

Fourth Phase

The evolution of recruit training

by Capt Bryan McDonnell

Every generation of enlisted Marine has specific memories of their recruit training experience. The drill instructor demanding excellence, the repeated honing of marksmanship fundamentals, and incredibly difficult training. One does not need to look far to encounter Marines of any age decrying perceived changes to that fundamental process, and by extension, their recruit training experience and their identity as a Marine. The reality is that recruit training was, and is, an iterative process. The core ingredients remain untouched—Marine Corps recruit training is a transformational experience created through teamwork and shared adversity; however, Marines continue to adapt to changes in conflict, culture, and technology. In fact, recruit training as we know it manifested through a series of changes brought about by multiple commandants.

According to Marine Corps University, Marine Corps recruit training entered its infancy through policy established by Commandant Franklin Wharton back in the 1800s and continued to change based on the needs of the Marine Corps and the Nation. With all of its history and storied tradition as the second oldest post in the Marine Corps, Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island still only accounts for approximately 106 years of our 245-year legacy. History is important, but it should be honored, not revered. It cannot be enshrined to the point of standing in the way of progress. That goes against the ethos and spirit of what it means to be a Marine.

The “fourth phase” of recruit training is the next step in that long, deliberate evolution of training. Enacted by the 37th Commandant Gen Robert Neller in 2017 and fully implemented

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The purpose of fourth phase for the new Marine is to foster a framework of critical thinking and life skills rooted in the Lejeune Leadership Institute’s “Six Fs”: Fidelity, Fighter, Fitness, Family, Finances, and Future. (Photo by CWO Pete Thibodeau.)

in 2018, the fourth phase of recruit training was designed to improve and enhance the transformation of recruits into basic Marines and better prepare them for the challenges of follow-on training and service in the FMF.

To better understand the role of fourth phase, it is important to review the function of the previous phases. The program of instruction for both depots is the same, but their phase timeline varies slightly based on the requirements imposed by their location. For simplicity, the basic breakdown below follows Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island’s phase variant.

The first phase of recruit training exposes recruits to our core values of honor, courage, and commitment, with an emphasis on breaking down the individual and creating an environment where teamwork can be fostered. The expectations for physical training and academics are established during this phase, and recruits are exposed to the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program and close order drill. Recruits are also assessed on their ability to swim and are trained in various swim techniques that account for equipment loads and the amphibious nature of Marines.

The second phase further reinforces the platoon model over the will of the individual and lays the groundwork for fundamental marksmanship skills. Recruits continue to master how to act and think as a platoon during team week, and repeatedly drill marksmanship basics during grass week. Second phase culminates with Table 1 rifle qualification.

Third phase builds on the groundwork established in the first and second phases by incorporating basic warrior training, which exposes the recruits to the austerity of the field and allows them to employ various tactics and in-

leadership development and are not isolated to recruit training. Together they contain the guidance and programs intended to continually hone Marines as they progress throughout their career. Incorporating the six “Fs” more deliberately into recruit training provided foundational elements that can be sustained as new Marines progress further through the entry level pipeline and their career.

Historically, when recruits went through three phases of training, the transition from recruit to Marine occurred closer to their transition to the next stage of entry level training. While

sion of the future Marine Corps. The Marine Corps is moving quickly to align with that mission—divesting itself of tanks and evaluating many processes that have been in place for years. The Commandant specifically outlines in the *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance* that training and education must evolve from an industrial age model to an information age model. He goes on further to explain that professional military education must move away from a methodology of “lecture, memorize facts, regurgitate facts on command” to a model that supports “think[ing] critically, recognizing when change is needed and inculcate a bias for action without waiting to be told what to do.” Fourth phase begins fostering that critical thinking and bias for action at the earliest possible opportunity, better preparing new Marines to adapt to their life in the operating forces and for success at educational opportunities further down the road. Critical thinking is not a gift; it is a muscle group that must be continually exercised to prevent atrophy.

As Marine Corps leadership continues to explore distributed operations as a necessary requirement for a future Marine Corps facing off against a complex array of threats and challenges; critical thinking, confidence, and the ability to act decisively will increase in significance and may tip the balance between a Marine’s life or death. Fourth phase imparts the significance of those skills as early as possible to our greatest asset—our junior Marines. Recruit training will undoubtedly continue to adjust and change as the requirements of the Marine Corps and our Nation change, but the necessity of maximizing our investment in the future leaders of the Marine Corps never will. Do not despair in the face of change. Marines continue to adapt and will certainly overcome.



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formation learned in previous phases. The recruits also execute Table 2 rifle qualification, completing their basic marksmanship instruction. Finally, recruits prepare for and undergo the Crucible, a grueling 54-hour evolution with reduced sleep and food. The Crucible also challenges the recruits to step into various leadership roles where they must think critically while employing the skills they have learned over the course of recruit training. This is the crowning moment of recruit training, and its completion marks the transition from recruit to Marine. The Crucible is another great example of change; prior to 1995, it did not exist, and recruits became Marines on graduation day by virtue of being addressed as such by their senior drill instructor. Now the Crucible plays an integral role in making a Marine and holds a special place in the memories of individuals who undergo recruit training.

The main focus during the creation of fourth phase was to refine the new Marine with framework fostering critical thinking and life skills, rooted in the Lejeune Leadership Institute’s six “Fs” (Fidelity, Fighter, Fitness, Family, Finances, and Future). The six “Fs” are the functional areas of Marine Corps

recruit training prior to the implementation to fourth phase exposed new Marines to the programs and information falling under all six functional areas, it was spread out differently throughout the twelve-week process; the implementation of fourth phase enabled more uniform delivery of that information and better postures new Marines for future success.

The Commanding General of Training and Education Command, in October of 2018, requested a review of fourth phase by the Center for Naval Analysis (CAN), the Federally Funded Research and Development Center for the United States Navy and Marine Corps. CNA determined there were certain adjustments necessary to further refine the fourth phase concept. CNA’s findings serve as another example that Marine Corps recruit training is not static in nature, again reflecting the iterative nature of recruit training and the importance of flexibility. The process of recruit training allows and demands continuous refinement in order to make the Marines able to meet the rigors of combat and our mission as an expeditionary force in readiness.

In July 2019, the current Commandant Gen David Berger laid out his vi-