

Future War, from the Tip of a Pen

Valerie Jackson

Introduction

Development of *Destination Unknown*

It is amazing what a couple of majors with a good idea can accomplish. Recognizing that the majority of the Corps is under the age of 25, and understanding that traditional forms of professional military education (i.e., reading a book from the Commandant of the Marine Corps' [CMCs'] reading list, then having a discussion) may not be the best vehicle for the absorption of professional material for the age group, Majors Austin Duncan and Adam Yang pitched an idea to the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Creativity and the Marine Corps University Foundation (MCUF) for support of a new concept: a graphic novel. With money from MCUF to hire a local illustrator to give classes, the majors assembled Marine officers and enlisted writer-illustrator teams to create something “organic, homegrown, and raw . . . created for the warfighter by the warfighter.”¹

Set in 2075, far enough in the future to elude Pentagon planners, the stories test the bounds of our traditional understanding of both the character and nature of war. The graphic novel is explosively popular, and has gone through two print runs, mailed and downloaded by Marines, the other Services, partners, and allies across the globe. As of the writing of this article, it has won three awards for innovation: the Navy Agility and Accountability Award, the Secretary of the Navy A+ Award, and the Department of Defense Gears of Government Award.

Our 31st Commandant, General Charles C. Krulak, wrote in the foreword to *Destination Unknown* that the reader must “not be afraid to look for answers

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in new intellectual or creative spaces.”²² Indeed, this work offers a new vision of an old idea: the answers to the problems that Marines may face in the future quite possibly lie dormant in the minds of Marines themselves, waiting for the spark of innovation to unleash the energy that guarantees our future victories.

The U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem

As the topic for the third and final essay contest of the Krulak Center’s inaugural year, the U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem essay contest challenged Marines to envision events that could lead to the disestablishment of our beloved Corps. As the era of one commandancy evolved into the next, the contest capitalized on the occasional paranoia Marines have about the Corps’ existence. The stories ran the gamut of possibilities: ethical decay, senior officer lack of leadership, defeat in battle, and complacency. Marine authors got creative with their presentations, making the writing itself a novel product. Krulak Center staff engaged senior officers to both read and comment on the importance of the contest and the nerves that some of the essays quite deliberately touched. Some of those comments can be seen below. Others have been made privately or in casual conversation. The contest did its work: it made Marines think about our weaknesses to make us stronger.

Major General William F. Mullen³

As human beings, we tend to think about things in a linear fashion. We assume that the current trends we are seeing will continue into the future and plan accordingly. This is done despite the well-established fact that trends in anything rarely continue along a linear path, often going in unexpected directions that are hard to predict. The only real constant is change. As military professionals, we have to be prepared for whatever happens, but in particular, we need to be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios. In addition, we learn a great deal more from failure than we ever do from success, because failure tends to affect us significantly by burning itself into our consciousness, with a commitment that we should never let it happen again.

This is why it is so useful to think about and wargame future failures. Many call this process a *premortem*, and it has always proven to be valuable. In these, several questions are asked and possibly answered: What are we not seeing? What happens when (not if) the plan goes awry? How do we set ourselves up mentally to respond quickly and effectively to changing situations instead of succumbing to the *stunned mullet* response—an Australian slang term for complete bewilderment or astonishment—that is very costly in combat? How do we do this on a regular basis when the opportunities to do this face-to-face are few and far between?

Needless to say, writing for self-reflection and analysis forces us to think

deeply and determine how best to convey our message. Doing so in fiction is much more difficult because the framework used in analytical writing is frequently absent. It does, however, allow more freedom of thought and can also be more palatable to the reader because it is not about real-life people or units. This last point may be what makes it most valuable. The author can make a telling point about sometimes controversial topics without losing a reader who usually turns away from the subject at hand. When that author is conducting a premortem by presenting potential futures, they are also pushing the reader to think innovatively, which may be the only path to success in the future operating environment that we see at present.

It is for these reasons that I applaud the Krulak Center's efforts with the U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem essay contest and the graphic novel *Destination Unknown*. They make for both interesting and mentally challenging reading, which is how we further develop our mental acuity to adequately deal with whatever challenges lie ahead.

Lieutenant General Loretta E. Reynolds⁴

Much has been written lately about great power competition and the changing security environment. As we enter a new decade, it is essential that national security professionals continue to assess and prepare for a changing global environment. The world of 2020 is different than the world of the year 2000 or even 2010. The security environment we face in the future will continuously change with new technologies, such as 5G, quantum computing, hypersonic systems, and artificial intelligence. As military professionals, we are impacted by shifting influences on national power—environmental challenges, economic shifts, and the ever-changing global political landscape—not just at home, but in the countries of our allies and strategic competitors. New warfighting domains of space and cyberspace will challenge our understanding of battlespace geometry, our warfighting processes, and the timing and tempo of conflict. An even more complex and interconnected information environment can yield faster battlefield communication and improved situational awareness, or greater risk from malign actors who wield misinformation like a weapon and our own overreliance on technology that can be targeted by our adversaries.

This strategic environment demands that we remain vigilant and never give in to intellectual complacency. Our world is changing; warfare will change with it. Moving forward together, we must find a way to manage today's risks while constantly readying ourselves for the emerging challenges of the future fight.

In this vein, I congratulate the Krulak Center at Marine Corps University for hosting the U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem essay contest. Our profession demands that we prepare for our worst day, that we imagine worst-case out-

comes and then vigorously guard against the decisions that will lead to failure. We must never get caught choosing habit over hard work. We find ourselves today in a time where the risk of not changing is greater than the risk of change. Tomorrow's force will require bold leadership, new thinking, rejection of the status quo, and open minds. We must constantly challenge our own assumptions. When we think about evolving threats as a Corps, we must be clear minded about two things. We must be clear about what stays constant, such as our ethos of "first to fight," or our commitment to being ethical warriors who will always be most ready when the nation is least ready. We also need clarity in those areas we will need to adapt, such as tactics/techniques/procedures, doctrine, equipment, relationships, and organizational constructs.

The essays written are sobering but also enlightening. They represent a willingness to imagine the worst and describe the potential impact of poor choice and hubris, of a changing dynamic in warfare where the Corps fails to correctly predict or understand the actions of our adversaries or our allies. The essays recognize the moral courage required to make meaningful change and the cost of not acting; they create discomfort when we are forced to accept that victory is not assured just because we are U.S. Marines. They mention closed-minded leadership and a preoccupation with current threats that distract from the deadlier future threat. They reference the importance of information, disinformation, and how critical it is to guard the truth and maintain the strategic narrative by doing what is right but not always convenient. The battle for the truth is increasingly contested in all facets of our profession; a firm grasp of the truth is necessary across the functions of staffing, equipping, training, and deploying troops. Finally, the essays mention the importance of integrity and military ethics, characteristics of the U.S. Marines that have always made the Corps a force the nation needs even when it may not have thought it needed it. The reoccurring theme is that the Marine Corps stands ready whenever crisis strikes the nation. When we fail to maintain our distinction as ethical warriors, transformed at recruit training for the good of the nation, we cede strategic battlespace to the adversary's narrative.

Some may scoff at the ideas written herein, but the wiser reader will see them as a warning and a clarion call for change. The time for change is now. Our responsibility as leaders in the military profession demands that we remain professionally curious, that we study and learn from history but not be burdened by old habits, and that we challenge assumptions and reject the status quo. The authors of these essays have demonstrated that this leadership can—and must—come from all levels. I challenge you to read these and think about your own role in setting the course for a lethal, relevant Corps capable of winning the future fight.

August Cole⁵

From stuffy, overfilled hearing rooms on Capitol Hill to undersea Pacific Ocean graveyards of shattered fighters, the demise of the Marine Corps in 2040 can be found in many places. These are just some of the scenes from the top stories entered in the Krulak Center's 2019 Marine Corps Postmortem writing contest, a competition for Marine Corps University students that explored what might cause the United States to disband the Corps two decades from now.

For any organization to squarely engage with its future tactical or strategic vulnerabilities, let alone its outright relevance, is no easy task. Yet, in this moment of unrelenting technological, political, and social change, it is an imperative analytical exercise for understanding future conflicts. The idea behind exploring such dark corners is to not only predict bad outcomes but to do something about them.

As a form of fiction intelligence (FICINT)—a melding of fiction and intelligence to create actionable information—the U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem's crowd-sourced narratives, as well as other Krulak Center efforts such as the *Destination Unknown* graphic novels, are by their nature experimental. And yet, they are perfectly timed for an era of thoughtful action and recalibration for the Marine Corps. In his recent guidance, the 38th Marine Corps Commandant, General David H. Berger, wrote: "We cannot afford to continue to admire problems or fail to take the necessary decisive actions."⁶ Nor can the Marine Corps afford failure of imagination in the steps it takes in the coming years.

Expect to see more such useful fiction. Breaking bad news about structural or technological problems to senior leaders is never easy. But it can go over a lot better when a potential vulnerability and its stakes are assessed through a fictional scenario. Then the question can be credibly asked, "Could that really happen—and what can we do about it so that it does not?" Another crucial aspect is the rich description used to create such scenarios—a Chinese military victory in the East China Sea, for example—that put people first, not technology. Fiction also allows intellectual trial and error when the costs are lowest. Finally, the Marine Corps needs to be able to draw on as many perspectives as possible in navigating the fog of future wars, and with as much intellectual diversity as possible.

What any one of these U.S. Marine Corps Postmortem essays reveals is of course important as a specific reflection of a possible future. Most critical, however, is they make clear that today's Marines are willing to confront tomorrow's challenges when it matters most—before they happen.

Endnotes

1. Majs Adam Yang and Austin Duncan, eds., *Destination Unknown*, vol. 1 (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2019), 7.

2. Yang and Duncan, *Destination Unknown*, vol. 1, 3.
3. MajGen William F. Mullen currently serves as the commanding general for Training and Education Command in Quantico, VA.
4. LtGen Loretta E. Reynolds is the deputy commandant for information at Headquarters Marine Corps.
5. August Cole is an award-winning author and futurist who has explored the future of conflict through fiction and other forms of storytelling. He coauthored with P. W. Singer the novel *Ghost Fleet* (2015), which has been on the Commandant's Professional Reading List for several years. He acted as a writing mentor for volume 1 of *Destination Unknown* and has generously continued in that capacity for the Marine author/artist teams currently drafting volume 2 of *Destination Unknown*.
6. *Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2019), 23.