

The Opportunity of a Generation

Leading Marines through historic change

by 1stLt D. Price Rowe

For 248 years, Marines have fought in some of the greatest battles ever recorded: Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Hue City, and Fallujah. In those battles, legends like GySgt John Basilone, MajGen Smedley Butler, and Cpl Kyle Carpenter fought with bravery and honor, helping to cement the Corps' legacy as a legendary warfighting institution. The story of the Marine Corps cannot be told absent the brave acts of our most famous heroes. Yet, for each of our famed warfighters, thousands of Marines have dutifully served both Corps and Country without fame and glory. For example, few of the Marine Corps' incredible feats could have been attained without the thousands of lieutenants—their names unknown outside their small circle of comrades, family, and friends—who gallantly guided their units into each of the Corps' battles.

Remember, for example, 1stLt John Presley O'Bannon, who led a successful attack at the Battle of Derna, becoming the first person to raise the United States flag over foreign soil during a time of war.

Also remember 1stLt Alexander Bonnyman Jr., who, at the Battle of Tarawa in 1943, bravely procured flame throwers and demolitions, allowing his Marines to destroy several enemy footholds. He eventually led an attack on an enemy shelter, which resulted in the destruction of over 100 Japanese soldiers, before he was killed in a "heroic stand on the edge of the structure, defending his strategic position."¹

From the founding of the Marine Corps itself, lieutenants have fearlessly led their Marines, no matter the mis-

"It will be necessary for officers not only to devote their close attention to the many questions affecting the comfort, health, morals, religious guidance, military training, and discipline of the men under their command, but also to actively enlist the interest of their men in building up and maintaining their bodies in the finest physical condition; to encourage them to improve their professional knowledge and to make every effort by means of historical, educational, and patriotic addresses to cultivate in their hearts a deep abiding love of the Corps and Country."

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sion—so daring were some of our predecessors that their stories continue to inspire today. Through their gallantry and professionalism, the lieutenants of the past proved that young officers can be entrusted to lead America's sons and daughters in any situation. These young officers will continue to lead, in peacetime or in times of war, wherever our flag unfurls.

For the first time in two decades, though, virtually none of the Marine Corps' approximately 6,500 lieutenants are leading Marines into battle. Instead,

Marine lieutenants are charged with the all-important task of preparing for war and achieving combat readiness.² With the reality of assured change facing the Marine Corps, lieutenants have never been more primed to prepare Marines for combat than now.

While the rest of the country enjoys its newfound peace, the Marine Corps prepares for the conflicts to come via *Force Design 2030*. There are many implications of carrying out a project as ambitious as *Force Design*: for example, the amount of human capital, time, and resources necessary to realize the project will be vast. But the Marine Corps has the assets needed to successfully navigate the challenge, that is, its junior officers. At Officer Candidates School, The Basic School, and the various MOS schools that follow, lieutenants spend nearly a year learning how to train and

lead Marines at the individual unit level. This training, coupled with the storied ability of lieutenants to lead Marines, signifies that Marine Corps lieutenants are well-prepared to spearhead *Force Design's* goal of “transform[ing] our traditional models for organizing, training, and equipping the force to meet new desired ends” at the tactical level.³

Influence on Marines

According to the most recent Demographics Report, in 2021 the Marine Corps employed around 6,800 active-duty lieutenants. Notably, the total number of Marine officers on active duty was around 19,500, meaning that first and second lieutenants comprise 35 percent of the officer corps. While this statistic does not come as a surprise (due to the type and scope of typical lieutenant billets, the Marine Corps requires a considerable force of active-duty lieutenants), it shows that lieutenants possess a considerable amount of influence within the Marine Corps. Specifically, because of their platoon commander relationship to Marines, lieutenants make a considerable impact on the training, education, and technical proficiency of thousands of individual Marines.

While it may seem improbable that a lieutenant could exert much authority over the direction of *Force Design*, a strategic-level policy shift, consider

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the compounding effect that hundreds of lieutenants could have on tens of thousands of Marines. Each year, approximately 1,700 Marines graduate The Basic School, taking with them six months of education on topics such as professional military skills, *esprit de corps*, and leadership.⁴ A vast majority of them report to the fleet to serve as platoon commanders, where they lead platoons with varying numbers of Marines. This means that each year, over a thousand new platoon commanders



Lieutenants will play an important role in refining Force Design concepts through their influence on field exercises. (Photo by Sgt Kallahan Morris.)

report to the fleet, where they impart the training and education they learned at the schoolhouse. Due to their recent education and proximity to the individual Marine, these lieutenants are in the best position to implement the educational requirements of *Force Design* at the tactical level.

So, if lieutenants are in a position to influence the future of *Force Design*, how can they do so in a meaningful and positive manner?

Relationships and Retention

Through *Force Design*, the Marine Corps aims to revamp and improve the Marine Corps on multiple fronts such as training and education as well as talent management. This is notable because it shows that the Marine Corps seeks improvement in any aspect that may enhance the health of the total force and lead to the success of Marines on the battlefield. In the coming years, lieutenants will have the opportunity to impact the implementation of *Training*

and *Education 2030* and *Talent Management 2030*.

As evidenced by the *2021 Demographics Report*, the percentage of Marines in the E2 and E3 paygrades doubles that of service members from other branches.⁵ Conversely, the Marine Corps retains about half as many service members as other branches in the E6 and E7 paygrades.⁶ This might indicate that the Marine Corps is slow to promote its members past the E3 pay grade, or it struggles to retain members past the E5 pay grade. Regardless of the cause, the Marine Corps is depleted of experienced Marines in the staff non-commissioned officer ranks. Therefore, the Marine Corps has rightfully focused on talent management as a key element of *Force Design*.

In an effort to retain talent, the Marine Corps is testing MarineView 360-Degree Leadership Review, a pilot program that could become an assessment tool for tomorrow's Marines. The Marine Corps plans to use MarineView360 as a program to develop and survey leaders by pulling feedback from Marines' seniors, subordinates, and peers.⁷ If implemented across the Marine Corps, MarineView360 could be a powerful initiative to assess the performance of lieutenants while encouraging them to invest in their subordinates.

Lieutenants of The Basic School are already taught to know their Marines and look out for their welfare. However, according to the *Marine Corps Times*, the Marine Corps struggles to identify toxic leadership, potentially leading to issues with retention.⁸ MarineView360 seeks to redress this deficiency by, among other things, *requiring* lieutenants to know their Marines and look out for their welfare in the fleet. A potential advantage of the program is that, if for no other reason than to receive a good assessment, lieutenants may adopt leadership styles that promote a healthier work environment. In turn, as lieutenants promote, healthy leadership styles would be reinforced and increasingly prevalent among the higher ranks. Eventually, the payoff would be noticed by improved retention and a happier, healthier force.

Aside from the potential implementation of MarineView360, junior officers may have other incentives and opportunities to invest in their Marines. Through *Talent Management*, the Marine Corps is pushing to improve the overall quality of life and quality of leadership for Marine families. Among other things, *Talent Management* focuses on realizing Marines' needs, such as housing, childcare, and familial requirements. As the first officer in many

Marines' chains of command, lieutenants will have a prime opportunity to grow interpersonal relationships with their Marines to ensure their needs are met. In building these interpersonal relationships with their Marines,

As the Marine Corps continues to forge ahead with *Force Design*, lieutenants will play a key role in participating in the studies necessary to refine key concepts. For example, first and second lieutenants will almost certainly play an

Through field exercises, young leaders will be able to lead their platoons through hyper-realistic battlefield scenarios to test new tactics emerging from Force Design.

perhaps lieutenants can promote better relationships between officers and enlisted, which may improve morale and produce an enhanced buy-in to the Marine Corps' mission.

Testing and Implementation of Force Design

Even more than relationships and retention, an intensely debated aspect of *Force Design* is the restructuring of the force. According to the *Force Design 2023 Annual Update*, “[b]etween July 2019 and December 2022, we executed 25 wargames and 42 integrated planning teams with subject matter experts from across the Marine Corps.”⁹

influential role in the evaluation and refining of new strategies that emerge from wargames. Through field exercises, young leaders will be able to lead their platoons through hyper-realistic battlefield scenarios to test new tactics emerging from *Force Design*. The information gleaned from these studies will permit the Marine Corps to polish *Force Design* theories and, in turn, potentially save the lives of thousands of Marines in the future.

It is no secret that the future of *Force Design* has been fraught with uncertainty. In *The Case for Change*, Gen Berger acknowledges that the entire defense community found itself at a crossroads in 2020.¹⁰ This uncertainty is further evidenced by the dozens of issues requiring further analysis in *Force Design*-related publications and continual updates to *Force Design* concepts.

Similarly, a future fight in the littorals would also be filled with uncertainty. In a world trending toward military technology with increasing range and lethal effect, the next littoral fight may be unlike any experienced before. Thus, it is vital that young officers be capable of leading effectively to guide their Marines through the coming years of transition. By leading with confidence and competence, young leaders will be able to instill the same sense of confidence in their Marines.¹¹ In this, the success of the lieutenant will be the success of each Marine, and the success of the Marines will be the success of our Corps.

Conclusion

Today's young officers have the



1stLt Mursuli, platoon commander, Company I, 3/7 Mar, conducting training to validate the company's proficiency while fully integrating all weapons systems of an infantry battalion.
(Photo by LCpl Aaron Harshaw.)



Marine lieutenants will continue to lead from the front, as they have done for 248 years. (Photo by LCpl Joseph E. DeMarcus.)

Importantly, though, lieutenants will get to participate in studies that will shape the future of our Corps and inevitably save the lives of countless Marines.

unique opportunity to lead the Marine Corps through a paradigm shift. Current lieutenants will bridge the gap between junior enlisted and senior officers. Through *Talent Management*, good lieutenants will grow interpersonal relationships with their Marines and realize their Marines' needs. Additionally, through potential programs like MarineView360, lieutenants may get the privilege of receiving constructive feedback so that they may lead Marines more effectively in the future. Importantly, though, lieutenants will get to participate in studies that will shape the future of our Corps and inevitably save the lives of countless Marines. Like the thousands of lieutenants before them, today's lieutenants are up to the challenge.

For 248 years, the American public has entrusted young officers with their sons and daughters. This should not change. While the future of *Force Design* still retains elements of uncertainty, today's lieutenants are well equipped to lead Marines through the change.

Notes

1. Staff, "Alexander 'Sandy' Bonnyman Jr." *Congressional Medal of Honor Society*, n.d., <https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/alexander-sandy-bonnyman-jr#:~:text=For%20conspicuous%20gallantry%20and%20intrepidity,20%5B%2D22%20November%201943.>
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
4. Staff, "The Basic School for Marine Corps Officers," *Officer Candidates School Guide*, November 27, 2021, officercandidateschool.com/2021/11/27/the-basic-officer-school-tbs.
5. Staff, "2021 Demographics Report: Profile of the Military Community," *Military OneSource*, 2021, <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/2021-demographics-profile/>. Eleven percent of enlisted Marines fall into the E2 paygrade, while 25 percent of Marines are in paygrade E3. Compare this to the Army (4.5 percent in E2 and 11.4 percent in E3), Airforce (2.5 percent in E2 and 14.7 percent in E3), and Navy (4.9 in E2 and 13.9 in E3).
6. Ibid. Seven and a half percent of enlisted Marines are in paygrade E6 and 4.8 percent of Marines are in paygrade E7. Compare this to the Army (12.3 percent in E6 and 7.2 percent in E7), Airforce (13.4 in paygrade E6 and eight percent in E7), and Navy (15.1 percent in E6 and 6.7 percent in E7).
7. Staff, "360 Degree Leadership Review Pilot Program," *Marines.mil*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Messages/Messages-Display/Article/3399647/360-degree-leadership-review-pilot-program>.
8. Philip Athey, "Here's How the Marine Corps Plans to Oust Toxic Leaders," *Marine Corps Times*, August 19, 2022, www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2021/11/09/heres-how-the-marine-corps-plans-to-oust-toxic-leaders.
9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Force Design 2030-Annual Update*, (Washington, DC: 2023).
10. David H. Berger, "The Case for Change," *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, No. 12, (2022).
11. Richard Neal, *What Now, Lieutenant?: Leadership Forged from Events in Vietnam, Desert Storm and Beyond* (London: Fortis, an Adducent Nonfiction Imprint, 2019).

