

The Beauty of Risk

Allowing and encouraging an atmosphere of risk taking

by LtCol Gregory A. Thiele

Over the last 15 years or so, Marines have been beaten to parade rest when it comes to taking risks. Whether it is wearing personal protective equipment in combat or motorcycle safety, virtually every conceivable sphere of a Marine's life has been influenced by the Marine Corps' aversion to risk. "Risk" has truly become a four-letter word in the Marine Corps. Some of this is good; after all, no one wants Marines injured unnecessarily. Unfortunately, success in war often necessitates accepting risks, and the willingness to accept risk must be tolerated and even nurtured during times of peace if it is to be called upon during wartime. As an institution, the Marine Corps has become too risk averse. Marines must be allowed, and even encouraged, to take risks if the Marine Corps is to remain an effective fighting force.

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***"If you never want to take risks you can achieve nothing!"
—Frederick the Great¹***

In an address to the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics in January 1999, LTC William Bell, USA, claimed that risk aversion was "possibly the greatest danger facing our Army."² Although LTC Bell spoke in 1999, it would be a mistake to believe

that risk aversion no longer exists, or that it is limited to the U.S. Army. A number of junior officers leaving the Corps have commented on the Marine Corps' risk-averse culture in the last few years.³ A decade of war has not banished it to the shadows. In a Marine Corps that preaches NCO leadership and "empowerment" of subordinates, but increasingly curtails both in practice, risk aversion is alive and well.⁴

It is easy to understand why the Marine Corps has become risk averse. There is a lot of pressure to prevent or limit mistakes. As LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret), famously observed, the United States wants, but does not truly need, a Marine Corps.⁵ Bad publicity can be extremely damaging and could potentially lead to the end of the Marine Corps as an independent Service. While conceivable, such outcomes are unlikely. The greatest threat to the Marine Corps' existence is ineffectiveness on the modern battlefield. In creating a risk-averse culture, the Marine Corps has unintentionally endangered its ability to prevail in combat.

Leaders that do not take risks lead units that are predictable. Predictability is among the worst traits for any military unit; it becomes a relatively simple matter for the enemy to take advantage of the patterns that develop. It is for this reason that the military theorist William S. Lind criticized U.S. forces' reliance on firepower in Afghanistan and Iraq, writing that U.S. forces "make heavy use of airstrikes because our 'line' infantry tactics cannot do without them."⁶ Mr. Lind believes that U.S. infantry tactics have become formulaic: when U.S. forces bump into the enemy, they hunker down and call for massive fires. The Taliban often attempted to use this reliance on firepower to cause



Frederick the Great (center) meets with Emperor Joseph II in 1769. (Painting by Adolph Menzel, 1857.)

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U.S. forces to inflict civilian casualties, to the ultimate detriment of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan.

Marine Corps doctrine, and many of the literary works that inform our understanding of our profession, encourage the acceptance of risk and taking bold action as the surest path to success. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, says that,

Risk is inherent in war and is involved in every mission. Risk is equally common to action and inaction. Risk may be related to gain; greater potential gain often requires greater risk. The practice of concentrating combat power toward the main effort necessitates the willingness to accept prudent risk elsewhere. However, we should clearly understand that the acceptance of risk does not equate to the imprudent willingness to gamble the entire likelihood of success on a single improbable event.⁷

It is important to note that *MCDP 1*, while encouraging risk taking, delineates between accepting carefully measured risks and foolish gambles.

The true beauty of risk is that it requires trust. If seniors do not trust subordinates, they will not allow subordinates to take risks.

Carl von Clausewitz wrote that “a distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable. No man who is not born bold can play such a role, and therefore we consider this quality the first prerequisite of the great military leader.” Clausewitz also had an interesting perspective regarding the willingness to take risks. He believed that the higher the rank, the less likely leaders were to act boldly. Likewise, “the greater the extent to which [boldness] is retained, the greater the range of his genius.”⁸

Characteristically, Sun Tzu approached the matter of risk more obliquely. Master Sun recommended

maneuvering in such a way that victory was assured even before battle was joined. While generally advocating efforts to limit risks, he also recognized the value of boldness. Master Sun wrote that, “If you can strike few with many, you will thus minimize the number of those with whom you do battle.”⁹ Often, the only way such a preponderance of force is possible is by accepting risks in an effort to surprise the enemy. Sun Tzu also claimed that, “In battle, confrontation is done directly, victory is gained by surprise.”¹⁰

Nothing in the preceding discussion should be construed as an attempt to ignore the importance of thinking through the possible ramifications if a risk does not pan out. Accepting risks for their own sake is not the answer; risks must be judged against the possible gains as well as against the potential negative consequences of failure. Decisions should be made upon this basis. Leaders must educate their Marines regarding what kinds of risks are acceptable, which are gambles and how to hedge against failure. What the Marine Corps needs are leaders, at all levels, who actively encourage their subordinates to take intelligent risks and are involved in the teaching process that this requires.

With its structural, pedantic approach to measuring and assessing risks, ORM (operational risk management) may actually be part of the problem. ORM is often viewed as a “check-in-the-block,” “cover-your-backside” exercise. Many Marines have the impression that if things go wrong, their higher headquarters will only use the ORM as a tool to second-guess any decisions that were made. Under such circumstances, ORM, potentially a valuable tool to teach subordinates about measuring and assessing risks actually degrades the bonds of trust between leaders and led.

The true beauty of risk is that it requires trust. If seniors do not trust subordinates, they will not allow subordinates to take risks. If subordinates do not trust their seniors, they will be extremely hesitant to accept risks. The most effective way to stem the tide of risk aversion is for Marines to build trust

at all levels, including individual and unit.

Trust is the “secret ingredient” or “accelerant” to maneuver warfare. Without trust, maneuver warfare is impossible. Possessing a doctrine that espouses maneuver warfare is insufficient. Maneuver warfare requires leaders who work relentlessly to build trust and confidence in their leadership among their peers, juniors and seniors alike. The greater the degree of trust that exists between leaders and led, as well as adjacent units, the greater will be the willingness and ability to take the risks necessary to succeed in maneuver warfare.

Trust should not be given blindly—it must be built, and this takes time. Trust comes through shared experiences and demonstrated reliability. The Marine Corps’ current personnel policies that move Marines every three years (or less) make it difficult to build organizations with deep levels of trust among all ranks. There is too much personnel turbulence.

In addition to trust, supervision is still required. This supervision takes the form of a conversation between professionals, with the senior leader frequently going in person to see what his subordinates require. Subordinates are not afraid that senior leaders will show up unannounced to have a look around. Subordinates may even desire their presence, as they are viewed as teachers and mentors by their Marines.

The kind of supervision that destroys trust comes from a leader who only shows up episodically, determines that everything being done is wrong, and second-guesses every decision made by the Marine on the ground. Under such circumstances, subordinates put on an artificial “show” while their seniors are around and experience a mixture of relief and elation when their superior has departed, whether they have learned anything from this person or not.

The Marine Corps did not develop a risk-averse culture overnight. It occurred slowly over time. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts...”¹¹ Regardless of how good the in-



Sun Tzu and Clausewitz recognized the value of boldness. (Photo by LCpl Richard Davila.)

tentions in discouraging risk-taking behaviors may be, the long-term result has negatively impacted the Marine Corps’ warfighting ability—which is, after all, its *raison d’être*. Marines must be allowed and encouraged to accept more risks. They must be taught how to judge what risks are appropriate and which are potentially too costly. The future of the Marine Corps depends upon this. It is time for Marines to get out there and take chances again!

Notes

1. Quoted in David Fraser, *Frederick the Great*, (New York: Fromm International, 2000).
2. William Bell, “Threats to Core Values,” (panel, Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, January 1999), available at <http://isme.tamu.edu>.
3. A recent example is a blog entitled “We’re Getting Out of the Marines Because We Wanted to be Part of an Elite Force,” available at <http://www.mca-marines.org>. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the author’s views is immaterial; the perception of the Marine Corps as risk averse is out there, particularly among junior officers.
4. Paradoxically, the Marine Corps, while discouraging risk-taking behavior in individuals, appears very willing to accept major risks when it comes to large acquisition projects (MV-22, Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, F-35). As there are unique factors at work to incentivize this

behavior in the acquisitions world, it is a poor indicator of an institutional willingness to take risks. In fact, one might reasonably argue that the Marine Corps should be *more* risk averse when it comes to acquisitions.

5. Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984; reprint, 1999).
6. William S. Lind, “Our Illiterate Infantry,” *The American Conservative*, (Online: September 2011), available at www.theamericanconservative.com.
7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: June 1997).
8. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
9. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War: Complete Texts and Commentaries*, (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003).
10. Ibid.
11. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000).

