

Survivorship Bias

Applying an old concept to new opportunities for leader development

by Col Kyle G. Phillips

“The responsibility of the commanders for their commands is absolute except to the extent that the commander is relieved of responsibility by competent authority or by regulations. While the commander may delegate authority to subordinates for the execution of details, such delegation of authority does not relieve the commander of responsibility for the safety, well-being, and efficiency of the entire command.”¹

Command is the pinnacle of leadership within the Marine Corps. From the earliest days of the Basic Officer Course, the Marine officer aspires to command. Every level of command throughout the career of an officer presents unique challenges. As an officer progresses, the responsibilities and scope of leadership in command increases. The Marine Corps provides the most dynamic and successful leaders to prepare future leaders for command. Lacking in the preparation for the incumbent leaders is an acknowledgement that even the most celebrated and respected officers in command are vulnerable to ethical, moral, and professional missteps that result in the relief of the commander and a degradation of unit combat readiness. Training and educating Marines to prepare for the multitude of challenges in command is critical to ensure the success of the commander, the Marines within his charge, and the combat readiness of the unit.

The focus for the Marine Corps must always be combat readiness. Combat readiness applies to both the operating forces and the supporting establishment. Each Marine must be *employable* and *deployable* within their MOS and as

a basically trained Marine rifleman. Therefore, commanders at all levels and throughout the multitude of organizations in the Marine Corps must focus on combat readiness and support the readiness of Marines throughout the force. Commanders must also ensure the health, safety, and welfare of their subordinates. Command presents the greatest professional satisfaction but can also be accompanied by the highest levels of stress and frustration for military leaders. Task saturation within this environment creates unfortunate opportunities for frustration, bias, arrogance, or egoism that may lead otherwise talented individual leaders to make bad choices.

The Marine Corps has a well-established progressive path to command. Company-grade officers will exercise limited command authority while being held accountable for their Marines' actions, readiness, and adherence to standards. The professional military education program provides leader-

ship education through career-level and intermediate-level school. Field-grade commanders are most often “board-selected” by seasoned leaders who evaluate their record and their potential to serve as a battalion- or squadron-level commander with increased authority and responsibilities. After selection and either prior to or immediately after assuming command, selected leaders attend the Commandant’s two-week Cornerstone Course to prepare those for the challenges of command.² A review of a recent lieutenant colonel command screening board highlights the competitive, merit-based system of how Marine officers are placed in positions of command.

The Fiscal Year 2019 Command Screening Board had a selection rate of 27 percent of lieutenant colonels who were eligible and had not removed their names from consideration.³ If the entire eligible population is considered, the selection rate is closer to sixteen percent.⁴ There is little doubt that those selected are capable of success in command. So, what is the Marine Corps to make of the fact that selected commanders, in such a competitive system, find themselves relieved of command?

As highlighted by the former Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, the majority of reliefs do not involve the considerations of technical competence within their unit or MOS.⁵ So with all the training, education, and selection criteria for commanders, does the current level of reliefs simply represent “normal” command attrition? An

>Col Phillips is the Commanding Officer of Headquarters and Support Battalion, Marine Corps Installations East-Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune. He has served as a Battalion Commander at the School of Infantry-East as well as the Staff Judge Advocate for 2d MarDiv. The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of DOD, DON, or the Marine Corps.

argument can be made that if there were more opportunities to study and learn from the reliefs of otherwise exceptional commanders, it could prevent the attrition described above.

Within leader development, there exists a certain survivorship bias that could impede learning from known hazards that commanders could encounter. Leaders who have risen through the ranks provide their experiences and approaches to incumbents in order to educate future commanders. However, there is remarkably little attention focused on failures and what future commanders can learn from failures, both organizationally and personally.

Survivorship bias is commonly associated with Abraham Wald's study of World War II bombers. The story is almost mythical in the lesson of *beware the data that you see*. Bill Casselman provides an excellent summary in his article "The Legend of Abraham Wald."⁶ As described in the article, Wald was assigned to evaluate enemy hits to Allied bombers in order to allow Army Air Corps personnel to determine how best to armor the airplanes to increase survivability. Although most of the bombers studied had fragmentary and bullet holes through the wings, fuselage, and ailerons, Wald recognized that the study of these bombers likely indicated that armor in these areas was not necessary—the bombers, of course, survived to make it back. By mathematically randomizing the hits, or so the story goes, any increase in armor was best applied to the cockpit and engines, as these more vulnerable—and critical—areas likely were more catastrophic:

What you should really do is add armor around the motors! What you are forgetting is that the aircraft that are most damaged don't return. You don't see them. Hits by German shells are presumably distributed somewhat randomly. The number of damaged motors you are seeing is far less than randomness would produce, and that indicates that it is the motors that are the weak point.⁷

As commanders, discovering the weak points is critical to not only personal success but, more importantly, the success of the organization. Survi-



Evaluating the failures of similarly positioned commanders is a valuable part of leader development. (Photo by LCpl Sean Evans.)

vorship bias may leave those preparing for command vulnerable to missteps, mistakes, or faults in the execution of their command tours. A deeper learning through evaluating the failed experiences of other similarly situated com-

dialogue on the factors that contributed to their relief. Although institutionally it is essential that the Marine Corps hold commanders to the highest moral, ethical, and professional standards, the Marine Corps must also recognize the

... the Marine Corps must also recognize the fallibility of the human experience and work to mitigate this for future generations of leaders.

manders would greatly enhance leader development. A leader who consciously evaluates how they approach leadership challenges by reflecting on both successes and failures will be equipped to understand potential friction points, account for chance, external influences, and environmental factors, and ultimately be more capable to face similar challenges in the future.

To overcome survivorship bias in leader development, it is not enough to simply provide a summarized list of those commanders who were relieved and the generic basis for the relief. A deep approach to leader development would seek out those former commanders who were willing to publicly discuss their case and engage in a meaningful

fallibility of the human experience and work to mitigate this for future generations of leaders.

An example of how this highly personal experience of learning through failure is found at the Admiral Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership. The Stockdale Center sponsors the leadership Capstone program for 1st class midshipmen preparing for graduation and commissioning. One of the most successful (and impactful) events is when a former Naval Academy graduate and Marine aviator presents his experience when he was involved in an aviation mishap that killed twenty civilians in Aviano, Italy. The presenter very openly and frankly discusses the professional and ethical failings and provides the

human and environmental factors that led to the tragedy and the subsequent actions resulting in his conviction at a court martial for conduct unbecoming an officer.⁸ The experience not only exposes the vulnerability to failures for the soon-to-be-officers of the Naval Academy but also provides an opportunity to reflect on their own values. The desired outcome is that by presenting scenarios not only of successes but also failures, future leaders will recognize when they reach a crossroads in their leadership experiences and choose the path of ethical and professional actions that benefit the Naval Service, their subordinates, and themselves.

Survivorship bias exists in leader development. The *Planning Guidance* of the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps emphasizes that we must be a learning organization. The Commandant further stated that “[t]hose selected for command have earned our special trust and confidence and are account-

able for all decisions and actions. When commanders fail to measure up to standards, they will be held accountable.”⁹ Future commanders should be equipped to learn from those who came before them in order to minimize blind-spots. The perception exists that the relief of commanders is shrouded in secrecy with the broadest reasons for the sacking released to the general public. Privacy considerations rightly shield those who have gone down a path resulting in the loss of trust and confidence to lead from continued shame and ridicule. However, if those who have stumbled are willing to share their experiences, the Marine Corps should embrace the opportunities to provide those leaders for future commanders to learn and develop. By providing opportunities in a non-attribution forum to frankly and honestly discuss not only the basis but the underlying circumstances involved in a relief for cause, the Marine Corps could also advance the efficiency and

effectiveness of our force and better care for the most important asset—the individual Marine.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Manual*, (Washington, DC: 1980).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 465/18 FISCAL YEAR 2019 CORNERSTONE: THE COMMANDANTS COMBINED COMMANDERSHIP COURSE (FORMERLY THE COMMANDANTS COMMANDERS PROGRAM AND SPOUSES WORKSHOP)*, (Washington, DC: August 2018).
3. Fiscal Year 2019 LTCOL CSB STATISTICS.
4. Ibid.
5. Hope Hodge Seck “70 Percent of Marine Commander Firings This Year Due to Bias, Disrespect,” *Military.com*, (September 2018), available at <https://www.military.com>: “Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Glenn Walters said that five of the seven Marine commanders removed from their posts to date this year displayed a ‘nexus’ of these cultural issues. ‘It’s because of command climate, how they treat people, how they treat people of different genders[.]’”
6. Bill Cassleman, “The Legend of Abraham Wald,” American Mathematical Society, (June 2016), available at <http://www.ams.org>.
7. Ibid.
8. Ed Timperlake, “The Challenge of Dealing with PTSD: Capt Joseph P. Schweitzer Comes to Terms with a Dramatic Accident,” *SLDinfo.com*, (February 2014), available at <https://sldinfo.com>. See also, U.S. v. Schweitzer, Crim. App. No. 200000755, (CAAF 2009).
9. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).



What Will Your Legacy Be?

It only takes a little planning to leave a legacy that reflects you and your values. When you make a planned gift to the Marine Corps Association, you help us fulfill our commitment to serve the men and women who protect our freedom.

For more information, visit our website mca-marines.org/legacy-gift-planning



If you have already included MCA in your will or estate plan, please let us know by contacting our office at **(703) 640-0175**