

Learning Through New Technologies

A case for podcasts as credited PME

by MSgt Jeremiah Johnson

Military professionalism demands that individuals and units find time to increase their professional knowledge through professional reading, professional military education classes, and individual study.¹

In 1997 when those words were first published, Marines were limited to only a few resources for individual study—namely, books and magazines. While there is a tremendous amount of information available in your local base library, and probably on a shelf at your battalion headquarters, few Marines then, like now, habitually utilize that resource. In late 2004, audio blogging started to catch on thanks to recent advances in digital technology. Today, we call them podcasts, and according to one survey in 2017, there are more than 115,000 English language podcasts alone listened to by 42 million Americans on a weekly basis.² Many of these podcasts are purely for entertainment, made for a niche market like fantasy football enthusiasts or SciFi fans. However, many podcasts focus on issues important to us as leaders and mentors of Marines, podcasts on military history, leadership, and warfighting. In 2016, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Robert Neller, put out a call for disruptive thinkers to challenge the status quo. To that end, I say our current ideas about professional military education (PME) need to be immediately challenged.

Let me first say that I by no means am advocating for Marines to stop reading. I am an ardent reader and enjoy

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recommending and discussing books for, and with, my junior and senior Marines alike. What I am advocating for is the addition of podcasts as an acceptable facet of PME. *MCO P1610.7F* defines PME as, “Commitment to intellectual growth in ways beneficial to the Marine Corps.” Traditionally, this has been done through formal schools, distance education, resident PME, and professional reading. However, *P1610.7F* also states that PME can be achieved by “involvement in learning through new technologies.” My interpretation of that passage leads me to the conclusion that new technologies (e.g., podcasts) can, and in many cases should, be considered a valid source of PME—so much so that they should be included in the MROW PME/Self Education portion for grading in Section G (1) of the Fitness Report.

I recently began to re-read *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*. I downloaded a PDF copy onto my tablet and did a quick search for any cliff notes or study guides to read in addition. That search returned a

podcast led by retired LCDR and Silver Star recipient Jocko Willink and retired LtCol David Berke, the first Marine F-35 Squadron Commander. I clicked on the link and began to listen. Over the next 11 plus hours, broken up into 4 episodes, I listened and read along with my copy of *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, as two highly decorated and experienced officers read and discussed its 145 pages. As they discussed its relation to their own battles and wars fought, its application in civilian life and business, and the need for leaders to understand and to creatively practice and apply its central tenets, I not only read it again but found myself engaged in the discussion and took away exponentially more understanding than if I had spent the two or so hours just reading from the pages.

While an all-around education is important, the subjects that our Marines concentrate on that can improve their leadership and warfighting abilities are of most concern.³

After recently reading *Killer Angels* (Shaara, 1974), a historical fiction, I then watched the fifth episode of Ken Burns the *Civil War*, titled “The Universe of Battle,” focused almost entirely on the



BruteCast

DOD Reads and the Krulak Center's "BruteCasts" are both valuable podcasts for professional military education. (Images by DOD Reads and the Brute Kulak Center for Innovation and Creativity.)

battle of Gettysburg. By using these alternate sources of media, this "broad spectrum of forums,"⁴ I furthered my understanding of the event beyond just what I could have learned from the book alone. I did this in exactly the same way as using Jocko podcast episodes 187–190 to further my understanding of *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*. More traditional methods of PME or leader led discussions may actually be doing our Marines a disservice. According to studies as early as 1969 and as recently at 2012, only 10 to 30 percent of the population retains information from a lecture and can apply that information.⁵ Imagine spending a few hours listening to an interesting podcast, asking your Marines to do the same, and having a meaningful discussion about its content vice a leadership lecture about what you alone read or heard. Many of our junior Marines already listen to podcasts. Leaders can exploit this and use it to further provide PME not only for our Marines but ourselves as well by directing the use of a media source that many Marines are already choosing to use on their own. Some podcasts may only last 20–30 minutes; however, a series on a single topic may last many hours. Juxtapose that with a book such as *Starship Troopers* (Heinlein, 1987), which may take five to six hours to read. A 20 to 30-minute podcast is much more likely to be listened to and the information retained, resulting in



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better discussions and better opportunities to connect with, mentor, train, and—most importantly—understand how your Marines think.

I understand some may say that podcasts do not count as PME. How can they not if they meet the intent of the Performance Evaluation System by improving leadership and warfighting abilities? We should consider that the "F" marking for PME on Fitness Reports stipulates that the MRO, "Makes time for study and takes advantage of all resources and programs."⁶ Podcasts are a resource that we, as leaders and mentors, should be utilizing, and all Marines should receive PME credit for. A quick search in any of the readily available podcast apps or a google search returns dozens upon dozens of military leadership, tactics, and history podcasts—all of which provide Marines a ready source of knowledge. The *Marine Corps Gazette* alone has several dozen podcasts by senior Marine leaders such as Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Berger and other influential leaders like former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis. The *Commandants Professional Reading List* also now includes podcasts in addition to its usual selection of books. We should encourage Marines to download these podcasts. We should discuss them and use them as a tool just like we would with any book.

Maj Breck L. Perry in his article "Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare through PME" outlines five lines of effort concerning PME—history, will, leadership, adversary, and advanced warfighting—with the end state being to create the best thinkers, decision makers, trainers, planners, and teachers in the Marine Corps. He advocates under unit PME methods that "PMEs are recorded and archived for a podcast that Marines can access and reference at their leisure."⁷ The method with which Marines learn new ideas and information should not matter; what matters is the ideas and information that they learn. Podcasts are a virtually unlimited source of information, all presented in a format that our junior Marines have likely been using since they were in middle school. Marines and Sailors of all ranks have the responsibility to educate themselves;⁸ they rightfully should receive PME credit for their efforts because they take the initiative to seek information, make the time to listen, and creatively learn through new technologies.

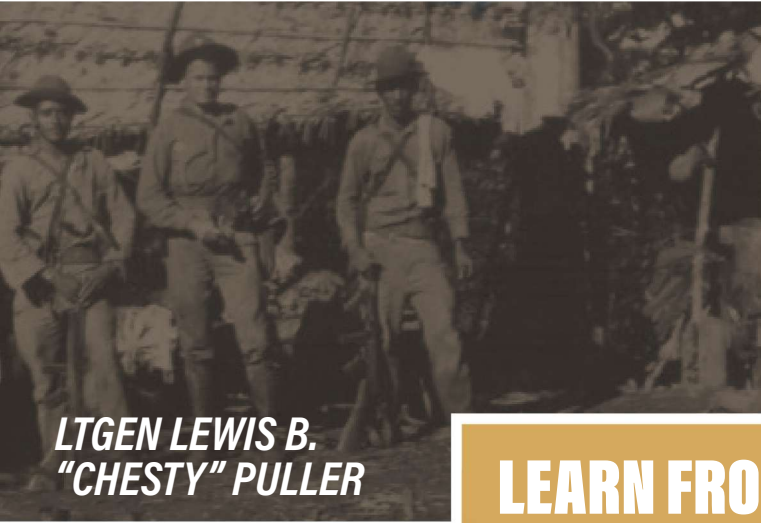
Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 2017).
2. C.B. "The Rise of the Podcast Adaptation," *The Economist*, (October 2017), available at <https://www.economist.com>.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO P1610.7F*, (Washington, DC: November 2010).
4. Maj Breck L. Perry, "Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare Through PME," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Washington, DC: August 2019).
5. Gen Robert Neller, *Frago 01/16 Advance to Contact*, (Washington, DC: January 2016).
6. *MCO P1610.7F*.
7. "Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare Through PME."
8. *Frago 01/16 Advance to Contact*.



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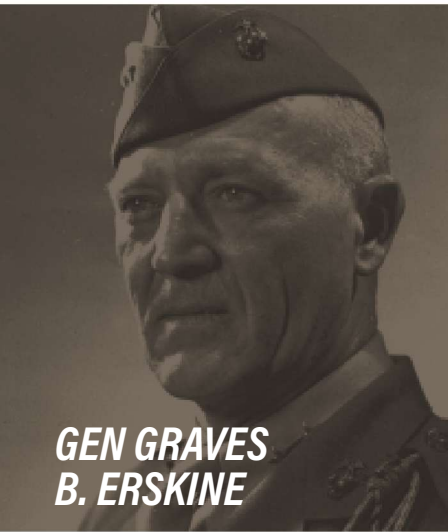
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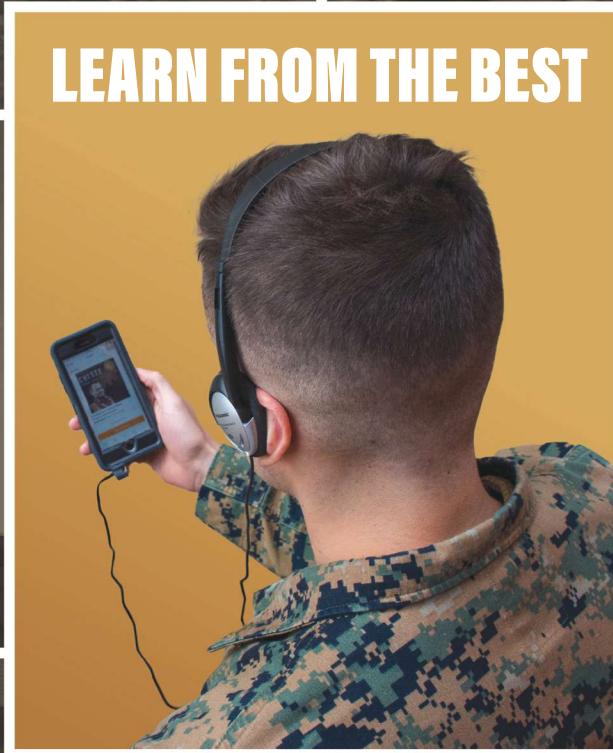
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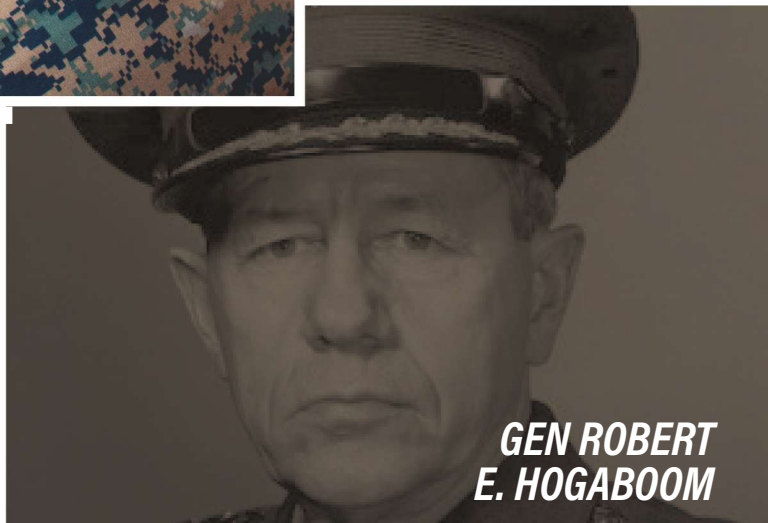
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