

2026 Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest: Honorable Mention

Maneuver-Warfare Out of the Corps

Lessons in imperfection

by LtCol Merritt Mitchell

Leadership in the Marine Corps is formally defined as both art and science, grounded in initiative, judgment, and moral example. However, in practice, the institutional culture often rewards the appearance of certainty more than the discipline of reflection. Leaders are trained to “decide, communicate, and act,” yet are seldom taught how to openly grapple with the ethical tension of real command.¹ The result is a professional environment that values confidence over candor and velocity over deliberation.

The Marine Corps does not fail its leaders by demanding excellence; it fails them by sustaining the fiction that perfection is attainable. We exalt military legends as if they were flawless yet quietly marginalize those who reveal the inherent uncertainties of command. This punishment is rarely formal. Instead, it manifests as stalled opportunities, subtle reputation erosion, and the unspoken lesson that intellectual honesty is safest when it remains private. *This article argues that the Marine Corps undermines effective leadership, not by demanding too much but by confusing professionalism with infallibility and discouraging leaders from exercising judgment visibly under conditions of uncertainty.*

Perfect Leaders Are Not Perfect

The Marine Corps often remembers effective leadership as perfection rather than practice. Presence, judgment, and trust earned under strain are later recast as flawlessness, creating standards

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MajGen Merritt “Red Mike” Edson with Marines. Edson’s leadership was defined by presence and endurance under pressure.
(U.S. Marine Corps photo, National Archives.)

no human leader can meet. MajGen Merritt “Red Mike” Edson remains one of the Corps’ most revered combat leaders. A Medal of Honor recipient and commander of the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, Edson embodied calm under fire during Tulagi and Guadalcanal. His defense of Lunga Ridge reflected every attribute later codified in *MCDPI*, *Warfighting*: initiative,

adaptability, and moral courage under pressure.²

Edson’s Marines followed him not because he was invulnerable but because he was present. He lived among them, shared hardship, and led from the front. Trust flowed from proximity, not distance. His authority was grounded in judgment earned under strain, not in the performance of infallibility. The danger of today is not in the honoring of leaders like Edson but in misremembering what made them effective and turning lived leadership into impossible mythology. Yet, Edson’s story also carries an uncomfortable truth. Behind the heroic image was a man who bore decades of stress, guilt, and exhaustion. In 1955, long after combat ended, Edson died by suicide. His death does not diminish his leadership; it humanizes it. If perfection were the standard by which leaders were judged, even Red Mike would have failed. When leadership is remembered as perfection rather than practice, leaders are not encouraged to learn openly but to appear invulnerable. Mistakes become acceptable only if they remain invisible, and doubt only if it remains unspoken.

Leaders who survive the human cost of command, fatigue, moral tension, and uncertainty often encounter

informal penalties rather than formal correction. By these penalties, I do not mean disciplinary action through established institutional processes, but subtle social and professional signals that follow a perceived misstep: diminished trust, exclusion from future opportunities, reputational narrowing, or a quiet reframing of a leader's narrative from bold to unreliable. These penalties are rarely documented and often unintended, yet they are widely recognized and keenly felt. Over time, they teach leaders not how to refine judgment under uncertainty, but how to manage the perception and suppress visible doubt. The result is not accountability, but caution misinterpreted as professionalism.

Imperfections Institutions Forgive

The Marine Corps' selective memory is not limited to success. Evans Carlson made real mistakes during the 1942 Makin Island raid, including operational decisions that cost lives and complicated extraction.³ Yet, Carlson's discomfort within the institution stemmed less from tactical failure than from what his leadership style implicitly challenged. His emphasis on egalitarianism, shared hardship, and moral consciousness questioned foundational assumptions about hierarchy, distance, and authority. The institution could forgive mistakes made in pursuit of mission accomplishment. It proved far less willing to absorb ideas that unsettled the structure of command itself.

By contrast, Merritt A. Edson was ultimately embraced, elevated, and canonized by the institution he helped shape, retiring as a major general. The lesson is not that one leader should deserve praise and the other should be diminished, but that institutions selectively forgive imperfections based on narrative compatibility. Leaders whose flaws reinforce existing norms are more readily absorbed into institutional memory than those whose ideas challenge the way authority is exercised. In this way, failure is not judged solely by outcomes but by whether a leader's story affirms or destabilizes the organizational identity.

The Mask of Command

In this sense, Marine leaders are often treated like clergy. Both are expected to model moral clarity, emotional restraint, and unwavering faith in the institution they serve. When they falter, disappointment feels disproportionate, as if a moral covenant has been broken. Yet, ministers and Marines alike remain human, operating under sustained pressure to embody ideals no one can perfectly maintain. Historian John Keegan described this phenomenon as the "mask of command," the emotional armor leaders

Maneuver Warfare and Moral Friction

The tension between initiative and restraint is not theoretical. I encountered it firsthand as a captain at the Expeditionary Warfare School. My conference group internalized maneuver warfare not merely as doctrine but as a competitive philosophy, viewing every event as a tactical problem to solve through tempo, deception, and initiative. During one field exercise, we exploited the rules creatively. We shifted trail markers, added misleading signs, and inserted physical tasks to slow competing groups. It felt audacious,



Marines advance under extreme conditions during the Pacific campaigns, where leadership decisions carried immediate human consequences. (U.S. Marine Corps photo, National Archives.)

wear to project authority and control.⁴ In the Marine Corps, that mask can harden over time. Stoicism becomes conflated with strength, and silence is mistaken for composure.

However, the mask of command is situational, not permanent. When worn too long, it preserves authority at the expense of trust and replaces learning with performance. Leaders who occasionally remove the mask do not weaken their authority; they strengthen their credibility. In institutions that quietly punish imperfection, however, the mask becomes less a tool of leadership than a shield against professional risk. I recognize this pattern not as an abstract critique but as a lesson I encountered personally early in my career.

improvisational, and consistent with the spirit of maneuver warfare as we placed ourselves in a position of advantage over those we saw as the enemy. Another group had done something similar in the previous competition and received praise for ingenuity. We believed we were applying doctrine as intended. Then the tone shifted. A senior instructor raised concerns that our actions crossed the line between creative initiative and ethical misconduct. Overnight, we moved from innovators to cautionary examples. One moment, we were praised for thinking like John Boyd, whose theories underpin maneuver warfare and the OODA (observe-orient-decide-act) loop; the next, we were being briefed on integrity and judgment.⁵ The same behavior, viewed

from different institutional lenses, carried different moral weights. For me, the lesson was not that initiative was wrong but that initiative without legitimacy erodes the trust it depends upon.

That experience revealed a central leadership dilemma. *MCDPI* exhorts Marines to create advantage through ambiguity, deception, and tempo, but it also insists that maneuver warfare requires judgment grounded in moral strength.⁶ Judgment, however, is rarely binary. What one leader sees as initiative, another may see as indiscipline. The truth often resides in the uncomfortable middle, where intent, context, and consequence collide. John Boyd argued that survival on a changing battlefield depends on the ability to adapt faster than an adversary. However, Boyd also emphasized moral authority. Speed without legitimacy degrades trust. Initiative divorced from ethical grounding becomes exploitation rather than leadership. As a commander, this experience now shapes how I evaluate initiative, not by how clever it appears but by whether it strengthens trust, preserves legitimacy, and reflects judgment I am willing to defend publicly. Maneuver warfare depends not only on speed and deception, but on trust as the moral lubricant of initiative.

Framework for Punishment

When subordinates act with initiative in ambiguous conditions, commanders must decide whether to correct, punish, or protect that behavior before momentum hardens into precedent. Errors are misjudgments made in good faith under pressure. Deviance, by contrast, challenges the norms that define authority itself. Leaders are frequently forgiven for the former, particularly when intent aligns with mission accomplishment, but far less readily forgiven for the latter. This distinction explains why some imperfections are absorbed into institutional memory while others are quietly constrained. Punishment decisions are rarely about outcomes alone. They are about whether an action threatens standards, authority, or the moral monopoly of command.

How a commander responds to error communicates more about institutional

values than any written policy. Punishment does not merely correct behavior; it shapes trust, signals what is safe to attempt, and defines whether initiative is rewarded or suppressed. When handled poorly, punishment teaches subordinates to hide mistakes and avoid risks. When handled well, it reinforces accountability while preserving the trust that allows initiative to survive. A framework for punishment is therefore not about severity or leniency, but about exercising judgment in a way that protects standards, learning, and the moral authority of command.

When doctrine offers principles rather than answers, leaders need a structured way to think through accountability before momentum outruns judgment. Before determining punish-

ment, commanders should deliberately consider the following questions.⁷

Context and Understanding

Did the reported action occur as described, and what context shaped it? Initial reports often strip away friction, uncertainty, and competing demands. Commanders must understand not only what happened but why it seemed reasonable at the time.

Intent and Awareness

Did the individual understand that the action crossed a boundary? Leaders must distinguish between willful misconduct and good-faith initiative taken in ambiguous conditions. Punishing ignorance of unclear limits teaches compliance, not judgment.

Purpose of Action

Was the action self-serving, reckless, or taken in pursuit of mission accomplishment? Intent matters. Leaders who punish intent rather than outcome preserve moral authority and credibility.

Risk Ownership

What level of risk was assumed, and on whose behalf? Commanders must be honest about whether a subordinate accepted risk for the unit, the mission, or others without authority to do so.

Pattern or Anomaly

Is this behavior an isolated incident or part of a broader pattern? A single error under pressure should be treated differently from repeated disregard for standards.

Desired Outcome

What is the punishment intended to achieve: correction, deterrence, education, or restoration of trust? Punishment without purpose becomes retribution rather than leadership.

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Organizational Impact

Who else is affected by this decision? Accountability decisions shape unit culture. Peers, subordinates, and leaders are all watching how judgment is applied.

Visibility of Response

How visible should the response be? Some errors require private correction to preserve dignity and trust; others require public acknowledgment to reinforce boundaries and maintain credibility.

Learning Versus Fear

Will this decision reinforce learning and accountability, or compliance and fear? Leaders must ask whether their response encourages initiative guided by judgment or caution driven by risk avoidance and driven by anxiety.

Handled thoughtfully, punishment becomes an extension of leadership rather than a failure of it. It teaches subordinates not only where boundaries lie but

how leaders think, what they value, and whether trust within the organization is genuinely reciprocal.

Trust, Persuasion, and Power

Without trust, tempo collapses into chaos. Marines can execute distributed command only if they believe their leaders will understand intent and forgive honest mistakes. Trust is what turns initiative into cohesion; without it, even the most elegant plan becomes noise. Robert Cialdini's principle of "liking" helps explain why. People are most persuaded by those they trust, respect, and believe share their values.⁸ At Expeditionary Warfare School, we imposed outcomes but persuaded no one. We treated peers as adversaries rather than partners and, in doing so, undermined the cohesion we sought to demonstrate.

Organizational theorist Jeffrey Pfeffer makes a related point: Leaders often succeed not because they embody abstract ideals but because they navigate relationships and power dynamics realistically.⁹ Our Expeditionary Warfare School episode was, in miniature, a study in power. We demonstrated initiative but failed to appreciate how our actions appeared within the context of the professional norms of the schoolhouse environment. In leadership, perception often shapes reality more than intent. This tension between intent and perception runs through Marine Corps history. Gen Charles Krulak's concept of the "Strategic Corporal" reminds us that even the actions of junior leaders can carry disproportionate moral and strategic consequences.¹⁰ In training as in combat, every decision communicates values. Initiative without trust signals self-interest; initiative grounded in trust signals leadership.

A Litmus Test for Judgment

I use this filter deliberately when evaluating initiative, accountability, and risk as a commander. When doctrine offers principles rather than answers, leaders need a simple decision framework before momentum outruns judgment. I propose that leaders ask themselves six questions:

1. Is this action legal?
2. Do I consider this morally right?
3. Is it ethically consistent with the institution I represent?
4. Whose risk is being assumed, and is that risk mine to take?
5. Does this action make sense?
6. If this decision were made public, would I stand by it?

These questions do not produce certainty. They produce clarity. They force leaders to confront intent, consequence, and visibility before action becomes irreversible.

Learning, Accountability, and Grace

Clausewitz wrote that war is the realm of uncertainty.¹¹ Leadership is no different. The fog is not merely tactical; it is ethical and psychological. Leaders must act decisively without perfect information or moral clarity. The myth of the perfect leader pretends that fog does not exist. In reality, all leaders operate within it, some more honestly than others. The myth of perfection ultimately collapses trust by discouraging candid reflection and honest dialogue.

Trust, by contrast, depends on shared understanding of intent, limits, and accountability. I have come to think of that shared understanding as an unspoken contract between leaders and those they lead. Leaders owe subordinates clear intent and the resources to accomplish the mission. Subordinates owe leaders disciplined initiative, honest feedback, and fidelity to intent within ethical boundaries.

When initiative strays beyond those boundaries, accountability is necessary, but it must be proportionate, contextual, and oriented toward learning rather than humiliation. If we want leaders capable of thriving amid ambiguity, we must allow them the space to wrestle with it rather than demand the performance of certainty. Leadership education should include not only the study of battlefield brilliance, but also the humility to examine failure and the courage to admit when judgment falls short.

Even Edson's story reminds us that strength and vulnerability coexist. His courage under fire saved Marines; his

quiet suffering afterward reveals the cost of a culture that glorifies perfection but seldom grants grace. Leadership should not demand invulnerability. It should cultivate resilience through honesty. Carlson reminds us that innovation without institutional legitimacy invites resistance, while Edson reminds us that legitimacy without humanity carries its own cost.

Carlson reminds us that innovation without institutional legitimacy invites resistance.

Conclusion

Perfection is a mirage. Leadership, like maneuver warfare itself, is fundamentally about adaptation, about orienting faster not only to the enemy but to oneself. Gen Hogaboom's career reminds us that command is not the absence of doubt but the willingness to bear responsibility for decisions made under uncertain circumstances. To be effective, Marines must learn to maneuver within the moral terrain of command, where speed and cunning yield to integrity. Leaders who never remove the mask may appear composed, but they lose the trust that allows initiative to survive first contact with reality.

The Marines we most need are not those who never err, but those who own their imperfections, learn from them openly, and lead with humility. Approachability and imperfection are not opposites; they are the same virtue expressed through different behaviors. In a profession defined by uncertainty, humanity is not a liability; it is the foundation of trust.

The practical implication is straightforward. Commanders must be explicit about how they judge initiative, how they distinguish error from misconduct, and how they apply punishment in ways that preserve trust rather than extinguish it. Leaders who make these standards visible do not

weaken discipline. They strengthen it by anchoring authority in judgment rather than fear.

Notes

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