

# Creating an Innovative Culture

How culture can translate to lethality

by 1stLt Jon Schumann

I joined the Marine Corps because the Corps is the most lethal and professional branch of the U.S. military. Marines, no matter the situation, always improvise, adapt, and overcome; we always find a way to win. When I graduated high school, I wanted nothing more than to be part of an organization like the Marine Corps. Seeking education but also wanting to work toward joining the military, I joined the Naval ROTC program at the University of Memphis. My personal and professional development throughout ROTC was filled with one-on-one mentorship and character development and my entry-level training demanded curiosity and critical thinking. I was rarely yelled at, and when I was, the purpose was to induce stress rather than make a correction.

Shortly after completing the Basic School and Infantry Officer Course, I became the Platoon Commander for 1st Platoon, India Company, 3/8 Mar. Just four months into my time as a platoon commander, I had the unique opportunity to participate in the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab's (MCWL) Operation METROPOLIS II. 1st Platoon's task in the experiment was to provide Kilo Company, 3/8 Mar with a near-peer or pacing threat, in order to test different technologies in their final stage of MCWL's experimentation process. Our force was known as the Adaptive Threat Force (ATF). ATF advisors, all former active duty service members with diverse backgrounds working under the name Guard Unit, attached to our platoon and immediately started encouraging us to see Kilo Company as our next enemy sees Marines. I fully bought into the idea, acting on the assumption that

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every Marine in the platoon thinking together would come to a more dangerous course of action to spar with Kilo than I could alone. I focused mostly on the culture of the ATF and worked to enhance our Marines' creativity, curiosity, compassion, and humility—all with the intent to increase lethality, and provide Kilo company the best possible peer-level adversary.

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My platoon sergeant and I attempted to create this culture by removing rank and instead teaching everyone that each Marine had a key role to play in the platoon. The purpose of this was not to create a flat organization but rather it was an attempt to show the Marines that ideas were more important than from who they originated. We tried to make it as obvious as possible that the Marines were allowed to talk to their leadership openly, so every evening my platoon sergeant and I would pick a random table at which to eat. From private to sergeant, we would do our best to listen to every idea, whether about train-

ing or our next out-of-the-box tactic we could use to push Kilo off balance. We also established a no-yelling policy and instead required Marines to explain the purpose behind corrections. *Asking why was encouraged* and often rewarded, especially if I had mistakenly forgotten to provide the Marines a purpose along with their task. The purpose of asking was to give the Marines a chance to learn who I was and how I thought, so when they could no longer ask during kinetic engagements, the Marines would trust in my tasking alone. This culture of compassion, humility, and creativity, combined with hard, realistic training, was the combination we all hoped would best fight Kilo Company.

Moving into the first force-on-force exercise, I was admittedly nervous to see if an environment encouraging creativity, demanding humility, and requiring compassion would be able to stand toe-to-toe with a force five times its size and with more experienced Marines. The results were astounding. We had implemented many ideas that the young Marines had voiced, ranging from robust deception plans, forcing Kilo into blue-on-blue situations by initiating contact between units along their boundary, and utilizing RPGs as a primary weapon, like the Chechens in Grozny.<sup>1</sup> We understood that they had no-fire areas in the battlespace, and we constantly ignored these boundaries

because some of our young Marines pointed out that our enemy never adheres to our political boundaries. These ideas were a direct result of our culture of innovation and allowed us to adapt and exploit fleeting opportunities in a chaotic and high-tempo battlespace.

After this first force-on-force exercise, MCWL and Guard Unit decided to have the commanders of each force sit down and debrief each other. Again, the results surprised me. The Kilo Company Commander, Capt Hanks, and I spent fifteen minutes discussing tactics and two and a half hours discussing the culture that allowed us to be successful against a larger force. I almost regret having this debrief because, during our final force-on-force, Kilo proved to be a formidable force. Any adversary would be most unfortunate to find themselves on the other side of their battlefield.

The *Marine Corps Operating Concept* directs our focus toward a fight with a peer or pacing threat, rather than toward counterinsurgency fights in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> MCWL recognized this with METROPOLIS II; however, we often continue to train using doctrine



**Force-on-force training with a dedicated opposing force can present unique leadership challenges and novel opportunities to inspire the best in Marines.** (Photo by Tech Sgt Joselito Aribuabo.)

tions to problems, even if it's currently non-doctrinal. All of this requires us to create a culture that teaches doctrine thoroughly but understands the importance of creativity to create new training, standard operating principles,

ship. Enlisted Marines need more time specifically set aside in entry-level training in order to better encourage and develop critical thinking, creativity, and curiosity. Ultimately, we need to create a trusting environment and curious culture that encourages innovation and allows for all Marines, especially junior Marines, to think about and create ideas on how to win future conflicts—not past ones.

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that was written to win past conflicts. Likely, our next adversary will force us to fight outnumbered; therefore, we should be conducting force-on-force training against a larger opposing force rather than one we outnumber three to one. Knowing that the electromagnetic dimension of war is requiring us to fight with equal technology or none at all, we should enable the generation that is most familiar with this technology: our communicators and junior Marines. An approach to this could be to allow these subject matter experts to implement new technology unfamiliar to older Marines in a controlled manner and allow them to find creative solu-

tactics, techniques, and procedures.

What I learned from this experience with MCWL, Guard Unit, and Kilo was that curiosity, creativity, compassion, and humility lead to lethality. Compassionate leadership is not coddling. We need to continue demanding the same high standard from our Marines; however, explaining the purpose during correction is essential. I argue that young Marines, both officer and enlisted, should understand how lethality comes from these traits early in their careers. This understanding should be introduced at The Basic School and the School of Infantry and reaffirmed in the fleet by every level of unit leader-

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#### Notes

1. Lester W. Grau and Timothy L. Thomas, "Russian Lessons Learned from the Battles for Grozny," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2000).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

