

Storybook Leaders

Conveying spirit

by Capt Frank G. Robinson

Marines and leaders of Marines enter the fleet at last—graduates of boot camp, School of Infantry, Marine Combat Training, Officer Candidates School, The Basic School, and various MOS schools—with minds and bodies trained in the arts of war and Marine Corps leadership. They know the leadership traits and principles and the troop-leading steps, and they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that, as leaders, they have a lot to learn and a long way to go—well trained but not yet the leaders you read about. Only so much leadership can be honed in a schoolhouse; the next phase in leaders' development is up to them and the mentors they encounter. But what's the next step? How do we grow as leaders of Marines? How do young NCOs and company grade officers become the great leaders of stories and medal citations? There is no shortage of writings and lectures on this topic. The following are a few thoughts on an important tool in any leader's kit, and a vital nutrient in a growing leader's diet: stories.

It's a girl! A baby is successfully delivered into the world for which she's trained for 9 months. The parents have high hopes—in their minds they've already written the first draft of her biography, starting with Harvard Law—but they can't make her grow; she has to do that on her own, and she will. Her body will grow as it was designed to, if only given the proper sustenance.

Similar to that baby girl, Marine leaders conceived and formed in Marine Corps training will grow if they properly nourish their leadership skills. However, if the baby refuses to eat, she will fail to thrive and will die. Likewise, any Marine who ceases to grow as a leader has likely reached the terminal rank in

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his career. Stories are a leader's protein; they build his communication skills, his influence, his very character. Whether the leader's own stories—the experiences that teach him perhaps better than anything else—or stories heard or read, which teach nearly as well as a fraction of the cost, a leader owes much of what he becomes to stories.

Somewhere in the corn-fed American Midwest, a coach has the audacity to bench his star player for not taking practice seriously. The coach says something trite and infuriating, like, "You are on the field what you are off the field." The crowd is livid. The coach stands firm.



Capt Ike Fenton commanded an understrength rifle company in the battle at No-Name Ridge, Korea. (Photo from The Battle History of the U.S. Marines, photo by David Douglas Dawson.)

Years later:

A platoon sergeant doesn't recommend a young Marine for promotion because he failed to maintain his uniforms and barracks room. He says to the young Marine, "If you can't lead Marines in garrison, you can't lead Marines." Incidentally, the young Marine also failed to complete his Leading Marines MarineNet course.

If you remember anything from what retired Gen Soandso says at the Birthday Ball this year, it will be the stories. Stories are one of the most effective and memorable tools for teaching, learning, and communicating. A single story easily conveys more meaning than hours of lecture or hundreds of PowerPoint slides. Stories can come from history, newspaper articles, professional reading, the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, and a myriad of other sources. Leaders often use stories in public speech to powerfully reinforce the message they are trying to get across. For example, in a speech about the mindset and conduct expected of Marines and leaders of Marines, you might hear one of the following:

A man named Rowan is called upon by the President to deliver a message to Garcia. No explanation or guidance is given, nor is any support outside of his own initiative, resourcefulness, and determination. He executes anyway, and perseveres until the mission is complete.¹

Rifleman Matthew Dodd demonstrates the discipline, resourcefulness, and tactical cunning of a true soldier. After being separated from his unit, Rifleman Dodd evades, harasses, and destroys his enemy pursuers until he can rejoin his brothers in arms.²

Alexander, the great king of Macedonia, publicly and intentionally sleeps in on the morning of the final battle for Persia at Gaugamela. Hundreds see and thousands hear about the generals standing outside his tent awaiting orders. Alexander walks out, bed-haired and rubbing his eyes. Their warrior king clearly isn't the slightest bit worried, so why should they be? The soldiers were never more confident in the face of battle than on that day.³

Leaders can use stories for much more than merely enhancing communication. Stories also have the potential to influence, to inspire, to instill. Take the

valiant actions of a Marine in combat. The event itself may have resulted in lives saved, bad guys killed, or a mission accomplished. But then a leader comes along and tells the story, perhaps in an award citation. The valiant Marine is honored and encouraged to further exploits. A hundred Marines in earshot hear it, and hundreds of young minds devour it in the hometown press release. Families and friends tell the story at barbecues, recruiters tell it at their stations, and Marines tell it to each other. Suddenly, the influence and meaning of that Marine's actions are multiplied, and the ideals she represents are passed on. Other Marines will strive to add such nobility to their character and honor to their names. Telling the stories of your Marines may not make you a great leader, at least not in a way that will be

recognized, but it will make you a catalyst for the greatness of your Marines.

Sgt Prettyman's convoy departs Forward Operating Base Nalay to recover a vehicle hit by an improvised explosive device (IED)—7 vehicles (vic), 15 passengers (pax). Explosive ordnance disposal personnel are embedded. Sgt Prettyman is assistant convoy commander and also the most experienced wrecker operator. Just as they arrive at the IED-blasted vehicle—BOOM!—a second IED detonates near and rolls vic two. Without hesitation, the mine roller clears a pathway to the rolled vehicle. A young wrecker operator is struggling to get vic two on its wheels. Sgt Prettyman radios his intentions and gets out to assist the recovery. The winch fails just as pot shots start coming in. They take shelter in the wrecker, but not before Sgt Prettyman is hit in the foot. The security element arrives and provides



Marine LtCol John Marshall Gamble became the only Marine to command a Navy ship during the War of 1812. (Photo from The Battle History of the U.S. Marines, A. deRose, Marine Combat Art Collection.)

suppression; the two wrecker operators get vic two upright and proceed to the other downed vehicle. More small arms fire. Another round strikes Sgt Prettyman in the chest just below the shoulder, but this time he sees where it came from. He's alive by a matter of inches. He doesn't fall right away, but raises his rifle sharply in the direction of the enemy fire. The other Marines see it. Some of the locals see it. The insurgent who took the shot certainly sees it, and I wish, I wish I could have seen his face in that instant. This is a Marine. This is the bound from hell, the Great Satan's guard dog you're up against. You just shot him twice, and now he's sighting in on you. Good-bye.⁴

Beyond all this, there is something even deeper that stories can accomplish. In *First to Fight*, LtGen Victor Krulak, USMC(Ret), describes the "almost spiritual" expectations the United States has for her Marines; it is based on faith—certain things that Americans believe about Marines which cause them to want a Marine Corps, although they may not actually need it. These things in turn are based on what Marines do—which become their stories. He adds a stern warning that a reversal of this narrative, the betrayal of America's faith, could spell a swift end to our beloved institution.⁵ Gen James F. Amos used similar words in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and spoke them in person to almost every active duty Marine: "Each Marine is infused with an understanding of the deeds of his or her predecessors. . . . It is almost spiritual!"⁶

Our leaders may have been more right than they knew. It is spiritual! In addition to mere meaning, stories also convey spirit. Stories can transmit or sustain one's spirit, and they can build or destroy one's faith. The Marine Corps has long recognized a bond among Marines far deeper than physical necessity or emotional need. It is a bond built and passed on by stories, indeed a spiritual bond. For almost 239 years, stories have been the medium through which the culture, ideals, heritage, and spirit of our Corps is passed. This is why Marine Corps history is so sacred to Marines: It is our story, our very spirit contained in its words.

Northern France, June 1918. The Russians have surrendered and the Germans double-down on the Western Front, pushing toward Paris. Everything is at stake. Two roads diverge in Belleau Wood: If the Germans defeat the Allies before the United States can tip the scale, the game is over, the fate of the world written in German. But if the Germans can be stopped, or even delayed long enough, there might be a path to victory. It is here that the United States Marines make their stand. Here, when urged by the retreating French to run, Capt Lloyd W. Williams says, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here!" Here, leading from the front, GySgt Dan Daly beckons his Marines to immortality: "Come on, you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?" Here Marines earned their *nom de guerre*: Teufelhunden, devil dog. Two roads diverged in a wood, and Marines—Marines guarded one of them, and that has made all the difference.⁷

World War II, Okinawa, Japan, Hill 53. The Marines have fought ferociously, and the Japanese begin to acknowledge their imminent defeat. Surprisingly, the Marines see a white flag rise over the Japanese position. The Japanese envoy tells them that they don't actually intend to surrender. They just want the Marines to stop shooting long enough for them to kill themselves. The Imperial warriors clutched grenades to their stomachs and necks and blew themselves to hell. Marines cheered for every concussion like a touchdown.⁸

0530 Monday morning at Marine Corps church, a company-strong choir sings and claps their hands to the rhythm of go-fasters on the pavement. "Gimme that old Marine Corps spirit—."

Do you need further proof of the spiritual power of stories? Of the utility of stories in leadership?

The leader of a radical religious cell is led through a Middle Eastern city to be executed. The crowd—a mix of rival groups, sympathizers, fence sitters, soldiers of an occupying force, and everyday citizens just trying to live their lives. How many will die for the wager that these people, if only shown a better way, can be something better than thousands of years of their own history have proven them to be? This leader is the first. His words are spirit and they are life, mostly stories.

For almost 2,000 years his followers have lived and died for these stories, and they do so still. He has become the most followed leader in history. Some have called this the greatest story ever told.

Through stories Marines are imbued with the spirit of Marines before them. Through stories a leader can inspire and empower other Marines. Stories enhance a leader's communication, influence, and spirit. I encourage all leaders of Marines to become storybook leaders. Seek useful stories in your personal and professional reading. If you run out, pay a visit to the wounded warriors at Bethesda or Balboa Naval Hospital and listen to their stories. Tell stories to your Marines, and tell their stories, particularly with awards. There are some leaders who are great, and others who evoke greatness in their Marines; stories are an effective way of doing just that and a powerful tool to add to your leadership repertoire.

Notes

1. Hubbard, Elbert, *A Message to Garcia*, Peter Pauper Press, Inc., White Plains, NY, 1972, accessed at www.birdsnest.com on 27 January 2013.
2. Forrester, C.S., *Rifleman Dodd*, Marine Corps University, Marine Corps Base Quantico.
3. Keegan, John, *The Mask of Command*, Viking Penguin, Inc., New York, 1987, p. 52.
4. This story is based on a personal interview with Sgt Kenneth Prettyman following his evacuation from Afghanistan. Sgt Prettyman was awarded the Purple Heart.
5. Krulak, LtGen Victor H., *First to Fight*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1984, p. xv.
6. Amos, Gen James F., *35th Commandant of the Marine Corps Commandant's Planning Guidance*, Washington, DC, 2010, accessed at www.mca-marines.org on 27 January 2013.
7. "Battle of Belleau Wood." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., accessed 27 January 2013.
8. A guide told this story during a battle sites tour on Okinawa, Japan, on 22 April 2011.

