

Strategic Communication through Narration

HOW U.S. MARINE CORPS COMMANDANTS STILL USE STORY TO INSPIRE SUPPORT

by Meriwether Ball and William J. Brown, PhD

Abstract: During the past four decades Walter R. Fisher's narrative theory has been developed and applied to many different areas of communication study. Yet, to date, extraordinarily little research has applied Fisher's theory to the study of military communication, despite Fisher's own formative experiences as a Marine, combat veteran in Korea, and drill instructor. This study illustrates how Fisher's theoretical framework provides a useful model for studying how Marine Corps Commandants strategically use storytelling to communicate important messages to those within their community. By examining three artifacts as communicative narratives, we explore how Commandants have used Fisher's tools to persuade their fighting forces to grasp their perspective about the situated circumstances, posture, and future direction of their command. Implications of storytelling as a powerful communication tool in the military and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: narrative paradigm, oral history, military strategic communication, Walter Fisher, U.S. Marine Corps history, Commandant of the Marine Corps, David H. Berger, Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., Clifton B. Cates

The sitting Commandant of the Marine Corps gave an interview to a Marine veteran member of Congress recently, which was posted as

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a video podcast to YouTube.¹ General David H. Berger shared much in the way of new information during the interview. He revealed stories not previously publicized about his family, his education, and his start as a U.S. Marine. He revealed struggles and inspirations that anyone—civilian and Marine alike—could find relatable. His life's trajectory, from the most ordinary nonmilitary, middle-class upbringing to leading a highly regarded fighting organization, is delivered matter-of-factly. While his intentions and descriptions were unquestionably sincere, this was perhaps no accident; it was likely quite strategic. General Berger was doing what Commandants have done through the

¹ Rep Michael Gallagher, "New Look at the Marine Corps with General David H. Berger," 18 February 2021, YouTube, 58:05 min.

ages: he was using story to attract attention to and to motivate support for the Marine Corps.

The purpose of this article is to show how communication scholar and Marine veteran Walter Fisher's narrative theory can be applied to understand how military leaders strategically communicate through storytelling.² Through sharing their experiences in story form, Commandants can connect with their audiences by breaking down barriers between warfighters of all ranks and seasons, allowing the audience to make sense of the problem and to participate in the solutions. First, the authors explain *narrative paradigm theory*, or storytelling theory, through the scholars who developed and evolved it. Second, we analyze the artifacts of oral history interview transcripts of Commandant Generals Clifton B. Cates and Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., and the video interview of General Berger. These artifacts were selected from the collections of documented publicly published interviews of these three wartime leaders to provide examples of narration that clarify and unify the intended message of supporting Marines and the Corps. The stories Commandants told during armchair interviews decades ago have real meaning well into the twenty-first century. Third, we examine literature regarding the ways in which storytelling compels warfighters to learn to decipher important messages in narration.

This article also explores how Marine veteran Walter Fisher changed modern communication scholarship. Terms that are critical to this article are discussed for their purpose in this specific thesis. First, *strategic communication* is defined and the intended audience considered. Second, the value of oral histories as strategic communication artifacts is addressed.

Strategic Communication

There are two perspectives through which we can describe these Commandant interviews as *strategic communication*. The first considers defining the term as it is used within this community, a rather technical and professionally accepted definition. The second proposes that because the outcome of their narratives promotes the Marine Corps' culture, biography, history, and character—primary qualifiers of adherence to theory—they also qualify as strategic communication.

Regarding the first viewpoint, while Fisher certainly would understand and value all aspects of the common term *strategic communication*, we believe he would have considered it not only in relation to communication scholarship but also to military usage. This term is used in professional practices including public relations, brand development, and corporate communication. Yet, when those in the Marine Corps community read the term *strategic communication*, frequently the Corps' 2017 development of the communication strategy and operations occupational field springs to mind. In that directive, the military occupational specialties of public affairs and combat camera were combined and renamed.³ The Corps defines *communication strategy* (COMMSTRAT) as “a communication activity that provides timely, accurate information which informs and educates about the missions, organizations, capabilities, needs, activities and performance of the Marine Corps as an instrument of national defense.”⁴ While this definition was not known to Fisher at the time he developed his theory, the elements of it apply to his theory of narrative.

The second point asserts that if strategic communication was not tactically planned, it wound up so in the natural order of Commandants discussing their experiences. By sharing one genuinely spoken story after another, each Commandant revealed aspects of their service that directly or indirectly inspires posi-

² Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390180>; Walter R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration,” *Communications Monographs* 52, no. 4 (1985): 347–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758509376117>; and Walter R. Fisher, “Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm,” *Communications Monographs*, 56, no. 1 (1989): 55–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390249>.

³ Marine Administrative Message (MARADMINS) 534/17, *Guidance for the Establishment of the Communication Strategy and Operations (45xx) Occupational Field through the Merge Of 43xx (Public Affairs) and 46xx (Combat Camera)* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 28 September 2017).

⁴ “U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific—COMMSTRAT,” Public Affairs, U.S. Marine Corps, accessed July 2021.

tive sentiments about the Corps. The purpose of strategic communication is to accomplish just such an objective, as revealed in Fisher's theory.

Audience

Of the three artifacts examined here, only Berger's was created during the internet age. This matters because social media has become an important vehicle for strategic communication. For instance, the use of strategic narrative, or strategic storytelling, has emerged as a form of soft power, which is a persuasive method for international relations.⁵ Both Berger, with his 73,000 followers, and Representative Michael Gallagher (R-WI), with his 34,000 followers, shared the interview on their official Twitter pages.⁶ Gallagher shared it on his YouTube channel as well as his Spotify station. This combined distribution indicates strategic communication intent by Berger. Considering that choice, there is cause to believe that if Generals Cates and Shepherd were alive during the internet age and engaged in social media, they, too, would have shared their oral history interviews with their followers. Indeed, the Marine Corps Oral History Program, which conducted and published these interviews, explicitly states that is the purpose of the artifacts: "Collectively, these memoirs provide a reservoir of material to be used profitably by both military and civilian researchers."⁷

Oral Histories as Artifacts

An astute observer may agree that the current Commandant's participation in an interview qualifies as strategic communication, as it was conducted on a public social media platform. That same observer may argue that the post-World War II-era Commandants'

participation in Marine Corps-arranged oral history interviews would not be strategic communication because they were: 1) conducted after their retirement, and 2) not expected to be viewed by the general public.

Regarding the first point, the time spans for each analyzed narrative are significant in both cases. For instance, Berger discussed his childhood and early marriage in his interview; both narratives occurred at least four decades prior to his discussion of each. Generals Cates and Shepherd shared narratives of events that had occurred two to five decades earlier. Roughly the same amount of time had passed since the events and their remembrance in interviews for each individual. It is unlikely that the quality of the earlier-serving Commandants' recollections was of a lower accuracy than that of the current Commandant. Further, in both cases, the current and earlier Commandants were talking to friendly interviewers. Cates and Shepherd were interviewed by Frank Benis, who conducted many such interviews for the Marine Corps, while Berger was interviewed by a Marine veteran who had served under him many years earlier. This trusted relationship between interviewee and interviewer, both supporters of making a record of a Commandant's perspectives on topics of interest to the Marine Corps community, validates the Corps' definition of strategic communication.

Fisher's Theoretical Framework

The groundbreaking theory developed by Walter Fisher on the efficacy of human narration for persuasion likely had its early seeds in his military experience.⁸ Fisher was a Marine veteran who saw combat at the Chosin Reservoir and subsequently served as a drill instructor. Later, upon finishing his bachelor's degree, he served as an Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps officer at Point Loma High School in San Diego, California.⁹ Extraordinarily little attention, thus far, has been given to understanding Fisher's military service as an important part of his scholarly journey.

⁵Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War, and Conflict* 7 no. 1 (March 2014): 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>.

⁶Cmdt Gen David H. Berger (@CMC_MarineCorps), "A great conversation with Marine veteran and Congressman, @RepGallagher," Twitter, 18 February 2021, 1150; and Rep Michael Gallagher (@RepGallagher), "It was an honor to have @CMC_MarineCorps on the NEW Look to discuss his transformational plan to ensure the Marine Corps can deter, fight, and win in the Indo-Pacific," Twitter, 18 February 2021.

⁷"Foreword," in Samantha Williams, comp., *United States Marine Corps Oral History Collection Catalogue Career Interviews* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2019), i.

⁸Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 1.

⁹"In Memoriam: Walter R. Fisher, 87," *News*, University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 31 July 2018.

This is somewhat surprising, as the military experience of great storytellers like C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien have been considered essential to fully understanding their narrative techniques.¹⁰

Fisher's narrative paradigm theory, which also can be regarded as a narrative persuasion theory, was groundbreaking for challenging the notion that understanding and agreement come only from the paradigm, or concept, of rational argument and reason.¹¹ He was convinced that decision-making occurred via another paradigm: reasoning based in story from history, culture, and character. Fisher's five assumptions that form the foundation of his narrative paradigm theory include: 1) people are natural storytellers; 2) people decide based on good reasons; 3) good reasons are based on history, biography, culture, and character; 4) narrative coherence—whether the story is rational—is based on coherence (whether the story holds together); and 5) narrative fidelity (whether the story rings true), as people constantly reevaluate their lives based on the world of stories available for their choosing.¹² The storytelling context is of primary importance in understanding how narration works in the military environment.

Narrative Coherence

Fisher's theory includes important conditions that must be tested, holding that every story must meet dual criteria: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity.¹³ Do the people and events line up? Do they fit together? Fisher described the judgments people place on a story to determine if they pass these tests. *Coherence* considers how people look for contradictions, wherein logic is of great use. *Fidelity* considers how people judge the details, facts, and interpretations of a story in comparison to other similar stories that they have heard.

¹⁰ Nora Alfaiz, "The Chronicles of War Repercussions in J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis's Life and Work" (PhD diss., George Washington University, 2020), 3; and Danielle Marie Oxnam, "A Storied Friendship: A Look into the Lives of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien" (honors thesis, University of Arizona, 2015), 18, 19.

¹¹ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 3.

¹² Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 6; and Fisher, "The Narrative Paradigm," 349.

¹³ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 8.

Narrative Fidelity and the Logic of Good Reasons

The primary criterion for narrative fidelity is whether the story might line up with a story a person would tell about themselves. Audiences are concerned about the message's values, the relevance of those values to the decisions involved, the outcomes of maintaining those values, the overlap of the audience and the worldview, and, finally, what the listener believes is "an ideal basis for human conduct."¹⁴ The Commandants' stories told here align with the theory in this way, as they are narratives that mirror Marines' circumstances throughout the Corps' wartime history. If the battle, location, and names were changed to another time and place, these anecdotes would maintain the same fidelity. These allow observers a persuasive case for the value of serving in the Marine Corps.

Storytelling through Interview

Considering that Fisher devoted more than 30 years to developing and discussing storytelling theory, he undoubtedly observed the storytelling techniques of the Marine Corps leaders under whom he served just prior to his academic career. Military storytellers, like all storytellers, "make their life experiences understandable by explaining choices and actions in relation to goals and outcomes, thereby expressing their identities within a personally meaningful plot."¹⁵ In this way, narrative can be a vehicle for making sense of seemingly random and disconnected events, transforming them into common, interrelated, and meaningful periods of a culture's history. This interactive interview style—the dialogic interview—allows military leaders to tell their stories in a way that resonates at a personal level with the goal of making a distinct connection with the members of their audience. This personal connection also allows for hierarchical boundaries, including military rank, to be removed—ever valuable when Commandants are seeking to build unity with their

¹⁴ Walter Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64, no. 4 (1978): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637809383443>.

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. by Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), s.v. "Stories and Storytelling," <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n364>.

audiences. Such interviews allow expanded narratives, which are good specimens to apply Fisher's theory.

Literature Review

Fisher's Response to Critics

Soon after Fisher's theory was published, Robert C. Rowland emerged as the primary challenger of its versatility, especially for nontraditional narrative works, which Fisher soon explored.¹⁶ In his first response to criticism, Fisher explained that his presentation of narrative paradigm theory came to be because technical reasoning and argumentative skill on specific subjects makes the average discussions of the general public appear irrational.¹⁷ This leaves little hope of spanning the bridge between experts and ordinary people regarding rationality, which left one class of humanity appearing to be superior to another.¹⁸ In 1985, Fisher published an elaboration on his theory. First, he explained the expanse of his philosophy on narrative: every scholarly genre includes a place for myth and metaphor, a place for cognition and import; in other words, a place for story. Second, compelling narratives provide reasons for decision and action.¹⁹ Finally, in his 1989-published "Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm," Fisher explains that narrative paradigm theory is more of a way to look at a topic, not the topic itself; it is not rhetoric, or criticism, or a celebration of narration, per se. Although it does celebrate storytellers, his theory does not deny any scholarly genres, does not deny rhetorical communication, is not a rejection of traditional argumentation, and does not deny the power of ideology or distortion or other communicative practices. Narrative paradigm theory is meant to offer a way of interpreting human communication that assumes that communications are essentially stories shaped by history, biography, culture, and character.²⁰ These important aspects allow room for broad application to the study of military storytelling and

discussion. Narrative paradigm theory offers an important theoretical lens to study Marine Corps strategic communication to any targeted audience. And finally, Virginia Commonwealth University scholars Randolph T. Barker and Kim Gower described the theory's value this way: "[Narrative paradigm theory] presents a model of storytelling as a complete organizational communication tool."²¹

Other Scholarly Interpretations

University of San Francisco scholar Cynthia Mitchell explored the power of storytelling to transform organizations and found that well-led organizations of all types—military, business, or government—benefit from leaders for whom narrative is an essential tool. She observed that

Human connectivity in storytelling is essential to acknowledge because a member's personal story often influences others in the workplace. Organizations must ensure that their members are indeed recognized and acknowledged; the organization will be incomplete without telling the stories of everyone involved.²²

In routine and unexpected circumstances, leaders tap into their wells of narratives that support their organizations' culture and identity. That is why these unscripted interviews are so fascinating. When asked open-ended biographical or retrospective questions, the Marine Corps Commandants studied in this article spontaneously drew from their wells of experience (biography) and told stories that were familiar to other such stories (narrative coherence), which rang true (narrative fidelity), and which appealed to Corps history, biography, culture, and character.

Today's global leaders must win their audiences with authenticity by sharing stories that create mean-

¹⁶ Robert C. Rowland, "On Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies," *Communications Monographs* 56, no. 1 (1989): 39–54, <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390248>.

¹⁷ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 4.

¹⁸ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 16.

¹⁹ Fisher, "The Narrative Paradigm," 2.

²⁰ Fisher, "Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm," 3.

²¹ Randolph T. Barker and Kim Gower, "Strategic Application of Storytelling in Organizations: Toward Effective Communication in a Diverse World," *Journal of Business Communication* 47, no. 3 (July 2010): 295.

²² Cynthia Mitchell, "Organizational Storytelling: How Leaders Use Powerful Stories to Transform Their Organizations" (PhD diss., University of San Francisco, 2019), 4.

ing between themselves and those listening in global industries and sectors. “Too often, leaders fall into the trap of thinking people will automatically listen to them and take appropriate, effective action in response to what they expect, just because of their authoritative position,” explain scholars Gabrielle Dolan and Yamini Naidu. “They soon learn that leading others is much more complicated than that because people are much more complicated than that.”²³ Further, Dolan and Naidu posit the premise that decision lies in emotion, which makes people remember; everyone remembers where they were on 11 September 2001, for instance. At the core of every story is emotion, which is how the bond between storyteller and listener is created.²⁴ Scholars exploring storytelling and narrative in healthcare found that individuals’ stories can display the similarities and differences between their experiences.²⁵ Stories deliver perceptions and meanings that, when told, allow others to place themselves within the stories to validate or dismiss aspects of the stories. Illustrations of aspects of narrative paradigm theory embedded within Marines’ stories that focus on the values of loyalty, humility, and courage in the face of fear and death instill basic human emotions with which all audiences can identify.

There exists risk and reward for leaders willing to reveal their humanity to those within their teams, as it opens the discussion to teachability, redirection, and adaptation. Jack Harris and B. Kim Barnes wrote, “Self-disclosure through storytelling is a powerful method of engaging and inspiring others. As a respected and admired leader, a story disclosing a failure can have the somewhat paradoxical effect of building trust and encouraging openness.”²⁶ Each of the Commandants volunteers such stories of error, or ignorance, or regret, because others can identify with them and they appeal to their shared humanity.

²³ Gabrielle Dolan and Yamini Naidu, *Hooked: How Leaders Connect, Engage and Inspire with Storytelling* (Queensland: John Wiley and Sons Australia, 2013), 40.

²⁴ Dolan and Naidu, *Hooked*, 4.

²⁵ Leah East et al., “Storytelling: An Approach that Can Help to Develop Resilience,” *Nurse Researcher* 17, no. 3 (April 2010): 17–25, <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2010.04.17.3.17.c7742>.

²⁶ Jack Harris and B. Kim Barnes, “Leadership Storytelling,” *Industrial and Commercial Training* 38, no. 7 (December 2006): 351.

Analysis of Artifacts

Three artifacts are used to explore the narrative techniques of Marine leaders instinctively, yet skillfully, drawing on Fisher’s narrative theory. All three are recorded discussions regarding recollections of past events, with minor direction by the interviewer, who, in each case, was either a Marine or civilian employee of the Service. The artifact of General Berger’s interview was created by Representative Michael Gallagher for a webcast filmed in December 2020 and published February 2021. Berger was interviewed while currently serving as Commandant and presumably at Marine Barracks Washington, DC. The interviews of Generals Cates and Shepherd were conducted for the Marine Corps History Division Oral History Program in the mid-1960s. Cates and Shepherd were each interviewed after retirement while in their early 70s. They were recorded on audio tapes, which were transcribed and typewritten, and handwritten notes were made on the transcripts by the Commandants themselves, which are included in the artifacts. Story selections are taken from each artifact. Included here are context, quotes, and paraphrases of a total of nine stories.

Each story from these artifacts was selected for its unique illustration of the history and culture attributes addressed by Fisher’s theory. Analysis of the theory’s aspects—history, biography, culture, character, coherence, and fidelity—are mapped out for each story. The Marine Corps’ core values, leadership traits, and leadership principles are frequently referenced regarding the culture and character tests of the theory.²⁷ The reader is encouraged to read the entire artifact, available through the Marine Corps History Division, as these are a tiny fraction of the wealth of narration offered by these leaders. Both Cates and Shepherd, who fought at Belleau Wood and other pivotal, ferocious World War I battles, were highly decorated and repeatedly wounded in the early months of their careers. Finally, each artifact will be considered for its usefulness as a tool of persuasion to support Marines or the Marine Corps.

²⁷ Item 4, “Qualities,” in “QPME: History and Traditions of the United States Marine Corps: Ethics, Values, and Leadership Development,” Marine Corps University Research Library, 27 August 2021.

General Clifton B. Cates

Narrative No. 1:

Put Lofty Dreams Aside Voluntarily

General Cates was Commandant just after World War II from 1948 to 1952. He was commissioned in 1917, but he had never heard of a Marine prior to that, and put off practicing law to serve his country.

MR. FRANK: What impelled you to join the Marine Corps?

GENERAL CATES: That's rather an odd story. As I said, I was getting ready to take the state bar examination and I happened to run into the son of the president of the University. And I asked him, "Has your dad had any calls for people going into the service?" And he said, "Not that I know of." I said, "Well, if he does, put my name down."

About two weeks later I saw him, and he said, "Dad has a letter from the Marine Corps wanting eight Second Lieutenant reservists. Do you want to apply?" And I said, "What in the hell is that outfit?" I really didn't know. And I said, "Yes, put my name down." And that's the way it started.²⁸

Analysis:

- *History.* Displays how the Corps recruited from within universities during World War I.
- *Biography.* Cates's start in the Marine Corps.
- *Culture.* Applies to leadership principle no. 11: seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.²⁹
- *Character.* Cates voluntarily left law practice to serve his country, displaying the leadership trait of unselfishness.
- *Coherence.* It shows the timeline of his life decisions to join the Corps.

- *Fidelity.* It rings true because it indicates how Cates's patriotism led to service to his country and Corps.
- *Persuasiveness.* It provides an example of a change in life's trajectory for the good purpose of service to country.

Narrative No. 2:

Disarrayed and Injured but Carried On

Cates was honored with high valor awards for his courage in France in June 1918. For context, the Battle of Belleau Wood began the day after this event. Cates describes it with humility, without careful scripting, even with regret.

On the night of the fifth of June and we had just gotten back reserve and gotten cleaned up when Major Holcomb got an order to attack at five o'clock—it was then twenty minutes to five and we were a good kilometer from our jumping off place. So, we double-timed part of the way and got into position, and actually we didn't know our objective or where we were going or what. We were deployed across this wheat field and taking very heavy fire—my platoon was. We received word that Captain [Donald F.] Duncan had been killed—the company commander. So, with that I yelled to this Lieutenant [James] Robertson, I said, "Come on, Robertson, let's go." And with that we jumped up and swarmed across a wheat field toward about two-thirds of the way I caught a machine gun bullet on the helmet. It put a great big dent in my helmet and knocked me unconscious. So, Robertson, with the remainder of my platoon, entered the west part of the Bouresches, and evidently, I must have been out for five or ten minutes. When I came to, I remember trying to put my helmet on and the dog-

²⁸ Oral history content presented throughout the article is transcribed exactly as published in the original. Gen Clifton B. Cates, interview with Benis M. Frank, session 1, 1967, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA), 3–4, hereafter Cates oral history.

²⁹ "Marine Corps Leadership Principles," in *Leading Marines*, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018), 2-6.

gone thing wouldn't go on. There was a great big dent in it as big as your fist. The machine gun bullets were hitting around, and it looked like hail. My first thought was to run to the rear. I hate to admit it, but that was it. Then I looked over to the right of the ravine and I saw four Marines in this ravine. So, I went staggering over there—I fell two or three times, so they told me—and ran in and got these four Marines. Then about that time I saw Lieutenant Robertson who, with the remainder of my platoon, was leaving the western end of town. So, then I yelled at him and I blew my whistle, and he came over and he said, “all right you take your platoon in and clean out the town and I'll get reinforcements,” which I thought was a hell of a thing.³⁰

Moments later, Cates was shot again, twice. One bullet was deflected by his helmet and another lodged in his shoulder. He continued:

We cleaned out most of the town but by that time I had, I think it was, twenty-one men left. So, I just posted them in four different posts around the town and set up a kind of a Cossack post. Within an hour though, the 79th Company came in and with Major [Randolph T.] Zane—Captain Zane. From then on there wasn't any question about holding the town. I mean, in two or three hours we had enough men in there to hold half a dozen towns.³¹

Analysis:

- *History*. Describes first moment of Battle of Belleau Wood.

- *Biography*. His early heroism as a first lieutenant, taking over for fallen company commander, and saving the town of Bouresches, despite vast losses.
- *Culture*. Applies to Marine Corps leadership principle no. 5: set the example.³²
- *Character*. Led through to victory with no direction, showing the leadership trait of decisiveness.
- *Coherence*. Holds together because it shows the reality of battlefield chaos.
- *Fidelity*. Rings true due to repeatedly encountering injury, loss, disorder, and fear.
- *Persuasiveness*. An inspiring example of ordinary young officer leading and winning an important victory.

Narrative No. 3: Discussion of Errors Openly

Cates skillfully discussed a concern he had of friendly fire, although it was not stated in such terms.

MR. FRANK: How long did you have to hold Bouresches? How long were you there?

GENERAL CATES: We were there until the night of the tenth. But, you see, we were pretty badly chewed up and we took terrific fire while in Bouresches. I mean the Germans laid it on us. In fact, we had a mystery there that has never been cleared up. It was a twelve- or fourteen-inch gun that fired once every twenty minutes into the town. And the people in the rear swore and be-damned it was a German gun but there wasn't any question about it. I went way back down the ravine and I could hear the damned shells coming from the south and I'd watch it and hear it go right over and hit in the town. We understood it was one of the big railway guns—naval guns.

MR. FRANK: One of ours.

GENERAL CATES: Admiral [Charles P.] Plunkett had; I think. We never could verify that, but we heard that was it.

³⁰ Cates oral history, 18–20.

³¹ Cates oral history, 18–20.

³² “Marine Corps Leadership Principles,” 2–6.

MR. FRANK: There's one in every war. It's like the one at Guadalcanal.

GENERAL CATES: Luckily, the thing was hitting right in the center of the town and practically ninety per cent of our men were out on the perimeter. So, it didn't do too much damage except to morale.

MR. FRANK: To know that you were being shot, suspecting that you were being shot at . . .

GENERAL CATES: And we couldn't stop it. It kept up for thirteen hours. As I say, we actually didn't have a good counterattack along there. Luckily, the Germans didn't counterattack.³³

Analysis:

- *History*. Reveals rare details of the iconic Battle at Belleau Wood.
- *Biography*. His detailed participation and leadership in one of the most important battles in U.S. history.
- *Culture*. Applies leadership principle no. 3: know your Marines and look out for their welfare.³⁴
- *Character*. He had the integrity to investigate, as best he could with the access he had, his suspicions and had the emotional intelligence to realize the impact of so much fire on his Marines' morale, showing integrity and initiative.
- *Coherence*. Story walks through from the beginning of his realization to his investigation, and then the resolution of waiting it out.
- *Fidelity*. The reality of friendly fire rings true.
- *Persuasiveness*. Illustrates that Marine leaders care for their troops, even to identify errors by their peers.

Narrative No. 4: Humble Leader

Cates displays cultural humility in the following brief exchange.

MR. FRANK: How would you compare from a personal point of view participating in World War I—the fighting in World War I and the fighting in World War II?

GENERAL CATES: Well, I don't know whether I correctly understand you or not, but I might say there was a lot of difference fighting as a Second Lieutenant and fighting as a Colonel and a Major General. In fact, in World War II I didn't have any close calls at all that I remember.³⁵

Analysis:

- *History*. Refers to Marine Corps participation in two World Wars.
- *Biography*. Identifies a Marine officer's span of rank and experiences during two wars.
- *Culture*. Applies core value (no. 2) of courage to tell the truth.³⁶
- *Character*. Displays Cates's integrity by honestly saying that the lower ranks face the harshest battle.
- *Coherence*. Experiences related span the range from junior to senior officer with respect to how far he went into harm's way.
- *Fidelity*. That high-ranking officers are rarely and that junior officers are often in harm's way easily rings true.
- *Persuasiveness*. An example revealing how senior leaders value the great risks that lower-ranking Marines experience.

General Lemuel C. Shepherd

General Shepherd was Commandant following Cates, from 1952–56. Like Cates, he was commissioned in 1917. He sailed for France after graduating from Virginia Military Institute. His narration differs from Cates's as less anecdotal and more philosophical, and it also meets the narrative paradigm theory criteria of addressing history, biography, culture, and character

³³ Cates oral history, 21–22.

³⁴ "Marine Corps Leadership Principles," 2–6.

³⁵ Cates oral history, 43.

³⁶ "Our Core Values," in *Leading Marines*, 1–7.

with coherence and fidelity despite approaching storytelling from a more sentimental angle.

Narrative No. 5: Soul-Baring Praise

In several exchanges with his interviewers, Shepherd discussed his relationship with Major General Charles D. Barrett. Barret died under questionable circumstances while serving in the Pacific in 1943, having just been relieved of his command. Shepherd's decision to share his feelings about a beloved mentor of the 1960s Marine Corps culture is disarming in its intimacy. Here are a few of the unexpected stories:

SHEPHERD: You may no[t] agree with me, and I admit my opinion may be influenced by my great devotion to Charlie Barrett. I knew him personally and discussed amphibious doctrine with him on many occasions. He was closer to me than my father. I mean, I say professionally. My father was a doctor in Norfolk, and I seldom saw him when I was a boy because he was practicing medicine night and day. He had the biggest obstetrical practice in Virginia and was gone all the time. But I grew to know Charlie Barrett intimately especially when we went back to France together after the war to make a relief map of the Belleau Wood Battlefield.

During this period, we became close friends. Some years later I was a student in the senior class of the Marine Corps Schools while he was an instructor. Barrett had just come back from the Ecole d'Guerre in [Paris] France and was well versed in modern warfare. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the amphibious concept. I recall his discussing sending reconnaissance patrols ashore from a submarine. He said: "now we send out patrols when we are engaged in combat ashore to determine the strength and location of the enemy." He once said to me, "Why can't we send patrols off a submarine to make a reconnaissance of the hostile shoreline and locate the enemy's defenses?" This was the concept, which was often followed during World War II, of making

a reconnaissance of the beaches before a landing was made. This is an example of Barrett's forward thinking on amphibious operations for which I believe historians should give him full credit.³⁷

Analysis:

- *History*. Development of amphibious warfare via research after the Battle of Belleau Wood and other World War I locations.
- *Biography*. Shepherd describes a Marine Corps leader who strongly influenced him.
- *Culture*. Shows Shepherd applied leadership principle no. 2: know yourself and seek self-improvement.³⁸
- *Character*. Displayed loyalty by his profound respect for his mentor and interest in defending his reputation.
- *Coherence*. He reasonably explains an illustration of his reasons for his positive experience of a criticized leader.
- *Fidelity*. Such experiences of developing devotion for a leader one works with for many years ring true.
- *Persuasiveness*. Describes opportunities for long-term mentoring.

Narrative No. 6: Unexpectedly Unassuming

Shepherd seemed to doubt whether his interviewers wanted to hear more about Barrett and, with humility, asked their permission to carry on. Perhaps Shepherd was so unassuming because he wanted to rally for Barrett's challenged reputation via personal illustration.

SHEPHERD: My first association with Barrett was when I was ordered to the Fourth Brigade Headquarters while I was on occupation duty on the Rhine following the Armistice of World War I. Are you interested?

Q: Yes, sir. Keep right on.

³⁷ Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., interview with Benis M. Frank and Robert Heintz Jr., 27 July 1966, transcript (Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA), 7, hereafter Shepherd oral history.

³⁸ "Marine Corps Leadership Principles," 2-6.

SHEPHERD: I was ordered to Brigade Headquarters in July, just after the Army of Occupation on the Rhine began its march on Berlin before the Germans signed the peace treaty. You know they wouldn't sign, so we started marching and got up to the border of the occupied zone. This move forced the Germans to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919.

Q: That was when [Marshal Ferdinand] Foch moved?

SHEPHERD: Yes, moved forward. I had the leading company of the Second Battalion, 5th Marines which was the advance guard. The battalion was ordered to jump off at nine o'clock at night. We were lined up on the perimeter ready to go at eight o'clock that night when we received word that the Germans had signed and to return to our billets. Upon my return to Segendorf, I found orders assigning me to the Staff of the Fourth Marine Brigade. It was very soon after that the Brigade returned to the States. Barrett was the Brigade Chief-of-Staff and I served directly under him so had the opportunity to become well acquainted with him and learned to admire his fine qualities and able mind. Just to show you how the man's brain worked, he had a forward-thinking concept about history. He said, now Belleau Wood is the greatest battle in which the Marines have participated in a long time. We should make a relief map of this battlefield. You know he was a great cartographer. That was his specialty. I mean he was an expert in topography which he had taught at the Marine Corps Schools. He said, "I think we ought to go back to Belleau Woods and make a relief map of the area for historical purposes."³⁹

Shepherd returned to France and the team completed the task. Later, Shepherd learned that Marines were not represented in the memorial to American troops at Belleau Wood. He took on the project of a memo-

rial while Commandant, enlisting Marine Corps War Memorial sculptor Felix de Weldon to create the item, and sourced all the funds.⁴⁰

Analysis:

- *History*. Refers to the end of World War I and the Marine Corps' role in Allied forces' war-winning counterattack.
- *Biography*. Shepherd's role in the war's end and participation in historical mapping.
- *Culture*. Developing warfare strategy by applying leadership principle no. 1: be technically and tactically proficient.⁴¹
- *Character*. Shepherd displayed knowledge and enthusiasm for history's lessons.
- *Coherence*. The story holds together, although the time span while in France at the end of the World War I is not well contextualized.
- *Fidelity*. Shepherd complimenting his mentor and explaining how they came to go back to France for further research rings true.
- *Persuasiveness*. An example of the education and research opportunities that can arise while serving in the Marine Corps.

General David H. Berger

More than half a century later, and on topics not related to warfare, Commandant General Berger used narrative in the same ways Cates and Shepherd had done. Berger used narrative to bond with his audience and break down the barriers of rank and power. As Berger seeks to draw innovation toward the Marine Corps while the pace of innovating is accelerating constantly, narrative paradigm theory may assist that effort.⁴² As the Commandant tries to connect with those in the Marine Corps community who care about the future of U.S. defense, he is competing with cor-

⁴⁰ Shepherd oral history, 11–13.

⁴¹ "Marine Corps Leadership Principles," 2–6.

⁴² Stew Magnuson, "JUST IN: Commandant Calls Marine Corps Tech Refresh 'Urgent,'" *National Defense Magazine*, 2 February 2021; MC2 Tom Tonthat, "Commandant Explores Student Research, Addresses Marines During Visit to NPS," *News*, Naval Postgraduate School, 13 December 2019; and Sgt Megan Roses, "Fighters of the Future," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 26 May 2021.

³⁹ Shepherd oral history, 8.

porate opportunities for brilliant technology-minded young professionals. Such prospects offer higher pay and more immediate liberties to prospective commissioned officers. This enables Marine officer candidates to envision what they could potentially gain by a career in the Marine Corps, regardless of their origins. In these artifacts, Berger, like Cates and Shepherd before him, pulled back the curtain on the highest echelon of Marine Corps mystique. Berger revealed his story of an average start in life, and his audience sees where he landed. Through this narration, his audience is offered a bond with his ordinary beginnings and a connection to his journey, exemplifying opportunities to impact the future of the Marine Corps.

Narrative No. 7: Rural and Ordinary Beginnings

GALLAGHER: Well, so where does the story begin for you? General Berger? Where are you from and what kind of family you grew up in? Was it a military family?

BERGER: It was not. I grew up in Maryland. My dad was in the Air Force for a couple of years, few years as an officer in the, like the late mid-fifties kind of timeframe.

As an engineer, electrical engineer, and then went into the National Security Agency [NSA], like in the early days when nobody knew was talking about it. So, he worked at Fort Meade all the way for 30-some years and retired from there. And I don't think he, I didn't know what he did probably until I was a captain, it just—went to Fort Meade, came home, and that was sort of all that anybody knew.

So, we, I grew up on a farm in Maryland and my dad went to Fort Meade and my mom ran our farm. And probably like you, I'm not afraid of very many things as a Marine, except for, except for my mom. And even now, you know, I wouldn't cross her. If I got sideways with her, she put me down like probably I deserve, but she did, she was capable of [it] back then.

So, all of my values growing up, came from—I am so fortunate because I had the

mom and dad and family that other people never had. I had that. So, I had my dad, is the smartest person that I have ever known. And my mom has all the fortitude and strengthened decisiveness and all I'd like to have.⁴³

Analysis:

- *History.* Describes the NSA during 1960s and 1970s as a rather invisible organization despite being near Washington, DC.
- *Biography.* Berger shared the circumstances of an idyllic family life when he was a child.
- *Culture.* Validates the very ordinary beginnings of most Marines.
- *Character.* He shares his devotion to his parents and the trait of loyalty.
- *Coherence.* The story is a nice summation of his upbringing and family circumstances.
- *Fidelity.* The quiet nature of his father and leadership of his mother rings true as an apparently stable middle-class family.
- *Persuasiveness.* Validates and inspires through the reality that every Marine has the opportunity to rise very high in rank.

Narrative No. 8: A Young Scholar

Berger continued by describing how, despite his ideal upbringing, he was not motivated for military service. He then found inspiration in a Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) gunnery sergeant, which seemed a random motivation, but that matters little considering the vulnerability shared.

And my dad told me what you should do is apply for ROTC because they'll pay for college and we weren't poor, but I thought this pretty great idea. So, I applied for an Air Force and Navy and Army ROTC and ended up within the ROTC scholarship. And that lasted all of one year. At Tulane. I actually, I barely lasted one year, the first year in New Orleans, just to be flat out honest, but fortunately for me, the

⁴³ Gallagher, "New Look at the Marine Corps with General David H. Berger," 02:17–03:51 min.

planets aligned because there was a gunnery sergeant at the ROTC unit.

And I had never met a Marine, never in high school, no recruiter, nothing. Didn't know anything about the military or Marines. Didn't know anything until I met him. And it was like, whenever that is, you know, when you run across that. That's whenever that is. I want sort of—that's my goal. So, then I tried to switch into the Marine Corps and dig out of academic probation at the same time.

So, after all that, then that was my, that was my background. I only went to the military because they paid for college and my dad suggested they will pay for it. And not only went into the Marine Corps because [I] ran into a gunny and that was, holy cow, I've never seen anything like that, but that was what I wanted to do too.⁴⁴

Analysis:

- *History.* Story describes the Navy and Army ROTC environment at Tulane University in the 1980s.
- *Biography.* Berger's service began after being inspired by meeting a gunnery sergeant.
- *Culture.* The leadership trait of bearing in that gunny launched a 40-year career in Berger, and probably others.
- *Character.* Both Berger and that gunny exemplify leadership principle no. 5: set the example.⁴⁵
- *Coherence.* The story nicely forms up the season of Berger's Marine Corps beginning.
- *Fidelity.* One Marine can inspire others to serve the Corps, as this example shows, so it does ring true.
- *Persuasiveness.* Demonstrates the attraction to the Marine Corps does not have to be complex, such as childhood study of battles; it can

be launched by encountering one inspiring person.

Narrative No. 9: Three Days to Four Decades

Berger shared an unexpected pact he made with his wife when he was first commissioned in 1981. Sharing an intimate marital detail is the kind of unique storytelling Fisher outlined in narrative paradigm theory.⁴⁶

GALLAGHER: And where were you taking it? Kind of in two-, three-year increments, early on in your career? And so, what was the moment at which you decided, okay, I'm going to make a full-on career.

BERGER: This actually, for me, I think it's different than for my wife, Donna. She, I think she would tell you, instead of a moment for me, we sort of had a pact.

I don't remember at what stage, but it was somewhere in there in the lieutenant kind of early captain stage where—And I don't know. I don't even know why I came up with this, but I said, if I ever have three days in a row where I don't want to go to work, then I'll get out happy, a happy man. And really you know, I'm proud of what little contribution I made.

So, I had one for sure, but I never had three in a row where I just don't want to go put my uniform on and go in. And that's, so it's not a day for me. I figured everybody has bumps along the way, but it's three days in a row. If you're hating to go to work. Okay. It's time to do something else. And I haven't had, haven't had three days.

GALLAGHER: That's amazing. And a testament to your wife that she was willing to serve the country by letting you do this job for so long.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Gallagher, "New Look at the Marine Corps with General David H. Berger," 04:08–05:30 min.

⁴⁵ "Marine Corps Leadership Principles," 2–6.

⁴⁶ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," 7–8.

⁴⁷ Gallagher, "New Look at the Marine Corps with General David H. Berger," 11:50–13:02 min.

Analysis:

- *History*. Describes Berger's personal Marine Corps history.
- *Biography*. Illustration of the impact of his marriage on his career.
- *Culture*. This narrative is an example of the leadership trait of endurance, or how endurance is achieved.
- *Character*. The core value of commitment and the trait of decisiveness are exhibited here.
- *Coherence*. Berger's personal criteria for professional success make a completed narrative.
- *Fidelity*. Although a rather intimate personal guideline, it is believable.
- *Persuasiveness*. A good example of the value of military spouses and their role in successful service.

Theory Applied to Commandants' Narratives

As the narrative analysis shows, these stories each pass the narrative paradigm theory tests, which means they are instruments of persuasion. Referring back to the Marine Corps' definition of strategic communication, these narratives are communication activities that provided accurate information that informed and educated about the missions, organizations, capabilities, needs, activities, and performance of the Marine Corps as an instrument of national defense. There is an exception for the COMMSTRAT definition's term *timely*, which was excluded as these leaders were discussing matters of historical, not current, significance. How narrative paradigm theory is used in civilian organizational leadership is a well-explored topic. The next section explores this topic in more general terms.

Commandants' Use of Narrative Coherence

Self-deprecation, lack of arrogance or insult to others, praise of the underdog, and praise of the criticized are all the types of checkboxes junior Marines—the ones whose lives are most at risk in combat and in training—look for when listening to a leader, and they are listening carefully. These nine stories pass the narrative

paradigm theory test of coherence with these narrative elements. Marines must trust their leaders implicitly, because when their leaders tell them to charge the enemy, they have to know they are doing the right thing for Corps and country. Marines develop that trust not only listening to leaders, but they also talk to those under their command in the exact same way.

Commandants' Use of Narrative Fidelity

Military training teaches observation of inconsistency, incongruence, and lack of "fit," so looking for narrative fidelity is something that comes naturally to Marines. Not unexpectedly, Cates, Shepherd, and Berger knew the general public would be their harshest audiences while knowing their Marine Corps audience would likely simply listen, rapt with attention, absorbing the stories of one whose experiences closely align with their own. In the case of these nine stories, any skeptic would likely be disarmed, primarily because the Commandants appear so humble, modest, and unpretentious. Even critical experts on the world wars in France and the Pacific could little argue with the personal experiences put forth by Cates and Shepherd. Their stories, although solid in fact and logic, primarily connect with the audience on an emotional level. That is the role the narrative value *rings true* plays in solidifying the Marine Corps' message through narration.

Perhaps upcoming research for these authors includes learning what aspect of Fisher's Marine Corps service may have influenced his theory. His experience in the Corps was not typical. Surviving the Battle of the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, which resulted in more than 17,800 U.S. casualties, under the direst battle conditions likely had a great impact on him. So, his integration of strategic storytelling into the process of decision-making brings many questions to mind for any Marine Corps historian, including what narratives Fisher heard that inspired his service.

Article Implications

Perhaps a deeper understanding of Fisher's theory can create something of a paradigm shift in military

leadership communication, especially for senior commissioned officers. In many ways, Commandants naturally adhere to Fisher's theory; they are inclined to spread the word of Marine Corps history, culture, and character through the strategic use of compelling narratives. Thus, it is reasonable to propose that Commandants intentionally use narratives as strategic communication to expand their audience, no matter how incremental. These narratives may attract highly intelligent technical young minds toward the Marine Corps, where they can advance innovation. This article has explored the idea that, without knowing they were doing so, Commandants of the 1950s instinctively applied the principles of narrative paradigm theory in their rhetoric and interviews. Cates and Shepherd are on a short list of distinguished Marines in the Marine Corps University Library, where future research may further explore how Fisher's narrative paradigm theory might be present in other Marine Corps narrations.

Conclusion

This article has explored how Fisher's narrative paradigm theory explains why storytelling has been an

effective and strategic communication tool employed by Marine Corps Commandants to engage audiences in support of the Corps.⁴⁸ First, narrative paradigm theory was dissected regarding the narrative use of history, biography, culture, and character, followed by discussion of the twin tests of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity—all amounting to the logic of good reasons. Second, in the literature review, consideration of Fisher's three essays in response to scholarly critique of narrative paradigm theory was followed by academic exploration of uses of story by organizational leaders. Third, the three artifacts, including nine stories, were presented, and analyzed as adhering to Fisher's theory. Finally, the implications of the article include recommending that Commandants consider narrative paradigm theory as part of their strategic communication toolkit due to its ability to attract people to the Marine Corps community and support the future of the Corps. The benefit to the Corps is that such storytelling breaks down hierarchical barriers, allows audiences to make sense of the problems the Corps faces, and motivates them to participate in the solutions.

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⁴⁸ Fisher, "The Narrative Paradigm," 364–65.