

Bringing the War to Their Neighborhood

Cultural education and small unit combat capabilities improvements to enhance Marine training and engagement outcomes

by Capt Timothy M. Bagnell, USAF

In the 21st century, the source of our greatest opportunities also gives rise to some of the most insidious threats confronting us. Today, technology connects everyone who has a smart phone, placing the immense ocean of knowledge that is the Internet at their fingertips. It is here that our search for new strategies and tactics, as well as the nature of these threats, begins. There are three main areas of concern when it comes to applying the Marine Corps' ability to adapt and overcome new and dynamic circumstances to today's challenges. The first is on the home front, where the Corps can act to enhance the education and training of those new and aspiring Marines. Second rests with the relationships we have with our international allies and partners and finding ways to improve them. Third, the Corps must find new ways to enhance unit effectiveness on the ground in combat zones that maximize operational outcomes while reducing collateral damage and civilian casualties. What follows are recommendations for how to approach and take advantage of these complex situations.

On the home front, our Nation is in possession of the most technologically exposed and capable generation in its history. This generation has never known a world without computers or the Internet. Their experience has exposed them to a level and saturation of ideas and knowledge that could fill the total experience of entire generations of Americans before them. They also see the world through a lens that is more accepting of different cultures and ideas. While cultural biases will always exist so

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long as cultural distinctions do, we have a primed generation ready to engage with these other cultures in a genuine way that older generations, in general, are not as capable simply because of a lack of exposure.

There are numerous steps to take in order to capitalize on this unique set of circumstances, but all revolve around the central concept of cultural engagement and education. Cultural education for current and future Corps

leaders must become a focus of officer and NCO training. Their example will be most critical to the overall success of any such program. To quote GEN Colin Powell, USA(Ret),

The most important thing I learned is that soldiers watch what their leaders do. You can give them classes and lecture them forever, but it is your personal example they will follow.¹



Experiences of the current generation are more accepting and willing to engage with different cultures. (Photo by 2ndLt Michael Maggitti.)

Areas of conflict, both active and potential, and threats to our national interests largely stand as follows:

- Middle East region: Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen
- Africa-Arab North: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco
- Africa-Eastern Horn: Somalia
- East Asia/Western Pacific region: China, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Korea.

The Corps must implement specific training modules into the standard regimen of leadership training. This training cannot be simply an add on; it must be a key stone around which the leadership curriculum stands. At its core, this training must engage students with the importance and applicability that cultural knowledge brings to a unit in terms of increasing its field effectiveness through increased understanding of the diverse perspectives they will encounter in the field. The intensity of this training will vary based on the level of leadership an individual Marine will engage with in the field, but all Marines must receive some form of this training. In whatever form or level of training each Marine receives, there are three main facets to consider—content integration, prejudice reduction, and knowledge construction process.² These aspects will allow for a focus on each mission's critical region using a tested and consistent teaching methodology that will empower Marines to take ownership of this education. More specifically, this training must focus on local and regional customs, those strategically-significant areas outlined above (e.g., do not show the bottoms of your boots to Arabs). This will include guidelines on greetings, expectations regarding acceptable physical contact, inter-gender interactions, food and dietary customs and expectations, and a solid core of linguistic training. This training cannot simply deal with the "what" of these cultural artifacts but must identify the "why" of them. This last piece is perhaps the most critical as it represents a major gap in the capabilities of all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces.

In operational theaters like Afghanistan and various points in the

Middle East and Africa, the military's need to rely so heavily on local translators has introduced a liability into our current operations. Not so much from the perspective of possible "blue on green" incidents in Afghanistan, for example,³ but that the political realities of our Nation have left these brave souls who have helped us behind in a country where their assistance to our soldiers places them, and their families, at risk. Our increasingly-public rejection of people from these regions stands as another propaganda tool for those forces hostile to us, allowing them to spread their narrative that Americans are untrustworthy and dishonorable, among other things. This situation jeopardizes our ability to recruit new translators or reenlist existing ones. Therefore, the Corps must engage in a program that emphasizes the languages of those regions that are likely points of engagement. This is not to say that every squad will have their own translator, but Marine officers and NCOs must have familiarity and knowledge of critical, functional phrases within a given language. Placing intelligence specialists within a platoon structure who are deployable with squads will be ideal in terms of flexibility of deployment that working at such an operating level represents.

Outside of regions that require a heavy "on the ground" presence of U.S. troops, the need for intelligence gathering cultural specialists still remains. For regions like the Western Pacific, where tensions are on the rise and the environment lends itself heavily to the unique operating capabilities of the Marine Corps, the need to have such specialized units ready to go is a critical preparatory step. Cultural training in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese will only serve to enhance the Corps overall operational readiness and, in the case of Japan, provides a much-needed opportunity to improve community relations between Marines based within what should be a friendly local population.⁴ Marines educated to function within these cultures will serve as invaluable ambassadors. Looking toward combat applications, such training will enhance the individual Marine's ability to work

directly with those local allies. In the case of China, such training will aid in intelligence gathering efforts, as well as many other field operations and foreign assets that such Marines may come to engage.

These same concepts apply to those localities throughout Africa. The complexity and myriad variety of the cultures within that vast continent place a detailed accounting of their content beyond the scope of this article. The principles outlined above—cultural education, linguistic training and familiarization, prejudice reduction—are applicable there as well, but the focus will either be highly specialized or very general depending on the evolving needs of the Corps involvement in any such regions.

A long-standing issue with such training is the matter of incentivizing Marines, both students and teachers, to take it seriously. Perhaps the most obvious incentive is to make Marines aware of the civilian applications such skills bring. All Marines must plan for the civilian lives they will one day return to, hopefully after a long and successful career with the Corps. People who can speak relatively rare languages (Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, Arabic, etc.) are in high demand in the business, diplomatic, and private security arenas, let alone other non-governmental organizations or non-profits. Laying out that these skills will be invaluable, and directly transferable upon their return to civilian life, will help bring more Marines around to the training and its merits. With that being said, you need people already familiar with the cultures in question as well as a primed audience from the afore-referenced modern generation.

The Marine Corps presently has access to civilian assets that will make implementing this training imminently actionable. Civilian contractors are one such option, but reservists and even faculty at schools where ROTC and JROTC units exist can come on board, especially for those programs that exist near to Marine bases. This brings us to the "primed audience." Scientific and academic studies have concluded that language and its associated

trappings are most readily learned at younger ages, particularly before young people enter their teen years.⁵ This is where JROTC programs stand as ideal points from which this training can be implemented. Obviously, it will not be as focused as that which is delivered to full-fledged Marines. There will be a secondary benefit from implementing this sort of training at this developmental level. For those who do not go on to join the Corps, they will be better equipped to positively engage with such people in their communities from a position of understanding and respect. This will, in turn, enhance the ability of those people to assimilate and adapt to life within the United States. This is one of the few concrete steps that Americans can take to begin to mitigate the prospect of homegrown radicals or lone wolf terrorists. It will also create a better-educated group of citizens who will have a better grasp of these complex political, religious, and cultural situations as they exist globally and locally. Lastly, a curriculum of this nature would be very appealing to most public, charter, and private schools, all of whom struggle to find new and creative programs that will enhance the learning experiences of their student bodies.

In this world of irregular warfare, ideologies are most effectively combated with ideologies and done so in those places where they are twisted to serve ends that would do harm to the United States and its allies. Educating current and future Marines to be leaders who can just as readily lead the charge up a beach as have tea with an Afghan chief or Japanese official is one of the most critical objectives the Corps faces today. Delay is not an option, these issues are too pressing not to move to achieve them with all speed and resolve. Such training will yield reciprocal results as those cultures we interact with from this position of authenticity and respect will be far more inclined to look at our culture and values with new eyes. The old adage that people “do care how much you know until they know how much you care” applies directly here. Taking the time to see things from another person’s perspective, particularly

an adversary, will always yield valuable results.

Speaking specifically to Japan and the recent troubles that have surrounded the Marine Base in Okinawa, there are several actionable steps to help with community relations. It is not in the nature of a Marine to hide when victory requires action. Therefore, Marines at the various camps around Okinawa should look for opportunities to assist in local community building projects as well as other needs that will have a lasting, positive effect on their surrounding communities. Repairing the frayed relationships here needs to be a high priority for the Corps, especially given the increasing tensions in the area. To this point, a reduction in the number of camps is necessary and the commands therein streamlined. This will engender goodwill by acquiescing to some of the demands of the people while strengthening those primary, mission-critical locations. In other words, use this controversy to achieve the Corps mandates to streamline or draw-down its operational forces while consolidating and strengthening its needed positions.

In addition, to reduce the stressors on Marines stationed in Okinawa, it would be beneficial to shorten deployment times and/or make transferring

to other duty stations, willingly or unwillingly, easier. By the same token, service to Okinawa will have to become far more common for Marines to accommodate this increased rotation cycle. Combining these two plans will improve the overall readiness of Marines based at Butler while simultaneously improving community relations, especially if done in conjunction with the proposed changes to the leadership education curriculum laid out above.

So far, points on revisions to the Marine Corps leadership curriculum have been emphasized, and a politically-sensitive situation has been addressed in a way that will benefit all interested actors. Lastly, this article will turn to examine what Marines do best—fight. Training Marines to function outside of combat is truly a critical objective, but in order to get to that point, Marines must be fully capable of ending any combat situation they find themselves in successfully. To this end, in addition to enhanced leadership training, the integration of improved battlefield assets and their rapid deployment to active units must stand as a critical priority. The proposals that follow are made because they will enhance a unit’s combat capabilities in a way that will reduce collateral damage and thus open opportunities to (re)



Marines and members of a partner nation observe MV-22 operations. (Photo by LCpl Savannah Mesimer.)

build relationships in those places where Marines are fighting today.

All Marines are marksmen, and there is said to be no more deadly weapon in the world than a Marine and his rifle. There are situations where even the best-trained marksmen will need enhancements and even the best shooter cannot put eyes on their target. First and foremost, you cannot effectively engage your target if you do not know who or where they are located. Enhancing communications capabilities through the existing integrated battlefield structures will benefit all units in the field. For example, a unit commander's ability to prioritize targets and maneuver to assist other units will be enhanced through direct connectivity to drone assets in an area of operations. It is not recommended for field unit commanders to be able to directly engage targets using drone assets like the Predator, for various reasons. This interconnectivity, however, would make requesting such strikes from remote operators or local combat controllers more efficient as both the unit commander and drone operator would be able to share the same visual on a target. This will also improve combat outcomes by increasing target verification efforts and reducing errant strikes.

An existing technology that should be utilized more, especially through enhanced communications capabilities, are the switchblade class of drones. Currently, such weapons systems serve mostly as locally-controlled flying blocks of explosives. Like their larger cousins, however, there exists the real possibility of collateral damage and civilian casualties. This weapons system could be outfitted instead with a modified projectile system capable of firing multiple rounds before any recoil would affect the targeting of the drone. A "metal storm" or similar electronic firing system would be ideal for a small drone as it can effectively put multiple rounds on target. This would allow for the neutralizing of the target(s) with anything from LTL (less than lethal) rounds to self-guided miniature grenades like those used in the XM-25 weapons system. A further ammunition option that could be integrated is



Fins inside this sniper's bullet change the trajectory based on laser identification and can correct the flight path of the bullet 30 times per second. (Photo by LCpl Austin Mealy.)

the EXCATO round. This advanced, course-correcting ammunition allows for extreme accuracy and will extend effective ranges for .50 caliber rounds (which has its own applications for Marine snipers using the M107) to unheard of ranges.

When combined, the application of a squad-controlled drone capable of neutralizing a target with little to

... course-correcting ammunition allows for extreme accuracy ...

no collateral damage would be a game changer not only on the ground, but in the larger war of public relations that is waged everyday beyond the battlefield. If civilian casualties are reduced, then a major recruiting tool for terrorist organizations is likewise reduced. This will also expand the operational possibilities for drones outfitted with such precise munitions—imagine a predator outfitted with an EXACTO weapons system being capable of finding and neutralizing a single target with no unintended additional casualties. There is also a cost

saving dimension to the calculus of this proposed integrated weapons system, but estimates are not possible given the classified nature of the exact capabilities of these technologies.

Both of these systems will allow for Marines, and the U.S. military as a whole, to build stronger local relationships through a reduction in collateral damage and civilian casualties. The political and social fall out from such unintended casualties stands as one of the greatest political and social challenges partner nations face when they attempt to justify our actions within their borders. This also holds true domestically as U.S. citizens raise objections to these tactics. Lest we forget the lessons of Vietnam and countless conflicts before, the support of the people must be maintained for any conflict to be successfully pursued to a positive outcome.

In conclusion, never before in history has a nation been so well positioned and so well endowed with the resources, manpower, and untapped resolve to make positive change on a global scale as is the United States of America today. This opportunity to offer greater security to our allies, enlist a wider array of international partners, and stifle and defeat our enemies hinges our willingness to see that our greatness flows from

the strength of our people, culture, and values. It is the challenge of this new century to find ways to maximize the benefits of these relationships while combating and minimizing the destructive ideologies that have come to be so appealing to so many disenfranchised and devastated people around the world. Our Nation's Marine Corps stands on the threshold of this opportunity. Looking forward, while still holding firm to our founding values and beliefs, the chance to adapt to this changing world is well within the abilities of the Corps. It is critical that we examine new dynamic methods and outcomes for training and equipping our Marines with the end result being an enhanced ability to establish relationships as well as beachheads. We must, therefore, demonstrate to the world that, despite many skewed and corrupted perspective on our Nation and its people, we stand with all peoples in support of their inalienable human rights against those who would

seek to deny others those very rights.

The proposals outlined above represent a real and actionable path for the Marine Corps, always first wherever the Nation needs the Corps to be, to demonstrate our resolve and commitment to carry forward those ideals and values we, as a Nation, represent. The razor tip of the spear must also shine the brightest and guide others along a course that will bring the United States of America, our allies, and partners into a better future where peace and stability are maintained through the dual principles of cooperative, *mutual* understanding along side the threat of the *full* and irresistible force of the U.S. Armed Forces for those that would do us harm. Indeed, the Corps will know its enemies just as well as they know themselves, and those Marines of today will possess the scholar-warrior minds and bodies necessary to lead and conquer all challenges the Marine Corps will face. If carried out thoroughly and

efficiently, our Nation will never be in peril again.

Notes

1. "Quote Page: The Military Leader," *The Military Leader*, available at <http://www.themilitaryleader.com>.
2. James A. Banks, *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001).
3. There are no known incidents where translators have turned on American soldiers
4. This point will be addressed in greater detail later in the article.
5. Edward Vajda, "Language Learning by Adults," *Second Language Acquisition*, (Online: undated), available at <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu>.



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