

Learning Without Losing

A conversation with Gen Robert B. Neller,
37th Commandant of the Marine Corps
by Col Christopher Woodbridge, USMC(Ret)



The entrance to CMC's office in the Pentagon. (Photo by Abby Wilson.)

On August 23rd, Col Mary Reinwald, the Editor of *Leatherneck Magazine*, and I had the rare opportunity to interview Gen Robert B. Neller, the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In a discussion that was less “question and answer” and more of a broad conversation ranging from a recent visit with the Philippines’ Marine Corps and the story of the Samar Massacre and the Bells of Balangiga (for a summary of this subject, see “Duterte to US: Return Balangiga Bells,” *Sunstar Philippines*, Manila, 24 July 2017), to the streets of Okinawa in the 1970s, to present-day leadership and professional development, to some of the challenges facing today’s Corps, we shared over an hour with the Corps’ most senior leader. Throughout this discussion, it was clear that our Commandant’s focus is on setting all Marines up for success

on the battlefield, in training, in garrison, and in their professional and personal lives. The comments that follow highlight some of the topics that are on the mind of an authentic, no-nonsense leader who balances the pragmatism of experience with the ideals and values of our Marine Corps.

I don’t want to lose to learn. *After reading the book Legacy by James M. Kerr, which presents lessons in sustaining excellence in an organization based on the experience of the “All Blacks,” the New Zealand national rugby team, the Commandant saw distinct parallels in the two organizations’ approach to sustained*

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excellence, training, and physical fitness. He hosted the coaches of the All Blacks at the Pentagon and in Quantico to discuss this shared view. CMC was struck by Head Coach Steve Hanson’s statement, “I don’t want to lose to learn.”

I think a lot of us think that we have to have a failure to learn lessons and implement change. I think the sign of a good organization is if they are willing to learn without having a failure. You have to be introspective; you have to be self-critical and analytical. I think we are that kind of organization, but we can always get better. We should never be satisfied, even in areas where we are really good. If there is a way to get better, we must be willing to entertain it.

For example, information warfare and modernization of the force.

The MEF Information Group is going to replace the MEF Headquarters Group because I think there is a general recognition that information is an operational area where we compete every day. Whether it be in cyberspace or the use of information, everybody should understand that every network is under attack. My concern is that for the last 16 years we’ve operated with tactical success, and Marines have distinguished themselves as they have always done. Yet this environment hasn’t stressed us in certain areas because our adversaries haven’t had competitive capabilities in electronic warfare, cyber warfare, space, precision long-range or indirect fire. We haven’t necessarily had to watch the electro-magnetic signatures that we generate in operations. Everyone has to understand that the game has changed. In order to ‘learn without losing,’ you have to take advantage of the experience you have, but you have to be able to recognize the operation that you’re

in for what it is. Operations are probably never going to be like they were before and are unlikely to be exactly as you thought before execution. Every game we have is an away game, and we fight away games because we don't want to fight home games.

Everyone understands that modernizing the force is going to require every Marine to be smarter, more cognitive, more adaptive, more fit, more disciplined, more sober, industrious, and willing to commit like we always have been, but I think the degree that it's going to take for us to do this will need more from all of us.

Read more. *What specific changes would the Commandant like to see? An avid reader and strong proponent of professional reading and self-education, he has been personally involved in two updates to the Commandant's Professional Reading list. The reading list, originally developed by Gen A. M. Gray, our 29th Commandant, in 1989, has seen several books added by subsequent CMCs, but Gen Neller is the first to have revised the list twice during his tenure. The Commandant's emphasis on PME extends beyond professional reading to writing, battlefield studies, and participation in professional discussions.*

We'll probably look at the reading list every year. There's so much being written, and there's so much going on in the technical areas, whether it be artificial intelligence, robotics, unmanned systems, additive manufacturing, or cyber operations. And there are so many new military history books out there, I just got a copy of *Hue 1968* by Mark Bowden, and I actually served with some of those guys. General Cheatham, he was my regimental commander when I was a lieutenant, and General Christmas, General Downs, and General Smith were all company grade officers during that battle. I grew up with those guys.

I think it's particularly important today, if you want to understand the Pacific, to understand the WWII experience. The classic book *Marines and Amphibious War* by Isely and Crowl, although out of print, is a great book, and I want to put it on the reading list. It doesn't focus on just what happens when the Marines land. More impor-

tantly, it focuses on the logistics, the sustainment, and the planning. What's really amazing about that book is it talks about the feedback mechanism after every operation that allowed the Corps and the Navy to quickly identify lessons learned and implement change to prepare for the next operation.

I still read my *Gazette*. From time to time, I call the authors, especially when I find what they say is of interest to me, whether I agree or disagree. I think it's an important venue ... to exchange ideas constructively. I think one of the best articles was written by LtGen Victor H. "Brute" Krulak about how to dissent if you don't agree ("A Soldier's Dilemma," Nov 1986). If you don't agree, you are compelled, as a professional, to express your disagreement. But you should also have an alternative course of action, and you should be able to do that in a professionally tactful way. There's also been a lot written in the *Gazette* on leadership, and I think it's important to be reminded because sometimes people lose their way. I am very encouraged because we have a lot of junior Marines writing for the *Gazette*, and they have a lot of really good ideas.

I can't imagine why you wouldn't be a member of your professional association. It is a personal decision, but if you're a lawyer, you belong to the American Bar Association. If you're a doctor, you belong to the American Medical Association. That's your professional organization. In my mind, it's up to everybody to decide that, but if you consider yourself a professional, and if there's a journal or publication or organization that's there to support what you do in your profession, it seems logical to me that you would want to be a member. That's everyone's decision, but I would encourage people to participate.

Drink less. *We were not surprised to learn that, if our Commandant could "magically" change one thing about the Corps, it would be our collective relationship with alcohol since commanders at every level learn that alcohol abuse is the root cause of almost all behavioral and disciplinary problems.*

The things that concern me are the things that Marines do that are not

productive to their success in life or our operational capability. A lot of that has to do with their social behavior. When it comes to every negative behavior, be it sexual assault, domestic abuse, illegal drug use, or suicide, the great majority of events start with alcohol abuse. So, if I could change anything, I would have Marines be more responsible and respectful of their use of alcohol. I'm not telling them not to drink. They're grown men and women I trust, but I think we all need to make better decisions. We're all accountable. If I could give you some advice that has 100 percent chance of improving your success on this earth, would you be willing to take that advice? Yes, of course. You need to be more conscious of how much alcohol you consume.

PT smarter: *Gen Neller directed a comprehensive review of the Corps' physical training program which has resulted in the Force Fitness Instructor program and changes to the PFT and CFT. The Force Fitness Instructors are trained and educated not only in physical training but also in nutrition and injury prevention. Changes to the PFT have been historic and the results positive although not universally understood.*

Today, for the first time in the history of our Corps, we all take the same PFT and CFT. It's the same test. Just as we've always done, we norm that test for age and gender, but it's the same test. Yet now there are widespread complaints about the test. What's the problem? We take the same test for the first time, and my sense, based on the results to date, is over time that the gender normed standards will become closer. The number of women who did pull ups was greater than I think we expected, and the scores that they got were higher than we expected. Next year, with the Force Fitness initiatives in place, it's going to get even higher, and when it does, then we will raise the bar again and close the difference in the normed standards.

Readiness. *In his travels around the Corps, the Commandant meets many younger Marines who are eager to deploy. They ask if the Corps will return in force to Iraq or Afghanistan and whether we will answer the threats of North Korea.*



Success is going to be a series of small changes which are going to make us an overall better Marine Corps. (Photo by Abby Wilson.)

One of the things about the last 16 years was the certainty of deployments, so it was easier to gain attention and focus. With less certainty, this focus is more challenging now, but my answer is still that we all joined a warfighting organization. Your job is to get ready to go to war if I call you tonight. This is a mindset, and for Marines, a way of life. Are you ready to go mentally? Is your family ready for you to leave? My goal is to try to get every Marine in their first term an opportunity to go somewhere and do something that's going to be hard.

If you're in the Pacific, three of the five challenges to the Government of the United States and peace and security of the world are right there—terrorism, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China. If there were ever a time when you have to be mentally prepared to go, now's the time. Tell me you're ready to go, that you've been trained, and that you've been focused. Show me that you've been studying, you're physically, mentally, and spiritually ready to go and face the ultimate test of combat.

On leadership and being Commandant. *At this unique time in our*

history, we have several former Marine officers in very senior positions in the United States Government. What does this say about how the Corps develops leaders? What is your priority for the Corps leaders, and what do you enjoy most as Commandant?

To me, it's an interesting historical phenomenon, but if you look across the fabric of America, there are a lot of people, not just in government but industry and business also, who have experience as Marines. Almost to a person, they will tell you part of their basis for success is what they learned in the Corps. Hard work pays off, but you have to be disciplined, and you have to exert effort. You have to be loyal to the people who are around you. You've got to be a good teammate. You have to pay attention to detail. You've got to have a plan. You can't slack off, and you've got to manage your personal life. The Marine Corps, if nothing else, teaches you that you can make it through adversity. You will have adversity in your business and you'll have it in your life and you can figure it out. You just can't quit—that's not an option. No surrender. No quit.

I've told Marines since I've been in this office that my goal is for them

to be successful in their life. That's my responsibility. Your responsibility is to work hard to try to achieve that success. The job of leadership is to facilitate you achieving your goal of success.

We all have equity in making sure you're successful, and there are thousands of Marines out there who want to help every other Marine. So, you're not here by yourself. There's a solution to every problem. Let's define the problem, just like you were taught. What's the problem? Come up with a course of action. Execute the plan and move on. The sun will come up tomorrow, and you're still a U.S. Marine.

I've been in the Marine Corps at a time when we hated each other just because of the color of our skin. We were literally killing each other. I see nothing positive that comes out of that for the Marine Corps or any member of the U.S. military or the Nation. If I'm lying out there in the street wounded, I've got to know that you're going to come out there and get me. And if you are out there, you've got to know I'm going to come out there and get you—no questions asked about race, religion, man, or woman. You're a Marine. You're American. I've seen the Corps when it wasn't that way, and it does not make us more lethal or more combat effective, and that is what we're here for.

As Commandant, I'm happy that I can help people. I can fix things, sometimes not as fast as I would like, but if I ask a question about something, I usually get an answer. I can help Marines and their leaders get to better decisions. I'm hopeful. I believe in my heart that many initiatives, like promotion panels and changing the PFT and Force Fitness Instructors and some of the changes to entry-level training, will really make a difference.

I think success is going to be a series of small changes which, in the collective sense, are going to make us an overall better Marine Corps.

