

Chips in the Rock of Discipline

Discipline—“It is made up of many things. It is humility because it behooves all of us to remember that simplicity is the sign of greatness and meekness is the sign of true strength.

Mental toughness/discipline is ‘spartanism’ with qualities of sacrifice, self-denial, dedication. It is fearlessness, and it is love.” Vince Lombardi

Of all the traits and principles we espouse as Marines, I would submit the foundation of all we are and say we are as Marines is the principle of “Discipline.” Discipline, from the Latin, *disciplinare*, means to lead forth or teach. It also means willing obedience to orders, rules and regulations—self-denial—doing the right thing—putting the mission and others above self—this is what we believe as Marines. Discipline is not relative. There is only one form of discipline—perfect discipline. I say this knowing that achievement of this level of performance is very difficult, fleeting, temporary but achievable. As a young Officer I had the honor and privilege of serving with the late Lieutenant General Richard C. Schultz. LtGen Schultz, a Silver Star winner from Viet Nam, Stanford graduate, author/poet is as fine a gentlemen I have ever met . . . but at the same time a tough war fighter who knew, first hand, what it took to succeed in combat.

During the times when I was able to be in his presence and talk about “Marine Things,” one of his most pointed and memorable comments was the following: “What are the two most important qualities of a Marine?” His response is paraphrased below:

“A sense of humor and to always maintain our individual and unit discipline. A sense of humor to deal with both the tough and sometimes frustrating situations we find ourselves in but also to be disciplined at all times to always accomplish the mission. Of the two, discipline is the foremost quality of a Marine as the operations of the Corps are based entirely on discipline. It is the “rock” upon which we build our culture and our institution, a culture and institution totally focused on winning our Nation’s wars. Because discipline is so critical to the success of our Corps both in garrison and in combat, as leaders, we all must foster and sustain a climate of discipline by always enforcing our rules and regulations. For every time we fail to do so it is the equivalent of taking a hammer and hitting the Corps’ “Rock of Discipline.” If this happens too often, too frequently, as it has happened during our history, the Rock/our discipline, will crack and we will be diminished as an organization and be unable to do those things our Nation expects from us.”

To provide some context, this conversation took place in the late 70s as our Nation was coming out of the national trauma of the Viet Nam War and was at the beginning of the All Volunteer Force. To be frank, our Corps had experienced serious issues in its ranks with discipline—substance abuse, poor fitness, racial tension and worse. The Corps, though comprised of many good Marines, was not of the overall quality of today’s Corps. But it was an emphasis on discipline by our leaders at the time—Wilson, Barrow, Kelly and Gray and those that followed ---that transformed our Marine Corps into the organization we have today. Nevertheless, as we have departed Iraq and now are planning to draw down and transition the fight in Afghanistan, our Corps, after a decade

of combat, finds itself in a similar place to that which we were in the late 70s . . . a place we have been before—coming out of a war, facing both manpower and budget reductions—ripe ground for a loss of discipline. So, as leaders, what are we to do? How do we maintain the discipline of the force without the focus and motivation preparation for combat has provided us the last 10 years?

I would suggest we first be honest with ourselves as an institution and consider how disciplined we have been the past decade. First, in combat. Though we have experienced well documented success on the battlefield, with Marines of all ranks performing in a consistently superior manner, we have not been perfect. And I say this based my belief that disciplined performance/behavior is a “black or white” thing—either you follow orders or you don’t. Now I know there are “gray areas” out there but in the majority of cases where Marines act in an undisciplined manner they knowingly chose to disobey. And if we are all sitting down I would ask all who have never knowingly disobeyed an order or regulation to stand up . . . are we all still sitting down? That said, our Corps is not an “optional” organization. Either you follow orders or not. Green side, brown side. Sleeves up, sleeves down—regardless of the temperature. Do what you are told or know what to do and do it, with or without supervision.

Back to our performance in the fight . . . as much as I admire and respect the performance of the force since 2001 where he have consistently performed in a very disciplined manner while in a legitimately challenging fight we have on occasion fallen short. Poor weapons handling, failure to follow pre-combat checks, too many Marines on media footage improperly carrying ammo and firing weapons—one handed mortar technique is my favorite—general discipline issues that one would want to believe wouldn’t exist in combat—thrift, infidelity, substance use/abuse and on. Am I being picky? Yes. Has it resulted in mission failure? No. But we are talking about Marines, the self proclaimed “America’s Finest” so my standard is high.

All this said, the great majority of Marines have performed with honor and distinction and in my view, based on the nature of the fight and its inherent complexities and frustrations I am continually amazed about the few number of Law of War Violations that have been discovered which reflects well on our discipline. I would attribute this high record of combat performance and achievement, and the corresponding level of discipline, to effective leadership. Both the positive actions of leaders supervising the day to day actions of the force but also the fact that leadership was both present, focused and engaged 24/7 on the mission.

“The ignoring of orders and regulations is like getting a bug bite. If you get bit once it doesn’t seem like much. But if leaders continually fail to enforce all the rules, a.k.a. enforce discipline, like a swarm of mosquitoes it will eat your ass up!”

Howard Lovingood Colonel USMC (ret)

Now let’s assess our discipline in garrison or when we have not been in the fight. I would preface these comments by stating this is the area where leaders need to really focus on as we come out of this fight. Historically, military organizations at the end of a

period of combat have consistently fallen in all categories of military effectiveness—training, discipline/behavior, supply and accountability shortfalls effecting overall readiness and overall performance. Why? No longer having the war to create focus, Marines don't get the same "charge" out of training that they did with a war to deploy to. The Nation moves on and the military is no longer in the headlines. Budget and personnel cuts take place. The economy improves making the recruitment of the high quality Marines we have taken into our ranks this century more problematic. Time will tell what comes to pass and the effect on our Corps and our discipline. But some, or all of the above, are in the immediate future.


So how have we historically reacted during periods of peace and how will we react in the future? Thus far, in the area of general "discipline," not bad . . . not great, but surprisingly well. All trends in the areas of discipline—court martial's, NJPs, discharges, non-EAS attrition are either trending down or within their normal ranges. Why? Good leadership. Quality Marines. The benefit of a combat deployment to focus the force and reduce the overall discipline factors overall due to the deployed force being focused on the fight.

Nevertheless, we cannot rest on our laurels and need to continue to track both numbers of incidents and quality of our leaders to enforce the rules. Now I could get really picky and point out that there isn't a base in the Corps where I couldn't walk into the MCX and see improper civilian clothes, Marines driving while talking on cell phones, driving without insurance/a valid driver's license, running with head phones/without reflective gear, male Marines being unshaven, etc., but that would be challenged as "in the weeds nit picking" but please remember the swarming mosquitoes. And that discipline to orders does not allow for optional compliance. If we cannot be disciplined in garrison how can we expect to be that way in combat? It is the responsibility of the leader to enforce orders and regulations and it is the responsibility of each individual Marine to police him/her self and comply.

In closing, let me remind the reader that my intent here is to neither criticize the current force nor be an alarmist on our Corps' lack of discipline. To the contrary, the Corps of today is exponentially more disciplined and capable than the one I joined in 1975. But we are not perfect and we do have issues—for example, our accountability of our equipment has not become one of our core competencies during the past decade. The coming reality of an operational environment with both a lesser need to deploy to combat, as well as reduced fiscal resources, should concern us all. What will get us through this time will be our ability to retain our discipline. Discipline is what has set Marines apart since 1776. Not the best gear, facilities or the most money but by being a force that was ready and prepared and able to take on the hard missions with a force that is well lead and will do what it is told to do. A force that is disciplined. To achieve that end I ask you to both as leaders and as individual Marines to protect "The Rock of Discipline."

dis·ci·pline

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(dī's'ə-plīn) 

n.

1. Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.
2. Controlled behavior resulting from disciplinary training; self-control.
3.
 - a. Control obtained by enforcing compliance or order.
 - b. A systematic method to obtain obedience: *a military discipline*.
 - c. A state of order based on submission to rules and authority: *a teacher who demanded discipline in the classroom*.
4. Punishment intended to correct or train.
5. A set of rules or methods, as those regulating the practice of a church or monastic order.
6. A branch of knowledge or teaching.

tr. v., -plined, -plin·ing, -plines.

1. To train by instruction and practice, especially to teach self-control to.
2. To teach to obey rules or accept authority. See synonyms at [teach](#).
3. To punish in order to gain control or enforce obedience. See synonyms at [punish](#).
4. To impose order on: *needed to discipline their study habits*.

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