

The “Train Me” Mentality

It's time to get serious about our profession as warfighters

by MajGen William F. Mullen III

While there are some who consider the past seventeen years of combat operations to be a positive advantage with regard to the seasoning of the Marine Corps as a force that is ready to fight tonight, I am not one of those people. I have been in this job as the CG, MAGTF Training Command for almost two years, and honestly, what I am seeing in the Operating Forces units that participate in Integrated Training Exercises (ITX), TALONEX (in conjunction with Weapons and Tactics Instructor Courses conducted by MAWTS-1), or Mountain Exercises at Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center is disturbing. With a cadre of officers and SNCOs from the staff sergeant and captain level, up to the sergeant major and lieutenant colonel level who have experience in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM or Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, there is a level of complacency that does not bode well for future fights. It is almost as if they have a “Train Me” mentality instead of pursuing an active role in leading and training their units. We cannot afford this mentality, if it does exist.

As an eminent military historian once said, we rarely if ever, get predictions about the next fight correct. The important thing is not to be too far wrong and to have the ability to adapt quickly to the situation we are faced with once the fighting starts again. My own professional reading of history and the new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy indicates that we will likely face a significantly more capable and determined enemy in the next fight than the ones we faced in Iraq or Afghanistan. This is contrasted by my

>MajGen Mullen is the Commanding General, Training and Education Command. This article was originally published on the Gazette website in July 2018, when he was the CG, MAGTF Training Center, Twentynine Palms, CA.



There are many challenges facing the Operating Forces. (Photo by LCpl James Mast.)

observations of Operating Forces units that lack proficiency in basic blocking and tackling, as well as a degree of complacency with regard to threats such as massed indirect fire, electronic warfare, and air threats, especially of the unmanned variety, that could easily cost us dearly in the next fight. This article is a challenge for leaders to prove me wrong and get energized to fix these trends quickly and effectively.

Aside from this complacency, I recognize that there are many challenges in the Operating Forces that need to be addressed by our current batch of com-

manders and SNCOs. A high operating tempo that does not allow enough time to train properly has always been a detriment to the readiness of our forces. A manpower model that does not keep up with the demands of ensuring key members of a team are placed into our Operating Forces in time for those teams to cohere before they are tested at an ITX or evaluated at a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation is another challenge. This is further complicated by losing officers and SNCOs to individual augment positions away from their assigned units. We also consistently lack

school-trained sergeant squad leaders in the infantry ranks because of the competition with special duty assignments. When we man squad leader positions at 21 percent school-trained sergeants, with the remaining billets filled by corporals and lance corporals, what results should we expect? We have the largest concentration of young adult males bonded together in primary groups of peers who need rock-solid, mature, and knowledgeable leadership to keep them oriented in the right direction. Lacking these types of leaders means we have peers leading peers, and we end up with the hazing and immaturity that we see almost on a daily basis.

Another factor that the Operating Forces actually have control over is how they use the time available to train properly. Organizations such as MAWTS-1, Marine Corps Tactics & Operations Group, and Marine Corps Logistics Operations Group have provided training on the Unit Readiness Program (URP) for many years now. This training offers a systematic method for a new unit commander to conduct an assessment of the unit he took over, determine where the unit currently is regarding the skills needed for the next deployment, and then develop a training plan that gets the unit ready for the anticipated deployment. Unfortunately, we do not see a great deal of evidence that the URP is being used, with the result that units are indifferently trained and are arriving at a Service-level training exercise—for which the Service is investing a great deal of resources—unprepared to take full advantage of all that is offered. When our exercise controllers see units struggling with basic proficiency tasks and making the same mistakes repeatedly, often despite the controllers preparing and sending out a “best practices” booklet to help units prepare, it really makes you question our level of professionalism across the Marine Corps. It seems at times that units have the “Train Me” mentality. This mentality, if it does exist, has been engendered by years of compressed depth to dwell and how Predeployment Training Program requirements have been handled. Instead of incorporating what is required into an overall train-

ing plan, many unit leaders just use the Predeployment Training Program checklist as their training plan and go through the motions, allowing others to train their units instead of taking an active, abundant role in that process.

Examples of the lack of professionalism, as evidenced by standards being allowed to slip in both the field and garrison abound. In the field, we are seeing a lack of immediate action drills that are taken on contact as “muscle memory drills” to get through that first contact. Tactical dispersion should be an automatic, but we rarely see it enforced with personnel or vehicles. When

... we are seeing a lack of immediate action drills ...

you walk around in unit “tactical” positions, you see gear adrift in a position that needs to be packed up quickly for displacement, especially in the dark and under fire. Perhaps most surprising is how uncomfortable our Marines seem to be at operating in the dark, and this is evidenced by the lack of light and noise discipline at night. This lack of confidence and proficiency at night is occurring because we have not been training for it enough. This is likely because our aversion to night fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps worst of all, we are seeing a lack of small unit leader engagement in ensuring all continuing actions actually continue for the duration of an exercise. When our exercise controllers make more corrections than unit leadership, that is a problem!

In garrison, the same lack of leader engagement displays itself in the lack of shaves on weekends and holidays, inappropriate civilian attire, trashed unit areas, the poor state of field day in the barracks, and an attitude that, when the uniform comes off, “I am on my own time and Marine Corps standards no longer apply.” We see all these types of problems on nearly a daily basis across the Marine Corps. In some cases, Ma-

rines who have been corrected by myself or my sergeant major were officers and SNCOs. When did this sort of behavior become acceptable? We, as Marines, are supposed to be holding ourselves to a higher standard, but instead, we are seeing a drift toward mediocrity. There are a lot of negative influences that creep into our ranks from the culture we come from and return to, but this only means we have to fight harder to uphold our standards, not surrender and take the easier path. Some may feel these are only minor issues that are not worth paying much attention to, but we see them as indicators of a general lack of professionalism. If our Marines are allowing small things to slip, what else will they decide is too hard to maintain, and when will they make that decision?

I know what you are probably thinking: it is easy for me to sit back and throw darts, but you can take this one of two ways—as the ranting of an old crank who is making comments from the cheap seats (not in the Operating Forces dealing with these issues face-to-face every day) or as a challenge to rise to and prove me wrong. It is your choice. Fixing this situation starts with energizing leaders all the way down the chain. Coach Bill Belichick of the New England Patriots has a saying which I admire: “Do your job!” Can you imagine a Marine Corps where every member of the chain of command actually does his job? It starts with the enforcement of standards in garrison and in the field—which we are not seeing! The same standards, especially in the field, are designed to save lives and enable our Marines to survive long enough to accomplish our assigned mission. Many times you hear Marines say they “would not actually do these things in combat when people are shooting at them,” but I am here to tell you that our Marines will do *exactly* what they have been trained to do, or allowed to do in training, even if it makes no sense when people are shooting at them. In essence, practice does not make perfect; only perfect practice makes perfect. We have immediate action drills, SOPs, and rehearsals to ensure the first reaction to combat is both positive (doing something to survive it and fight back), and



Training must be continually repeated. (Photo by LCpl Kenny Nunez Bigay.)

instinctive (automatic instead of the stunned mullet response). After that, the mental agility to observe a situation, orient yourself to what it means, make a decision about what needs to be done, then act accordingly enables adaptation to a rapidly changing situation (the OODA loop). All of this has to be trained and *ingrained* to overcome the shock of direct combat. Veteran units know this, and their actions in combat demonstrate this knowledge. For better or worse, the majority of our Marines and all of our units are not veteran units. We have combat veterans in our units, but their numbers are dwindling, especially when you consider the fact that 75 percent of the Marine Corps turns over every four years. The required training and ingraining must be continually repeated to ensure we are able to answer the call when it comes.

None of us should ever settle for good enough. We fought the equivalent of the junior varsity over the last seventeen years, and while it offered some tough fights in isolated instances, it does not compare with the people we may fight in the near future. To rest on our laurels is a recipe for disaster bred by overconfidence and a lack of professionalism amongst our officers, SNCOs, and NCOs. As former Secretary James N. Mattis once said, the price of a lack of competence in our profession

is “filling body bags” until we figure it out. The U.S. Army’s Combat Studies Institute published a monograph entitled, “We Were Caught Unprepared,” about the Israeli Defense Forces going into Southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006. It should be required reading for all of our leaders because, from what we are seeing at our training venues, we are risking having someone write a similar monograph about us after our next fight. The Israeli Defense Forces made poor assumptions and were overconfi-

Their basic unit proficiency had been allowed to atrophy to an unacceptable level ...

dent after fifteen years of low intensity counterinsurgency operations against the Palestinians. Their basic unit proficiency had been allowed to atrophy to an unacceptable level, and the service men and women had a very difficult time against Hezbollah. Because they did not clearly win, they lost in the eyes of the world—and also in their own eyes. We will have this same challenge unless we wake up and change our ways.

This is *our* Marine Corps. As leaders, we get the kind of Marine Corps we expect, enforce, and inspect. If our junior leaders are not doing all that is necessary to make us successful, then it is our fault, and we need to enforce the necessary changes. If we allow standards, *any* standards, to slip, then we have just established a new, lower standard. Many lament the fact that we never seem to live up to our maneuver warfare doctrine and seem to think it should just happen naturally in our units because it is our doctrine. Well, it does not happen naturally. It comes about when all Marines in a unit are competent, when leaders have come together as a team and learned to trust each other, when they have trained together enough that they understand intent and immediately move to accomplish that intent whether they are told to do so or not, and when they outpace anyone they encounter with the OODA loop. I have seen this work in units I have belonged to, and it is truly amazing to watch, but it has to be worked toward and achieved. To repeat, it does not come naturally—especially trust, which is the most important ingredient.

If we truly want to live up to our doctrine and be the kind of Marine Corps we can achieve if we energize our leadership to do all that is required of them, then we have to get moving right now. None of us knows when the next fight will come or where it will occur. Our mission is to be the “most ready when the Nation is least ready.” That is a tall order, and though we have always been able to answer the call and “figure it out,” I would prefer it be at less cost in body bags because we are truly competent professionals. As I said earlier, it is up to each and every one of us wearing the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor today. We have an amazing tradition to live up to, and we cannot ever let that tradition down. If we do, then someone may decide, as they have in the past no less than six different times, that maybe the United States does not need a Marine Corps anymore.

