship's daily operations? Are we on course to arrive at our destination on schedule? Enlisted leadership in the Marine Corps often feels like stepping onto that ship as the new first mate. Whether through promotion, appointment, or arriving at a new unit altogether, enlisted leaders are always inheriting missions that are already in progress. It can be tempting to step into new leadership roles and begin casting judgments and issuing orders before fully understanding the situation, mission, culture, and disposition of the unit. Leaders who do this, however, risk lowering the morale of the crew, losing the captain's trust, and steering the ship off course.

I learned that lesson the hard way during my first opportunity to lead Marines. I believed as a junior Marine that leadership meant holding Marines accountable through force and authority. Young leaders seemed to be weighed and measured by the corrections they were able to make and the presence they commanded while making them. As a newly promoted corporal, I tried to fit that mold by acting tough, loud, and authoritative, and in doing so, became unapproachable and ineffective. Not only was I steering my ship off course, but my crew was ready to send me adrift! That slow-burning failure changed how I thought about leadership. Years of introspection and practice have taught me that the most important qualities of an enlisted leader are empathy and situational awareness.

Empathy is defined in the updated *Leading Marines* as “a genuine interest in the lives of your Marines, the challenges they face, and their overall well-being.”¹ Despite some negative rhetoric after the addition of the 15th leadership trait, it is important to point out that nowhere in the premier leadership publication of the Marine Corps does it say anything about lowering standards, softening our approach, or taking any focus away from the accomplishment of our assigned missions. It simply demands that leaders care enough to understand who their Marines are. When employed properly, empathy is one of the most powerful tools an enlisted leader has at their disposal to gain the understanding required to make more sound decisions concerning the growth and development of their Marines. *Leading Marines* is not the only piece of doctrine that alludes to empathy and understanding. The first step of the *Marine Corps Planning Process* is problem framing, which can only be done with a clear understanding of the environment, the mission, and the people involved. Leaders who put that problem-framing mindset into every aspect of their leadership

¹ *Leading Marines*, MCWP 6-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024), 2-4.

are the most effective thanks to their heightened situational awareness.²

Situational awareness is the foundation that allows leaders to make fast, informed decisions in any environment. As a corporal (and admittedly still at times in my career), I often attempted to gather the details as they were at the time, create a game plan or course of action, and stick to that plan for the entirety of the transaction. I learned through inevitable and repetitive failure that enlisted leaders cannot rely on snapshots of their environment and hope to remain effective. Situational awareness requires continuous observation, listening, and re-assessing everything in one's environment. Leaders who can employ situational awareness in this manner and experience success deserve commendation, but with a caveat: the most dangerous thing an enlisted leader can do is assume their new situation is the same as their old one. Every mission is different, and what may have been successful in the past can fail catastrophically if applied to a new situation, a new mission, or a new team without adaptation. The most effective enlisted leaders step onto each ship with humility and curiosity, gaining an understanding of their current situation and its variables before making changes that could reduce the crew's efficiency or steer the ship off course.

At the end of the day, effective enlisted leadership begins with understanding, not authority. Empathy builds trust and fosters the respect necessary for a team to function well together. That trust and respect is not for a feel-good moment. It is what gives leaders access to the honest, unfiltered information they need to see the full picture. In short, empathy results in higher situational awareness. When Marines know their leadership genuinely cares, they are more likely to share concerns, report changes to their situations, and speak up about potential problems before they escalate. That continuous flow of information is what keeps leaders attuned to the shifting

² *Marine Corps Planning Process*, MCWP 5-1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2010), chap. 2.

conditions of their environment. Leaders should approach each new leadership opportunity like a first mate stepping aboard a ship mid-voyage. Take the time to understand your crew, the conditions, and the course, and you will be better equipped to make sound decisions, preserve unity, and keep the ship on course no matter what kind of seas you face.

ESSAY 13

Empathize or Realize How Worry Multiplies

by Gunnery Sergeant Cord Burgan

The staff noncommissioned officer (SNCO) does not just transmit information, they must be able to transform guidance into purpose. They faithfully execute the commander's vision and are stewards of the Marines' motivation. As leaders, the SNCO builds the bridge between vision and execution, between intent and action. Now, imagine if empathy was the hidden strength of this bridge. What if it was seen not as a weakness but rather as the discipline of seeing another Marine's struggle without letting go of the standard? Empathy allows us to sense when the drift begins and to apply correction without crushing spirit.

An SNCO's sphere of influence as a leader may be the difference between drift and direction. No one can control another person's thoughts or choices, but every SNCO can care for what falls within their reach.

If leaders fail to lead with empathy, then there are at least two things to worry about: you will carry the mission alone, or you will watch your Marines march without meaning. If they march without meaning, then purpose itself begins to drift. When purpose drifts, the question is no longer about orders or tasks, but about whether your Marines understand why they fight.

If they understand why they fight, well then there is nothing to worry about. But if they do not, well then there are only two things to worry about: either they will find purpose on their own or they will not. If they find it on their own, then you are lucky because meaning has sparked in them without your hand, and there is nothing to worry about.

But if they do not, well then there are only two things to worry about: either they keep moving out of habit or they break down. If they keep moving out of habit, sometimes purpose catches up to them in motion. Habit becomes discipline, and discipline becomes where meaning can take root. If that happens, then there is nothing to worry about.

But if they break down, then there are only two things to worry about: either they will find purpose by turning that breakdown into a breakthrough or their discipline will fail them. If the weight of hardship bends them but also teaches them, and that breakdown becomes breakthrough, then they will rediscover strength, and once again there is nothing to worry about.

But if they fail in their discipline, then there are only two things to worry about: either an empathetic correction will realign them or it will drive them further away. If that correction realigns them with the purpose and mission of the Marine Corps, then the course has been corrected and there is nothing to worry about.

But if they are driven further away, then there are only two things to worry about: either they have stopped listening to you or they have stopped listening to themselves and lost their identity. If they have stopped listening to you, there is still time to adapt. You can shift your approach, change your words, or even lead with silence until the door opens again. If you find a way back in, then there is nothing to worry about.

But if they have stopped listening to themselves and lost their identity, then there are only two things to worry about: either you find a way to lead them back to meaning or they drift beyond your ability to reach.

And in that moment, you will not just ask why they failed. You will ask when they stopped choosing to heal. Because pur-

pose may be taught and discipline may be enforced, but healing is always a choice. No matter how loudly we call, no one can walk back to meaning except the one who has lost it. Healing is not a gift we can hand them. It is a decision they must make for themselves.

Ask them, "What do you want to want?" You can help them notice the quiet current beneath all the noise and the pull of who they are toward who they were meant to become. If you want anything, it should be action charged with value, discipline fueled by alignment, and motion that knows why it moves.

In the end, there are only two things to celebrate: they either ignite the spark within from the start or they discover it through the fires they endure. One path begins with clarity and the other with courage, yet both lead to purpose.

And once you have found your purpose, well then there are only two things to worry about. To live it fully with effort and to live it faithfully with integrity. Effort can drive purpose, integrity can guide purpose, and empathy keeps that purpose human. If a leader understands that, then they will never have to worry again. If a leader lives that, they become the bridge of purpose, because to empathize is to strengthen and to not empathize is to realize how worry multiplies.

Note to the reader: Empathy, stewardship, and translating intent into meaningful action are not responsibilities that SNCO's hold a monopoly on. Rather, they are responsibilities that scale. An NCO can use empathy at the point of friction as a SNCO uses it where the Marines meet the mission across the formation.

ESSAY 14

Developing Leaders

by Gunnery Sergeant Matthew N. Guelzow

For 250 years, the Marine Corps has been synonymous with leadership. From our doctrinal publications that lay the framework for how to lead Marines to the battlefield heroism that defines who we are as an institution, the Corps is renowned for its methods used to transform young men and women into confident and competent leaders. As the saying goes, “Leaders are not born, they are made.”¹ From recruits stepping onto the yellow footprints to Marines with 20-plus years of service, Marines across the globe are developing their style of leadership through rigorous professional military education (PME) and individual first-hand experience. The three most important practices a young Marine can hone early on in their career are the abilities to put subordinate Marines in positions that will tap into their potential and grow into the next generation of leaders, truly lead by example, and humbly acknowledge one’s shortfalls to learn from them.

When it comes to molding the next generation of enlisted leaders, putting Marines in positions where they are forced

¹ This saying was first attributed to football coach Vince Lombardi during a speech he made on 22 June 1970 in Dayton, OH.

outside their comfort zone to make decisions is the best way to demonstrate their potential and truly allow them to grow. The Marine Corps is subject to a vicious cycle of leaders only spending time in a billet long enough to do something once before they are expected to learn the next billet above them. This creates an environment where new leaders constantly learn to lead through trial by fire and it causes a lack of continuity in how we shape future leaders. Turnover time between key billets is rarely ideal, but when it does exist, we must take advantage of it by putting our future replacements into positions where they get the full experience in three steps:

- Allow them to observe how we do the job and ask questions.
- Allow them to do the job with us in their “back seat,” coaching them through the right actions and helping them to mitigate friction along the way.
- Fully giving them control of the team and situation but remaining in their hip pocket to give them rudder steers and provide feedback as necessary.

The worst thing we can do as leaders is to retain control of everything until the last minute then expect our replacements to be ready for the task ahead of them. Allowing Marines to experience problems under our guidance before they are expected to be completely responsible is the most effective way we can tap into their potential and prepare them for their future fight as leaders.

As cliché as it may seem, the most important leadership quality is setting the example. As leaders, we often underestimate how impressionable our young Marines can be. Our subordinates watch our every move, and just like a young child copying their older siblings’ actions, our Marines will remember everything we do or fail to do, and they will develop their own leadership style based off what they observe. Plastered on the halls of the School of Infantry West’s Advanced Infantry Training Battalion’s classrooms is the John C. Maxwell quote, “A leader

is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”² This quote posted for all aspiring infantry squad leaders to see, implies that to be a leader of influence one must be knowledgeable in their profession, go the way by leading from the front, and show the way by teaching, coaching, and mentoring those under their charge. There is a reason why the Marine Corps Officer Candidates School motto is *Ductus Exemplo*, or lead by example. With the standard established by the officer corps, it is understood that setting the example is the foundation of military leadership. Marines of all grades and billets can set the example for others to follow, which establishes this trait as the keystone from which all other leadership traits follow.

One of the biggest challenges of a leader is to identify personal shortfalls and mistakes and to humbly learn from them, especially when that means acknowledging their mistakes in front of their Marines. When we refuse to recognize our mistakes, we deny ourselves as well as others the opportunity to learn from them, which only ensures we repeat those same mistakes. Perhaps the best example of a unit that has built a culture on learning from their own mistakes is the Tactical Training and Exercise Control Group aboard Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, California. After completion of a training event, the exercise controllers (a.k.a. Coyotes) immediately huddle and take turns voicing their own mistakes as well as calling out mistakes others had made. While in the circle, rank is not a barrier. If a mistake was made, a sergeant can correct a major in a manner that allows the whole team to understand the deficiency. This accountability ensures lessons are learned and measures are taken to prevent that same mistake in the future. This culture, built around remaining humble and forever a student, develops leaders who are comfortable with acknowledging their mistakes in front of all

² Karl J. Newman, “The Power of Leadership,” *John Maxwell Team* (blog), accessed 6 February 2026.

ranks in order to grow. Everyone can use this philosophy to truly “know yourself and seek self-improvement,” and then forge young leaders who can confidently admit their mistakes for the betterment of the team.

The Marine Corps wraps its leadership into many packages from our leadership traits and principles taught at boot camp to conveying an operation order around a terrain model at one of the advanced schools. There are many unique ways for people to learn and just as many methods from which to share knowledge, but the three pillars that will ensure success for enlisted leaders throughout their careers remain the same. Put Marines into positions where they are forced to learn under new experiences but while senior leaders can teach, coach, and mentor them into success. Set the example for all to emulate; there are always Marines learning by observing examples before them. Stay humble and acknowledge mistakes in order to learn from them to create an environment of trust and constant improvement. We owe it to every Marine to combine our doctrine, shared knowledge, and individual experience to set the example and coach our future fire team, squad, and section leaders to be the best versions of themselves through these battle-tested practices.

ESSAY 15

Cultivating Builders **Investing in the Future of Those We Lead**

by Gunnery Sergeant Selena Benitez

As I have grown in the Marine Corps, I have learned that leadership is shaped by both the examples we witness and the lessons we learn along the way. Some leaders inspire us to grow, while others serve as reminders of what not to become. Regardless, every encounter provides an opportunity to reflect on who we are as leaders, who we strive to be, and what values we want to uphold. In addition to the lessons and values from our families, the Marine Corps instills its core values of honor, courage, and commitment as the foundation of leadership. These values guide us not only in combat but in every aspect of our professional and personal lives. From my own experience, I believe the most important qualities of an enlisted Marine are integrity, discipline, and empathy. These traits, although simple in nature, cast a broader net of complexities that not only ensures mission accomplishment but also enables leaders to shape their Marines into the best versions of themselves.

Integrity is the heartbeat of leadership. It is the unseen force that gives life to trust, credibility, and respect. It demands leading by example and holding oneself to the same expectations set forth for others, because credibility is built when actions align with their words. For instance, it can be demonstrated by

taking ownership of one's own mistakes and having the mental courage to speak up against unethical behavior. Early in my career, I came to understand that integrity is not a personal trait but the foundation of trust, respect, and resilience within any team or organization. Ultimately, this safeguard against unethical deviations is what separates a team that merely survives to one that thrives under pressure. Integrity ensures that every decision, no matter how difficult, is grounded in honesty and accountability, both of which are essential to the well-being of the individual Marine and mission success.

While integrity establishes the moral compass for Marines, discipline ensures those values are carried out in action. Upholding this standard is every Marine's responsibility; it demands instant obedience to orders, pride in physical fitness and personal appearance, in addition to the cultivation of a warrior's mindset. Discipline is the foundation of mission accomplishment, and those expectations are rooted in the Marine Corps' leadership principles. These serve as the bedrock for developing the Marines' character and their confidence as leaders. However, this expectation is not about blind obedience but about respect for experience, performance, and the example set for others to emulate. It is about taking ownership of even the smallest tasks, reminding us that the habits we build in our daily routines prepare us for greater and more demanding responsibilities. When orders are carried out quickly and precisely during training, it develops muscle memory and fosters the trust required to operate effectively under pressure.

Though often overlooked in discussions of military leadership, empathy is what allows leaders to connect with their teams on a personal level. It is the ability to understand the struggles, fears, and motivations of those under one's command. Empathy does not mean being soft; it means being aware. Leaders must invest time in both their personal and professional development, whether by guiding them down the right path or being the mentor that they need. The Marine Corps teaches us to leave a place better than when we arrived, and in the

same way, leaders must strive to transform them into better versions by the time they depart. In addition, building these interpersonal relationships fosters trust and shows Marines that they are valued as individuals. When leaders demonstrate genuine care and invest in the lives of those they lead, Marines gain a sense of belonging and give their best effort not only for themselves, but for a greater purpose. I have learned that being present establishes credibility far more effectively than speeches or directives, and it is this presence that earns Marines' trust and makes them believe in their leaders.

When integrity, discipline, and empathy are present in a leader, they become a force multiplier. They create an environment where Marines feel secure, respected, and driven to perform not out of fear but out of mutual commitment. Together, these traits form the essence of effective leadership, creating Marines who are not only capable, but also resilient, trustworthy, and inspired to become the best versions of themselves. My legacy will not be written in mission reports but in the Marines who come after, becoming sturdier and more resilient leaders who carry forward the lessons I shared and the standards I upheld.

ESSAY 16

Enlisted Leadership through a Continuously Adapting Organization while Maintaining the Customs and Courtesy of Marine Corps Tradition

by Staff Sergeant Michelle A. Wynveen, PhD

Leadership manifests in various forms and combinations, including transformative, transactional, authoritative, servant, followership, referent power, coercive, bureaucratic, and rank-based leadership. These approaches can be employed independently or integrated, depending on the mission objectives, troop welfare, and the personnel involved.

In the context of the Marine Corps, recruit training serves a critical mission: to transform individuals by breaking down their sense of individuality and selfishness. This process molds recruits into cohesive team members and emerging leaders, establishing a foundation for realizing their full potential should they choose to embrace the Corps' customs, traditions, and leadership principles.

The Marine Corps Uniform and All It Represents

Leadership is a uniform. Similar to the various uniforms, such as Dress Blue (A, B, C, D), Service (A, B, C), Combat Utility (cam-mies), physical training (PT) gear, or flight suits, these attire options serve as a modern-day coat of arms. They symbolize the organization and convey the identity standard and professionalism that every enlisted Marine is expected to embody.

Each component of the enlisted Marine uniform reflects a connection to historical traditions and customs that uphold the prestige of being a United States Marine. Conversely, poor maintenance, ill-fitting attire, or worn and faded materials signal a lack of respect for this emblem of Marine identity to the observer. Pride in one's uniform and the meticulous care taken in its presentation are indicative of leadership qualities and the manner in which leadership styles are demonstrated. The uniform, therefore, is not only a symbol of service but also a reflection of personal discipline and respect for the Marine Corps' values.¹

Comparing Marine Corps Uniforms and Leadership Styles

Just as the uniform is decided by occasion, circumstance, or event, so are leadership skills. Leadership adapts as modernity evolves just as the uniform undergoes continuous improvement. Leadership, like the uniform, is adaptable to occasion, circumstance, and event. As modernity evolves, so too must leadership skills, which undergo continuous improvement much like the uniform. Enlisted Marines are introduced to leadership from the moment they step into their recruiter's office. Embracing the challenges of independence, courage, and overcoming fear, they transition into a new realm of leadership potential the instant they place their feet on the iconic yellow footprints.

This moment is permanently etched in the memory of every Marine who has served, marking the beginning of transformational leadership training that persists throughout their lives. This transactional leadership moment was simply building on the formative learning they had acquired in their life before the Corps, until the recruit makes the profound decision to sign the "blank check" for whatever future challenges lie ahead. This pivotal point signifies not only a transition in leadership devel-

¹ For more on the various uniforms, see Tracy Ford, "USMC Uniform and Civilian Equivalencies," Training Command, accessed 6 February 2026.

opment but also a commitment to the values and responsibilities inherent in being a Marine.

The Enlisted Fitting Room and Finding that Perfect “Leadership Tailor”

Leadership skills manifest in various forms and are employed across different situations and circumstances. Mastering these styles, applying them appropriately, and recognizing when they are ineffective are essential components of a Marine’s personal growth and development throughout their service. Using the metaphor of a fitting room, Marines can experiment with different leadership styles, trying on various suits to see which best complements their personality and leadership approach. The goal is to confidently “strut down the runway” with a leadership style that is well-tailored and authentic. Your subordinates, peers, and superiors serve as your audience, observing your “command presence” and determining whether your leadership style inspires investment and trust. Conversely, they assess whether your approach constitutes bad leadership, such as coercive tactics, which may be viewed as ineffective or detrimental. These styles hold no place in the audience’s observation of respective leadership styles in which they choose to adopt.

Ultimately, effective leadership involves self-awareness, adaptability, and understanding how your style influences those around you are skills that develop over time through experience and reflection.

In the Marine Corps, enlisted Marines are being taught all forms of leadership, whether they are paying attention to it or not. They realize what good leadership looks like, what bad leadership looks like, what coercive leadership looks like, and most importantly, what transformational leadership looks like. The two most underrated, but highly recommended and regarded, forms of leadership are servant leadership and learning followership. Whether it is recruit training, MOS school, staff noncommissioned courses (i.e., Corporal’s Course, Sergeant’s Course, Advanced Academy, or the Sergeant Major Sympto-

sium, etc.), these courses are tailored for the level of leadership experience, proven capability, and comprehension at their various levels. The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL) at Quantico works diligently on checks and balances to maintain continuous process improvement (CPI). The focus on continuous process improvement through methodologies like Lean Six Sigma, total quality management, design thinking, agile, and generational evolution ensures that leadership development remains relevant and adaptive to modern challenges, including advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and societal changes.² Additionally, understanding the political, economic, religious, cultural, and social (PERCS) framework highlights the importance of humility and growth in leadership to effectively navigate evolving changes.

Finding Your Personal “Leadership Tailor”

Opportunities to enlist your personal “leadership tailor” are endless. Many would call this a mentorship program. A leadership tailor refers to a trusted individual, such as a mentor or someone you admire within the Marine Corps, who plays a pivotal role in your leadership development. This person is more than just a mentor; they serve as a confidant with whom you can share your thoughts and decisional burdens. The leadership tailor provides honest feedback, critically analyzes situations, and helps you identify and meet your full potential as a leader. Essentially, they are someone you actively seek out to help shape and refine your understanding of true leadership standards.

Your tailor is someone who highlights the importance of continuous growth and alignment with core leadership principles within the Marine Corps. They recognize critical changes necessary for success, while also understanding how each experience you have as an enlisted Marine, such as a new duty station, during temporary duty (TDY), cultural excursions, or

² Lean, Lean Six Sigma, total quality management, design thinking, and agile are process improvement methodologies and creative problem solving.

various deployments. With this, the tailor can reinforce these principles, which is essential for effective leadership development.

Tailors can be told about the role they play in your leadership growth or simply exemplify the epitome of leadership from afar. While these leadership tailors are there helping you try on various leadership suits (i.e., the transformational jacket, authoritative tie, and the servant leader pants), they are also teaching you to be a leadership tailor for the next enlisted Marine you serve with. Overall, this perspective reinforces that leadership in the Marine Corps is a continuous, adaptive process rooted in shared experiences, personal growth, and a commitment to serving others.

Conclusion

A good, enlisted Marine demonstrates humility by recognizing when they are wearing their leadership uniform in accordance with regulations and standards, as well as by acknowledging when they are not. This self-awareness and adherence to proper standards are essential qualities of effective leadership and professionalism within the Marine Corps.

ESSAY 17

Leadership Is Not Rank Deep, It Is Backbone Built

by Sergeant Kavonte Jones Sr. (Ret)

Introduction

Once a Marine, always a Marine. That is not just something we say, it is something we live. The day I earned my Eagle, Globe, and Anchor (EGA) was the day I stopped being “just me” and became part of something that demanded more. More discipline. More sacrifice. More strength than most will ever understand.

But I did not learn leadership from a textbook or a leadership billet. I learned it in the silence. In the field. In the barracks. In the backseat of a squad bay (barracks) when one of my Marines was falling apart and needed someone who was not going to judge them.

I was not the most senior Marine. I was not the most decorated. But I was consistent. I was dependable. I made it a point to be the one who showed up, even when I did not have it all together myself.

Lead through the Chaos

In the Corps, you do not get to wait for the perfect moment to lead. You lead when the moment shows up—whether you are

ready or not. I did not wait for someone to tell me it was time to step up. I did it because the Marines around me needed it. Because the mission required it. Because I refused to watch good Marines fall through the cracks while others looked the other way.

I led while I was tired, while I was hurting, while I was trying to figure out my own life. Because enlisted leadership does not come with a pause button. You do not get to opt out just because life gets hard.

Meet Them Where They Are

Here is something people do not talk about enough. Sometimes, you do not lead from the front, you lead from the floor. You sit down next to your Marine and you listen. You hear the pain behind the sarcasm. The frustration behind the attitude. The fear behind the silence.

Leadership means being human—not soft—human.

Some of the most powerful leadership moments I have had did not happen in formation or during a safety brief. They happened in the quiet. Behind a closed door. Out back near the smoke pit. Just me and a Marine who felt like they did not matter. Instead of giving a speech, I gave them my time.

Lead from Experience

I did not come from perfect circumstances. I did not always have a model to follow. But I learned. I paid attention. I adapted. I turned every trial I went through into a tool to help someone else.

That is what leadership is, taking what nearly broke you and using it to build someone else. I did not lead from a pedestal. I led from experience. I taught my Marines how to bounce back, how to handle pressure, and how to speak up when they needed help because I had to learn those lessons the hard way.

Accountability over Applause

There is a big difference between commanding and leading. I never wanted my Marines to follow out of fear. I wanted them

to follow because they trusted me. Because I earned it. Because I took care of them even when no one was watching.

Leadership meant making sure the new guy knew how to tie down gear before it flew off a 7-ton truck. It meant helping someone clean their rifle after hours because they were struggling to keep up. It meant checking in with the quiet ones, the sharp ones, and the ones who acted like they did not need anyone.

Leadership is responsibility without applause. It is being the one who stays late, checks rosters twice, and holds yourself to a standard even when nobody else does.

Stand Firm, Even Alone

I have had to make hard calls. I have had to correct Marines who were older than me, outranked me at one time, or just did not want to hear it. I did not always raise my voice. I did not throw my weight around. I just stood firm, spoke tactfully, and held the line.

Being liked was never the goal. I could care less about being “popular.” Being respected for doing right for and by my Marines—that is what mattered.

Letting Go Is Still Leadership

This one took me a while to learn. Sometimes, no matter how much you pour into someone, they still go off course. Remember, it is not your fault. You can guide. You can mentor. You can walk beside them for miles, but at some point, they have got to take ownership.

When they do not? You have got to know when to step back.

Real leaders know when to fight and when to release. That is not quitting—it is maturity. It is wisdom. Sometimes, it is the only way you protect your peace and purpose.

Spirit-Driven Leadership

Leadership is more than physical, more than mental. It is spiritual. You cannot lead well if you are spiritually empty. There were moments I had to pray in silence before confronting a

Marine. There were times I had to ask for strength because I was carrying burdens no one else could see.

I did not advertise it. I did not need to. But I knew I could not give what I did not have. So I stayed grounded. I stayed faithful. I stayed ready. I was already prepared.

Real Leadership Echoes

The enlisted Marines are the pulse of the Marine Corps. We carry the culture. We hold the standard. We keep the fight sharp and the mission focused.

I was honored to lead some of the finest warriors this nation has ever produced. And to this day, the lessons I learned leading those Marines shape how I lead as a father, husband, entrepreneur, and community member.

I did not need a salute to know I mattered. I did not need a parade to know I made a difference. I know because Marines still reach out. They still remember.

That is the reward! That is legacy.

Leadership, real leadership, does not fade. It multiplies. It lingers. It shows up years later in messages that say:

"You saved my life."

"You believed in me when I didn't."

"I lead the way you led me."

That is what this is all about. Not rank. Not recognition. But impact! I'll never stop leading because *once a Marine, always a Marine*.

Semper Fidelis.

ESSAY 18

The Core Elements of Leadership

by Corporal Matthew J. Fritch

Enlisted leadership may assume a variety of forms, however, there are some core elements that I believe are critical components of effective enlisted leadership. These core elements, consisting of professionalism, self-awareness, and empathy, in my experience have been both most apparent and important in defining the character of one's leadership. Regardless of personal eccentricities and character traits, when enlisted leaders are able to inculcate these elements into their own and their subordinates' leadership style, there can be little for want in other departments, as these elements are basic and simple to initially implement. They also act as foundations for further development of one's leadership style into their specific niche; in a word, these elements are plastic. What that means is that, in their simplest manifestations, these elements create a solid foundation, but can assume a variety of forms based on what specific niche this enlisted leader is filling, not just as a Marine, but also just as a good human being.

Professionalism

This is an element oftentimes derided at the lower enlisted level in my experience as something of a point of shame. The

seriousness with which one approaches their own profession, however, should not be a point of shame unless it is at the opposite end of the spectrum—that being of apathy toward it. Being a serious professional, means not evaluating what you do not know in terms of how much of a hassle it is or how much sense one can make of it logically, but rather as something that needs to be done. That is, something which we may, in the immediacy of the moment not recognize the value of in its totality, and as such must be performed with the same energetic vigor and seriousness of the most life-or-death of the tasks we perform as Marines. This sense of professionalism is apparent in the simplest of tasks and two spring to mind immediately: that of getting a haircut and shave and that of cleanliness. These are two, simple, routine tasks that, although not life-or-death and not directly affecting operational success, are fundamental to establishing the professionalism that we as Marines, and those who are not Marines, look to Marines as a benchmark of their dedication to themselves and others, as well as their self-discipline. Such simple, menial tasks are not meant to be taken at their face value; their purpose is to provide insight into one's level of commitment to the organization and their standards for their own conduct. We have all had to police call (cleanup) around the barracks, or get last-minute haircuts or shaves, and the panic-induced stress derived from such a last-minute haircut, and the apathy with which some of our peers engage with even the thought of a police call, are measuring sticks with which we evaluate ourselves and others and their inculcation into the Corps.

Self-awareness

A solid understanding of one's own strengths as well as their deficiencies is instructive toward understanding leadership in others and developing it in oneself. To observe and assess unabashedly one's own character and to be able to work toward developing those areas in which one has deficiencies is not only an essential element of leadership but also personal development generally. This goes beyond one's own "capabil-

ities and limitations” as well. Self-awareness is also important on the smaller, day-to-day time scale: How does one carry oneself? How does one act around leaders and subordinates? What are the personal qualities one exhibits on a daily basis? How do their individual actions affect those they work with and the wider Corps? These questions, when asked often, are what guide an individual toward being the human being and the role model that they strive to become. Self-awareness precedes the ability to make *considered* decisions concerning one’s role in the world around them. That awareness gives one the ability to hesitate at the right times, to consider what one’s actions will actually affect in the limited world of one’s own daily experiences. This cause-and-effect relationship regarding one’s interpersonal relationships and their actions is an important marker for one’s ability to grow more as a leader, as without this capacity, one has no metric with which to measure their own impact on their world. In my personal experience, I have seen the effects of a lack of self-awareness; individuals who only coast through their daily or weekly tasks, those who do not evaluate their own progress on an extended timetable: What goals have I met in this past month? These past six months? This year? An enlisted Marine who cannot realize who or what they are, and how much progress they have made, oftentimes become dejected, stagnant, and unmotivated to make (or even take the steps toward) change in their personal, professional, or social lives, which can be detrimental to the readiness of our Corps, and creates a culture of subpar enlisted leadership.

Empathy

Beyond an understanding of oneself, the ability to understand others is also an important foundation on which leadership may grow. A fundamental aspect of interpersonal communication is empathy, but I use this here not strictly as the ability to *feel* and relate to the emotions of others, but rather the ability to put ourselves into the shoes of our peers, as well as our leadership and subordinates. Why is this important? In any organization, the relationships, the connections that make up

the whole is the glue that supports the entirety of the superstructure and the culture that has been produced via the millions of interactions between the respective parts that make up that superstructure can be thought of as the restorative force maintaining that glue. Indeed, it is true that every one of those individual interactions affect, at some level, the solidity of the organizational superstructure. As such, a mutual understanding, a *trust*, must be developed via the empathy of the individuals that make up the organization. This does not necessarily mean that every individual needs to have an intimate knowledge of all other individuals that make up the organization, rather it means that those individuals must have some idea of the responsibilities, expectations, and real human actions that act as the engine of the organization. Without wielding this knowledge, the assumptions we make about others that make up the same organization as us can often be more detrimental than a complete ignorance of their existence within the organization.

To conclude, these elements, even taken apart from each other, may increase the quality of enlisted leadership that we strive to improve here in the Corps. There is little need to overcomplicate, make doctrine of, or philosophize these elements further as they are simple, foundational concepts that may be applied in any profession. It is important, however, to consciously apply these elements lest we forget and slip into a state of complacency and apathy, as the human material with which we work is indeed plastic, and as such, it is in our best interests to mold that material into a form that best serves our organization's goals.

ESSAY 19

Know Yourself and Seek Self-improvement

by Staff Sergeant David Estes

Ten years. Six ranks. Countless opportunities for endless growth. All of these things represent my time spent in the United States Marine Corps. During the past 10 years, I have had the perspective of seeing many Marines come and go, as well as seeing several Marines pass in and out of leadership positions, and I have even had the pleasure of holding some of those leadership positions at certain points of my career. Overall, though, I have come to understand that leadership is not a title that we can hold, but rather a mindset that we as Marines are called to adopt. With this truth in mind, I can say with confidence that the most important qualities that an enlisted leader can and should have are KYASSI (know yourself and seek self-improvement) and developing a sense of responsibility among your subordinates.¹ When both of these qualities are present, both the Marine and their unit are set up to thrive.

KYASSI is a quality that is crucial for an enlisted Marine to have when in a leadership position because it demands from

¹ "Appendix B. Foundations of Leadership: Leadership Principles," in *Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1998).

that Marine humility, responsibility, and emotional intelligence. When a Marine has the emotional intelligence to explore his own deficiencies and excellencies honestly, he is able to place himself in positions where he is able to succeed or perhaps step back from areas where he is not best suited. When a Marine has the humility to admit to himself the areas of his life he needs to grow in, he can seek improvement and reach a new potential rather than stay in denial and plateau. When the same Marine embraces the responsibility he has to understand himself both as an individual and as a Marine, he can use that assessment to make improvements in places where improvement is necessary, or step back from an area where his strengths do not lie and allow another Marine to shine. By doing this, the Marine is able to provide a perfect example of how it is not the individual who should take priority, but the unit. During my career, I have witnessed senior enlisted individuals that were slowly becoming ineffective in MOS proficiency due to the nature of our evolving corps. On the one hand, I have seen leaders who succumbed to the nature of habit or to the excuse of “this is how it’s always been done” and then ultimately lost a notch of respect from their subordinates over time; on the other hand, though, I have seen others that checked their pride at the door, realized areas where they needed to grow, and then allowed the NCOs to train them up to speed on new processes. By doing this, those leaders ultimately reinforced trust and respect and continued to thrive over time because they were able to enlist buy-in from subordinates after setting the example of having humility and integrity, adapting when necessary, and remaining above reproach.

As an enlisted leader in the Marine Corps, it is equally as crucial to develop a sense of responsibility among subordinates as it is to lead with integrity and intention; in fact, I have seen time and time again how developing and fostering a sense of responsibility within your subordinates is a key piece of leading well. The Marine Corps unit is just that: a unit that works best when all components of it are being used to their best potential, and when each individual is able to support

the overall mission in their daily tasking and responsibilities. A leader plays an essential part in making sure this is happening by assigning billets thoughtfully, coaching and mentoring, and guiding with care through mistakes and successes. I have seen this pay big dividends during my time in the Corps. When I was a sergeant, I had several lance corporals under my charge that were losing their motivation and love for the Corps. I delegated mission critical tasks to them and gave them the opportunity to work above the scope of their current rank, all while providing careful supervision and guidance. I could almost physically see the burden of responsibility immediately situate itself on their shoulders and I saw those lance corporals, as Marines do, rise to the challenge. As a result, I saw a reignition of dedication to and love for the Marine Corps in those individuals as they began to feel and see the direct result of their responsibility and hard work pay off. Supervision as a leader is a very fine line to dance on; it is no secret that nobody likes a micromanager. Allowing junior Marines to make mistakes or even fail at difficult tasks is a very important part of developing them for the future, as long as the leader is effectively coaching, mentoring, and guiding that junior Marine through those failures and using them as learning opportunities and areas of growth. Without the opportunity to take on new and unfamiliar responsibilities, it is impossible for a person to grow beyond the place where they currently stand, and that is why it is so important for an enlisted leader in the Marine Corps to guide their Marines to and develop within them a sense of responsibility.

By embracing the two leadership principles of KYASSI and developing a sense of responsibility in subordinates, an enlisted Marine is exemplifying the two leadership qualities which I have seen over the last ten years prove to be tried and true for leading and strengthening their unit. A Marine can have many good qualities and still lack in their leadership potential; a Marine can be physically strong, he can be courageous, and even well-liked by his peers, but if he does not know himself truly and strive to seek self improvement in the areas of life where he needs to, he will fail as a leader. A Marine can even excel

in his MOS and demonstrate bravery and adaptability, but if his subordinates see him allowing himself to fall short of the standards he himself is trying to hold them up to, he will fail as a leader as well. True and successful leadership is not easy; it takes work, and practice, and deep introspection. It also requires the tactfulness of knowing what responsibilities to take on and which to delegate. If a Marine entering a leadership position was guided toward embracing these two leadership qualities and exemplifying them as a part of his new position, he would have a greater chance of success and would provide infinitely more value to the Marine Corps than someone who lacked these qualities in leadership. As a Marine of 10 years, I feel confident saying that this is true and that if every Marine in some capacity was able to adopt these qualities, we would see the Marine Corps thrive and grow to be a place we all truly desire it to be: a Marine Corps above reproach.

ESSAY 20

Leadership Forged in Service **The Enduring Traits of an Enlisted Marine**

by Gunnery Sergeant William E. Clark

Leadership in the Marine Corps is not a rank, but a responsibility. From day one of stepping on the yellow footprints of Parris Island or San Diego, Marines are taught that leadership is ingrained in every billet, whether serving as a fire team leader, a small arms repairer, or a staff noncommissioned officer (SNCO) entrusted with guiding young Marines. During my time in the Corps, I have learned that the most important qualities of an enlisted leader are servant leadership, accountability, respect for a diversity of perspectives, resilience in the face of failure, and, above all, integrity. These pillars form the foundation of my leadership philosophy and have been tested, strengthened, and proven through the challenges of real service.

The foundation of my philosophy is servant leadership: the idea that the leader exists to serve those they lead. This means being out front when the mission demands it but always keeping the welfare and development of subordinates in mind. In practice, this is more than a philosophy; it is a daily obligation. As a young NCO, I quickly realized that Marines do not follow titles, they follow people. If my Marines saw me putting myself first, I would lose their trust. But when they saw me in the front of the line for hard jobs, and the back of the line for comfort,

they knew I was invested in them. One of the proudest moments of my career was hearing a junior Marine say, “Gunny eats last, so I know he’s always got our back.”

Servant leadership also means giving subordinates the space to grow. I strive to issue fire-and-forget orders: clear intentions paired with trust. I have seen Marines rise to challenges when given responsibility, and I have seen them stumble, but both experiences were valuable. By trusting them, I was not just delegating tasks, I was training the next generation of leaders. Their successes and failures reflected on me, but more importantly, they taught lessons those Marines would carry forward.

A second essential quality is accountability. In the Marine Corps, accountability is not optional; it is the price of leadership. Every decision I make affects not just the mission but the lives and futures of the Marines I lead. I learned this lesson early on when a decision I made left us without necessary gear for several hours. My Marines adapted, but I knew I had failed them. Instead of shifting blame, I owned the mistake, explained my reasoning, and acknowledged how I would do it differently moving forward. That moment strengthened my credibility because my Marines saw that I would not hide behind excuses.

In turn, I expect accountability from those I lead. Their successes are shared, but their mistakes must be owned. When a Marine admits they fell short but with a plan to fix it, I know they are learning the essence of leadership. Accountability is not about punishment; it is about growth.

Another crucial quality is recognizing and valuing the diversity of Marines. No two Marines are the same. They come from different towns, family structures, cultures, and experiences. These differences can either divide us or strengthen us. I approach leadership with the understanding that I do not have all the answers. I rely on the strengths of my Marines, and I encourage them to be themselves rather than mimic me. A lance corporal who grew up turning wrenches on cars may know more about maintenance than a staff sergeant who has only read the manual. A private first class with a different cultur-

al background may offer a perspective that reshapes the way a team approaches a problem. By fostering an environment where Marines can share their ideas and experiences, I build not only better teams but also more resilient ones.

If servant leadership and accountability are the foundations of leadership, resilience is the steel that reinforces it. Marines are not defined by how often they succeed, but by how they respond to failure. I have failed many times in my career. I have misjudged timelines, made the wrong call, and overlooked details that mattered. But each failure became a steppingstone. I learned to plan more thoroughly, to think outside the box, and to anticipate gaps in future plans. Most importantly, I learned never to let my Marines fear failure. I encourage them to make decisions boldly, knowing that if they fail after proper planning and effort, it will become a teachable moment.

One vivid example was during a live-fire range when a junior Marine made a mistake operating an M2A1 heavy machine gun. Instead of berating him in front of everyone, I pulled him aside, walked him through what went wrong, and reiterated safety procedures. The Marine never repeated the error and later told me he saw it as a growth opportunity rather than a punishment—he gained confidence instead of fear. That is resilience: turning setbacks into lessons.

Above all else, integrity is the most vital quality of an enlisted leader. A Marine without integrity cannot be trusted, and a leader who cannot be trusted cannot lead. My word is my bond, and I will not sacrifice it for convenience, recognition, or advancement. Integrity has been tested many times, when pressured to cut corners on maintenance, when given the chance to shift blame, or when tempted to take credit for a subordinate's accomplishments. Each time, I returned to the principle that trust is everything.

If my Marines or superiors cannot trust me, then I cannot accomplish the mission. I have also made it clear to those I lead that integrity is a “nonnegotiable.” I can accept mistakes, but I cannot accept dishonesty. When I caught a Marine trying to shortcut maintenance in the Marine Corps' Global Combat

Support System (GCSS) and brief it as complete, I sat him down and explained that the mistake was fixable but the breach of trust was not. By demanding integrity, I ensure that every Marine knows trust is the glue holding us together.

The Marine Corps has taught me that leadership is not about being perfect. It is about serving others, providing accountability, respecting differences, learning from failure, and living with integrity. These qualities are the pillars of enlisted leadership. I have seen them demonstrated by leaders I admire, who never asked their Marines to do anything they would not do themselves. I have had to develop them in myself, when the easier path would have been to blame others or compromise my principles. And I have seen the impact they have had on my Marines, who grew stronger, more capable, and more united when these qualities are present.

In the end, leadership in the Marine Corps is about leaving a legacy, not of medals or accolades, but of Marines who are stronger, wiser, and better because you led them. If I can look back at my career and know that I built Marines who lead with courage, accountability, and integrity, who in turn shape the next generation and carry forward these values in every fight, then I will know I have fulfilled the sacred calling of an enlisted leader, guided always by the enduring pillars of servant leadership, accountability, respect for diversity, resilience, and integrity.

ESSAY 21

Shaping Future Performance The NCO's Responsibility

by Sergeant Manuel A. Lopez-Chavez

Marine noncommissioned officers (NCOs) as the backbone of the Marine Corps, are entrusted to carry a great deal of responsibilities, which demand continuous learning and adaptability. In order to sustain the transformation of their Marines, NCOs are expected to lead with firmness, fairness, and dignity. Through the processes of performance counseling and evaluations, they are able to provide guidance and feedback in a timely manner, critical for the development of Marines. Performance counseling and evaluations are both tools that directly aid and enable NCOs to guide and develop their Marines, by fostering a cohesive environment, learning how to motivate them, and maintaining a record of goals and past performance that allows personal and professional growth.

Marine NCOs are able to guide and mentor their subordinates through the counseling process, influencing cohesion in a positive way. At times, Marines may find themselves in situations where they lack the knowledge or are unsure on how to progress on their own. This may directly affect mission accomplishment as well as them in a personal and professional way, as they seemingly fall behind in comparison to their peers. Following the commander's intent in *Marine Corps Order (MCO)*

1500.61, "To provide a common framework and practical tools to assist leaders in developing all Marines . . . to achieve their full potential and be successful," an NCO is encouraged to engage in a teaching and coaching manner during counseling that creates awareness and accountability for both parties.¹ Identifying shortcomings or areas for improvement is vital and can be achieved through feedback and the constructive nature of the counseling. Counseling a Marine can occur formally or informally and should always be based on the "goal theory" as its core element. By doing so, Marines will gain confidence by achieving attainable goals, while the NCO actively works to establish a "buy into" the goal and its importance. While counseling subordinates and managing objectives has a positive impact on a cohesive work environment, the Marine Corps possesses another procedure that allows NCOs to motivate their Marines by looking back and assessing past actions.

The professional and formal nature of performance evaluations, results in increased motivation, as an individual is provided an accurate assessment on their career's progress. Performance evaluations, unlike the counseling program, focuses on rating the achievements and conduct of a Marine in a specified amount of time. This has its own benefits in the development of Marines, as it plays a crucial role in identifying trends, streamlining progress, and reinforcing professional goals. A feedback session after an evaluation provides an NCO the means to ensure the Marine understands the reasoning behind the grade provided. This has proven to be a productive tool for validating and rewarding positive behaviors. Conversely, highlighting deficiencies also serve as a device of improvement, which can later be attended to during future counseling sessions. *Marine Corps Order 1610.7B* states that "periodic performance evaluation can also help clarify and crystallize the subjects on which the counseling process should focus," further solidifying the idea that the overall intention should be

¹ *Marine Corps Order 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 28 July 2017), 2.

that of developing the Marine through the use of both systems, as one complements the other.² A fair evaluation also serves the evaluated, as it creates an opportunity to self-reflect and to gauge one's priorities, which will influence the results of the following counselings. Leaders should always strive to motivate their men by setting the example and showing them fairness, but keeping in mind that their personal and professional development is also a top priority.

The strategic use of performance counseling and performance evaluations help Marine NCOs lead, by having the means to maintain a record of goals and performance while supporting the personal and professional growth of their men. General Krulak states that "Every effort must be made to ensure mission accomplishment and Marine welfare."³ This supports the idea that NCOs are entrusted with more than just tasks to complete and that the welfare of their Marines is at the forefront of their responsibilities. According to *MCO 1610.7B*, "The PES highlights past performance; counseling shapes future performance," supporting the idea that while not the same, both are linked in the molding and development of Marines.⁴ The use of performance evaluations in conjunction with counseling, allows the NCO to not only understand the behaviors and attitudes of a Marine and evaluate their performance, but to align their agenda and focus on overall growth. This has a direct impact on the ability of an NCO being able to know their Marines on a personal level, understand how to motivate them, and when to recognize them. From another perspective, as an NCO shows genuine care of their men, a bond of trust will grow, allowing for a mission focused and cohesive environment to also grow, which directly aligns with the aforementioned idea.

The Marine Corps prides itself in having the highest stan-

² *Marine Corps Order 1610.7B, Performance Evaluation System (PES)* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 5 June 2023), 14.

³ Gen Charles C. Krulak, "Marine Noncommissioned Officers: On the Front Lines of Leadership," *Leatherneck* 81, no. 6 (June 1998): 2.

⁴ *Marine Corps Order 1610.7B, Performance Evaluation System (PES)*, 14.

dards and discipline, and possessing an unmatched esprit de corps. This would be unachievable if it was not for the illustrious line of professionals who have always ensured the success of the mission and the welfare of their Marines. Marine NCOs still carry on with the privilege of leadership, and continuously counsel and evaluate those within their ranks, instilling discipline and upholding standards. The counseling program and performance evaluations serve as tools that give NCOs the means to manage the objectives of their Marines and emphasize their careers' progress. Through performance evaluations and the counseling program, Marine NCOs learn how to motivate their people, foster a cohesive environment, and maintain a record of past performance and goals that empowers them to develop Marines personally and professionally.

ESSAY 22

Leading with Precision Leadership Lessons as a Production and Analysis Chief

by Staff Sergeant Oakley D. Lewellen

In the Marine Corps intelligence community, leadership is often exercised away from the front lines, but its impact resonates at every level of command. As a production and analysis chief, I have learned that leading an intelligence team means more than meeting time-critical production requirements. It requires shaping analysts into confident professionals, safeguarding the integrity of information, and driving operational outcomes through teamwork and clarity. Throughout my time in this billet, I have come to value three leadership traits above all others: integrity, adaptability, and empathy. These traits have not only defined my development as an enlisted leader, but they have also proven essential for guiding Marines through the critically demanding, detail-oriented world of intelligence production.

Integrity:

The Foundation of Trust in Intelligence Leadership

As a production and analysis chief, I oversee the creation and dissemination of intelligence products that directly influence mission planning and command decision-making. This responsibility means our products must be accurate, unbiased,

and transparent. Integrity is not just a moral requirement in this role, it is a professional imperative. A compromised assessment, even unintentionally, can result in operational failure or put Marines at risk of serious injury or death. As the senior enlisted leader within my section, I set the tone for what is acceptable, and I have learned that integrity starts by example.

I remember a time during deployment when our team was under significant pressure to deliver critical geospatial intelligence to support a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) mission. One of my analysts finished a product that looked accurate on the surface but after closer review, I realized the functional necessity of the product did not meet the critical requirements. We had hours, not days, to correct this. I could have approved the product as is to remain on schedule, but I instead explained the issue and we started over to ensure the information needed was provided.

That decision slowed our production down, but it also taught my team that quality and accountability come before convenience. Integrity in this context was not just about avoiding a mistake, it was about setting a standard. I want every Marine in my shop to know that cutting corners or thinking “it’s good enough for government work,” is never the right call, especially when Marines lives could be at risk.

Adaptability:

Managing Chaos in a Fast-Paced Intelligence Cycle

The intelligence production cycle does not operate in a vacuum. It is dynamic, deadline-driven, and constantly impacted by shifting operational requirements. As a production and analysis chief, I am the node between raw data and the decision-makers. The environment changes fast, commanders need updates, and intelligence gaps persist. Leading in this space requires the ability to pivot quickly, reprioritize tasks, and maintain composure under pressure all while ensuring my team remains focused and effective.

One of the most challenging periods I faced in this role

was deployment workups. We had an overwhelming volume of requests for information (RFIs), and we felt overwhelmed by the task-saturated requirements across our unit. I could feel the pressure because given the way our shop was operating, we did not meet the task at hand. If I did not adapt the way we operated, we would fall behind and risk delivering inaccurate products.

To make this work, I reconstructed our team into ad-hoc cells focused on specific requirements and instituted rolling updates. This created a streamlined workflow based on our ability to adapt as an intelligence section.

That experience showed me that adaptability is not just about staying flexible in your own role, it is about being able to quickly assess your team's strengths, reconstruct workflows, and communicate clearly down and in and up and out. Intelligence work does not slow down for us to catch up. As a leader, I must be ready to change course without losing direction.

Empathy:

Building a High-Functioning Intelligence Team

Empathy is often overlooked in discussions about leadership, particularly in technical fields like intelligence. But in my experience, it is one of the most important traits of an enlisted leader, especially in a high-pressure environment like production and analysis. Our Marines often work long hours behind secure doors, poring over data, drafting assessments, and reviewing reports that may never be seen outside a sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF). The stakes are high, but the recognition is often minimal. As a chief, I have learned that if you want Marines to perform at their best, they need to feel valued, not just as analysts but as human beings.

A few months into my current billet, I noticed one of my junior analysts was consistently missing small details in his production. He was not making catastrophic mistakes, but the quality of his work was most definitely slipping, and his attitude began to change. Instead of writing him up in formal paperwork, I sat down with him to see what was going on. It turned

out he had been struggling with personal issues and had been hesitant to speak up out of fear of appearing weak.

Conveniently enough, I had dealt with something like this situation in the past, and I had a list of resources that helped me when I needed support. Within a few weeks after he used some of the resources I provided, his performance improved significantly. That moment reinforced to me how empathy does not mean leniency. It means being attentive, asking questions, and leading in a way that respects the whole Marine, not just the rank or billet.

I have applied that lesson across the board. I hold my team to high standards, but I also make space for check-ins, mentorship, and development. I ensure the analysts know how their work contributes to the bigger picture. I encourage feedback and foster an environment where they feel comfortable speaking up when something does not make sense. That human connection is what turns a group of Marines into a high-functioning intelligence team.

Conclusion: Leadership beyond the Brief

Serving as a production and analysis chief has shown me that leadership in the intelligence community is multifaceted. It demands technical proficiency, but even more, it demands character. The most effective enlisted leaders in this field uphold integrity, embrace adaptability, and lead with empathy. These are not abstract values; they are daily decisions about how we mentor our Marines, how we approach a flawed product, how we respond under pressure, and how we carry ourselves when no one is watching.

I have seen firsthand how these qualities influence mission success, not just through polished intelligence products, but through the development of confident, capable Marines. Marines who can think critically, operate under stress, and lead others in turn. The SCIF may be a quiet place, but the leadership required inside it is loud and clear.

As I continue in this profession, I remain committed to im-

proving myself and to investing in those I lead. Because in the intelligence world, as in the broader Marine Corps, the mission is only as strong as the Marines who support it. Those Marines deserve leaders who are present, principled, and prepared.

ESSAY 23

Turning Military Discipline into Entrepreneurial Drive

by Sergeant Major Christopher J. Thomas (Ret)

Leadership is a journey marked by continuous growth, adaptation, and unwavering commitment to others. As a retired U.S. Marine Corps sergeant major with more than two decades of service, I have witnessed firsthand how core leadership qualities shape not only the success of units in the field but also the character and careers of those who serve. My experiences, from serving as a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina, and Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, to serving as the sergeant major of Marine Corps Recruiting Station Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, have reinforced the importance of certain qualities that define an effective enlisted leader. These qualities, cultivated during my military career and now applied in my civilian endeavors, are timeless and universal.

Integrity stands as the foundation of trust and the cornerstone of effective leadership. In the Marine Corps, integrity means doing what is right, even when no one is watching. It involves honesty, moral courage, and consistency in actions and decisions. Leaders who demonstrate integrity earn respect and loyalty from their Marines, creating an environment where accountability thrives. During my time as a drill instructor, I

emphasized the importance of integrity to recruits, instilling in them values that would serve them throughout their lives. Discipline and self-control are also vital. An enlisted leader must exemplify discipline, adhering to standards, maintaining composure under pressure, and setting the tone for others to follow. Self-control enables a leader to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively, especially in high-stress situations. I learned that discipline is not just about following rules but about embodying a mindset that prioritizes mission and team welfare above personal comfort.

Communication skills are essential for effective leadership. Clear, honest, and effective communication allows leaders to articulate expectations, listen actively, and provide constructive feedback. When communication breaks down, confusion and mistakes follow; but when it is present, trust and cohesion flourish. I witnessed that leaders who communicate with clarity foster trust within their teams. As a senior leader, I learned to convey complex instructions simply and to listen empathetically to Marines' concerns, which helped build mutual respect. Leading by example is perhaps the most powerful leadership principle. Actions speak louder than words. Effective leaders demonstrate the behaviors they expect from others. This includes maintaining professionalism, showing resilience, and exemplifying dedication. During my years of service, I understood that Marines often emulate their leaders. Whether in combat or training environments, I made it a point to uphold the highest standards of conduct, knowing that others would follow suit.

Empathy and compassion, while sometimes overlooked in traditional military leadership, are equally important. Understanding and respecting individual circumstances help foster a positive environment. Empathy helps leaders connect with their Marines, recognize their strengths and struggles, and provide tailored support. I learned that showing genuine concern enhances morale and loyalty, which are critical for unit cohesion. Adaptability and flexibility are also crucial. The Marine Corps operates in a dynamic environment where plans

often change rapidly. Effective leaders must adapt swiftly and keep their teams focused. My experiences taught me that rigidity leads to failure, whereas flexibility allows for innovative solutions and resilience. I often had to adjust training methods based on unit and personnel needs, reinforcing the importance of adaptability.

Resilience and mental toughness are indispensable qualities for military leaders. The ability to persevere through adversity while maintaining focus is essential. I encountered numerous challenges, from rigorous training to demanding operational deployments. Developing mental toughness enabled me to lead effectively and support my Marines during difficult times. Resilience is also vital for civilian leadership roles, especially when navigating setbacks or uncertainty. Throughout my career, I have seen these qualities demonstrated repeatedly, and I recognize that they are cultivated through intentional practice, reflection, and a commitment to personal growth.

Transitioning from military to civilian leadership, I have found that these core qualities remain essential, albeit expressed differently. As the founder of Elite 9 Talent Solutions, I emphasize integrity, discipline, and effective communication in developing leaders and organizations. My military background provides a foundation of resilience and adaptability that guides my work in workforce development, leadership training, and veteran transition programs. Working with transitioning servicemembers through Department of War SkillBridge programs and our proprietary Veteran Workforce Development Program™ has reinforced the importance of empathy and understanding their unique experiences. Many face challenges adjusting to civilian employment, and leaders who demonstrate compassion and patience can make a significant difference in their transition journey.

Moreover, the leadership lessons learned in the Marine Corps have shaped my approach to organizational development. Leading by example remains central, whether training a civilian team or guiding organizations through change. Integrity and transparency foster trust, which is vital for fostering collab-

orative efforts and driving sustainable success. The qualities of an effective enlisted leader, integrity, discipline, communication, leading by example, empathy, adaptability, and resilience, are timeless. They are rooted in character and reinforced through experience. My Marine Corps service provided a rigorous environment in which these qualities were tested and refined. They continue to serve me in my civilian endeavors, guiding my interactions with clients, veterans, and organizational partners.

Leadership is not solely about holding a position of authority; it is about inspiring others through actions that reflect core values. The Marine Corps instills these qualities deeply, and they remain vital in any context, military or civilian. As I reflect on my journey, I am convinced that cultivating these qualities in oneself and others is essential to building effective teams, fostering growth, and making a positive difference in the lives of those we serve.

ESSAY 24

The Perspective of an Enlisted Leader

by Gunnery Sergeant Justin Cavanaugh

When it comes to the application and demonstration of leadership, the United States Marine Corps is the premier Service in the Department of Defense. Marines consistently demonstrate leadership traits through their words and actions, and the end result is undeniable. The unique nature of the Marine Corps requires its senior leaders to embrace a steadfast commitment to embodying key traits and characteristics of leadership, while simultaneously accomplishing dedicated tasks within the organization. Entrusted with the bulk of direct leadership, enlisted Marines routinely answer the call to guide and direct Marines in meaningful ways and support the force by reinforcing the caliber and competency of the Marines that make up the ranks. The foundation of the Marine Corps' success is the enlisted cadre's ability to mentor Marines and steer them toward decisions that not only improve the quality of the Service, but also the betterment of the individual. These leaders, at all levels, demonstrate qualities that embody true, core leadership. The fundamental aspects of leadership that are on display on a daily basis truly showcase what makes the Marine Corps stand out from other branches. While the Marine Corps' 13 leadership traits are recited from day one at basic training, it is the

application of these traits that truly reflect the character and demeanor of the Service's senior leaders.

There is a long list of significant leadership qualities that should be demonstrated by senior enlisted Marines. The demonstration of these qualities should provide subordinate Marines with a safe and comfortable reference point to nest their own individual leadership aspirations under while they strive to achieve positions of authority. One of the most important qualities of a strong leader is to ensure that self-accountability is practiced at all times. When an individual who is serving in a leadership position does not embody the professed direction that is imposed against their subordinates, it creates a level of animosity and friction between leaders and the subordinate servicemembers. Whichever individuals are entrusted to govern the types of actions carried out by their troops, they should be able and willing to be a walking representation of the types of actions that are being requested at all times. Unfortunately, it is often the case that Marines serving in leadership roles act in a "do as I say" manner without any consideration for the consequences of those actions. From my personal experience, the Marines who remain accountable for themselves and their actions often portray themselves as credible and trustworthy leaders who are capable of ensuring mission success.

In addition to maintaining an essence of self-accountability, leaders who display humility through their success also have been proven to earn the trust and respect from both subordinate and superior Marines. It is very often the case that the Marines who receive recognition and ultimately promote into echelons of leadership tend to wear their successes as badges on their sleeve, on display at all times for everyone to observe. When leaders can balance their demeanor in a way that suggests that, despite all of their previous experiences, they are still willing to learn and absorb new information, it appeals to junior Marines more so than a conceited, arrogant individual who attempts to prove they are subject matter experts in all areas. The willingness to remain humble through all phases

of life resonates strongly with contemporary generations and can make those senior enlisted leaders significantly more approachable. This benefits the overall unit in many ways because it fosters stronger connections across echelons of command and expands lines of communication beyond the immediate channels. Factors such as this should drive leaders to strive to establish a better sense of connection with their Marines, starting with a sense of self-awareness and collective humility.

The greatest strength of the Marine Corps is the ability of its enlisted Marines to adopt guidance and create their own lessons nested within their leadership styles that are designed to accomplish the mission at hand. While officers and other senior leaders set conditions for operational success, enlisted Marines ensure that cohesion and unit connectedness are intact across the unit ranks, and guidance is clearly understood by Marines so that they can be effective at all times. Enlisted leaders must consistently display the necessary leadership qualities to gain trust from their subordinates and establish a culture that is focused on accomplishing the mission and minimizing distractions. When these Marines put forth their best effort into developing as leaders, the entire force reaps the benefits of strong, competent individuals leading Marines into the fight.

ESSAY 25

The Standards We Live By

by Gunnery Sergeant Lenae A. Parzanese

For 250 years, the Marine Corps has been built on three words every Marine knows by heart: honor, courage, and commitment. These are not just values we recite; they are the standards we live by, the fuel that drives us, and the legacy we defend every single day. The Marine Corps requires enlisted Marines who lead with fire, live with discipline, and care deeply for their Marines. While we stay anchored in our core values, the interpretation and application of leadership are constantly evolving to succeed in the latest missions. For enlisted leaders, the purpose is clear: lead with consistency, earn trust through action, and shape Marines through character and example. The most respected leaders do not just give orders; they show the way, lift others up, and become the leaders they once looked for when they were young Marines.

Honor is constant; its seen in how we treat Marines, how we lead, and the culture we build for the Corps. Our symbols, from the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor to the Good Conduct Medal, remind us of who we are and what we stand for. Honor is reflected in how leaders care for their Marines, by understanding their struggles, advocating for their growth, and showing up when it matters most without a clipboard. That is how pride is

maintained, not through speeches but through daily actions. Our honor as Marines runs so deep that many of us ink it permanently into our skin. It marks who we are, what we have endured, and what we will always be. It is the enlisted ranks that keep this passion alive. Through consistent care, trust within the Marines is built, and the culture becomes contagious. Enlisted leaders are responsible for shaping their unit's culture through their behavior, tone, and priorities. They set what is accepted, corrected, and celebrated. Leaders are tasked with creating an environment where that pride is protected and strengthened; they build it intentionally and sustain it every day. Nobody has to tell an enlisted Marine to be proud, because they are—unapologetically, visibly, and forever. That pride runs deep and eternal. Honor defines our core values. Now, as honor guides our foundation, courage, developed through training and experience, is what empowers us to stand tall when it matters most.

Courage is the quality enlisted leaders showcase in hard places, such as deployments, special billets, nonstandard training fields, and long nights that test patience and grit. Courage stands steady in our leaders when the world feels unstable. If a leader can hold the line when it all hits the fan, when nothing is going right, that is when the Marines really know who to follow. Our leaders speak with a calm voice, hold their posture with confidence, and steady our Marines in the storm. This courage is built over years of discipline, repetition, and tough assignments. It grows stronger when leaders step into challenge, when they train their Marines as if every day is the day the fight begins. The best leaders stay sharp, hungry, and relentless. The grind continues, and so does our leader's courage. The influence of the most respected voices in a unit are sometimes the Marines who are still climbing. A wise enlisted Marine embraces that type of influence, mentors it, and turns it into tomorrow's strength. But courage alone is not enough, what sustains it day after day is commitment and the relentless choice to put Marines and the mission first.

Commitment to the Marine Corps does not have an off

switch, ever. Enlisted leaders give all their time, energy, and comfort for the sake of our Marines. They answer calls at midnight, drive across town when needed, and they stand ready without pause. Leadership gives and gives again, because the Marines matter more than themselves. When leaders stay dedicated to being sharp, focused, fit, and ready, their Marines copy that dedication. Another defining quality of a committed leader is unwavering discipline. It is the thread that holds everything together, and not always about being liked. It is about ruthless consistency. Enlisted leaders give their Marines purpose and demand the best, especially when it is hard. The Good Conduct Medal reminds us that many Marines step into the Corps young, untested, and from every kind of background. To serve three years or more with discipline, honor, and no nonjudicial punishment (NJP or Article 15) is no small achievement. It is proof of growth, grit, and commitment. Before 1990, a Marine could earn the medal even after an NJP. Not anymore.¹ The bar is higher, and that is by design. Our Corps does not settle, we demand the best, and we rise to meet it.

The Marine Corps thrives on leaders who live with honor, lead with courage, and sacrifice with unwavering commitment. Enlisted leaders carry the weight of 250 years of tradition, setting the standard, building Marines, and protecting a legacy written in blood, sweat, and sacrifice. Leadership shines in the Marines built, the trust earned, and the example left behind. That leadership endures—undaunted, inspiring, and forging the future. It is the relentless spirit of our leaders that ensures the Marine Corps remains strong, unshaken, and unstoppable for the next 250 years and beyond.

¹ *Marine Corps Order P1070.12K, Marine Corps Individual Records Administration Manual* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 14 July 2000).

ESSAY 26

As Leadership Evolves

by Sergeant Kayanah Brown

An enlisted Marine's leadership skills are in development from the moment they step on the yellow footprints. My leadership skills have been cultivated during my seven years of service, filled with ups and downs that have taught me a lot. My current position as a sergeant in a staff noncommissioned officer billet has been the most trying time in my career. Becoming a division chief was overwhelming, I did not understand how to ask questions about things I had not learned. A gunnery sergeant who was meant to guide me told me that she did not think I was the right person for the job. I was committed though and wanted to do a great job. Being a sergeant in a shop is very different from being a division chief who is also a sergeant. I am the senior noncommissioned officer (SNCO) as the only sergeant and the staff sergeant. I give my Marines advice on everything from cars to familial relationships, but I also write page 11s and negative counseling.¹ I attend all the staff meetings, yet I do not have close relationships with the SNCOs in the

¹ A *page 11* (NAVMC 118) refers to administrative remarks in a *Marine's Service Record Book* to document counseling, performance, misconduct, and special qualifications.

unit because I am a sergeant. I have turned to books like *On Combat* by Dave Grossman and *Call Sign Chaos* by Jim Mattis, for lessons about leadership that I carry with me, and are reflected in the qualities I value the most.²

Marines are people too. Along with being an individual pertinent to their respective military occupational specialty (MOS), Marines are something to someone else as well, they are mothers, sisters, wives, fathers, brothers, husbands, or friends. At any point these relationships Marines hold dear could fracture or their loved one could experience a crisis or the Marine themselves experience a crisis. Compassion is necessary to guide a Marine through hard times. Empathy goes hand in hand; this skill helps breed compassion where it is most needed. It is also important to mention that one does not need to understand a situation to respond with compassion.

One of my lance corporals is expressive in his dislike for things that do not directly pertain to him. When we were at the height of work, he was disrespectful to his corporal, so I advised my corporal to give him a negative counseling for the disrespect. During their counseling, we found out that he had some family issues that were affecting his behavior. This led us to take a more caring approach and helping this Marine with his familial troubles. He still received a counseling for disrespect but instead of the entire situation being negative we found the root problem. Compassion in this situation led to this Marine receiving help for a problem he did not realize we could help with.

Being able to hold yourself and your Marines accountable is an important quality of a Marine enlisted leader. Accountability starts at the lowest level and is generally enforced at the NCO and above level. When NCOs are promoted, the warrant reads, "You will lead your Marines with firmness, fairness and

² LtCol Dave Grossman and Loren W. Christensen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace* (New York: Open Road, 2008); and Jim Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York: National Geographic Books, 2019).

dignity while observing . . . and enforcing all regulation and articles governing the discipline of the Armed Forces.”³ Enforcing the rules and regulations while leading Marines is the job of an NCO. Awards are a way to reward great behavior; this positive form of accountability shows Marines that they are seen, and it encourages them to continue this behavior. Page 11s, 6105s or NJPs punish negative behavior.⁴ For military members, this behavior violates the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Holding Marines accountable for the negative acts they commit is necessary to keep good order and discipline in the Marine Corps and one responsibility of enlisted leaders.

As division chief, I have had the responsibility of writing page 11s and providing recommendations to my sergeant major regarding my Marines’ inappropriate choices. One of my Marines was not recommended for promotion due to a ticket he received. Though he did not show it, I know he was disappointed in this decision. He was tasked with developing his maturity and the goal was that he would gain a better sense of responsibility by the end. This did not occur. I made a recommendation to my officer in charge (OIC), and I decided that he should still not be recommended. The task of holding your Marines accountable when the punishment could affect their career should not be taken lightly. It does not make me regret the decision though. How is a Marine supposed to grow if they are not given the opportunity to work on their faults? As leaders, it is our job to ensure our Marines do not fall through the cracks.

The last leadership quality comes from the Marine Corps leadership trait of judgment. Good judgment means a leader can make sound decisions and come to reasonable conclu-

³ “Non-Commissioned Officer Promotion Warrant (DD Form 216 MC),” U.S. Department of Defense, 2002.

⁴ The 6105 refers to the numbered paragraph in the *Separations Manual* (MCO P1900.16F/6105) that requires leaders to “make reasonable efforts to identify and address Marines’ deficiencies and help them overcome the deficiencies before proceedings are initiated to separate the Marine from the Marine Corps.” This counseling statement is a first step in the behavioral rehabilitation process.

sions: "We make tens of thousands of decisions daily."⁵ Many of these decisions are made subconsciously and others weigh heavily. Along with decisions regarding our MOS, enlisted leaders are required to infer about promotions, give recommendations on NJPs, or create doctrine for their units. At a lower level, this decision can be recommending your friend to Behavioral Health for counseling and notifying their chain of command. It can also look like walking into the Substance Abuse Counseling Center to get help with a drinking problem. Judgment extends to all decisions leaders make about their Marines' careers and how well-developed your judgment is will determine if you have made the correct choice for that scenario.

During my first deployment as division chief, I made the mistake of leaving an important asset back at home station. Rather than conveying this immediately, I decided that it would be better to have someone grab the asset for me first, then I would move forward. This was the wrong decision. I waited too long to notify the proper channels, and the situation became a lot bigger than it needed to. It was eventually worked out, but it damaged the relationship I was building with the leadership who were looking at me to guide this shop. That mistake showed me that I needed to grow faster in my role and that this position required me to improve my communication and make better judgment calls.

During my career, there have been many moments when I have questioned the decisions I have made. I have made decisions that cost me my rank and ones that earned me Navy and Marine Corps achievement medals. Having compassion, empathy, accountability, and judgment is a basis that will get you very far as an enlisted leader. Being an enlisted leader requires you to think of more than just yourself and being able to understand the big picture of the Marine Corps. You are a mentor, a subject matter expert, a career counselor, a financial advisor, and even family to your peers and Marines. Marines

⁵ Amanda Reill, "A Simple Way to Make Better Decisions," *Harvard Business Review*, 5 December 2023.

are expected to be more because we know it is possible. By striving each day to grow, we not only strengthen ourselves but also inspire our Marines to do the same. Our leadership styles will continue to evolve as we take on new roles to become the leader our Marines need.

ESSAY 27

Empathy The Marine Corps' Quiet Weapon

by Sergeant Andres Ruiz Grijalva

The Marine Corps is an institution that commonly receives individuals from communities filled with gang violence, physical abuse, and low-income backgrounds. It transforms them into remarkable, empathetic leaders who lead the world from the front, armed with empathy and understanding. It achieves this by bringing together Marines from every corner of the country and the world to work together toward a common mission. The metamorphosis one undergoes during our time in service sheds away our past selves by exposing young Marines to leaders who exemplify our ethos, grounded in professionalism and compassion.

An empathetic leader who understands people's perspectives and backgrounds has the maturity to motivate people around them. My story begins in Ecuador when my biological father, a womanizer and alcoholic, would beat my siblings and me and proclaim that we would never amount to anything in life. "You are dumber than donkeys," he declared with a bottle of whiskey in his hand, and emphasized how unequipped we were to succeed in the world. Growing up in that environment, hearing those words from him, limited the opportunities I envisioned for myself.

Years later, my mother divorced him, yet the wounds of his physical and emotional abuse remained with me, much like the stains on his empty whiskey bottle. I carried these wounds with me when I moved to New Jersey. As a 13-year-old adolescent in a new country, with low confidence and no purpose, this issue was exacerbated by having to learn a new language and adapt to a different culture.

My mother and stepfather, my heroes, had sacrificed so much for me to be in this country, but I felt I was not honoring their sacrifice. I said to myself, "This is not what I want for myself. I know I can achieve much more." A desperation for more arose that day. I knew change could only start within myself. I took ownership of my situation and promised myself not to waste the opportunity to live in a country where the ideals of liberty and equality could help me achieve the American dream.

The ability to empathize with someone's struggle, understand their background, and engage with them is a superpower that inspires and motivates people, which makes an effective enlisted leader. The first person who spoke to me beyond my heavy accent and self-doubt was my Marine Corps recruiter. After a few pleasantries, Gunnery Sergeant Mac asked, "Are you interested in joining the Marine Corps?" I replied "Yes!" without hesitation. Showing up at his office without any previous connection to the military was daunting for a 16-year-old kid like me. As I opened the door and pressed the ring to enter, filled with butterflies and nervousness, I was expecting to meet an emotionless warfighter. The reality was a drastic change; I met a funny, empathetic, demanding, and decisive leader.

During our first conversations, he told me he believed in me, and as I shared my story with him, he said he knew I could make something of myself in the Marine Corps. He told me I could find my home in an organization that would take me in with all my flaws and mold me into a better citizen. He acknowledged that I had gone through difficulties in high school but assured me that it would not define me in the Marine Corps. This

marked the beginning of a journey brimming with challenges, disappointments, excitement, and much-needed growth.

On 11 November 2019, I stepped onto the yellow footprints at Parris Island, South Carolina, as a 17-year-old boy. After the check-in process was finished, we were finally able to meet our drill instructors. I was intimidated by these men who embodied professionalism and discipline. After living my whole life without anyone expecting these high standards of me, it was a shock like submersion in freezing water, with every single cell of my body telling me to run far away into the warm comfort.

Yet, it reinvigorated my drive to enlist, despite my parents' pleas, who had viciously urged me not to enlist. I graduated meritoriously, was promoted, and was excited for what lay ahead in my journey. Drill instructors instilled in me a warrior mindset and did not treat me differently for my accent or lack of confidence; instead, they demanded a rigorous level of professionalism and perfection within our platoon. A different aspect of empathy, yet they executed it effectively. They succeeded because they understood our backgrounds. Some of them had their lives transformed, just as ours were, and they wanted to pass that forward.

Someone who listens to understand and puts themselves in others' shoes has the innate ability to make others feel heard and appreciated, leading them to perform consistently better. My sergeant in my first platoon, who checked me into my unit, embodied the empathy that a leader must have for their subordinates. He took the time to listen to my story, yet constantly challenged me to overcome the self-doubt I had. He believed I could earn my associate's degree, be meritoriously promoted again, or become a martial arts instructor. When others laughed at my aspirations, he looked at me and said, "I will have the package ready for you to study for those boards." These words meant the world to me. He could have easily dismissed me, as many of my peers mocked me for having aspirations. As a food service Marine, many people felt disappointed, but I knew I could not stay in that position. Seeing someone eager

to improve themselves and consistently work on themselves made them feel insecure about their own position and their leadership. Had my sergeant not been there for me, I would not have followed my passions and my enthusiasm to be a Marine. The empathy to constantly listen to his Marines and adjust his plans according to their needs is the biggest lesson I learned as a Sergeant and as a citizen. Treating people with empathy and positively reinforcing their accomplishments and initiative helped me feel that I was breaking the cycle; that I had not succumbed to prejudice and disdain, but rather that I had, in a small way, begun to normalize kindness, empathy, and respect within my immediate community.

I am aware of this transformation, having been exposed to empathetic leaders who believed in me despite my low socioeconomic background and, ultimately, becoming a first-generation college student at Princeton University, where I have thrived academically. This would not have been possible without the Marines, who provided me with the care and understanding I, as a broken kid, needed. The most foundational leadership trait that I learned as a Marine has helped me help so many other veterans and people from the same backgrounds, having learned from past leaders that the most important thing sometimes for a person to change is having someone who listens to them without judgment. I aspire to constantly employ the leadership skills that I developed as a Marine to continuously work hard to live the leadership traits and principles that I developed as a noncommissioned officer, and return to service after completing my degree.

ESSAY 28

Leadership Defined

by Corporal Megan A. Hinzman

Leadership is simply defined as “the office or position of a leader,” “capacity to lead,” and “the act or an instance of leading.”¹ An elementary definition for a single word that represents distinguished figures spread across the centuries, a single word that encompasses traits such as empathy, courage, and integrity. These traits are deemed critical for the effectiveness of organizations, such as the Marine Corps, which are renowned for success and act as pillars to create the foundation for great leaders. The question then begs the answer: What is it about these three attributes that create such prolific leaders?

Leadership within the Marine Corps is a practice deeply rooted in character and heavily reliant on empathy, the bridge between rank and respect, where authority turns into influence. Eleni Tzouramani in “Leadership and Empathy” writes, “Research shows that empathic leaders create emotional bonds and are therefore competent in understanding and addressing their team’s . . . needs, appreciating and drawing on people’s talents, recognizing others’ perspectives in problem

¹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “leadership (n.),” accessed 17 February 2026.

solving and including them in decision-making.”² An empathic leader connects with their Marines on a human level, creating a climate of mutual respect and trust.

Consider a small unit leader who notices a usually high-performing Marine who appears withdrawn from their peers and distracted. The unit leader does not dismiss it as mere laziness or insubordination but instead asks questions with genuine concern and provides advice for following actions. By fostering an empathetic relationship with their Marine, the small unit leader reduces the potential for the situation to degrade further and instead enhances cohesion and trust within the unit. The Marine Corps cultivates an environment that creates close knit relationships among peers and coworkers where empathy is critical for a leader to successfully foster a harmonious work climate.

A more universally recognized trait among Marine Corps leadership is courage. Defined as mental or moral strength to persevere and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty; courage is not limited to acts of physical bravery. Moral courage, the ability to do what is right even under pressure of backlash and in the face of fear, is equally as important. An article in the *Journal of Business Ethics* states, “Courageous leaders initiate and carry through their decisions. Some even seize the opportunity to innovate, transform their organizations, or pursue new enterprises in order to be more effective.”³ Courage enables innovation and progression, crafting a leader not afraid to question the status quo, push for change or admit mistakes.

Perhaps the most revered example of Marine Corps courage is the story of Sergeant Dan J. Daly, recipient of the Medal of

² Eleni Tzouramani, “Leadership and Empathy,” in *Leadership Today: Practices for Personal and Professional Performance*, ed. Joan Marques and Satinder Dhimman (New York: Springer, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31036-7_11.

³ Michael E. Palanski et al., “Virtuous Leadership: Exploring the Effects of Leader Courage and Behavioral Integrity on Leader Performance and Image,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 132, no. 2 (2015): 297–310, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2317-2>.

Honor not once, but twice. Leading the charge against German positions during the Battle of Belleau Wood during World War I, Sergeant Daly's courage under fire inspired Marines to press forward in one of the Marine Corps' most defining battles. His example is still used today, teaching recruits the emphasis on courage.⁴ Shift forward about 90 years and Marines are still illustrating this trait as demonstrated by Sergeant Dakota L. Meyer, another recipient of the Medal of Honor. He embodied the enduring tradition of courage during the Battle of Ganjgal in Afghanistan in 2009. Directly disobeying orders to stand down, Sergeant Meyer repeatedly drove into the kill zone in an unarmored vehicle under heavy enemy fire to rescue his fellow wounded Marines and retrieve bodies of the fallen. With no hesitation, Sergeant Meyer risked his own life for the sake of his comrades, exemplifying both moral and physical courage to do what was right in the face of overwhelming odds.⁵ Exhibited by both these examples, courage continues as a trait essential to Marine Corps leadership, both on and off the field of battle.

In addition to empathy and courage, integrity provides the bedrock foundation for an excellent leader. In his chapter, "The Role of Integrity in Individual and Effective Corporate Leadership," Jan Warren Duggar writes that "we characterize individuals with integrity as individuals that we can count on to do consistently what is 'right' and what is expected of them. They are reliable and predictable in dealing with others and with issues, and they are defenders of what is fair, just and acceptable."⁶ Integrity forms the basis of trust—without it, units fracture and fail. A leader lacking integrity may command both

⁴ "Sergeant Major Dan J. Daly," Marine Corps History Division, accessed 18 February 2026.

⁵ "Sergeant Dakota L. Meyer, USMC," Marine Corps History Division, accessed 18 February 2026.

⁶ Jan Warren Duggar, "The Role of Integrity in Individual and Effective Corporate Leadership," in Charles A. Millick, ed., *The Challenges for Leadership, Values, and Happiness: What Are the Keys to Your Success in the 21st Century?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), chap. 4.

fear and obedience, but never true respect. Marines must be able to trust that their leaders will stand by their word, make fair decisions and hold themselves accountable.

This standard is set from the start at Marine Corps recruit training, where recruits are rigorously evaluated on their integrity. Even small lies or lapses in honesty can result in dismissal, teaching a valuable lesson that integrity, once compromised, is difficult to restore. It is a trait that is nonnegotiable in a profession where lives are at stake and establishes a culture where honesty and accountability are respected.

The interdependence of these three traits is tightly interwoven. The best leader balances all three traits, discerning when to apply each in accordance with the situation. They are not abstract ideals, but instead enduring traditions that define leadership within the Marine Corps. Demonstrated in the actions of Marines every day at the shop level to the historic heroes such as Sergeants Daly and Meyer, these traits ensure that Marines remain capable of earning and keeping the trust of those they lead and are both effective and respected moral warriors. Together, these traits provide a model not just for the Marine Corps but for leadership in any walk of life.

ESSAY 29

Marine Leaders

by Lance Corporal Lexi Morgan

Many qualities make a Marine a great leader. The most important ones are honor, courage, commitment, positivity, communication, compassion, and humility. Leaders are a vital entity within the Marine Corps. Without leaders, there would be no structure or people to look up to or strive to be like. Every Marine should strive to be a leader and the best Marine they can be.

The Marine Corps core values—honor, courage, and commitment—are essential qualities of a leader, and every Marine should follow them. A great leader is always honest with themselves and everyone around them. They also take honor and pride in being a Marine by upholding the physical and grooming standards. A great leader dares to do things that are difficult, uncomfortable, and scary. They show other Marines that you must have courage to do the things in life that make you feel uncomfortable. As many Marines say, “You have to embrace the suck.”¹ A great leader also embodies commitment.

¹ *Embrace the suck* was popularized by Marines during Operation Iraqi Freedom. See Col Austin Bay, *Embrace the Suck: A Pocket Guide to Milspeak*, rev. ed. (Brentwood, TN: Bombardier Books, an imprint of Post Hill Press, 2018).

They finish everything they started, no matter how difficult it gets. When they are at their lowest point and want to give up, they tell themselves to keep pushing and finish. During boot camp on a hike, a fellow Marine who was not very tall, strong, or big was struggling to keep up. She was crying from the pain, but she kept telling herself to keep going and to push. Not only was she telling herself that, but she was also telling her fellow Marines who were also struggling. It is not easy to be a great leader, but a good start is by having honor, courage, and commitment.

Not only are the core values important, but being positive is another important quality of a leader. Having a positive attitude is important to me and shows me that you care. A positive leader can make good decisions under pressure because they are in a good state of mind. I try to stay positive in everything I do to show my fellow Marines that I can do anything, even if it may seem hard. When someone I know makes a mistake, I tell them it is not the end of the world and we can fix it.

Communicating is an important quality not only in the Marine Corps but in many jobs. You must communicate with your peers, so the job gets done efficiently and respectfully. Ordering your Marines around is not the right way to communicate. A good leader will communicate by engaging in conversations, listening, and asking for others' opinions on the matter. During projects, I have seen my leaders ask me and my peers what our thoughts were on the matter, how we thought it could be better, and they encouraged a rebuttal on something they said. A great leader should know how to communicate properly and effectively.

Being compassionate with your peers can go a long way. Listening and just being there for someone can mean a lot. A leader will tell their Marines that they are there anytime and anywhere because they care about their Marines and their well-being. My corporal is someone who I think is compassionate because he is someone who truly cares about other people and will do anything for them. He is someone I can go to talk

about my feelings or if I need help. A compassionate leader will set aside their rank and be there for you.

Humility can show who is a true leader. Being able to admit when you are wrong and learn from your mistakes is a great quality. Someone who has no humility has no pride and a very superior attitude. A great leader will admit their faults, take what they have learned, move on, and apply it in the future. They show their fellow Marines that it is sometimes okay to be wrong and make mistakes. They also accept and value the importance of someone else's idea.

There are many qualities to a great leader, and these are just some of them. These are the qualities that I find important and try to bestow in myself. I am also not saying that if you do not have these qualities, then you are not a great leader. You can just have good positivity and patience to be a great leader. I am still a junior Marine, but every day I try to be the best Marine I can be. I try my best to be a leader and a great person by having positivity, honor, compassion, and courage. I look at my peers, and I learn from what they are doing, both the good and the bad. I also challenge other Marines to be the best that they can be. Leadership is at the core of everything we do and everyone we interact with; that is why the Marine Corps needs great leaders.

ESSAY 30

Moments of Leadership

by Staff Sergeant Paul Nicholas Chang (Ret)

The destiny of becoming a Marine is only for the select few in society. Every Marine was born to fulfill their role in service to our country, to the Corps, and to each other. As character is developed through the challenges of basic training in Parris Island, South Carolina, the very first impression of military reality is stepping off the bus and onto the yellow footprints. This experience is what no other person in the world has gone through except for the few who willingly volunteered to face the physical and mental challenges of what is known as “Marine boot camp.” The hallmarks of this introduction to the military life are based on the foundation of likeness and the development of the *esprit de corps*.¹ It is also splattered with chaos, fatigue, suffering, and a healthy dose of quarterdeck time that has throughout history lasted longer and demanded more than any other Service.² However, through all the phases of training a symbol of what we all aspired to be was constantly standing

¹ Merriam-Webster defines *esprit de corps* as a common spirit within a group that inspires enthusiasm, devotion, and the honor of the members.

² *Quarterdeck time* refers to standing sentry or providing security or overwatch.

there in front of us, the drill instructors. They introduced me to what leadership should be through decisive decision-making and clear instructions even on the simplest of tasks. Leadership was on display 24 hours a day for 13 weeks, and I watched and recognized that leadership is a trait that cannot be purchased but is inherent in everyone if willing and able to break through the fear of failure. Even after retiring from the Corps, I still see and feel the presence of my drill instructors who took the first cut at molding who I am today.

My first enlistment was never planned out, and I allowed the winds to guide me as the Corps needed and landed in Camp Pendleton, California, volunteering for an unknown role when asked for volunteers. That role was to be the new pogue at 1st Reconnaissance Battalion located in Camp Las Flores.³ As a “boot,” I quickly learned what being in the Fleet Marine Force meant and how a command culture of leadership can shape everyone. This was demonstrated by those up and down the chain and all were purposeful in demonstrating professionalism to ensure the junior enlisted had clear examples of leadership. I learned through many of the men from every section of the command and learned through their discussions what it meant to lead from a small team aspect and that leadership also meant that you as a leader empower the best suited person regardless of their rank. I found myself growing up there and getting educated through the discipline, physical demands, and culture in the process from what I experienced to be some of the finest Marines and corpsmen the Marine Corps and Navy had to offer. I took these lessons and moved on to my next duty station at an air wing, then at an inspector and instructor staff, and the next at Headquarters Marine Corps, and quickly found that the core commonality across these duty stations across the world was the focus on elevating the next generation of Marines through a common leadership standard that began with leading by example, mentorship of all subordi-

³ The term *new pogue* refers to a newly arrived noncombat or noninfantry servicemember.

nates, and a degree of humbleness by the highest of ranks that I still see to this day. As a staff noncommissioned officer, I recognize that having greatness surround me from every rank and occupation is what not only shaped who I am today, but also taught me to see the larger picture of what leadership really means from both the front of the team and within the ranks who follow.

Leadership means that you serve subordinates by representing their needs, developing their skills, and guiding them through the difficult times. Providing an experienced voice to those who are seeking personal betterment through listening and providing transparency of decisions. Quality leadership also represents the mistakes made as leaders and how those mistakes are addressed as examples of critical thinking and lessons learned. Leadership is serving those who are above you not only in rank, but those whose mission requires your support to meet objectives regardless of their rank. Leadership is self-actualization to recognize that the greater potential of personal success and mission accomplishment is based on helping all to succeed. And, most of all, leadership is forming a team that relies on each other to succeed at any given task or fail together and learn the lessons why. The characteristics of such a trait cannot be easily voiced but can be seen in the moving actions of many throughout our Marine Corps history. The actions of many can be surmised as the inspiration behind our leadership culture of the Corps and that is a title that is earned. The greatest leaders that I encountered were from every race, religion, gender, age group, and society. Moments of leadership came from all of them, but the one constant that I experienced throughout my years until retirement was that a Marine looks to another with the greatest of respect and the highest of expectations of virtue as the Marine bond demands it from the moment of stepping on the yellow footprints to the day when the burial team completes your last *ave atque vale* (hail and farewell).

ESSAY 31

Leadership that Lasts Living the 4 Es

by Master Gunnery Sergeant Levingston D. Hodges III (Ret)

What makes an enlisted leader effective—really effective—is not a checklist of traits or a rehearsed speech at formation. It is how they carry themselves day in and day out. After years in the Marine Corps, I have come to believe the most important qualities of an enlisted leader are captured in four essential traits: engagement, empathy, expectations, and example. These do not replace our traditional leadership principles; they bring them to life. And during my career, they have shaped how I lead, how I have grown, and how I try to leave each unit better than I found it.

Engagement: Presence that Means Something

When 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, took over from 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, in al-Anbar Province, it was not long before the first test came.¹ A Marine and a corpsman from our unit were shot minutes after the midnight turnover. It was a moment where leadership was not theoretical, it was urgent. I stayed

¹ Sgt Roe F. Seigle, "Hawaii-based Unit, 'America's Battalion,' Arrives in Al Anbar Province," 1stMarDiv.mil, 18 March 2006.

with my section, helped coordinate the casualty evacuation, and kept communication flowing to higher headquarters. My role was not unique. It was what was needed.

That kind of presence carried into the daily rhythm of that deployment. Our section rotated through 24-hour operations. I stayed on station for most of those hours, ensuring Marines felt supported and understood the mission. This was not about proving a point. It was about consistency, being there so they never had to guess whether leadership would show up. In environments like that, presence becomes stability. And stability builds trust.²

Empathy: Not a Luxury, a Leadership Tool

There is sometimes a hesitation in the Corps to talk about empathy. It gets confused with leniency or weakness. I have seen that attitude firsthand. During a discussion about retention surveys, I shared with a sergeant major that we needed to lead with more empathy. He replied, “I don’t carry sunshine and rainbows in my pocket.” Another said, “That’s just their perception.” But that is the point—their perception is the ground truth for them and if we ignore it, we miss the opportunity to lead them effectively.

Empathy is not about lowering standards. It is about knowing what your Marines are carrying—on duty and off—so you can help them perform at their best. That could mean listening without judgment, recognizing burnout, or just remembering what it felt like to be junior and unsure. When Marines know they are seen and respected as individuals, they give more than compliance—they give commitment.³

² *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997).

³ MajGen John A. Lejeune, “Kindly and Just,” Letter No. 1, 19 September 1922, Marine Corps History Division, accessed 18 February 2026.

Expectations: Clarity Builds Confidence

I have always believed Marines deserve to know exactly what is expected of them. That is how they grow. Whether it is daily standards, long-term goals, or how they fit into the bigger picture, clear expectations give Marines something solid to work from. In my sections, I made it a priority to outline those expectations early and revisit them often through feedback, coaching, and steady communication.

It goes both ways. I also asked what they expected from me. That opened up trust and often gave me insight I would not have gotten otherwise. Clear expectations cut down confusion, resentment, and the kind of avoidable problems that grow in silence. It is not about micromanaging, it is about giving Marines room to perform with purpose.⁴

Example: Show up First, Stay Late when Needed

Leadership by example is one of the simplest ideas in the Marine Corps and one of the hardest to fake. Whether we are talking about physical readiness, training standards, or professional development, I have always tried to uphold the same expectations I set for my Marines.

When I was assigned to I Marine Expeditionary Force and served on the commanding general's Crisis Response Team, I was required to complete the Marine Corps Forces, Central Command, predeployment training program every six months. That included weapons qualifications, vehicle rollover drills, and swim qualifications—all completed under tight timelines.⁵ I noticed junior Marines were always there, doing the work. But not all senior enlisted were. To me, that made it more important to show up, quietly and consistently.

⁴ NAVMC Directive 1500.58, *Marine Corps Mentoring Program (MCMP) Guidebook* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 13 February 2006).

⁵ MARADMIN 740/07, *The Pre-Deployment Toolkit* (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, 19 December 2007).

Likewise, I have never led a section or platoon where I was not the first to step on the scale when weight standards came up or the last to eat in the field. These are not grand gestures. They are small, daily ways to show Marines that the standard applies at every rank and that I respect them enough to live it myself.

Why It All Matters

The longer I have served, the more I believe leadership is not about being impressive—it is about being reliable. Engagement, empathy, expectations, and example are not concepts I read about and decided to adopt. They are tools that helped me stay grounded and connected, especially in times of stress, uncertainty, and heavy responsibility.

Marines do not need perfect leaders, but they do need present ones. They need leaders who listen, who clarify, who guide, and who never ask for something they would not do themselves. I have done my best to be that leader. And every time I see one of my Marines succeed, grow, or take on leadership roles, it reminds me why these four Es are not just useful, they are necessary.

ESSAY 32

Leaders Givers and Takers

by Private First Class Miguel Angel Torres II

Neale Donald Walsch said, "A true leader is not the one with the most followers, but one who creates the most leaders."¹ Leaders can be anyone, no matter the age, race, color, height, or gender.

My name is Miguel Angel Torres II, and I have experienced all types of leaders from good to bad in my time as an enlisted military servicemember. Growing up, I would always see and hear the same quote, which would say how there are two types of people in this world: givers and takers.² The takers may have everything they want and live comfortably while the givers gave everything but will always have a feeling of knowing they made a difference no matter how small. I have experienced this not only growing up throughout my lifetime, but in my time as a United States Marine. I have seen leaders who are takers, ones who I would not describe as bad or evil people but ones who

¹ Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue*, book 1 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 114.

² This phrase is most famously attributed to Marlo Thomas, whose father told her that "there are two kinds of people in the world: givers and takers. The takers may eat better, but the givers sleep better." Danny Thomas was an entertainer and the founder of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

have been misguided. I have seen and heard them take credit for another Marine's work. I have seen them be awarded and recognized for contributions they were not a part of. In this world, you will always see takers, you will always have a choice to be a taker or a giver. In a world full of takers, I have been blessed to be surrounded by a world full of givers. I have the pride of saying that my first unit in my career Marine Aircraft Group 39 is a community full of givers. I have seen and experienced, my leadership from the private first class all the way up the enlisted ranks, give everything they have to fulfill a mission essential environment while also sustaining a great camaraderie. I have heard from my leadership that the "work will always be there, but the relationships and connections you Marines will build and have built, will soon come to an end." I have seen my enlisted leaders stay late after hours to catch up on work while letting the junior Marines go home to rest, and they would still be the first ones to show up early for work and lead the way. These are what I describe as givers.

Besides describing givers and takers, there are many important qualities of being a leader. While many others have different perspectives on what a leader is, the most important qualities of being a leader are integrity and honor. The United States Marine Corps, which I am proudly serving, commits to always having integrity. A Marine does not cheat, lie, or steal. A leader will always tell you how it is. A leader will correct you when you are wrong and accept when they are wrong; they will award you when you do right, and they help you when you cannot get back up. Leaders who have integrity will never have the fear of thinking they will be betrayed by the followers they are leading. Instead, they will have a great benefit of molding their followers with great integrity to become excellent leaders to carry on for future generations to come. While integrity is something a leader should always have, having honor goes side by side with it. To have honor is to have commitment to someone or something. Whether it is staying true to yourself or true to the ones around you. Having honor in a leader will not only benefit them but benefit the Marines around them.

Without integrity and honor traits in your leadership not only in your military career but throughout your lifetime, you will have no choice but to follow or be a leader who is misguided. Having honor and integrity is what will make a great leader and make the ones surrounded by them great leaders.

To explain and conclude what qualities make a great leader and how there are two types of people in the world, I can say I have been shaped into a giver. Not only as a result of being surrounded by givers throughout my life and in my military career but seeing how takers take everything and deal with a wave of guilt to a point in which the personnel they lead will fail to have trust for them. I have developed honor and integrity which further reinforces the leadership I demonstrate. I will continue to hold on to this for the rest of my military career and throughout my life, so that I can guide and provide support to those who I lead in the future into great leaders and even better people.

ESSAY 33

Resilient Leadership

by Corporal Trey Sweeney

The United States Marine Corps has a stellar reputation of developing civilians into professional warfighters and returning them to society as leaders in their communities. This reputation stems from the philosophy “every Marine a leader,” which is instilled in the first days of recruit training and cultivated throughout a Marine’s career, ensuring they are comfortable leading others in every clime and place. The foundation of the Marine Corps’ leadership development consists of two lists: the leadership traits and leadership principles. Although these lists provide a solid base from which to work, one trait is missing: resiliency. While the lists of leadership traits and principles are crucial for the development of a leader, the trait of resiliency is the most important for any developing leader to learn. Every Marine, regardless of rank, billet, or military occupational specialty will encounter adversity, and their ability to recover from that setback could be the defining moment in their career.

Every day, Marine leaders are tasked with developing creative solutions for complex problems, and supervising their subordinates in the execution of their plan. Although Marines usually succeed in solving the problem, they may encounter unforeseen challenges during the execution, which may have a

demoralizing effect on the Marines. It is the leader's responsibility to overcome these setbacks and ensure the morale of the Marines remains high.

Due to the nature of combat and the preparation required to succeed under its extreme conditions, leaders will inevitably encounter difficult situations. These situations may be caused by various stimuli, such as mistakes made by subordinates, enemy action, nature, or a sense of complacency within the leader. Furthermore, the incident could vary wildly in size and scope, from failing a physical fitness test to losing Marines in combat. Regardless of what the situation is, the best leaders are the individuals who respond instantaneously, taking accountability for their actions or those of their subordinates, and train incessantly to ensure it never happens again.

Throughout American military history, countless individuals have persevered despite encountering demoralizing adversity. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the commander of the United States Pacific Fleet during World War II, is one example. As an ensign, Admiral Nimitz was relieved of his first command, the USS *Decatur* (DD 5), for running his ship aground. Then Ensign Nimitz was court-martialed and given a letter of reprimand, in addition to being relieved of command.¹ However, Nimitz refused to allow this incident to define his career. He was transferred to submarines, an experience that would prove crucial later in his career, and excelled in his profession. By 1941, Admiral Nimitz's reputation was so stellar that President Franklin D. Roosevelt personally chose Nimitz to become the naval commander in the Pacific, where he would lead the campaign across the Central Pacific, destroying the Imperial Japanese Navy in the process.²

Due to the nature of the warfighting profession, sometimes leaders must show resilience in the face of enemy action. Ma-

¹ "Decatur II (Destroyer No. 5), 1902–1919," Naval History and Heritage Command, 19 April 2018.

² Tyler R. Bamford, "Leadership Principles of Chester Nimitz," *Naval History*, December 2025.

rine Corps Corporal William Kyle Carpenter is one of the best examples of resiliency from recent history. Then-Lance Corporal Carpenter deployed to Afghanistan in 2010, during the Battle of Marjah. While providing security, a Taliban insurgent threw a grenade onto the rooftop Carpenter was on, which he subsequently covered with his body. In the ensuing blast, Carpenter was critically wounded, but survived, beginning a path to recovery that was long and arduous. Today, Carpenter strives to live his best possible life, he has earned a college degree, runs marathons, and, most importantly, visits Marines around the world.³ Both Nimitz and Carpenter are the embodiment of resiliency and perseverance. Although enlisted Marines will rarely have an impact on the scale of either Nimitz or Carpenter, they can still profoundly change the lives of their subordinates for the better. In order for them to succeed in the development of their subordinates, Marine leaders must demonstrate both what right looks like and what resiliency is.

Resiliency is a trait that I am actively developing at the time of this writing. I recently experienced a setback in my career, which was both highly embarrassing and demoralizing, and resulted in me being reduced in rank. Although I have experienced adversity before, both in the Marine Corps and as a civilian, nothing has come close to the severity of this incident. However, I vowed to myself that I would not let this incident define my career and that I would recover. The last months have been difficult, but I believe there are Marines who use me as an example, and I would be letting them down if I were to sulk over something that cannot be undone. Although I am not in the same position as either Admiral Nimitz or Corporal Carpenter, I believe that I can have a lasting impact on the Marines around me, demonstrating to them that no challenge is insurmountable.

Resiliency is one of the key leadership traits that does not get discussed nearly as much as it should. Due to the nature of

³ *Medal of Honor: 150 Years of Courage and Sacrifice* (Clearwater, FL: Belmont International, 2011).

a Marine's profession, it is guaranteed that everyone who wears the uniform will experience some form of adversity. While adversity can take many forms, from a ticket for driving under the influence, to being the victim of sexual assault, to making a decision resulting in the death of a Marine in combat, how the individual recovers is what subordinates remember. Resiliency allows leaders to accept responsibility for their actions, realize the past cannot be changed, and move forward with tenacity. It is the responsibility of every Marine leader to develop their subordinates professionally, and demonstrating how to face adversity is one of the most crucial lessons a leader can teach.

ESSAY 34

Persistency over Perfection

by Staff Sergeant Joshua Edwards

Leadership often parallels the messy and profound journey of parenting. It is not about perfection or having all the answers. Just as parents raise children through evolving circumstances and their own flaws, leaders guide their teams through challenges, adapting, growing, and showing up—even when they are imperfect. At its core, leadership is about consistent presence, genuine effort, and a deep commitment to the growth of those you lead.

Leaders are not born leaders, and parents are not born parents. Both roles are forged through trial and error, tempered by humility. We will neither always be the smartest in the room, nor will our leadership style remain timeless. In fact, the methods we use today may seem outdated when our Marines reach this same point in their careers. But that should not discourage us, it should liberate us. We do not need to be perfect; we need to be present. Leadership is not measured by the absence of mistakes, but by the consistency of our effort and the sincerity of our commitment.

I learned this early on. As a fresh private first class at 2d Combat Engineer Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, I showed up with my battle buddy, who, to put it bluntly, was

a physical training (PT) phenom. He maxed out every event, received constant praise, and was always being nominated for every opportunity. I was doing well, but I was always second best. It would have been easy to give up, to resign myself to mediocrity, and check out after four years.

What kept me from going down that path was the impact of my staff sergeant, now a retired gunnery sergeant. He was not the smartest man in the room, or the loudest, or the most eloquent, but he was always there. He invited me to the gym. He gave his time. He did not lead from above; he led from alongside. His presence mattered more than any speech or performance. It showed me that leadership was not about being exceptional, it was about consistent effort and genuine care. While my battle buddy left the Corps after four years, I stayed because of a leader who chose to show up, invest, and believe in his Marines.

During my 2017 deployment, the lesson repeated itself. My squad leaders were deeply flawed men. If they had been my peers instead of leaders, I might have been disappointed in them. Yet, despite their imperfections, they shared their homes, introduced us to their families, and carried the burdens alongside us. They did not have all the answers, but they cared. And in their care, they built trust.

It became clear: great leadership does not require perfection, it requires presence. These Marines were not role models in every way, but they never made us feel alone. They stepped into the trenches with us, and that made all the difference. Their flaws did not erase their leadership, they humanized it.

As my career has progressed, I have noticed a troubling trend: many senior noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) have become less involved in the daily lives of their Marines. I rarely see SNCOs doing PT with their units or showing up for key events like graduations unless required. Even more concerning is the decline in those quiet, heartfelt, mentoring moments, those one-on-one conversations that help Marines navigate life's messier challenges.

This erosion of presence threatens the foundation of lead-

ership. When leaders physically and emotionally engage with their Marines, they build trust, foster belonging, and reinforce their commitment. Marines do not remember every order or policy, we remember the leaders who showed up. The ones who stood beside us when we succeeded and stayed with us when we stumbled.

Every Marine wants to feel seen, supported, and valued. As SNCOs, it is our job to provide that. That means being present for the big wins and the hard losses, whether it is a reenlistment ceremony or a tough family situation. It means showing up even when it's inconvenient, especially then.

The analogy between leadership and parenting is very practical in a sense. Both demand a relentless commitment to others' growth, even when the way forward is unclear. We do not need to be the strongest or the smartest. We need to be present. That presence is not just physical—it is emotional, mental, and moral.

Leadership is guiding Marines through their worst moments, not just standing beside them at their best. It is investing in their development with no promise of recognition or return. It is asking, "How can I help you succeed?" and sticking around long enough to see it through.

Just like a parent's legacy is found in the character of their children, a leader's impact is seen in the growth and success of their Marines. It is not about perfection, it is about persistence. It is about showing up, again and again, ready to serve, support, and stand beside those you lead.

ESSAY 35

Strength of Character The Discipline behind Effective Leadership

by Staff Sergeant Nicholas S. O'Connor

The concept of leadership can be such a vague and broad subject. For some, it is a convenient buzzword that can be readily thrown out in staff meetings. To others, it is a long checklist with minute instructions regarding how one takes charge of others. I believe that leadership is less of a concept or checklist and more of a skill, somewhere between these two views that some believe leadership to be. It is one that needs to be sharpened consistently lest it be dulled by time and complacency. Carl von Clausewitz once stated that “strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful feelings, but in maintaining one’s balance in spite of them.”¹ I believe that discipline and self-awareness of your strengths and weaknesses as a human being and within the context of your leadership role are key aspects to understanding what leadership truly is. As staff noncommissioned officers (NCO) in the Marine Corps, we have the honor of being able to affect so many other people around us. It is therefore our duty to develop ourselves, our subordinates, and even our leaders.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 107.

It is very clear to the junior enlisted and junior officers among our ranks which of those can take charge of their Marines and the mission at hand. While some may not fully understand the specific traits that make a leader, they can always recognize who has that “it” factor. The kind of leader who intrinsically understands what needs to be done, when it needs to happen, and how to best take care of their Marines and the institution. It is important to understand that to become an effective and altruistic leader, we must latch on to them to understand how they developed and what pieces of their knowledge and positive traits to take away and use in our own lives. My first experience with such a leader was Major John Cruz.

In 2016, I was assigned as a clerk to an S-1 with Marine Aviation Training Support Group in Pensacola, Florida. Although Major Cruz was an air traffic control officer by trade, he was assigned as the group adjutant. He was a prior enlisted Marine who had a leadership style blending the hard-nosed discipline of a seasoned NCO with the care and concern of a father figure. He was the type of individual who would always be in the front of every challenging task and gave the Marines the way forward. Although he was always consistently busy with meetings, he made it a point to take time to ask all his junior Marines and NCOs how their lives were and what they had on their plate.

The rapport he built with all of us allowed him to establish open communications between everyone under his charge. Marines were getting the advocacy and guidance to make smart decisions, allowing them to focus on the task at hand. It also allowed him to get a better gauge on how projects and inspection preparations were going. His disciplined approach to fostering open and honest discussions and the flow of new ideas made this group very successful, and his Marines developed into professional leaders with technical and communication acumen that made us all successful both on and off duty. Looking back on the lessons he imparted to me, his bias for action and extreme ownership of both the mission and his Marines’ welfare had a significant impact on the way I lead today.

One of the most important lessons I learned from Major Cruz is that, at the end of the day, we are all human beings. We all make mistakes. We all fail, whether you are a brand-new private checking into the fleet or the colonel who has been in for more than 30 years. It is not a matter of if, but when. However, it is not of utmost importance what mistake you made, but how you learn and correct your shortcomings. It takes a lot of self-discipline to honestly confront and address your own weaknesses, but I would argue that is one of the most basic and effective ways of sharpening your skills and character as a leader.

Self-diagnosis can be difficult and sometimes dangerous to one's character if that is the only litmus test for good leaders. I believe that having a mentor you trust to discuss what you want to be versus what you present is another important factor to developing your leadership skills. Additionally, it is important that you persist in your pursuit of self-growth, even when it becomes difficult. That is the aspect of discipline that great leaders have in common. Great leaders are not driven by fleeting motivation but by an unwavering commitment to do the hard, often unglamorous work every day to improve.

As a Greek philosopher stated, "Without Discipline, there can be no freedom."² Your success to lead Marines and accomplish missions rests on you. Your bias for action and willingness to learn from past failures will determine your potential to grow. The sooner you own your actions and decisions—and model this for your Marines—the sooner you will inspire those around you to do the same. Ultimately, this is the goal for every leader. The greatest strength and achievement of a leader lies not in personal accolades, but in the growth of those they lead and the lasting impact made on their lives.

² Though this quote is often attributed to Aristotle, the first known similar use was by twentieth-century French composer Nadia Boulanger.

ESSAY 36

The Complex Battlefield of the Thinking Warrior

by First Sergeant Ivan Linares (Ret)

We ask schools to focus on preparing students for the world of work, rather than on inspiring them, and we end up with uninspired students and mediocre professionals. The more we chase the goal of efficient education, the further it recedes.¹

Compassionate Uncertainty

The Marine Corps has consistently produced exceptional leaders through time-tested principles: honor, courage, and commitment. These foundations remain unshakable; however, during my progression from junior Marine to senior enlisted leader, I discovered that our Corps' most significant strength is its ability to *adapt* and overcome. This strength requires Marines to build on these foundations with qualities suited explicitly to modern complexity: persistent curiosity, collaborative commitment, and tactical adaptability.

These qualities do not replace our traditional values; they amplify them. They transform great Marines into exceptional

¹ Ian Leslie, "Seek and You Will Find: Why Curiosity Is Key to Personal and National Success," *Guardian*, 6 June 2015.

leaders capable of navigating both operational challenges and the complex human terrain of modern service.

Persistent Curiosity

Persistent curiosity creates productive tension within traditional military structures. The Corps needs standards, discipline, and reliable execution (convergent thinking); however, it also needs innovation, creative problem-solving, and innate curiosity (divergent thinking). The curious leader must navigate this tension without destroying either requirement. I learned that the key is timing and context. During crisis situations, complicated solutions often work best: clear orders, immediate execution, and minimal discussion. However, during developing situations, complex approaches yield better outcomes: thoughtful questions, collaborative solutions, and shared ownership. The most effective enlisted leaders I have observed master the flexibility of this paradox. They can shift from being directive to inquisitive, from answer-giver to question-asker, from problem-solver to problem-framer, depending on the situation's requirements. This flexibility does not undermine authority; it enhances it by making leadership more relevant and significant. Their perseverance creates conditions for breakthrough understanding. It is the refusal to accept surface-level explanations that leads to genuine inquiry and ultimately, effective solutions. A leader must reflect (possessing intellectual humility) on their solutions to develop a living hypothesis that can be continuously refined. Curiosity fuels the grit and tenacity that leaders need to continue searching for answers. This perseverance of operational curiosity can reveal gaps and provide room for transformative initiative.

Collaborative Commitment

The most profound shift in my leadership came when I realized that a singular vision (no matter how brilliant) creates compliance, while a shared vision creates commitment. This pivot requires moving from "here is what we are doing" to "here is what we are facing."

As a first sergeant, I inherited a unit with poor morale. My initial instinct was to diagnose the problems and implement solutions (convergent and complicated thinking). Nevertheless, curiosity made me wonder: What do the Marines see that I am missing? What obstacles were they encountering? What solutions had they tried? What would success look like from their perspective? (divergent and complex thinking) These questions were a form of cocreation to help Marines face the inevitable: *adaptation*. The solutions that emerged were more innovative and widely embraced because they stemmed from a shared understanding rather than imposed authority. The difference was profound, and I quickly realized that compliance-driven leadership produces Marines who effectively execute orders. In contrast, commitment-driven leadership produces Marines who understand the intent, embrace initiative, and navigate better in complex environments.

Tactical Adaptability

True adaptability stems from independence of mind and the intellectual courage to see beyond prescribed solutions and recognize patterns that others miss. This independence of mind creates topsight: "Topsight is something that, like insight, you pursue avidly and continuously, and achieve gradually . . . it is the quality that distinguishes genius in any field." David H. Gelernter also states that topsight is distinguished from over-view, although similar in meaning, which is something you have or do not.² The ability for enlisted leaders to elevate their perspective and see how tactical actions connect to strategic intent helps align curiosity and commitment into a shared vision of agile adaptability.

Traditional Marine Corps development follows a predictable path: recruit, train, and sustain. This approach works well for complicated challenges that have known solutions. How-

² David H. Gelernter, *Mirror Worlds or the Day Software Puts the Universe in a Shoebox . . . How It Will Happen and What It Will Mean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

ever, today's operating environment presents increasingly complex novel challenges that require adaptive solutions. The curious leader recognizes that indoctrination (while necessary for basic competency) must eventually give way to inquiry. The Marine who questions assumptions, explores alternatives, and seeks deeper understanding becomes the leader who can navigate uncertainty and inspire others to do the same.

Exploring alternatives does not mean abandoning standards or embracing relativism; instead, it means understanding that standards exist to enable mission accomplishment, rather than constrain creative thinking. When curiosity reveals better ways to achieve the mission, a shared commitment ensures widespread adoption, and adaptability finds ways to implement them.

As a faculty advisor at the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy, I inherited a curriculum designed for complicated problems with known solutions. However, our students faced complex educational challenges due to their varied backgrounds. Working within institutional constraints, I utilized academic freedom to explore various methods for teaching the material. Instead of memorizing responses, I focused on content that enabled students to recognize patterns and apply principles to unique situations, always maintaining topsight of how their decisions support the broader intent. As Rand notes in their study on professional military education in the U.S. Department of Defense, PME must cultivate *adaptability*, critical thinking, and doctrinal fluency across the force.³

Command and Control, MCDP 6, reminds us that military organizations must be “liken[ed] to a predatory animal—seeking information, learning, and adapting in its quest for survival and success—than to some ‘lean, green machine’.”⁴ Independence

³ Charles A. Goldman et al., *Intellectual Firepower: A Review of Professional Military Education in the U.S. Department of Defense* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA1694-1>.

⁴ *Command and Control*, MCDP 6 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1996), 46.

of mind and diversity of thought transform passive processes into active ones, true adaptability.

Conclusion

Persistent curiosity and collaborative commitment entice the perseverance of adaptability. They are force multipliers that enable Marines to maintain the warrior ethos while simultaneously navigating increasingly complex operational environments. I have seen these qualities in the best leaders I have served under: the gunnery sergeant whose perseverance in questioning why we had always done things a certain way led to discovering more efficient methods; the lieutenant colonel whose independent spirit allowed him to see connections between tactical actions and strategic objectives efforts that others missed; and the sergeant major who built harmony without sacrificing standards through effective feedback loops. Most importantly, I have watched junior Marines develop these qualities and become exceptional leaders.

Our Corps has continuously evolved to meet new challenges while maintaining the warrior spirit. These leadership qualities represent not a revolution against tradition, but an evolution within it. The future operational environment will demand Marines who can continuously adapt. Our enlisted leaders must remain curious, persevere until inquiry yields understanding, maintain independence of mind, foster diversity of thought, and achieve topsight, rooted in an end state of a shared commitment to adapt.

ESSAY 37

The Work

by Sergeant Matthew J. Pocklington

I do not mop the floor anymore. I used to, and I used to enjoy it every now and then. Cleaning is refreshing at times. Few tasks in life immediately let you see the finished product as a direct result of your amount of effort. Too often, I find myself working on never-ending projects without the benefit of seeing their culminating result. Spending a week of preparation for an accomplishment that is overshadowed by the planning for the next mission leaves you feeling helpless sometimes. But a crisp mowed lawn or a boot-print free floor is mission success manifested right in front of you, and the satisfaction felt is in direct proportion to your sweat and effort applied.

Now my junior Marines take up the task. Their day could not be complete without beautifying some portion of the workspace, just as mine was when I was in their boots. The burden of cleanliness falls to them, but they undoubtedly value the moment of peace it offers to clean the head with their buddies while hurling insults and gossip at one another in good humor and poor taste. And they refuse to let me mop. They insist. They do their job and more, everything that I ask and more, and I value their respect and loyalty more than they know. More than I

will ever admit to them. And they do not know that their loyalty, to me and to each other, is the key to our success.

That desire to succeed must come from more than just accomplishing the commander's intent, especially when the distant commander is a general whose face you only know because it hangs on the wall in the exchange. That desire is derived from something shared at a smaller level, between a small group of Marines that strive and accomplish something together. Loyalty to other Marines and to the team. Loyalty turns a group of Marines into an unstoppable force when reciprocated by leadership. A noncommissioned officer (NCO) loyal to their Marines and Marines loyal to their NCO will solidify the core of a unit and radiate the strength and confidence needed to overcome even the most daunting challenges.

Evidence of this exists everywhere in the life of a Marine. Our Marines easily work 60 percent of their waking lives. They work 12-to-14-hour days, 5 days a week, when not working weekends. Operational tempo dependent of course; working weekends or on detachments that number probably shoots up to 80 percent. They slowly burn out like the embers of a fire, still hot and smoldering but losing their glow, while their tempers heat up from within and snap without warning. The days drag on at times, where a 12-hour day will evolve into 16-, and even 20-hour days are not unheard of. The work never stops and its demands are unpredictable and insatiable.

But with these challenges comes a strange phenomenon. Marines start volunteering to stay late and come in early. I have seen Marines at the end of a long day, when their bones are too tired to make the trip home, and they elect to sleep where they sit, leap up at a new task that threatens the section. Anything that threatens the whole. Because that is what those long days and impossible challenges force us to become. The unit becomes a single entity greater than the sum of its individual parts. Inclement weather, pop-up threats, troops in contact drills, mission essential configurations, and hasty defenses all require immediate action, and there have

never been more smiles and laughter than the entire unit running out to defend against a sandstorm or flash flood that threatens the spaces. Imminent defeat against even the forces of nature cannot break up a unit bound by trust and commitment to each other.

The unity that comes from every Marine, old and young, fighting together against the common threat is unshakable. Like the phalanx of ancient warfare, with the infantry's shields locked together, each man, regardless of rank, covered the flank of his brothers to his left and right. There in the fight against whatever enemy, shoulder to shoulder with each other, fear dissolves and is defeated by the trust and confidence in the leaders who rushed to the front lines first. Leaders who turn to the work without a word and know that their Marines will follow. And their Marines do follow. They take up the empty positions to the left and right because they want to be a part of the victory.

Maybe not total victory over the entire enemy, not every battle wins the war, but the moral victory that comes from standing strong with someone who has stood up for you. The NCO who has always set the example and never led them astray. The NCO who pushes them to be better instead of just existing. The NCO who has taught them and built on their failures and shared in their celebrations of success. The NCO who has been with them for every step of the 40- or 60- or 80-hour week, showing them how to be like an NCO, which is what they want to be. They hold their corporals and sergeants in the highest regard because they endure the same hardships.

I have learned that the more I push myself, the more my Marines strive for success. For my success and theirs. If I spare a moment to ask about their welfare or offer what help I can, that moment is never wasted. It is repaid 10 times over by the trust it builds. The trust that someone appreciates them as something more than just another worker body. Their loyalty should be built on a foundation laid by the honesty, empathy, and core values that come from being a genuinely good,

hard-working person. And when they go above and beyond, it is because they have seen that same bar raised before by their NCOs.

Loyalty is a complicated idea. Its many facets are present in every relationship that we share with those around us. It can be the strongest weapon against the enemy, transforming a group of individuals into an impressive team that surpasses all expectations. I have found it to be invaluable, and I will always have respect for those who have struggled with me, regardless of rank or origin. Loyalty as a concept remains a complicated, intangible asset to the Marine Corps, and I may never understand it enough to unlock all its secrets. But I know enough. I know that when it is time to go to work for real that my guys will have my back. And that is just what we will do while the philosophers figure out the rest and the nations play their politics. We will just go to work. We will work the problem together, figuring it out as we go along if we have to. And then we will do it again with the next problem. Every time, we will do it standing shoulder to shoulder, facing the threat.

ESSAY 38

Uncompromised

by Sergeant Major Glenn R. Ray

Living a life without compromise takes discipline. *Tactics*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-3, tells us:

*“There is only one kind of discipline—PERFECT DISCIPLINE. If you do not enforce and maintain discipline, you are potential murderers.” In the face of adversity and difficulty, discipline enables individuals to pursue what is best for those around them, their unit, and the Marine Corps.*¹

Merriam-Webster states that a professional is “characterized by conforming to the technical and/or ethical standards of a profession.” When you are leading people in the profession of arms, strict conformity to technical and ethical standards keeps people alive and makes units more lethal. A leader who lives without compromise will be disciplined enough to not only live by and enforce the highest standards, but also fully capable of building the men and women in their charge into the best

¹ Quoted material from Gen George S. Patton, *War as I Knew It* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 376; and *Tactics*, MCDP 1-3 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 46.

versions of themselves. Trust will be constant, and growth exponential.

The greatest demonstrable quality in a leader is being one who lives without compromise; a person who personifies the values of their organization and is unwilling to break from what is morally and ethically right. As difficult and rigid as this may sound, people eventually trust the consistency of a person who cannot be corrupted and will seek their guidance in the most difficult times. I am writing this on the 25th anniversary of my service as a United States Marine and wondering how often I got it wrong, and if I fixed it in time to change my impact.

As a young, 20-year-old noncommissioned officer, I was hot-headed and quick on the trigger. My ferocity in attacking any violation was matched only by the foul language that spewed from my ignorant mouth in my noble, yet misguided, attempts to discipline Marines. Marines under my charge were highly disciplined, physically fit, and knew proper customs and courtesies. I was doing my job. Then it happened; a private first class who was 26 years old checked into the unit and, after a few weeks, started to walk past me without giving the proper greeting of the day. One time, I laid into him, and he stood there at parade rest waiting for me to finish, "Are you done, Corporal?" he asked. "Why, you got somewhere to be?" was my response. "Well, if you are going to curse at me, and disrespect all the Marines in the shop, why would I want to be around you?" he asked flatly. I was compromised, I was not perfect, I was a tyrant, and my Marines lived in fear.

I learned a lot in that moment and in the many years since, but no matter how much I grew there would be no outrunning what I was in the hearts of those Marines. Years later, as a company first sergeant, one of the Marines from that shop was assigned to my unit as a gunnery sergeant and it took a long time to earn his trust. If we never reconnected, he would have spent the rest of his life thinking I was a tyrant, and the totality of my impact on his life would have been negative.

As a sergeant, stationed in Hawaii, I had a first sergeant who initially had an immediate positive impact on my life. I was

on duty and the first sergeant called to tell me I needed to complete my professional military education (PME) prerequisites so I could attend the next sergeant's course. I explained that I was on duty and likely would not have time, so he made me sit in his office until it was done. My direct leadership had done little to prepare me for promotion and he stepped in, without knowing me, to make sure I attended PME because I was in zone for promotion to staff sergeant. At this point, the first sergeant had earned my trust and respect because he demanded of me, for me.

Some months later, we were performing a physical fitness test as a company in an area where there was a row of pull-up bars as wide as the warehouse they were next to. I witnessed the first sergeant walk one of the score keepers down to the far end, away from everyone else, to count his pull-ups. He did a total of zero correct and complete pull-ups but the score sheet read 20. I lost most of the respect I had for him on that day and wondered how he could so overtly compromise himself. A few months after the pull-up situation, he was arrested and subsequently court-martialed for beating his wife and, to this day, receives just as much respect from me as he could do pull-ups.

Compromised people compromise people. As a group sergeant major, I routinely met with the five subordinate sergeants major and offered my experience to assist them in maintaining good order and discipline at their commands. A couple of the units were experiencing high levels of disciplinary issues, so I offered the two sergeants major some candid advice, "Tell your bosses to keep their hands out of their pockets and get Marine Corps haircuts." One of them chose to have a conversation with his boss about the importance of setting the example, they made some changes and the unit improved. The other was more concerned with pleasing his boss so his fitness report would look good, refused to have the tough conversation, and the unit continued its descent into chaos.

Looking back, each team I have had the privilege to lead since becoming a SNCO has been a winning team; out-running, out-producing, out-lasting all those who chose to lead and live

in a way that lent credence to comfort and complacency instead of adhering to the doctrine and policies that are written in the blood of our nation's heroes. Many times, feelings have caused people to resist the discomfort of growth, and each time their feelings and love of compromise inspired an investigation, the facts won, and growth happened. Leaders need not fear doing right, they need only fear the results of choosing personal gain and comfort over creed. Embrace courage of doctrinal conviction and live without fear.

I cannot count how many times in my later years that Marines from the past have dialed my number because they trusted me to provide uncompromised advice; good, bad, or indifferent, they knew they could trust me to guide them toward the morally and ethically *right* thing. I have had opportunities to talk veterans out of suicide, help a former Marine deal with the crooked cops in his department, provide fatherly advice to people just coming into parenthood, write letters of recommendation to help people advance in life, and advise on several other life matters. I have never called the first sergeant mentioned earlier in this essay. I did not write our doctrine; smart people wrote our doctrine based on the wisdom and experience of our heroes. At some point, I figured out that absolute adherence to our doctrinal leadership traits, principles, and values is the winning way, and living without compromise continues to yield positive results for me, my family, and my Marines. As a Marine leader, everything must matter, or nothing will matter. Live without compromise and win every battle.

ESSAY 39

If You're Going to Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

by Staff Sergeant Dennis Micahel Benton

It is not about your rank, how many medals you have, or how loud you can read doctrine that makes you a leader in the Marine Corps. It is all about doing something and trusting. You can say what you mean and do what you say, but you cannot just talk. That is nothing. Marines do not follow empty. As a staff noncommissioned officer (NCO) and enlisted leader, I need to be the kind of Marine that other people can trust. This means that you should not only say the right things, but also do the right things all the time. You need to be honest, think about yourself internally, and be reliable in doing. These are things I have worked on in myself and things I have seen in the infantry community's most respected members.

If I do not keep the trust that my rank is supposed to show, it does not mean much. I do not think a list of the best traits of an enlisted leader is the best way to find them. Instead, I think it is better to look at how that Marine lives their values. We do not need machines; we need people who think, act, and have morals. This is what the Marine Corps' leadership traits, core values, and even *Warfighting* (MCDP 1) say. Marines who keep their promises. Merriam-Webster defines *integrity* as "the quality of being honest, complete, and undivided," which is exactly

what it means. Leaders do not have to be perfect; they just must be honest. As a machine gunner, I quickly learned that when my Marines ask, “What’s in it for me?” (WIFM), they want to know, not because they are selfish. They want to know that what we are doing makes sense, that I am not wasting their time, and that I see them as people, not just numbers on a list. That fits with the rule: keep your Marines up to date. I try to pay full attention to my Marines as their leader. They are not just soldiers; they are also young men and women with their own issues, goals, and limits. When I lead, I try to be honest. I think about where I came from. I used to be in their shoes, having to deal with problems and doubt every decision made by those in charge. If you forget that, it would be a sign of bad leadership. It would be wrong for me to pretend that I always knew what to do. Integrity means showing them that I am working on myself as well. I might do well in one area and not so well in another, but I do not hide it. I handle it. Being “undivided” does not mean you are flawless. It means owning up to your mistakes and making things right when you can. I have told my Marines that I am still working on myself. That honesty has earned more trust than any rank or position ever could. There are things I am good at and things I need to work on. The most important thing is that they see me working and know that I will never ask them to do more than I ask of myself.

We always do an after-action review (AAR) after every mission or range. Is there any way we could do something like this at work? It is not enough to just follow a list from books to be a leader. If you try to use someone else’s way of leading, it is like trying to load a .50-caliber round into your M16. It does not work. You will always feel off if you do not lead in a way that fits with who you are. And that stress will eventually come out in how you act around other people when you are not yourself. The Marines can sense it. They can tell when you are lying. One of the most important things that ever happened to me happened after I got back from the evacuation of Kabul, Afghanistan. I dealt with it like many Marines do: by drinking. I

thought I had things under control. I was losing it. I lied to my partner, ran away from my problems, and forgot who I was. I only figured out what was going on after I sat down alone and asked myself, "What am I doing?" That was my internal AAR. I was honest enough to admit that I had stopped doing what I said I would do. So, I did the right thing and stopped drinking right away. I told my Marines. And the answer was not to judge; it was to help. This honest moment made it easier for other people to open up about their problems. It made it possible for real connections and leadership to happen. There is not a guide for that kind of personal leadership, but it is very important. For 30 minutes, talk to yourself. What do you want to stay away from? What needs to be fixed? That uncomfortable moment of truth is when real growth begins. "Know yourself and try to get better," says the leadership principle. We got it. But are we really doing it?

Being reliable does not mean being perfect. It is all about being there. You always show up, do what you need to do, and take responsibility for the outcome when things are stressful, chaotic, and unclear. My Marines need me to be consistent, not just give them answers. I will not back down when things get crazy, and they need to know that. That I really do have them when I say I do. That I will always do what I say I will do. There is no other way to get that trust. People give it. It comes from being aware of what's going on around you even when no one is watching. It comes from being accountable when things go wrong. It comes from remembering birthdays, checking in on the quiet ones, and being the person they know will pick up the phone when they call.

The leaders who had the biggest impact on me were not always the ones who were the loudest or had the best fitness report. They did it every time. They did not just talk about rules; they followed them. They did not yell about discipline; they showed it. Anyone can learn what makes a good leader. Anyone can put on the uniform. But not everyone has these qualities. As a leader in the Marine Corps, especially as an enlisted

leader, you must be someone people can trust to do the right thing, even when it is hard. This is especially true when things get hard.

To me, it all comes down to three things: being honest, being dependable, and thinking about myself. I have learned those things the hard way: by failing, talking honestly with people, and keeping my promises to myself. I have seen them in other people, especially in the infantry, where real leadership shows when no one is watching and there is nothing to gain but respect.

I will never say that I know it all. But I will keep coming back. I will keep paying attention. I will keep on going. I must do what I say if I want to be honest.

ESSAY 40

What Makes a Leader?

by Sergeant Nicolas A. Raymundo

The Marine Corps is a constantly changing organization that every Marine, from the top to the bottom, must adapt to. Policies shift, missions evolve, and technology advances, but one thing that does not change is the need for strong enlisted leaders. Over time, I have met amazing leaders who helped develop me into the Marine I am today, and I have also met leaders who reminded me exactly what not to do. Regardless of the type of leader, I have always been able to learn something from them. Leadership is not something you instantly gain when you pin on a new rank; it is a quality that must be built from the earliest stages of your career. From a private fresh out of boot camp to the sergeant major of the Marine Corps, every Marine should continually find ways to improve their leadership abilities. The enlisted leaders who make a lasting impact are those who constantly refine their skills, adapt to change, and remain grounded in the values of the Marine Corps. Through my own service, I have found that the most important qualities of an effective enlisted leader are empathy, setting the example, staying true to core values, being calm under pressure, and humility.

Empathy was a long-overdue leadership quality that the Marine Corps recently began to emphasize more openly. Many

leaders mistake empathy for “being soft,” when in reality it is about understanding the challenges Marines face, both in and out of uniform, and making decisions that help them succeed. When I first arrived in the Fleet, I was already dealing with several stressors. Shortly after checking in, liberty restrictions were put in place due to COVID-19. This made adjusting to Fleet life even more difficult, and my performance began to slip. Initially, I was given a hard time, but one of my sergeants took a different approach. During a counseling session, he asked about what was affecting me, then shifted the conversation to more personal topics: whether I was interested in college, if I had hobbies, and how I was adjusting overall. During the following months, he helped me enroll in college and find ways to pursue hobbies while still following the liberty rules. That one-hour counseling session and follow-on gave me back my confidence, drive, and motivation. It was my first real experience with empathy in the Marine Corps, and I have carried that lesson forward. Now, when I counsel or correct Marines, I take the time to understand their situation before making judgments.

One of the biggest hypocrisies I have seen in the Marine Corps is in how some leaders talk about “setting the example.” Too often, Marines justify poor behavior simply because they see their leaders doing the same thing. The clearest example is in physical training (PT). I have heard senior leaders call their Marines lazy for failing to earn a first-class Physical Fitness Test (PFT) or Combat Fitness Test (CFT) score, while those same leaders could barely maintain a third-class score themselves. When a leader fails to uphold the same standards they demand, it sends a message that the rules are flexible depending on rank and trust begins to erode. Conversely, when a leader truly sets the standard, it inspires Marines to follow suit. As a sergeant, I will always be beside my Marines during PT, pushing for personal improvement, and living by the same expectations that builds credibility and respect. That kind of leadership creates motivation and a culture where excellence becomes the norm, not the exception.

Staying true to your core values is one of the clearest mea-

asures of a leader's character. In the Marine Corps, I have seen leaders who act with integrity even when it is inconvenient, and I have seen leaders who bend their values to avoid discomfort or personal risk. Marines naturally follow the leader who makes the hard right choice instead of the easy wrong one. I once served under a staff sergeant who never shied away from admitting mistakes, even if it meant more work or tough conversations with higher-ups. His honesty set the tone for the entire work center, we knew the standard and trusted him to hold himself to it. In contrast, I have seen leaders who ignored the standards as long as it benefited them personally. That kind of leadership erodes trust quickly. A leader who stays grounded in their values not only protects their own credibility but also fosters a culture where Marines know that doing the right thing is both expected and respected.

Being calm under pressure can mean the difference between a situation spiraling out of control and one that ends with a clear, effective solution. I have seen leaders in the Marine Corps who can think clearly in the middle of chaos, and I have seen others who let stress dictate their actions. Marines will often mirror their leader's tone, if that leader panics, focus and confidence across the unit can collapse. I have watched my NCOs handle stressful situations by relying on their training and experience, staying composed, and delivering clear directions. That kind of steadiness keeps the team calm and mission focused. On the other hand, I have seen leaders who lose confidence under pressure, give conflicting orders, and make situations worse. Staying calm under pressure does not mean ignoring urgency, it means controlling your own reaction so you can control the situation. That self-control inspires trust and gives Marines the confidence to follow your lead when it matters most.

Humility is one of the most overlooked yet most respected qualities in an enlisted leader. I have been under leaders who admit when they do not have all the answers and who seek input from their Marines or take the time to reread the references. This kind of humility creates an environment where

every Marine's skill and knowledge are valued, leading to better solutions and stronger unit cohesion. I remember my corporal once asking me, a lance corporal new to the Fleet but with fresh training, for advice on a maintenance issue. My input helped create a solution, and it sent a clear message that rank does not always determine the answer. In contrast, I have seen leaders shut down suggestions just to protect their ego, resulting in wasted time, lower morale, and missed opportunities. Humility does not mean weakness; it means having the confidence to put the mission and the team's success above personal pride.

The chevrons on your collar might get you obedience, but they will never guarantee respect. The enlisted leaders who inspire Marines do so through qualities that cannot be issued or awarded; empathy, setting the example, staying true to core values, being calm under pressure, and humility. These traits are not automatically gained with rank; they are developed over time through self-awareness, consistent effort, and a willingness to learn from both good and bad examples. I have learned valuable lessons from leaders who inspired me and from leaders who fell short, and both have shaped the way I lead today. In the end, leadership is not about how loudly you give orders, it is about the trust and respect your Marines have in you when the challenges come. That is the kind of leader I strive to be, and it is the kind of leader the Marine Corps will always need.

APPENDIX

Classroom Discussion Questions

Foundations of Leadership

1. What qualities are universally associated with effective leadership, regardless of profession or environment?
2. How does personal character influence a leader's ability to earn trust?
3. Can someone be a good leader without formal authority? Why or why not?
4. How does self-awareness shape a leader's interactions and decisionmaking?
5. What is the difference between being *in charge* and truly *leading*?

Military Leadership Concepts

1. In what ways does military leadership differ from leadership in civilian organizations?
2. How do discipline and standards contribute to effective leadership in the Marine Corps?
3. What role does the Marine Corps' core values (honor, courage, commitment) play in shaping leaders?

4. Why is adaptability essential for leaders in military operations?
5. How does mission-focused thinking influence leadership behaviors?

Leadership and Battlefield Success

1. What leadership traits have historically contributed most to success in combat?
2. How does a leader's ability to manage stress affect unit performance under fire?
3. In what ways do tactical decisions reflect the leader's character as much as their competence?
4. How important is communication in high-pressure battlefield environments?
5. How does decentralization of command enhance battlefield agility and effectiveness?

Enlisted Leadership in the Marine Corps

1. What makes enlisted leaders—NCOs and SNCOs—the “backbone” of the Marine Corps?
2. How do enlisted leaders shape unit culture and morale?
3. What responsibilities do enlisted leaders have in mentoring junior Marines?
4. How does good enlisted leadership safeguard mission success when officers are not present?
5. How does the Marine Corps' structure rely on enlisted leaders for continuity and institutional memory?

Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making

1. How should leaders balance mission accomplishment with the moral obligation to protect their Marines?
2. What role does integrity play in maintaining credibility with subordinates?
3. How should leaders address ethically ambiguous

situations in a deployed or operational environment?

4. What can leaders do to foster an environment where Marines feel safe raising concerns or ideas?

Leader Development and Growth

1. What habits should Marines cultivate early in their careers to prepare for leadership roles?
2. How do leaders ensure they remain teachable and open to feedback?
3. What is the most important lesson you have learned from a leader you admire?
4. How can a leader intentionally develop leadership capacity within their unit?

Team Dynamics and Influence

1. What factors help a leader build a cohesive and resilient team?
2. How does a leader's behavior during adversity shape the behavior of the entire unit?

RECOMMENDED READING

Commandant's Professional Reading List

Leadership

These titles celebrate the profession of arms and the timeless burdens, responsibilities, and inspirations of leading Marines in peace and war.

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

- Carpenter, Kyle, and Don Yaeger. *You Are Worth It: Building a Life Worth Fighting For*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.
- Grossman, LtCol Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1996.
- McRaven, William H. *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life . . . And Maybe the World*. New York: Penguin, 2017.
- . *The Wisdom of the Bullfrog: Leadership Made Simple*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2023.
- Uriarte, Maximilian. *The White Donkey: Terminal Lance*. New York: Little, Brown, 2016.

SMALL UNIT LEADERSHIP

- Gardiner, Ian R. *The Yompers: 45 Commando in the Falklands War*. Havertown, PA: Pen and Sword, 2021.
- Marlantes, Karl. *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2009.
- Martin, Iain C., ed. *The Greatest U.S. Marine Corps Stories Ever Told: Unforgettable Stories of Courage, Honor, and Sacrifice*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Matthews, Jeffrey J. *Generals and Admirals, Criminals and Crooks: Dishonorable Leadership in the U.S. Military*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2023.
- Willink, Jocko. *Leadership Strategy and Tactics: Field Manual*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

- Mattis, Jim, and Bing West. *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. New York: Random House, 2019.
- McKeown, Greg. *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. New York: Crown Currency, an imprint of Random House, 2014.
- Robins, Rebecca, and Patrick Dunne. *Five Generations at Work: How We Win Together, For Good*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2024.
- Symonds, Craig L. *Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- McChrystal, Gen Stanley, and Anna Butrico. *Risk: A User's Guide*. New York: Penguin, an imprint of Random House, 2021.

Foundational

The titles listed here provide the essential civic principles and core doctrinal publications that ground every Marine in the enduring ideas and warfighting philosophy of the Corps.

Competing, MCDP 1-4. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription. National Archives, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 4 May 2020.

Expeditionary Operations, MCDP 3. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018.

Intelligence, MCDP 2. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018.

Leading Marines, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-10. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024.

Learning, MCDP 7. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020.

Logistics, MCDP 4. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023.

Sustaining the Transformation, Marine Corps Tactical Publication 6-10A. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024.

Warfighting, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997.

About the Authors¹

Gunnery Sergeant Moise Barbier was born in Haiti and is shaped by the immigrant experience and a deep commitment to service, resilience, and purpose. He is an active-duty United States Marine with 15 years of service, having led in demanding operational and advisory roles across various environments. As a doctoral candidate in global security, his academic work examines identity and how leadership influences international conflict and decision-making. Beyond his professional and scholarly pursuits, he is a dedicated mentor and parent who believes leadership is measured by the growth of others. He continues to build a career that bridges military service, advanced scholarship, and public leadership that is guided by mission, integrity, and impact.

Gunnery Sergeant Ryan Barclift is a Marine Corps operations chief who has spent more than a decade working with the Ma-

¹ Note that not all the essay contest participants provided biographical information. Those who did are provided here in alphabetical order and not according to their placement in the contest.

rine Corps Aviation Combat Element. He has coordinated numerous aviation assets, fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and tilt-rotary aircraft to support the Ground Combat Element and Logistics Combat Element. His efforts working with all elements of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force has enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of the fighting force. Throughout his career, he has filled numerous billets outside of his primary occupational specialty, enabling him to see many pros and cons of operating outside of primary duties.

Gunnery Sergeant Selena Benitez is the Education Command supply chief at Marine Corps University. She develops Marines beyond technical skills, investing her time, wisdom, and energy in each Marine. She seeks to know them beyond their rank, identify untapped potential, and build both character and competence. She believes that today's mentorship lays the groundwork for their future success.

Gunnery Sergeant Dennis Benton has spent six years as an 0331 machine gunner with 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, and 1st Battalion, 8th Marines. After the infantry, Benton transitioned to recruiting duty, where he now serves as a career recruiter (8412). He tries to bring the same discipline, grit, and standards from the Fleet into helping build the next generation of Marines. Above everything, Benton is focused on leading well, staying grounded, and taking care of his family and the Marines around him.

Sergeant Kayanah Brown enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2018 and has since served in three different units across a variety of roles, earning multiple qualifications while steadily developing her leadership abilities. She has deployed twice, first to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and later to Australia. Brown graduated from Southern New Hampshire University in 2025 and is currently pursuing a master's degree in social work. Her experiences in the Marine Corps and education continue to shape and develop her perspective on leadership and service.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Master Sergeant Cord Burgan is a CBRN defense chief (5769) currently serving as an instructor at the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy (SNCOA) in Quantico, VA. He has had the opportunity to instruct at the Advanced School, Sergeants School, and the new SNCO Leadership School. He presented at Modern Day Marine 2025, supporting Enlisted Professional Military Education (EPME), and other events supporting the next generation of Operational Stress Control and Readiness (OSCAR) training. Burgan's essay was originally intended as a poem inspired by a first sergeant, a friend, a Marine Corps Military & Family Life counselor, and a chaplain.

Sergeant Manuel A. Lopez Chavez is a naturalized citizen originally born in Cuba who graduated from Miami Coral Park Senior High School in 2020 and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps later that year. He served as a training NCO early on in his career and later as platoon sergeant, gaining valuable experience on small unit leadership. He was also recognized as the Meteorology and Oceanography Marine of the Year in 2024.

Gunnery Sergeant William E. Clark was born in Lafayette, LA, in 1986 and enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2005, completing recruit training at Parris Island, SC, and initially qualifying as an electro-optic ordnance repairer (2171). During his career, he later transitioned his military occupational specialty to small arms repairer (2111) after graduating from the Infantry Weapons Repairer's Course in 2013. He has served in numerous armory and ordnance leadership roles across multiple Marine units, supporting operations including Operation Talisman Saber, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Landing Force CARAT, and Operation Allied Welcome. Rising through the ranks from private first class to gunnery sergeant, he has led maintenance operations, logistics coordination, and training at the company, battalion, and regimental levels. Highly decorated for his service, Gunnery Sergeant Clark currently serves as the regimental ordnance officer at 4th Combat Readiness Regiment.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Staff Sergeant Joshua Edwards enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 2014 as a motor transport operator. In 2017, he deployed with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit in support of the Global War on Terrorism and Operation Inherent Resolve. Currently, he serves as the aquatics SNCO for Base Aquatics and the battalion force fitness instructor for Headquarters Battalion, Marine Corps Base Hawaii.

Corporal Matthew J. Fritch is an 0261 geographic information specialist with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. He hails from Jacksonville, FL, and is inspired by his many family members who have and are currently serving in the U.S. Armed Services. His hobbies include reading and writing, and he has a special interest in the development and evolution of institutions.

Sergeant Gregory Gagnon is an 0511 Marine Air-Ground Task Force planner that departed Parris Island. His first duty station was one of the newest—Plans, Policies, and Operations South—helping facilitate operations and exercises across the globe. Now, he is working at 4th Marine Regiment, the oldest and the proudest, providing support for the expeditionary operations and exercises that 4th Marines is known for.

Sergeant Andres Ruiz Grijalva served five years in the Marine Corps in Japan, South Korea, and the United States. He attends Princeton University, where he studies anthropology with a focus on law and politics. He is active in the nonprofit space for veterans and is involved with organizations such as Service-to-School, the Warrior-Scholar Project, and Veterans Campaign.

Master Sergeant Tara M. Highbaugh has served faithfully in the United States Marine Corps for 19 years. Her career spans multiple facets of service, including Marine security guard duty, recruiting duty, and operational deployments. She currently applies her experience to developing education programs that strengthen Marine readiness and leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Corporal Megan Hinzman is a Bell UH-1Y Venom crew chief for Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 169. She enjoys writing and has a bachelor's degree in English literature with a minor in creative writing from Liberty University. She can always be found with a science fiction or psychological thriller novel in hand. She loves to collect plants of all varieties and enjoys trail running in her free time.

Kavonte Jones Sr. is a Marine Corps sergeant, founder of CrownThrive LLC, and a compelling voice on what it means to build—community, family, and legacy—when the systems around you were not built for you.

Staff Sergeant Adalberto Jaramillo has more than 12 years of honorable service in the United States Marine Corps, serving across multiple occupational specialties including administration, intelligence, as a combat marksmanship coach, and Spanish linguist. He is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in cybersecurity from Western Governors University. Throughout his career in the Active and Reserve components, he has led and mentored Marines with an emphasis on disciplined leadership, operational excellence, and continuous improvement. His leadership philosophy centers on accountability, adaptability, and a steadfast commitment to developing resilient, capable Marines prepared for the complexities of modern service.

Staff Sergeant Oakley Lewellen currently serves at 1st Intelligence Battalion, Intelligence Operations Center (IOC). He is preparing for submission to the FY27 Warrant Officer Program and has extensive experience in leadership, intelligence, and operational planning. Staff Sergeant Lewellen is known for his analytical skills and commitment to upholding military standards while mentoring fellow Marines. Outside of his professional duties, he enjoys spending time with his family, playing golf, and attending motocross events. His dedication to service and personal development reflects his focus on excellence in every aspect of his career.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Staff Sergeant Nicholas S. O'Connor was born in Angola, IN. He currently serves as the operations chief for III Marine Expeditionary Force G-9 in Okinawa, Japan. He would like to dedicate this essay to Lieutenant Georgiy Nemkov and Major John Cruz (Ret) for their lessons in leadership.

First Sergeant Chase McGroarty-Hunter currently serves as a senior enlisted leader with 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. He writes extensively on warfighting, leadership, and the profession of arms, and is the founder of the Bayonet Warfighting Society, an online community dedicated to sharpening the mind of the modern warrior.

Sergeant Matthew J. Pocklington joined the Marine Corps in October 2020. After initial training, he was designated a UH-1Y Venom helicopter crew chief with Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 169 at Marine Corps Air Station, Camp Pendleton, CA, in January 2022. He participated in two overseas deployments and multiple detachments with the unit to include inter-Service and international operations. He is now preparing for his third overseas deployment as one of the unit's weapons and tactics instructors.

Sergeant Major Glenn R. Ray is a native of Michigan and began his service as a Marine shortly after graduating from high school. He started his career in the logistics community and has now served in each element of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force, serving in senior enlisted leader positions up to the brigade level. He has two deployments to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom and two deployments to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve, and he currently serves as the director of the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy in Quantico, VA.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Isboset Rendonhoare is a career Marine who enlisted in 1997, attending Recruit Training in San Diego, CA. He currently serves as deputy director at the Staff

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Noncommissioned Officer Academy in Quantico. Through his career, he has held diverse leadership roles, including maintenance chief, recruiter, and senior leader advisor for Marine Forces Europe and Africa. He has deployed multiple times in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Kuwait) and Operation Enduring Freedom (Iraq), along with deployments to Japan and Australia. His personal decorations include two Meritorious Service Medals and four Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medals. Academically, he holds a bachelor of science in organizational leadership and a master's degree in strategic leadership.

Sergeant Major Christopher J. Thomas is a retired U.S. Marine Corps leader with more than 20 years of service, culminating as sergeant major of Marine Corps Recruiting Station Harrisburg, PA. Throughout his career, he served as a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, SC, and supported officer development at Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, RI. His leadership experience spans training, operational readiness, and organizational command-level responsibility. Following retirement, he founded Elite 9 Talent Solutions, a leadership development and business consulting firm focused on workforce transformation and talent strategy. He now applies the discipline, resilience, and integrity forged in military service to developing leaders and strengthening organizations in the civilian sector.

Michelle Wynveen left active duty as a staff sergeant of Marines in 2015 and later found vocation as a county veterans service officer (CVSO) and a female veterans' issues advocate. She earned a PhD in leadership, innovation, and continuous improvement with a dissertation titled, "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Female Veterans from Military Service Through Transition to Civilian Living: An Assessment in the Development of Identity(ies) of Self." She uses her role as a department head and CVSO to support change, innovation, and continuous improvement within the world of the VA standards and

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

procedures. Ultimately, she would like to be the researcher behind the scenes providing concrete, accurate, and up-to-date and real-time issues to lawmakers and convince them to make the necessary changes in support of veterans and their unmet needs. Wynveen was recognized as the Wisconsin Women in Government: Rising Star Award recipient for 2025. She has completed the executive education at University of Wisconsin-Stout's Women in Leadership Program to revamp and teach new curriculum as the social, economic, and cultural climate evolves. Her current research focuses on female veterans' benefits and advocacy.