

Lessons from the Smoke Pit

By MGySgt Adam Walker, USMC (Ret)

A Common Sense Approach To Good Order and Discipline

Good order and discipline, accentuated by a strict adherence to standards, is a cultural marker of the Marine Corps. Marines stand out because of these attributes. There are valid reasons for such rigidity, proof of which has been born in our storied history time and again. There are seemingly just as many stories where the enforcement of standards is situationally absurd.

Staff noncommissioned officers are keepers of the culture. As such they, and the NCOs, are the parties obliged to make corrections when standards are disregarded. This is quite necessary, particularly in that passive-aggressive rebelliousness often shown by the junior enlisted Marine in the second to fourth year of an enlistment.

This unusual phenomenon is manifested in each generation with the same behaviors. Some of these include growing hair longer than regulations permit, not shaving on the weekend and wearing clothing in violation of established standards. This type of conduct emerges when the excitement of being a Marine wears off, and the desire for individuality (felt most strongly in youth) is strong. Even as the luster wanes, the pride in being a Marine has not vanished, it is simply subdued.

Cultivating the proper desire for good order and discipline (as opposed to observed compliance) requires sound leadership. Conversely, poor leadership not only extinguishes this potential, it fuels a disdain.

Examples of poor leadership in the enforcement of standards occurred numerous times in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last 20 years. One of these instances is partially described in Ryan Rogers' war memoir "Lions of Marjah," about his experience in Afghanistan.

Rogers writes, "Both were high-ranking enlisted men. They had freshly starched desert digital utilities on and smelled of Curve cologne for men. They had clean everything. Clean haircuts, clean shaves, clean boots and trousers that were bloused high enough over their boots to see clean black socks. I didn't notice them until the one turned around in line and told me that I stunk and needed a shower and some new cammies on before I came back in the chow hall."

Reading "Lions of Marjah" will provide full context to the narrative, but in short, a young NCO, who led a rifle squad through several months of combat operations saturated with kinetic activity, had just returned to one of the large camps. He would rotate home in a few days, had not been to a chow

hall in months and was under threat right up to the very last helo ride that deposited him minutes before the chow hall was about to close.

The senior SNCOs who engaged Rogers, in an attempt to enforce good order and discipline, had lost perspective. The hot chow (a powerful boost to morale) should have been prioritized for the young warfighters, who spent months outside the wire on the edge of the empire. Not only did they miss the mark, this kind of behavior degrades the likelihood of retention among the cohort most desired for the seed corn of the next war's senior enlisted leaders.

I saw a near mirror experience occur in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2009. Fortunately, I was a master sergeant on my third combat tour and was able to intervene in a manner that defused the situation while correcting course in a way that affirmed and assured the young Marines without disrespecting the senior SNCOs.

I was serving as the assistant operations chief of a regimental combat team (RCT), and my duties rarely took me outside the wire. My first two tours in Iraq were as a rifle platoon sergeant, which greatly shaped my perspective. Our RCT's personal security detail (PSD) was essentially a reinforced rifle squad mounted in up-armored HMMWVs. These guys were outside the wire daily, covering large swaths of the Al Anbar Province. They often slept on the ground beside their gun trucks on another forward operating base as they conducted battlefield circulation, subsisting on MREs and Rip Its. Hot chow at the DFAC was intermittent and greatly valued.

I stood in line one day as they just made it back in time for hot chow after a 10-day run. Their salt-stained FROG suits (flame-resistant organizational gear) filled the air with a stench offending the senses of those who were comfortable aboard the FOB. Copenhagen-filled smiles broke the stubble-chinned landscape of their faces. I watched the glow of their camaraderie, remembering the joy in coming back alive. The revelry was broken by the sharp bark of two first sergeants, who exuded the stereotype of former drill instructors. "Hey Marines! Take your ass back to wherever you came from, shower up and put on clean cammies before you even think about walking into the DFAC."

The PSD's senior Marine was a sergeant. He had no leverage to advocate for his Marines. I understood the anger, discouragement and disrespect these young warriors felt.

Instinctively I stepped forward with an assertive and upbeat

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MAJ MIKE REYNOLDS, USMC

tone. "Thank you, First Sergeant!" Then turning to the squad leader, I said, "Welcome back Sgt Smith! I am glad none of your guys got hit this time. How long has it been since your Marines have had a hot meal?" Somewhat stunned, he replied, "Ten days, Master Sergeant." I smiled and then said, "Roger that. Hey, I want you to take your people and cut in line in front of me and the first sergeants. But listen! Hygiene is important in a camp with this many people; make sure your Marines wash their hands, and if you reach into a self-serve area like the salad bar, roll up those nasty sleeves so you killers don't get us 'Fobbitts' sick."

Sgt Smith subtly smiled with comprehension and said, "Aye, Master Sergeant," as I invited the first sergeants aside with a wave of my arm. Their look was sheepish and humbled as one of them said, "Oorah warriors" as a kind of apologetic and affirming gesture.

Almost every veteran from OIF/OEF can either recall an event that occurred similar to this one or affirm this is the culture in which they served. More often than not, the outcome was not encouraging.

The questions demanding response are, "Why does this occur?" and, "How do we fix it?"

The first question is near implicitly understood by anyone bearing the title Marine. We are trained from Forming Day 1 for "strict adherence to the obedience of orders." This is compounded by the SNCOs' obligation (as keepers of the culture) to make corrections. The gap in execution comes where common sense makes a departure. Understanding intent, the "why," is monumentally more important than the actual rule.

As to the fix, the answer is simply to remember that leadership is a human endeavor. It is all about people. Marines are remarkable people. Leaders should cultivate the best attributes

in Marines and make corrections when contextually necessary and in a manner which elicits a desire to want to do better, vice extinguish the love of Corps.

This is not to say we should coddle or be soft to our Marines. Many of them, still in their youth, have simply not developed the maturity to consistently do the right thing in all circumstances. We can lead through a swift kick in the ass when necessary, but that certainly should not be the default.

What is imperative as leaders is that we instill the "why" when we reinforce a ruthless adherence to standards. Habits of thought and habits of action are driven into the bedrock of the individual so that he may instinctively perform when the confrontation of flesh and steel comes. Too many leaders take the first step (enforcing a regulation) with the short-sighted end state of keeping up appearances as opposed to shaping the tactical instincts of the young warfighter. "Nasty recruiters" call this the WIIFM, "what is in it for me." A leader worth his salt can convey why the offending Marine wants to do the right thing instead of berating, embarrassing and disrespecting the Marine, who may very well be his replacement in a few years.

This course correction takes forethought and deliberate action but very little effort. The impact, however, will reverberate for generations. The most influential senior leaders often tell stories of their platoon sergeant or squad leader decades ago and the impact he had. These tales, relayed to the next generation, are an enduring legacy. This is the attribute that should be cultivated.

Author's bio: Adam Walker served as an infantryman for 25 years, retiring as a master gunnery sergeant with three tours in Iraq and a Purple Heart. He now writes stories on laughter and leadership from an old field desk. 🇺🇸

Are You Ready?



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