

# Many Minds Any Weapon

Improving human capital in the Marine Corps by bolstering educational requirements for enlisted promotions

by Cpl Daniel Duffy

**E**pochs after the blood dried, the Battle of Thermopylae remains indelibly inked in the pages of military history. Virtually every Marine knows the valiance and courage Spartans displayed in fighting a formidable, numerically superior foe. Far fewer know what happens next in the Spartan saga. Not long after their victory in the war against the Persians, the Spartans would be routed and defeated by a band of farmers in the Theban wars. How could this happen? How could the warriors who fought so bravely be beaten at their own game? How could a society that was training for war, literally since they were infants, suffer an embarrassing defeat by nomadic farmers? The answer is that Sparta suffered a brain drain. The wounds may have healed from battle, but Spartan decay had not been at the surface level. It was decay of the mind that plagued the ancient city. While the Athenians valued creativeness, idea flow, innovation, and merit, Spartan dogma thwarted creative thought and subordinated merit to tradition.<sup>2</sup> Like a dictator's rule that inevitably leads to bread lines, Spartan dogma stifled the critical thinking necessary to flourish, and she soon would be sentenced to the annals of history.

Marines can learn just as much from Sparta's defeats as they can from their victories. The Spartan example underscores how crucial the role of the mind is in warfare and emphasizes the unseen potential armies tap into when they capitalize on this force. In an age of advanced warfare, the demand for intelligent warriors is higher than ever. Not

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only because weapons systems themselves are more complex than the spears of Ancient Greece but also because the capabilities of modern weapons amplify an individual Marine's capability, rendering him a more relied upon asset than in past conflicts. Because technology has scaled this ability of lower ranks, it makes sense that we should expect heightened judgment and cunningness from our non-commissioned officers. In short, because smaller units will do a lot of the heavy lifting in future conflicts, we need to equip them with the skills to optimize effectiveness. Cur-

rently, the Marine Corps' educational requirement for enlisted Marines can be described as a "check in the box." Put simply, it is not a climate that values education. This is a mistake given the changing nature of warfare. No need is more pressing than the sharpness of our Corps' lethality, but that is not the only challenge the Marine Corps faces today. Recruitment and retention, leadership, and transitioning back into civilian life are all challenges of modern warfare. The great thing about education is that it simultaneously provides an antidote for all these challenges. Incorporating college-level courses as part of the educational requirement that is considered in promotion for enlisted Marines will sharpen fighting prowess, increase recruitment, improve retention, and ease the transition to civilian life when enlistment ends.

What I am proposing is not to supplant the focus from war fighting but



***If current enlisted education takes on a "check the box" character, is the Corps truly preparing Marines for the challenges of the future operating environment? (Photo by Sgt S.T. Stewart.)***

rather to supplement it with training of the mind. Course requirements should be progressively scaled by rank and light enough to not divert resources from other aspects of combat readiness. For example, attainment of the rank of corporal might be dependent on the completion of English 101, promotion to sergeant, English 101 plus American history (or other electives), etc. Reasonable latitude should be given on how to best implement the new standard, but the crux of the objective should not deviate from strengthening our warriors' minds.

The education requirement enhances the Marine Corps' combat effectiveness. In Aristotle's words, man is the "rational animal" and warfighting is no exception. As far back as the Theban Wars, the decisive factor did not hinge on brute strength. Historian John David Lewis observes the key factor in Sparta's defeat:

the Athenians created a magnificent edifice of intellectual innovation; on the other hand, the Spartans were concerned primarily with one virtue, courage, and they cultivated it amid claims to religious piety and obedience to tradition. But this put severe limits on their ability to think creatively.<sup>3</sup>

The Spartans were defeated because they lost the ability to adapt and innovate new strategies. Education fosters these skills for the simple reason that it improves one's thinking. For example, as a Marine expands his vocabulary, he widens his conceptual capacity and abstractions. He is able to draw on more examples when he learns history and become an efficient problem solver after tackling math. He implements these skills anytime he gives a class to fellow Marines, provides nuanced feedback to his subordinates, or proposes an improvement to senior leadership. He is a more adept mission planner because he is able to anticipate obstacles that otherwise would have gone unnoticed and a more well-rounded ambassador of our Corps. In other words, he is a better Marine. In a key moment, on the eve of a key battle in World War II, the Americans leaked a radio message falsely claiming "AF" was having water shortages, suspecting that "AF"



**Optimal enlisted PME programs should educate Marines to excel in their primary duties and provide a foundation of college credits outside the Corps.** (Photo by LCpl Sebastian Rivera Aponte.)

was the Japanese code for Midway. Ensuing Japanese transmissions confirmed that indeed, "AF" was their code for Midway.<sup>4</sup> The information helped us win the Second World War. That is the kind of cunning and creative thinking we should facilitate at all levels to scale the combat effectiveness and amplify the Marine Corp's lethality to heights remembered long after the battle dust settles.

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Recruiting will also benefit from a reinforced educational requirement. Ask any recruiting office across America and they will tell you the biggest obstacle recruiters face is the opportunity cost young people face when weighing enlistment. Joining the Marine Corps means they have to delay or forgo higher education or technical schooling. This places them at a disadvantage as any delay in schooling means less experience in a market. If a potential recruit knows

they can complete some college while in the military, this is a more palatable decision, as they know they can "kill two birds with one stone." Parents and relatives' opinions can also influence a recruit's decision to enlist. Using the education model can be used as leverage for recruiters and young people in convincing any opinion that a recruit may weigh in his decision process. Lastly, it will attract smart recruits who take education seriously. There are smart, high school kids that *want* to join the military, but because they are very intelligent, a college education is the stronger force that pulls them in that direction. The educational requirement attracts more of these smart kids on the margin. It becomes a mechanism that inflows human capital, ensuring a strong future. It is true that the GI Bill accomplishes this to some extent, but a meatier in-house educational requirement strengthens this goal.

Retention and officer recruitment benefits from bolstering education. Obviously, the more education a Marine has completed, the easier the transition will be to become an officer. It gives Marines a promising career path if they choose to stay in stay in the Marine Corps. This promotion from within will ease the burden of officer recruiting. Moreover, as any Marine in chow

halls from Okinawa to Camp Pendleton will tell attest to, the fact that being led by officers that personally relate to the unique challenges an enlisted Marine faces immediately gains the respect of their subordinates. A tenet of Marine leadership is leading by example. A leader should never ask his Marines to do something he would never personally do. Increasing the flow of enlisted Marines to officers gives this sentiment more teeth. At times when leadership is strained, it is easy for Marines to develop the mindset: “What do they know? They’re not one of us” There is a sense in which this is true. An officer *cannot* fully relate to enlisted Marines’

them transition to the civilian world. Psychologist Nathaniel Branden notes that a key component of self-esteem is self-efficacy. He writes:

Self-esteem is the disposition to experience oneself as being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It is confidence in the efficacy of our mind, in our ability to think.<sup>7</sup>

Just like a machine gunner has the confidence to assemble his weapon blindfolded after repeated rehearsals, the mind, too, is like a muscle that grows with nurturing. A well-developed mind gives the Marine the confidence in civilian life, whether it be writing a resume

as much as strengthening their bodies. The challenges of recruitment, retention, and what a Marine does when he leaves the Marine Corps are all integral parts of our organization and all have the potential to undermine our mission if not taken seriously. Developing human capital simultaneously addresses all these concerns in unique ways; it is the ultimate “bang for the buck.” Because equipping Marines with education optimizes our mission and makes them better citizens, it faithfully executes our motto: *Semper Fidelis*.

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experiences unless they have been in their boots. Having shared experiences gains a Marine’s respect because Marines know their officers have sweated through the same hardships they endure. Additionally, having a boots-on-the-ground perspective allows a leader to survey a battlefield from a wider lens. It is one thing to plan a mission by studying a map; it is quite another to have firsthand knowledge of a platoon’s capabilities, limitations, and motivations.

Introducing the education requirement will ease the transition to civilian life. In one poll, nearly two-thirds of military personnel said they faced a difficult transition to civilian life after completing their enlistment.<sup>5</sup> Problems can range from adjusting to family life to finding employment. Much more disturbingly, suicide rates among previously deployed veterans are among some of the highest in the Nation. One Marine infantry unit recorded a suicide rate fourteen times higher than the national average.<sup>6</sup> This is a complex issue, and it is not my intention to simplify it. One thing is incontrovertibly clear, however, facilitating the thinking skills in our Marines can only help

or using her introspection skills to help cope after a traumatic event. Introducing a stronger educational requirement sets a Marine up for success by posturing his mind to face life’s challenges after his enlistment ends.

There is an economic analogy that can be drawn to my educational proposal. Because technology has morphed industries and created new ones at a blistering pace, the average worker must be able to adapt to the changing landscape if he is to stay competitive. Gone are the days of learning one skill and working in the same factory for decades. The new worker must be willing to learn new skills and change industries. This raises the issue that the best way to prepare the new workforce is not by attempting to teach him job after job but by teaching him how to think so he is successful in learning new skills and able to cope with the changing environment. In short, teach him how to be a life-long learner; teach him how to fish, as the adage goes. We can expect a similar, rapid transformation in war fighting. All while the junior Marine is tasked with increasing responsibility. This places a demand for Marines to learn, adapt, and grow in the mind

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#### Notes

1. John David Lewis “Victory and the Will to Fight,” in *Nothing Less than Victory: Decisive Wars and the Lessons of History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. History.com Editors, “Battle of Midway,” History, (October 2019), available at <https://www.history.com>.
5. Derek Turner, “Vets Facing Difficult Transition to Civilian Jobs,” Military.com, available at <https://www.military.com>.
6. Dave Phillips, “Suicide Claims 14th Marine From a Unite Battered by Loss,” *New York Times*, (December 2015), available at <https://www.nytimes.com>.
7. Staff, “What Self-esteem Is and Is Not,” Nathaniel Branden, available at <http://www.nathanielbranden.com>.

