

Breeding a Bias for Action

A student's perspective
by 1stLt Mackenzie Gage

“**B**e Bold,” these words were chosen by my Staff Platoon Commander as the first emphasized words in his Staff Platoon Commander's Guidance.¹ All of the successful military commanders we study in history, from Alexander the Great to GEN George S. Patton, demonstrated bold decision making. On the other hand, many military disasters can be attributed to timidity and hesitation in some way. *MCDP 1, Warfighting* states, “The Marine Corps style of warfare requires intelligent leaders with a penchant for boldness and initiative down to the lowest level.”² Boldness is an essential trait for success in maneuver warfare. The Basic School (TBS) preaches a bias for action as a key component of “being able to decide, communicate, act in the fog of war.” However, in practice certain aspects of the period of instruction can inhibit students' ability to develop a penchant for boldness.

Boldness is defined by *MCDP 1* as “unhesitatingly exploiting the natural uncertainty of war to pursue major results rather than marginal ones.”³ *MCDP 1-3, Tactics* characterizes bold behavior as daring and aggressive.⁴ Examples of boldness at the strategic level are relatively obvious, such as the Spartan King Leonidas deciding to block the Persians at Thermopylae rather than wait to assemble a larger army or Alexander the Great deciding to attack the Persians immediately upon his arrival at the battle of the Granicus. Both of these actions had major consequences that ultimately led to victory at the strategic level. Bold decision making at the tactical level is harder to identify,

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especially at TBS. The difference between tactical patience and indecision or hesitation often cannot be determined by looking at the outcome. Additionally, it is difficult to differentiate between an Officer Candidates School mindset, based solely on aggression, and legitimate bold decision making, involving judgment, daring, and initiative.⁵ *MCDP 1* states that boldness is based on a strong situational awareness.⁶ The field exercises at TBS provide students with the greatest degree of situational

awareness they will ever possibly have. Students know the enemy personally, know their tactics, techniques, and procedures, and generally can even deduce a window for when the enemy will attack or where the enemy is defending. So the question remains, if situational awareness is supposed to provide the basis for boldness, why do some lieutenants in the field and garrison, demonstrate a lack of a bias for action?

We cannot expect Marines to exercise boldness and initiative in the field when they are accustomed to being over-supervised in garrison. If Marines do not exercise initiative in garrison, they have no basis to do so while in the field. Initiative is a prerequisite for boldness.⁷ However, throughout the Programs of Instruction there are limited opportu-



Students must be allowed initiative and not be hamstrung by over-supervision. (Photo by SSgt Melissa Marnell.)

nities for students to actually exercise initiative. The most initiative many students took was planning a single-squad level physical training event. Meanwhile, a lot of commander's time and white space are spent sitting around in the barracks. The initiative to conduct a physical training program or work on Marine Corps Martial Arts Program as a small group often encounters resistance. These are perfect times to develop initiative and allow lieutenants to experiment with training ideas. TBS is one of the last opportunities in a Marine officer's career where they can fail and learn from it without real consequences. If student platoon staff had to legitimately plan to fill time productively, it would develop a sense of initiative amongst students that currently is minimized. There are plenty of resources available to do this: The Training Set for Fire Operations (a call for fire simulator), the Martial Arts Center for Excellence (Ramer Hall), technology filled classrooms, and a platoon of lieutenants with a mind full of ideas aimed at constantly improving themselves.

In the field, initiative is developed by the briefing process. Starting with TBS class 1-16, the platoon commander briefs his squad leaders and the squad leaders must then go brief their squads. This begins to develop initiative, but it can be taken farther. Evaluating both squad leaders and platoon-level billets will encourage them to take initiative at the squad-level rather than centralizing the "WIIFM" (what's in it for me) with the platoon commander by giving all of the key leadership billets a stake in the operation's success or failure. The debrief process for field operations and orders generates perceptions that can inhibit decision making analysis. Students are incentivized not to bring up valid points in front of evaluators simply by virtue of being labeled a "blue falcon." If the individual conducting the debrief is perceived to be a neutral non-evaluator, they may have more success soliciting constructive criticism at peer level—facilitating critical thinking and a real analysis on billet holder decision making. However, the root of the problem is a fear to take initiative. Students fear the repercussion from tak-

ing initiative because of the perceived subjective nature of assistant instructors grading for billet holders. There is a perception that assistant instructors grade differently, some harder than others. This perception has similar effects to a "zero-defects" mentality, in that it stifles boldness and initiative.⁸

This issue can be addressed with a slight change to the billet holder grading process. The same grading rubric can be used with modifications similar to how fitness reports are done. The perception can be mitigated by implementing an assistant instructors reporting profile, a relative value system, and a comparative assessment.⁹ An assistant instructor reporting profile and comparative assessment listing their average grade—high and low—allows a student to see how they actually did compared to other students. This can be differentiated by billet and by field exercise for even more accuracy. Currently, only seeing the numbered grade and comments from the assistant instructor facilitates the perception of subjective grading. The relative value system will compensate for grading differences between assistant instructors and will ensure the grading system was not subjective. Additionally, ensuring the students understand how they are being evaluated and why these tools are in place will mitigate the perception of subjective grading. Eliminating this perception will minimize the student's concern of self-protection which is critical to enabling students to experiment and be bold decision makers in garrison and in the field.

Developing a "bias for action" is the combination of a willingness to take initiative, act boldly, and accept risk. The value of this cannot be overstated. The 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Robert H. Barrow, spoke to a group of soon-to-be-commissioned officers and emphasized individual audacity as the key to future success. He defined audacity as "boldness of thought and action, which often contradicts established wisdom." "Institutionalized audacity" at the individual level can be attributed to the successes of the Marines (at places such as Tarawa), the Israeli Army, the tactical success of the German Army in World War II, and

Gen Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in the Civil War.¹⁰ These successes require the typical second lieutenant remains a risk acceptor.¹¹ We must cultivate the audacity to conceive bold strikes and the guts to carry them out. The more opportunities that can be provided to develop a bias for action and the less barriers to bold thoughts and action, the more successful officers we will breed. Therefore, developing our habit of thought is just as important as developing our technical proficiency.

Notes

1. Capt J.L. White, "Staff Platoon Commander's Guidance," (Quantico, VA: The Basic School, August 2015).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: June 1997).
3. Ibid.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: July 1997).
5. This thinking process includes falling in love with our plans, routes, and generally not thinking out our decisions using some form of a METT-TC analysis.
6. *MCDP 1*.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. The Basic School, "Fitness Reports," *B3K3738 Student Handout*, (Quantico, VA: The Basic School, September 2015).
10. R.S. Moore, "Institutionalizing Audacity," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 1983).
11. Capt C.A. Leader, "Risk Aversion and the Absence of Moral Courage," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: August 1983).

