

Lessons Forgotten

Marine Corps Recruit Training

by LtGen Jack W. Klimp, USMC(Ret) & Col Warren Parker, USMC(Ret)

Operationally, the Marine Corps has never let the American people down. From Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Inchon, and Hue City to Fal-lujah and the Helmand Province, the Marines have consistently proven themselves ready to, in LtGen Krulak's words, "do something useful" for our country and be "dramatically and decisively successful."

Unfortunately, that has not always been the case in our treatment of recruits. On no less than three occasions over the last 60 years, the Marine Corps has violated America's trust. The Ribbon Creek disaster of 1956 resulted in the drowning of 6 recruits. A combination of indefensible incidents in the mid-70s caused our people and the Congress to question that "unfailing alchemy" for transforming young Americans into Marines and nearly resulted in the dissolution of the Marine Corps. Most recently, the death of a recruit at Parris Island led investigators to find a serious pattern of maltreatment, abuse, and hazing of both recruits and junior DIs (drill instructors).

At approximately 2030 on the evening of 8 April 1956, SSgt Mathew McKeon, a DI, marched Platoon 71 into the dark, muddy, and hazardous waters of Ribbon Creek, thrusting the Marine Corps into a fight to preserve recruit training. Six recruits were drowned that night.

The media immediately focused on the Marine Corps and its training practices.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Randolph Pate, flew to Parris Island and promised that the DI would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Some at HQMC advised the CMC to do nothing—it would go away. Col James Hittle, the CMC's Legislative Assistant, cautioned otherwise. Sensing

>LtGen Klimp was an Infantry Officer who served at all levels of command and staff. He also served as a Company Commander and S-3 RTR, MCRD San Diego; CO, Recruiting Station Phoenix, AZ; CG, MCRD, Parris Island; CG, Marine Corps Recruiting Command; and Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

>>Col Parker was an Infantry Officer who served as a Platoon Commander, Company Commander, Battalion S-3, Battalion XO, and MEU (SOC) S-3. He also served as a Series Commander/Company XO/OIC, Field Training Unit, MCRD, Parris Island; CO, Recruiting Station Macon, GA; CO, 6th Marine Corps District; Chief of Staff, Marine Corps Recruiting Command; and EA to the DCMC Manpower and Reserve Affairs.

"We exist today—we flourish today—not because of what we know we are, or what we know we can do, but because of what the grassroots of our country believes we are and believes we can do . . . while the functions which we discharge must always be done by someone, and while an organization such as ours is the correct one to do it, still, in terms of cold mechanical logic, the United States does not need a Marine Corps. However, for good reasons which completely transcend cold logic, the United States wants a Marine Corps . . . likewise, should the people ever lose that conviction—as a result of our failure to meet their high—almost spiritual—standards, the Marine Corps will quickly disappear."

—LtGen Victor H. "Brute" Krulak

the potential calamity on the Hill, he rushed to brief Senator Richard Russell, the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman, and Congressman Carl Vinson, his equally powerful counterpart on the House Armed Services Committee. Mr. Vinson declared that he expected a thorough investigation and genuine action to fix the problem—no cover-ups. He made it clear

that he knew there was a real problem, and the Marine Corps needed to fix it fast. Compounding all of this was the fact that 1956 was an election year, and the Marine Corps itself could become an issue, putting its very existence in jeopardy.

Marine Corps leadership moved quickly to implement reforms designed to ensure that abuses like Ribbon Creek

would never happen again. Recruit Training Commands were created to be commanded by brigadier generals directly appointed by and answering to the Commandant. Officers were designated to oversee recruit training down to the series level. DIs were more carefully screened and trained in DI Schools. The number of DIs per platoon increased from two to three. The role of the DI was reframed to emphasize example, leadership, persuasion, and psychology in the process of recruit training. A special training company was created to provide remedial training to recruits needing additional physical conditioning, motivation, education, or medical rehabilitation. The campaign cover was introduced to recognize the new norm of professionalism and specialization of the DI billet.

Almost 20 years later on a mild and calm Saturday, 3 January 1976 to be exact, a single, distinctive “pop” of an M16 rifle shot was heard at the Parris Island Rifle Range. From 50 yards away,

the shooter, a DI, pointed the weapon and yelled to the target, “I’m going to kill you!” The target, a recruit, had reason to believe the threat given that he had, over the course of his first month at Parris Island, been pushed into wall lockers and slammed against walls by his DIs. He had been made to repeatedly jump from the roof of the 10-foot high wooden instructional sheds at the range. He had been threatened with death. Seeing the rifle aimed at him, he reflexively put his hands up in a futile move of protection. The bullet hit his left hand between the index finger and second fingers, exiting through the fleshy part of his palm. The target—Pvt Harry Hiscock. The shooter—Sgt Robert Hinson, DI. A cover-up involving both DI and recruits immediately commenced.

The month before—6 December 1975—on the West Coast, SSgt Harold Bronson, the Duty DI for Motivation Platoon, MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot) San Diego, conducted

pugil stick training for those assigned to the platoon. There were too many “malingerers” in Mote Platoon, and his goal was to “make them fight.”

Pvt Lynn McClure, 20, had come to Motivation Platoon from the Correctional Custody Platoon after a period of unauthorized absence. McClure was a 10th grade dropout who had held a series of odd jobs back home in Texas. He had been arrested for theft and public drunkenness, and he had been a patient in a state mental hospital for a short period. McClure attempted to enlist in the Army in September 1975 but was rejected. After two attempts to enlist in the Marine Corps, he was accepted. Almost immediately upon arrival at MCRD San Diego, it was apparent that he was completely unsuited for military service, particularly the Marine Corps.

SSgt Bronson ordered McClure into the circle for a pugil stick fight. He ordered two larger recruits into the circle as well and started the fight with his



New recruits arrived at the train station in Yemassee, SC. They were then taken to Parris Island. (Official Marine Corps photo, ID: 150615-M-AB123-001.)



Gen Robert H. Barrow. (Photo by GySgt G.W. Heikkinen, 5 July 1978.)



Gen Louis H. Wilson. (Photo by SSgt Kline, 11 October 1978.)

whistle. The two recruits overwhelmed McClure. SSgt Bronson urged them on, chanting, "Kill, Kill." He yelled for McClure to fight. McClure was knocked unconscious and rushed to the Depot dispensary, later moving to Balboa Naval Hospital. He died on 13 March 1976 from traumatic brain injury.

In Washington, DC, Gen Louis H. Wilson, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, embarked on a quest to improve the quality of the Marine through better recruiting and training upon assuming office on 1 July 1975. His background included a tour as Officer in Charge, Recruiting Station New York City; District Director, 6th Marine Corps District; and Commanding Officer, The Basic School. He knew that the Marine Corps faced a "crisis of quality" well before assuming duties as Commandant. Gen Wilson's trusted deputy in overseeing his quality initiatives was LtGen Robert H. Barrow, who had served as a DI and the Commanding General, MCRD Parris Island.

Hiscock's shooting along with the death of Pvt McClure created yet another crisis for the Marine Corps, bringing into question its ability to recruit

and train an elite, high-quality force in the all-volunteer environment. Recruiting fraud and malpractice to make the "quota," abuse, hazing, injury, and death during recruit training shook the Corps to its foundations.

Gen Wilson was summoned before Congress in late May 1976 and grilled over the shooting of Hiscock and the death of McClure. He made a solemn promise to Congress and, by default, the American people that abuse of recruits would not be tolerated. All Marines and recruits would be treated with "firmness, fairness, and dignity."

The key changes made by Gen Wilson were to assign two general officers at each depot, ensuring one would be physically present at all times; place two officers in each Series to ensure "veille to taps" coverage; require psychiatric examinations for all DIs and Series officers; require personal interviews of each recruit by the Series officers twice during training; ensure the presence of a Series officer at all physical training, rifle range, and close combat training; and elimination of the Motivation Platoon. Wilson's theory was simple—"if they need motivation, kick them out."

One of the most significant changes was the creation of the Eastern and Western Recruiting Regions under the command of the Depot commanding generals. One officer would now be responsible for both the recruitment and basic training continuum.

Simultaneously, LtGen Barrow, as the Manpower chief, ensured that only the highest quality officers were assigned to recruit training by personally reviewing each officer's record during the assignment process. Gen Wilson and LtGen Barrow realized that the Marine Corps itself hung in the balance. Losing our "crown jewel" of recruit training to a consolidated Armed Forces training system was a real possibility being discussed in the Congress.

Fortunately, the solid leadership, credibility, and convincing testimony of Gen Wilson alongside the promise to Congress and the American people of new reforms saved the Corps once again. It should also be noted that, with Gen Wilson's approval and after LtGen Barrow's personal screening, dozens of company grade officers were swiftly moved to the MCRDs from Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton;

many leaving their families on as little as four days notice. After attending Series Commander School, they were assigned to recruit companies. These officers contributed immeasurably to stabilizing the leadership and supervision at the Series level on both Depots.

Now, 40 years later, another recruit death. Pvt Siddiqui fell from the third story of a recruit barracks and subsequently died of his injuries. Twenty plus Marines are facing disciplinary action. A regimental commander and two sergeants major have been relieved. A battalion commander faces potential court martial. Congress is, once again, pressing for answers. A DI stands accused of abusing recruits while under the influence of alcohol by putting the recruit in a clothes dryer and repeatedly calling him a terrorist. Pending disciplinary action, he was put back to work in a recruit platoon. Beyond the death of Pvt Siddiqui, there have been 377 hazing incidents reported between January 2012 and June 2015. One third of them have been substantiated.

It has been over two decades since the second general officer was removed

from the Depots. One brigadier general splits time between recruiting and recruit training. The second Series officer was eliminated some years ago as well, only returning after the latest incidents. A marked absence of officer leadership and supervision crept into recruit training over the years between the Wilson/Barrow initiatives and the present. In fact, officer supervision came to resemble the post-Ribbon Creek, pre-McClure period. Key commanders with limited troop leading experience were assigned to the Depots. The MCRDs became a place where officers outside the combat arms could be rewarded with commands.

Officer leadership, supervision, and oversight are critical at the Depots. A strong officer presence in recruit training ensures compliance with training directives, policies, and procedures, thereby protecting recruits and DIs who are vulnerable when focused on teaching and may fall victim to tunnel vision and poor judgment during the "heat of the moment." Officers with troop-leading experience at the small unit level are key to supervising the

process. Generals Wilson and Barrow understood this. That is why they basically doubled officer presence at Parris Island and San Diego.

Complacency has played a role as well. With no Ribbon Creeks or McClure-/Hiscock-type incidents, all must be well at the Depots. Competing priorities for general officers, experienced company grade officers, and the desire to provide opportunities for command have certainly influenced decision makers. The demands of two wars over the last decade and a half have placed tremendous stress on our manpower system.

As in the past, the Marine Corps is responding to the challenge. There is an increased officer presence and supervision in recruit training. The mandatory suspension of any Marine being investigated for recruit abuse, hazing, or maltreatment has been affirmed. Better visibility and review of investigations has been mandated. The assignment process for DIs and officers has been modified. The cessation of any practice based on differentiating between DIs of differing experience lev-



A DI shows recruits different training items, circa 1956, Parris Island. (Official photo ID: 150511-M-AB-123-001.)

els, to include a “zero tolerance” policy for “hat hazing,” has been mandated. Mental health process and procedures are under review.

In the words of Gen Edwin A. Pollock, “The three most important places in the Marine Corps are the two recruit depots and The Basic School.” Marine Corps leadership must recommit to placing our best officers at the MCRDs. The Commandant should be clear in his guidance to the Deputy Commandant, Manpower and Reserve Affairs, that only our best company grade officers who have demonstrated successful troop leading experience will be assigned to the recruit training regiments.

Command screening for recruit battalions must be refocused to assign officers into those positions of trust who have successfully demonstrated leadership of Marines in the field. We cannot afford to place officers in these critical billets in order to allow equal opportunity for command across MOSs. Proven troop leaders are critical when commanding dozens of talented, motivated, and ambitious NCOs and SNCOs. The Commanding Officers, Recruit Training Regiments, should be personally chosen by the Commandant much as we currently do with the CO, Marine Barracks, Washington, DC; the CO, TBS; and the CO, Officer Candidates School.

The requisite numbers of Marines must be provided to Drill Instructor School to keep staffing of the recruit battalions/companies at 110 percent. Failing to do so results in many NCOs and SNCOs serving beyond their normal three-year tour due to shortages, simultaneously creating situations where Marines have little to no time between recruit platoons. Three years should be the maximum tour for a DI except in the most extraordinary circumstances, but only with the concurrence of CG, Training Command.

A second general officer should, once again, be assigned. They should have recruiting and/or recruit training experience.

The remaining Wilson/Barrow initiatives should be fully implemented including providing the assistant series



Shooting incidents have occurred during recruit training. (Photo by LCpl Sarah Stegall.)

commander and company executive officer.

The history outlined above should be taught at all Marine Corps schools, including the Marine Corps University. It is key that the history not be lost, diminished, or ignored. We have, in the past, repeated the error of believing that the challenge has been resolved, and we can move on. In the era after the Korean War and prior to Ribbon Creek, Parris Island had become a backwater for assignments and key billets were held by officers at the end of their careers. As we moved further from the McClure/Hiscock tragedies, many of Wilson/Barrow initiatives were allowed to atrophy. We cannot allow the possibility that the next will be our last. In the words of our current Commandant:

We pledge to train them with firmness, fairness, dignity and compassion ... Simply stated, the manner in which we make Marines is as important as the finished product.

Finally, the Commandant should carefully consider appointing a “Senior Advisory Council on Recruit Training.” This Council would consist of retired general officers/colonels who would meet quarterly or semiannually to review recruit training, provide the CMC with another “set of eyeballs” on the two recruit depots, and provide

continuity to the institutionalization of the Wilson/Barrow/Neller initiatives, effectively institutionalizing lessons of our past and ensuring the initiatives. Members should be drawn from those retired officers with “hands on” experience in recruit training and recruiting.

The retention of recruit training as we have known it over the past century is key to “Making Marines.” As Gen Charles C. Krulak simply stated, “The individual Marine IS the Marine Corps.” We cannot have a higher priority than the assignment of our very best to the key leadership positions in recruit training. Only by learning the history and implementing and institutionalizing the key reforms will we continue to preserve our proven system for “Making Marines.”

>Authors’ Note: The authors are grateful to the following sources for inspiring, influencing, and providing notes for this article: Lt-Gen Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret), First to Fight, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 1984); Keith Fleming, The U.S. Marine Corps in Crisis: Ribbon Creek and Recruit Training, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1990); and Eugene Alvarez with Leo Daugherty, Parris Island: The Cradle of the Corps; A History of the United States Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina, 1562–2015, (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2016). 