

Leaders of Marines

How the five horizontal themes forge the finest

by 1stLt David A. Powell

The resounding theme reiterated to Marines at The Basic School when they ask for the best approach to take as they take charge of their first unit is *don't act like you know it all*. In other words, young lieutenants, fresh out of college, must recognize the experience and subject-matter expertise of their non-commissioned officers, sometimes formed over the course of over a decade of service. What value do prior-enlisted, newly commissioned Marines, gain from enrollment at The Basic School? What do these seasoned Marines gain here that they did not formerly possess? This article presents why the tenets and formation at The Basic School prove invaluable not only for prior-enlisted, newly commissioned Marines but more so for each new lieutenant before he leads Marines. I feel particularly called to convey this, as a prior enlisted officer, who gained more knowledge in leadership from my time at The Basic School than at any other school I had previously attended.

Before accepting my commission and becoming a second lieutenant, I had the privilege to rise to the rank of gunnery sergeant. My thirteen-year tour in the enlisted ranks saw a wide range of Marine officers with varying leadership styles. Some were strict, demanding the highest standards; some were more lax, relaxing the standards to gain favor within their platoon. While platoons may have *liked* having relaxed standards, it was only when the demand was high that Marines were challenged to a degree that the platoon could operate at a level truly reflecting the Marine Corps legacy. Observing these styles helped me learn what kind of leader I wanted to be and motivated me to learn how to develop that style. As I began my journey to become an officer, I took the



The five horizontal themes of officership are the core of leadership instruction at The Basic School. (Photo by LCpl Andrew Herwig.)

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lessons of leadership that I had learned through professional military education and my own experiences and dedicated myself to mentoring and guiding those who sought help with their development. During the first phase of the period of instruction, my company was introduced to the Five Horizontal Themes of Officership. While I had never been exposed to these themes as such before this, I argue they encompass what comprises an outstanding leader of Marines.

A Leader of Exemplary Character

With over a decade of experience in my Marine career, the importance of leading by example was not a novel concept; however, this tenet is amplified as a Marine officer. BGen Stewart

captured this sentiment when he stated, "A commander is entrusted with great authority and responsibility; it is a position of power. However, the success of every commander is ultimately about how they lead, serve, and take care of those in their charge rather than a list of accomplishments."¹ To be a leader of exemplary character is to be willing to both meet and *exceed* the standard and to hold themselves and those around them to maintain that standard. This is how we maintain the reputation of the world's most illustrious and professional warfighters.

The Marines of Alpha Company were evaluated on their character daily at the Basic Officer Course (BOC). At every turn, Marines are evaluated through mundane, simple things like collecting room key counts, to more complex and arduous challenges such as land navigation. For those who sought the easy route, the option was always there; however, not one Marine within the company was willing to compromise their character or integrity because they knew that they must be the

standard. The Marines here are responsible for managing their own time and utilizing it to develop their knowledge of lessons they have not mastered and seek guidance from those possessing a better understanding. Even when leading peers through patrols, exercises, and field operations, the level of mutual respect and understanding surpassed any I have previously witnessed. Truly, the BOC develops and evaluates the future leaders of our Corps and forges them into lethal, resilient, and upstanding warfighters.

Devoted to Leading Marines and Sailors 24/7

In the civilian sector, finding leaders willing to devote the entirety of their time to leading subordinates can seem a formidable task. In the Marine Corps, we understand that we are Marines 24/7; furthermore, this means that we are Marine *officers* 24/7. When conducting the Oath of Office, officers swear

they will “well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which they are about to enter.”² To the Marine officer, this holds the implied task of being a devoted leader to those he will lead into combat. As Marine officers, we must be willing to devote all our time to leading those under our charge, on and off the clock—to be willing and able to work through issues, to mentor, and to take care of those around us.

As the company progressed through the BOC, Marines saw this theme in the staff platoon commanders assigned to command their respective platoons. The staff platoon commanders’ example of being available for questions and guidance was consistent not only with what I had witnessed throughout my career, but also with the first Horizontal theme. From such examples, I began to witness students emulating those characteristics of devotion. It was not uncommon, walking the halls of Pokorney, to find Marines discussing

order development, calls for indirect fire, or other military education topics. Even without a specific course dedicated to it in the period of instruction, the opportunity is present to see this tenet manifest and utilized to exercise this fundamental theme.

Able to Decide, Communicate, and Act in the Fog of War

This Horizontal theme was best encapsulated in the words of Gen Mattis when he wrote:

Battle is so loud that it is hard to hear—let alone make sense of—what someone is trying to direct you to do in the midst of the chaos. At that instant, the muscle memory of training and rehearsals must kick in; swift decisions have to be made with inadequate information. Every warrior must know his weapon, his job, and his comrades’ reactions so well that he functions without hesitation.³

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This excerpt conveys the reality that the fog of war is a fundamental aspect of war and drives home the point that the ability to operate in this environment is essential.

Throughout the training at the BOC, Marine leaders are evaluated repeatedly to operate swiftly with limited information, despite arduous, meticulous planning for exercises, even planning for contingencies (plan A, B, C, and so on), as the tree line enveloped a platoon, they had to quickly adapt to changes in the environment, enemy situation, and even the composition of the platoon itself. Visibility was re-

duced, the enemy became elusive, and Marines became casualties. Even with the friction inherent in the field, all the Marines were forced to adapt, improvise, and overcome to achieve a tactical victory. As leadership billets rotated, this allowed all the Marines of Alpha Company to experience these conditions and develop their capabilities as Leaders of Marines.

Throughout the grounds and halls of Camp Barrett, where classes are held and the Marines are quartered, stand constant, visible reminders of the Ma-

rine Corps legacy. From the statues and memorials on the grounds to the mementos and belongings of fallen Marines after whom our halls are named, we feel the weight and pride of that lasting legacy. Looking around, I see the leaders around me continue to develop their *esprit de corps* as they learn about the Marines around them and the Marines that have come before.

Conclusion

Looking back on the training conducted at The Basic School, I am glad that prior enlisted Marines are mandated to participate. My experiences have grown, my leadership developed, and an unbreakable bond has formed between myself and the lieutenants of First Platoon. Looking out on the other branches of Services, I see peers going directly to their MOS schools; however, as Marine officers, we are trained to a level that brings forth some of the finest leaders that I have seen. Through training and the direction of the Five Horizontal Themes, Marine leaders are prepared and ready to face today's challenges and whatever the future holds.

Notes

1. Kevin J. Stewart, "Leadership for an Incoming Commander: Privilege to Lead Marines," *Marine Corps Gazette* 102, No. 12 (2018).
2. Richard M. Swain and Albert C. Pierce, *The Armed Forces Officer* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2017).
3. James N. Mattis and Francis J. West, *Call Sign Chaos* (New York: Random House, 2019).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MWCP 6-10, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: 2019).



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A Warfighter Who Embraces our Naval Character and the Corps' Warrior Ethos

The importance of this Horizontal theme stems from the roots and purpose of the Marine Corps as a department of the Navy. Our command structure reflects this, in that, for example, we, as a Corps, fall under the Secretary of the Navy. Our original mission was to provide ships with capabilities that a typical navy never organically possessed. However, the Marine Corps has become the capability for the Navy to project power from sea onto land. From that unique capability that Marines provide, each Marine inherits being a part of an elite organization that is a part of our Nation's force in readiness.

When looking at *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*, we see that our ethos stems

Mentally and Physically Tough

The Horizontal theme of *mentally and physically tough* may be the only theme that needs no introduction; however, this one could mean the most. The word *mentally* could infer the ability to act and decide in the fog of war; however, it could also implicate having the moral courage to make tough decisions—which may include sending Marines into a fight where casualties are high. Regarding physical toughness, Marines have always valued those leaders who lead from the front and take on obstacles from a long movement before a fight to fighting for hours on end with little to no time for recovery.

For myself, The Basic School has truly challenged me both physically and mentally—more so than any challenge in my previous career. The BOC is

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