
Chapter 7.

Company-Grade Officers

Uniquely within the Department of Defense, all Marine officers start their careers with a rigorous six-month program of infantry leadership training. Regardless of their assigned MOS, the Marine officers' six months of training at The Basic School sets the foundation that enables them to lead in every clime and place. The role of a junior officer lies between the reality of inexperience and the expectation of leadership. Throughout an individual's time in the Marine Corps, different ranks, roles, and responsibilities will determine what missions a Marine will execute. However, each Marine officer is a leader from the start. Whereas "every Marine a rifleman" is the credo of the enlisted ranks, "every Marine officer is a rifle platoon commander" is the professional expectation of the officer corps. Articulating and translating knowledge from the officer training pipeline into action is part of the transformation for the junior officer.

The decisions they make as leaders will have outcomes, intended and unintended, that will affect the lives of the Marines they lead. As they learn from the outcomes of their own decisions, they will develop their own experience and wisdom for accomplishing the tasks before them. It is not enough to be a technical expert in one's specialty. Emotional intelligence, temperament, and the ability to work with Marines through their personal and

professional problems are part of being an officer. Unit culture is established at the highest level by the commanding officer, reinforced by junior officers and SNCOs, and exercised by all Marines throughout the unit. A junior officer must engage in these actions while exercising thoughtfulness, good judgment, and humility.

LEADING WITH HUMILITY

Marine officers must have the courage to lead in combat, the empathy to counsel a distressed Marine, the integrity to enforce unpopular decisions, and the humility to accept correction from more experienced enlisted Marines. Leaders are expected to be and do many things; most notably, they make decisions. By the nature of a military organization, subordinate Marines follow the lawful orders of their leaders. Without humility, young officers may become caught up in their own authority and lose touch with their moral obligation to their Marines.

Although final decisions are an individual Marine's sole responsibility, the deliberation is not. Junior officers are encouraged to consult with their nearest enlisted leader, solicit input from more experienced officers, and learn from the mistakes others have made before them before making a decision. There may be an assumption that when a junior officer asks for advice they are looking for the answer to the problem, thereby taking the perceived "easy" path. This is a fallacy, where the belief is that wisdom is only gained through one's own mistakes. By demonstrating humility and an open-minded willingness to

learn, the Marine officer shows respect for their fellow Marines, and respect for the responsibilities they bear.

There are no easy shortcuts to becoming a good officer. It takes a nose-to-the-grindstone dedication every day. No one leader has all the answers. Humbly seeking knowledge is a proactive, continuous process that requires pulling information from myriad sources. As leaders of Marines, junior officers can look to successes and failures they experience personally or learn from others as they adapt their own leadership styles and improve themselves and their Marines. One of the leadership principles the Marine Corps teaches is “know yourself and seek self-improvement.” The mantle of leadership weighs heavily on the shoulders of every officer and demands that each strengthen themselves to bear the load. Marine officers must persevere in providing discipline and leadership for their Marines, but also for themselves.

CONFIDENCE WITHOUT EXPERIENCE

Junior officers may have prior enlisted experience or may have attended a military academy, but most were college graduates commissioned through an Officer Selection Office or Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps program. Regardless of their commissioning source, each officer brings with them a unique background and various life experiences. The new officer may be inexperienced as a lieutenant, but rarely is inexperienced in life. Individuals can commission at any age between their early 20s and mid-30s. Officers may be single or married, with or without children, and come from many backgrounds. Some

officers have performed on national stages, traveled around the world, or owned a business. Each commissioning class creates officers of different religious beliefs, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and races. A common question college students ask officer selection officers is, “Do I need to have a certain major or degree to become a Marine officer?” The answer is no, meaning the Corps is full of leaders who are educated in fields of psychology, criminal justice, business management, journalism, and many others. Their individual circumstances combined with the training received as a candidate or cadet will influence how they lead a platoon of Marines. They lean heavily on their mentors and senior officers to help them in the profession of arms, but they may also use past and present life experiences to shape their decisions. Briefing skills can be drawn from experience in the performing arts, aggression in tactical engagements can be honed from competitive sports, and interpersonal conflict resolution can be recalled from coaching or advising.

Young officers who find their confidence waning due to a perceived lack of experience should not discount their own knowledge, experience, and skills; they can draw on times in the classroom, playing field, or conference room that required courage, discernment, or discipline. Additionally, although the ultimate responsibility for any decision made, and accountability for the outcome, will always fall on the officer, when time and circumstances permit, the officer should solicit advice and guidance from as many trusted sources as possible. “Marine Awarded Medal for Combat Valor” on page 7-5 tells the story of 1stLt Rebecca Turpin being faced with an enemy attack. Through

Marine Awarded Medal for Combat Valor

As a supply officer in 2009, 1stLt Rebecca Turpin, from Combat Logistics Battalion-3, led an 18-vehicle convoy between forward operating bases in Afghanistan. What should have been a one-day trip became more than 50 hours of attacks by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), small arms, and rocket propelled grenades. She called in air strikes and directed machine gunners through waves of attacks. She navigated IEDs, performed vehicle repairs, coordinated support with explosive ordnance disposal, conducted sweeps, gathered intelligence, redirected the convoy multiple times, and used Cobra pilots as eyes in the sky as she led her Marines to safety. Arriving at their destination (Forward Operating Base Musa Qala), Lt Turpin and her Marines began their real mission: supply distribution and vehicle maintenance to the Marines. She was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with “V” device for heroism or valor in combat.



1stLt Rebecca Turpin

“Throughout the mission, Lieutenant Turpin led by example and set the standard of calm under fire. She ensured that her Marines effectively fought their way out of dangerous situations and completed her logistics resupply mission. Her efforts ensured the delivery of vital combat logistics support to [Forward Operating Base] Musa Qalah while eliminating several enemy threats along the way.” —LtCol Michael Jernigan, Commanding Officer, CLB-3³⁰

the ordeal, she embraced her role as a leader while maximizing the skillsets and experience of those around her.

The Marine Corps identifies, screens, and trains officers through a combination of aggressive leadership, strong character, and sound judgment. The individual's unique character and personality will allow them to make the role their own. Positive traits must be cultivated and provided the opportunity to flourish in order for the new officer to sustain their transformation.

SUSTAINING SELF

Staff Noncommissioned Officer/Officer Relationship

Upon arrival at their first unit, junior officers will have subject matter experts around them to assist with developing in their new role. As they grow, they will build professional and personal relationships with those around them. Most notably is their relationship with the SNCO. It is among a SNCO's duties to mentor and train young officers. This mentorship is not just for the sake of the officer, but for the sake of the junior Marines whose lives the officer's decisions ultimately effect. As young officers find their foothold in the early years of their career, they can turn to the seasoned SNCO for support and guidance to sustain themselves through the harder times. The SNCO provides guidance from experience where the junior officer has none. The junior officer looks to the SNCO to help them make the right decision and to build their confidence through experience.

It is one thing to seek out a relationship and another to establish one and sustain it over time. Every relationship is different, based on the individuals involved and the scope of their responsibilities. There is no easy answer and there are no magic words to create the perfect relationship, but it is most easily started with open communication. An honest and genuine conversation sets the foundation for the relationship and for the officer's transformation from that of a student in training to a strong Marine leader. The SNCO will see the officer's desire to not just make the easy or popular decisions, but the right decisions. Marine officers who are eager to learn open themselves up to endless opportunities for training and growth, sustaining themselves through continual transformation.

SUSTAINING OTHERS

Command Climate

As leaders, junior officers have the responsibility for ensuring the well-being of their subordinates. What is not always understood is that they also have the responsibility of

“To all Marine officers into whose keeping the Corps is year by year entrusted....”

—The Marine Officer's Guide

looking after the future of the Corps. This may require making hard decisions that result in Marines being separated from the Corps, or easy decisions that allow individuals who have the potential for future leadership to be put into positions where they can continue to grow. It is important to continue developing those future leaders who will take up the responsibility after their

superiors move onto the next assignment. It is incumbent on officers at every level to create an environment in which their Marines will thrive, perhaps drawing inspiration from the Corps' 26th commandant, General Louis Wilson (see inset below), who set the ultimate example for creating a good environment. Small

General Wilson's Personnel Campaign

After the Vietnam War, the Corps had to address problems with drug use, lack of discipline, and low morale. General Louis Wilson, for which the headquarters building of Officer Candidates School is named, made it his agenda not only to purge the ranks of drug users and other non-performers but also vowed to improve the quality of Marines and equipment in the Corps, even, he said, if the only Marines who remained were himself and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps.



Gen Louis Wilson

He called on “all Marines to get in step and do so smartly,” then launched his campaign, discharging underperformers and promoting leaders. He changed recruiting standards, requiring that all enlisted Marines be high school graduates (which at the time was unprecedented in the Services), established the Air-Ground Combat Center at Twenty-nine Palms, California to improve training opportunities, and acquired new equipment, specifically the F/A-18 Hornet, which served the Corps for the next 50 years. Wilson's tenure also saw the commandant's billet given full membership as one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³¹

acts of encouraging and rewarding initiative will go a long way in instilling the responsible mindset needed for these future leaders to come into their own.

MCDP 7, *Learning*, provides key insight into the role of learning and leadership, positing that in order “to continuously improve, Marines take a focused, self-disciplined approach to career-long learning and instill a culture of learning throughout our Corps.”³² Marine officers must not only instill a culture of learning throughout the Corps, but they must also cultivate one within themselves. A Marine officer can never cease to exercise critical thought, sound judgment, and a deep-rooted commitment to leading Marines. The lives and welfare of enlisted Marines are at stake, and anything less than complete and total commitment to serving as a military officer within the profession of arms is a disservice to oneself, the Corps, and ultimately, the Marines under one’s charge.

Lead by Example

Every Marine officer accepts the substantial burden of leadership upon accepting their commissions. Officers without prior enlisted experience are in the unique position of being brand new to the organization, but also in charge of its members.

“It is not enough that you merely know a leader’s qualities and not enough that you proclaim them; you must exhibit them. To exact discipline, you must first possess self-discipline, and to demand unsparing attention to duty, you must spare none yourself.”

—The Marine Officer’s Guide

Marine officers are held to the highest standards of ethics because they must be trusted to make the right decision when it matters. Sustaining the transformation is not just about looking like a Marine in uniform but living up to what it represents. When in doubt, go back to the motto *Ductus Exemplo*—lead by example. Marines are not looking to their lieutenants for depth of experience. They look to them to be the embodiment of the standards of a Marine. Learning how to balance the uncomfortable pressure of high expectations while displaying the utmost respect for enlisted Marines' welfare, time, and morale is a foundational element of being a junior officer. Marine officers who demonstrate the standards they expect of their Marines sustain the transformation of those around them. They establish themselves as trustworthy leaders who embody the ideals of the institution.