

When They Come Knocking

The burden of leadership

by Maj Ryan Pallas

The enormous gravity of our chosen profession is never easily articulated in the written or spoken word. I have pondered countless nights how to convey the burden of leadership, or more plainly, the responsibility of being a Marine, to family, friends, and fellow Marines. This work is an attempt to remedy that shortfall. I must admit it is a flawed and incomplete work—and to no fault but my own. We are a storied culture, and this is an attempt to add to that story.

Throughout our lives, we are held accountable to those who knock on our door. This can occur metaphorically and physically. Metaphorically, it signifies the daily measurement of our ability to serve in specific roles while meeting or exceeding the expectations of those around us. Our daily interactions are defined by a particular bond or title: son, brother, husband, father, subordinate, peer, superior. Our ability or inability to answer these knocks can produce consequences—sometimes fatal.

Throughout my career, I have identified three knocks: *the personal/professional, the enemy, and the actual*. The personal and professional fall within the metaphorical category and are expectations set by our families, friends, and fellow Marines and measured by how well we satisfy those expectations according to others and ourselves: “Am I a good son?” “Am I a good husband?” “Am I a good Marine?” The measurement of these tasks is not easily quantifiable. Nevertheless, the daily requirement to perform well in these roles persists throughout a lifetime, reflected in our legacy. This is true for any role we play in life—what continues to remain after

>Maj Pallas is a Marine and CH-53 Helicopter Pilot. His tours include Miramar, CA, Yuma, AZ, Kaneohe Bay, HI, and Quantico, VA. He currently serves at Headquarters Marine Corps in Quantico, VA.

our passing is the test of a life lived in the service of others. The goal of any leader is the continued success of their Marines, even in the leader’s absence, whether in garrison or combat.

The professional aspect evolves further into the daily role we model as Marines—from first thing in the morning until our head hits the pillow at night: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

At the gym or the grocery store, we are constantly evaluated by leaders, peers, subordinates, and—for those serving in a joint capacity—other Services. Consistency in these roles is infinitely more challenging than it seems and is something I took for granted as a young lieutenant. For example, subordinates can sometimes fail to appreciate a colonel with 28 years of service prepared to lead, mentor, and perform every day, fully aware another promotion is absent from their future—something I observed when working on a large staff. However, this is the consistency we should all strive to achieve. We as leaders must be ready for the unknown to arrive at our doors every second of



Marine Corps officer candidates with Lima Company, Platoon Leaders Class 2nd Increment, Alpha Company, and Delta Company, walk across the parade deck after completing Officer Candidates School (OCS) on Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA, 14 August 2021. Friends and family in attendance show their support during the OCS Class-237 graduation and commissioning ceremony. (Photo by Cpl Sean Potter.)

every day. There is no distinction between on and off duty. When we can no longer answer the knock, it is time for us to move on.

MajGen Ray “E-Tool” Smith, a Vietnam veteran serving during the Tet and Easter Offensives, spoke of this accountability. He discussed a Marine who gave the ultimate sacrifice leaving him to wonder if he turned out to be the type of leader this fallen Marine wanted him to be. This is a reminder of the expectations placed upon us as Marines and our chosen profession. I have found throughout my career being unable to meet the expectations of those you lead is far more disappointing than failing to meet the expectations of those you are led by.

The second knock, also metaphorical, is the enemy. We cannot choose the time or place when a non-governmental actor or peer adversary will act on their own accord, but we must be ready. The expectation has been, and always will be, Marines will answer the call. This comes at a great expense to the individual Marine: time away from home; long and sleepless nights; weekends at work; and absentee birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries when deployed. However, for all who wear the uniform, these are necessary and noble costs to endure. This burden is not borne alone. Our family and friends have endured many, if not more severe, hardships than our own. They endure the sleepless nights and long hours in silent service as their loved ones depart repetitively throughout a career, disrupting normal day-to-day lives. These knocks are never answered alone, which brings me to the last and most impactful knock any of us can receive.

It is often portrayed as a lone government vehicle, service members in dress uniforms, a chaplain, and a folded flag, walking silently to the door of an unsuspecting spouse or family to say, “On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation.” This knock is one Marines, families, and friends always hope to avoid. These knocks are met by fear, screams of anguish, tears, rage, or sometimes, overwhelming silence. For those who have been given the sacred duty of delivering such a knock,



A Marine Corps recruit with November 2 Company, 4th Battalion, Recruit Training Regiment, holds an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor during the Crucible on Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, SC, 3 December 2016. The Crucible is the final test of everything the recruits have learned during the recruit training process and the last event before becoming Marines. (Photo by LCpl Sarah Stegall/Released.)

it is an experience which cannot be accurately summarized within this article. The important takeaway is through our daily preparation and desire to meet the demands of the figurative knocks

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discussed previously, we can mitigate to the utmost of our abilities this final physical knock from occurring. The words of James Warner Bellah come to mind:

A dead soldier who has given his life because of the failures of his leader is a dreadful sight before God. Like all dead soldiers, he was tired, possibly frightened to his soul, and there is on top of all that never again to see his homeland. Don't be the one who failed to instruct him properly, who failed to lead him well. Burn the midnight oil, so that you may not in later years look upon your hands and find his blood still red upon them.

I hope to never fail in answering a knock at the door, or through my lack of preparation, deliver a knock to an unsuspecting family that their loved one gave their life for my own shortcomings.

I think MajGen Smith is right. As many of us do, I too, have a friend who gave his life in service to this country. I spend a significant amount of time wondering if I am the Marine today he would have wanted me to be and if the Marine Corps is better with me around. My hope is to convey this burden of service to the men and women I serve side-by-side with, like those who took the time to instill this responsibility to me. I would also like to convey to my family and friends as a son, brother, husband, friend, and father, that the burdens endured are not mine alone. I want to thank each of them for their unwavering support as they remain silent pillars of strength I draw from in my own repeated attempts to answer this call, usually coming at their expense.

My greatest fear: my inability to answer the door when it knocks.

