Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Essay Contest 2018: Honorable Mention

A Follower's Guide to Leadership

Observations on leadership

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***>MGySgt Miller, an 0399 Infantry Operations Chief, retired in 2019 after 30 years of service. Many of the examples discussed here are drawn from his recent book,* Stepping Off.**

I followed Marine officers for 30 years. As retirement looms, I ponder how the best and worst officers I knew differed from each other. "Best" does not mean those I liked most or feared most, but those who led combat units most effectively. If you graduated from Quantico, I will follow you anywhere; *how* you lead is flexible. Alas, while I saw many combinations of personality types and leadership traits succeed, I also saw them fail; I think I know why.

Put the "Awe" in "Officer"

Create good rumors. If you are arrested, we will know. Fortitude also makes news, even from a single witness. I started "good" gossip after a new lieutenant joined my light-armored vehicle platoon. Standing in the light-armored vehicle turret at highway speeds in winter surpasses motorcycling naked in Iceland. This was years before Gore-Tex outerwear or any suitable winter gear. Marines piled illicit garments under cotton field jackets, and we alternated who protruded from the turret. The lieutenant arrived in bare cammies. "He'll last five minutes," I thought. Actually, he smiled through blizzards for three hours. I alone witnessed this. Once I thawed, I told everyone about our *really* tough platoon commander. I still have no idea how he did it. Did he put space blankets under his utilities or wear a plutonium cummerbund? *How* does not matter—the result did.

What will be your legacy? *(Photo by Sgt Sean Berry.)*

PT or resign. Officers with derogatory nicknames are usually overweight. If you shoot poorly, we see that yearly or on your Service uniforms. If you're fat, you're *always* fat; we see it daily in any uniform. My infantry company separated four Marines who failed the PFT run. Finishing dead last was our obese CO. He retained command and returned from combat with a Bronze Star. Privately, we still refer to the blizzard-impervious lieutenant by his military title. We call the flabby captain "Pie Eater."

Employ "I'm the officer" moments shrewdly. Screaming continually is not effective; never screaming is worse. Tact does not preclude confronting Marines publicly; it requires choosing wisely *which* infractions to correct publicly. You are older, more mature, more intelligent, and far better trained than your median Marine. When someone shoots azimuths poorly, correct him privately. By contrast, cowardice, willful disobe-

dience, and dangerous actions demand *public* tongue lashing.

My rifle company received unforeseen combat orders. Suddenly, Marines discovered Quakerism or remembered hidden injuries. Only a non-deploying admin officer was present. Still, he gave the best "man up" speech I've ever heard. He called Marines cowards and worse. What looked like a trend, if not a mutiny, ceased. The men claiming conscientious objector status all recanted. All deployed, all served honorably, and some served heroically.

This officer was mild-mannered; however, in this situation, he displayed *controlled* anger and spent his "I'm the officer" capital wisely. A different officer wasted *his* moments tormenting recruits. Between events, he mocked men over scars, incontinence, or anything convenient. Maybe he was sadistic; maybe he eased his workload by ensuring that recruits never bothered him with tales of drill instructors' hazing.

My turn came outdoors. After learning that I was more educated than he was, he mocked me before twelve drill instructors, handed me some bread, and ordered that I catch a seagull and return with it. I lacked gull-specific college credits, but quickly lured a dull bird to my shins, beak down. Just before I could pounce, my drill instructor spooked the bird, sparing the gull's life and saving my eyes from being pecked out.

Lieutenant Seagull was not my last superior who visibly hated his job. A captain would not write fitness reports for sergeants; my unit had many, and most were not career Marines anyway. A major processed my missing gear statement, detailing why I returned from Afghanistan with only 119 of 120 items. He did not read it or look up from his desk—he checked "denied" and shoved the paper back at me. I would still obey lawful orders from any of the three, but *officers who inspire Marines treat every billet as special.* One in 10,000 American adults currently serve as Marine officers. *Someone* wants your billet.

Have the highest composite score. PFCs will not grasp all of your responsibilities, but they can calculate your enlisted composite score. Some Marines might outrun or outshoot you, but in aggregate, you should be the most proficient Marine. If you are not, practice—you can afford compasses and pistols.

Master what is visible. We will not know if you mark your skivvies correctly, but we will notice how well you roll your sleeves. We will not know if you can take marching platoons out of the left oblique, but we will know if you flub "Post." If you make a show, do so credibly. A colonel insisted that anthrax shots were safe (true, but try telling PFCs) *and* that he would go first; he did. He entered a shack full of officers and reemerged holding his arm. Cynics lacking X-ray vision scoffed.

Sleep outdoors. Yes, you will handle officer business periodically. Are not most such meetings, though, during *daylight*? One captain continually gave the message, "This field operation is vital, but while you freeze/broil outdoors, I'll sleep at home because of my meeting from 1300–1500." The dullest private still takes attendance at Taps.

Marines want godlike officers. My company's mission required a second pair of $1.50 glove inserts. Marines spent 1,000 man-hours lined up for a *captain* to issue custody cards. A *Navy* captain signed every meal ticket himself, nationwide. Would you want him commanding the USS *America* in combat? Zeus did not distribute glove inserts.

Tell Us What We Must Know—Yourself

During my career, nobody inspired more awe than Gen Alfred Gray, our 29th Commandant. With three Purple Hearts and a gruff manner, he embodied grit. However, his biggest contributions were intellectual. He directed *Warfighting*'s publication, thereby promoting commander's intent. Sadly, DESERT STORM and his retirement intervened before commander's intent penetrated the enlisted ranks. Until it does, *commander's intent should come from commanders.* If you are both tougher and more intelligent than Gen Gray, you may ignore commander's intent and skip this section.

"When I tell you to f...ing do something, you f...inging do it, you don't f...ing ask why. 'Why' is none of your f...ing business. What I'm telling you is probably stupid, and it probably isn't the best way to complete the task, but you will f...ing do it. Understood?" The class was titled "Leadership," taught by a first sergeant twelve years after *Warfighting*'s release. Surely, you filled in the blanks correctly. In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, John Wayne's Sgt Stryker employs *worse* commander's intent. A counterintuitive order reaches him through three levels of officers with "why" intact. The Duke makes this an "I said so" order, then nearly kills an intelligent junior Marine for bravely wanting to disobey it. Do not blame us: commander's intent defies everything taught in recruit training. I have forgotten my general orders but not "instant, willing obedience to orders."

Any commander's intent you give dies at the first enlisted level. Typical enlisted chains of command include my leadership instructor, Sgt Stryker, and corporals chosen for their loudness, meanness, and longevity—not their tactical insights. I *never* received commander's intent from enlisted superiors; prospects for my final months look bleak. I did receive excellent commander's intent from many officers, however, with the best predating *Warfighting.*

Before exercises, the CO briefed *everyone* on our mission. We all understood our strategy and what the captain expected from our (notional) Nicaraguan enemies. After missions, he *de*briefed us, reinforcing commander's intent, showing humility, and giving positive reinforcement. A typical statement was, "I'd foreseen the enemy's response, except at the river. Cpl Gomez knew our real goal was keeping them across the river, though, so he seized the ford even though his radio broke. Great initiative."

His briefings undercut nobody. Afterward, lieutenants said, "Let me amplify the skipper's order and clarify our platoon's role." Marines did not balk when there was not time for "why?"; I recall once thinking, "He didn't explain—this must be *really* urgent." This captain was not soft. He did not give commander's intent to be liked; he gave it to ensure we would accomplish our mission even in his absence. He

gave it *himself* so we knew we had his authority to improvise if required. He understood two things that were true at Tun Tavern and that will be true when your toddlers earn their commissions in twenty years: *Marines die, and comm sucks.* The first is axiomatic. With communications, Marines will always push the envelope, using flags, radios, or whatever follows. As electronics advance, we consume the engineering budget with more encryption, jamming resistance, and integration with ancillary systems. Your son's radio will be integrated with his exoskeleton, call-for-fire system, improvised-explosive-device jammer, and drone controller. However, the battery will die when he needs it most, and Marines will be yet more dispersed across the battlefield.

Many officers also ignore commander's intent. In Baghdad, I was one bullet from becoming the senior Marine among 50 while having *no* idea what our mission was or even where we were heading. Optimal commander's intent varies with the leader, unit, and mission. For every combination, though, there is some baseline knowledge needed by all Marines—whatever you settle on, deliver it yourself.

Give awful news yourself. Your senior enlisted leader's job description includes "professional jerk"; he knew that when he put "F" on his gunnery sergeant fitness reports. He will happily convey unwelcome news: "The Ball tickets are $80" or "Everyone must do 'Information Assurance' again." However, awful news, such as "The '96' is canceled" or "LCpl Adams died while on leave" should come from you. Dire news contains either solid reasoning or teachable moments. Perhaps the "96" gave way to vital training. Few Marines die from kidney failure; there is a lesson about drugs, alcohol, motorcycles, or knife fights with "Jody."

If you want Marines to understand financial management, *teach us.* To prevent sexual assaults, suicide, or drug abuse, tell us why and how. I listen to doctors about medicine and chaplains about theology, but I'd rather listen to my CO than outside "experts" on most topics.

Impart specific, useful advice to individual Marines. Decades later, I recall comments like, "Here's a radio feature you might not know" or "This will improve your kneeling shooting position."

Care for Us

When officers suffer, Marines do not grumble. We whined about sleeping on snow in poncho-wrapped cotton sleeping bags until officers laid their bags *directly* on snow. Pepper spray was excruciating, but the major went first. Combat was rough, but the captain led us, carrying a radio.

Food is different: officers cannot prove they *are not* eating, so *never run out of the chow.* Many Marines starved during the 2003 march to Baghdad. We got one MRE daily while digging fighting holes and sleeping one to two hours. Marines collapsed from walking or merely standing. Meanwhile, officers *said* they were hungry. Were they? Truth did not matter—our *belief* they held a secret stash did.

Similarly, make heavy gear visible during hikes. I humped 27 miles with a 50-pound pack (along with much else). Did officers carry 50 pounds, or did they carry bubble-wrapped balsa shavings? We never knew. Another CO led a hike carrying .50 caliber barrels on his shoulders. *Nobody* whined.

"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much." Marines who do not trust you in garrison will not trust you in combat. Before invading Iraq, my unit's orders were rescinded days after issuance. Marines drove 1,000 miles and paid for lodging themselves. When travel claim time came, we heard, "Suck it up." Paperwork required effort, so our officers punted. Would they stiff pilots earning four times what we did?

The black-to-tan boot switch occurred before we deployed. These were to be issued, not purchased. My company found pallets of size-7 boots rejected by other units. We all (forcibly) signed for boots, tossed them, and then bought our own. We did not leave for war thinking, "Wow, they'll be *great* combat officers."

Help all Marines. Units rarely deploy intact. Usually, they borrow corpsmen, individual augmentees, or other servicemen normally assigned elsewhere. Returning from war, they will scatter and be alone administratively. Keep accurate rosters of *everyone* who rates awards, needs fitness reports, or is owed reimbursement. Augmentees' unit medals must be awarded *by name.* I stood with officers wearing awards we all rated but enlisted Marines did not wear. Getting names into a MARADMIN took work. Officers bullied admin clerks into entering their awards. We did not have that option.

Decorate enlisted Marines. We *hope* that officers win more battlefield honors than we do. Officers disproportionately affect the battle's outcome by design. But for valor awards, do most heroic or selfless acts involve officers? Officers are outnumbered ten to one. My company gave Bronze Stars with Combat 'V' to 2 of 5 officers and 0 of 115 enlisted men. Saying, "We tried, but bureaucrats downgraded the enlisted awards," does not help; it makes you look weak.

Give high-speed gear to privates. In Afghanistan, junior Marines performed biometric enrollments using laptop computers with dead batteries, cracked screens, and measly storage. Enrollments took 30 minutes, 29 of which were spent waiting for the computer. Meanwhile, inside the wire, we used brand-new laptops to make one daily PowerPoint slide saying, "Sir, here's why we didn't bomb anyone yesterday."

In Iraq, drivers had *no* night vision equipment. This was decades after such gear became commonplace. We had numerous accidents, including fatal ones, on dusty, moonless nights. Vehicles collided or rolled into canals. Leaders yelled by radio, "Pay closer attention," hoping we would sprout echo-location organs.

Prioritizing fancy equipment for officers is understandable and universal. Decades ago, I worked on the Army's M1A2 tank program. We set the lowest priority on capabilities for drivers (usually E-2s) to give officers *multiple* night vision systems. I am not equating AAV drivers with F-35 pilots but merely saying that neither can navigate at night using bare eyeballs.

Risk our lives (intelligently). When ordered to remove mission oriented pro-

tective posture (MOPP) gear, Marines will not say, "Sir, no Americans have died in gas attacks since 1918, but I want to keep wearing this." Officers allow many unattributable deaths to prevent one death attributed to their perceived negligence. MOPP gear is cumbersome. Mask carriers and extra canisters hinder vehicle egress. Meanwhile, Marines die in vehicle fires wearing *charcoal* MOPP suits. MOPP gear has killed numerous Marines—we just do not know who. Similarly, men wearing heavy body armor are easier targets than those with light armor.

Consider our aforementioned nighttime drive. All vehicles had headlamps. Using those, we would have sped past hostile towns instead of pretending, because our lights were off, that enemies would not notice a snail-paced 1,000-vehicle convoy. We did not use lights because no officer wanted his Marine dying while using high beams in combat. If ten died in collisions—well, yes, Marines die in wars.

I *never* complained when officers balanced risks and ditched burdensome equipment or procedures. I whined with the best PFC about wearing MOPP suits when flame-resistant organizational gear made more sense.

Remember when you *failed.* You faced impossible scenarios in Officer Candidates School. Nobody thought you would really escape from Alcatraz using yarn and dead chem lights; instructors were evaluating your leadership, observing your bearing under duress. But also remember the outcome: no matter how well you inspired other candidates, no matter how resourceful you were, you *did not* escape from Alcatraz using yarn and dead chem lights. Most Marines cannot spell *non sequitur,* but we recognize them. Here is one: "*I* ran the 'Quigley' in winter; surely, *you* can find laundry soap without leaving your fighting hole."

Small Things for Big Officers

Junior officers' jobs are hard enough. Senior officers can ease their burden with these steps.

Consider how your orders reach privates. For instance, "I want your men lined up like Jews at Auschwitz." The general would have gagged at how his seemingly sensible order to maintain military appearance evolved before reaching me, an enlisted platoon commander in a foot-mobile infantry company in Iraq. My men were to line up for haircuts. *I* had to find scissors, clippers, and power in a field of Mesopotamian silt lacking all three. The captain flaunted *his* excellent haircut, obtained elsewhere. The general looked foolish, living in a palace with electricity and traveling with a marching band. Company officers looked impotent, scolding us to perform tasks they could not enable.

Wear something shiny. Initially, I enjoyed saluting: I sought blue window stickers, steered toward any glint from passing collars, and took pride in my salutes. Then came DESERT STORM, fought by officers split between, "Never salute in combat zones!" and "Salute me, Marine, or you'll stand before the general!" Midway between bifocal age and cataract surgery, I steer *away* from unknown servicemen. Will it be pilots in unmarked fleece or airmen in eagle-covered flight suits? Army majors with tan-on-tan cloth insignia or female soldiers wearing indistinguishable lieutenant colonel or specialist blobs between their breasts? Saluting should be respectful and *reflexive,* not a mind-teaser. Combat zones are worse. No two Afghan bases share saluting policies. "Salute all officers" is simple, as is, "Don't salute in Central Command's area of responsibility." The myriad in-between policies beget enlisted ulcers. *When* Marines should salute is not my business. *How* we know when to salute demands history's simplest order: "Enlisted Marines shall never be reprimanded for saluting officers wearing reflective insignia, nor for failing to salute officers wearing subdued insignia."

With age, take less enlisted advice. Platoon sergeants give lieutenants enlisted perspectives but also *experienced* perspectives: they have been Marines a decade longer. As officers advance, this gap vanishes, then reverses. The current Commandant was commissioned eight years *before* his sergeant major enlisted. Listen carefully to your senior enlisted leader about overlooked troop welfare issues: "Sir, that uniform isn't mandatory," or "Consider our 200 college students." By contrast, why defer to him regarding discipline? "Restrict all Marines to base" is easy, but is it just?

A sergeant major in Afghanistan hated flame-resistant organizational gear suits, fleece, and beanie caps—everything worn by field Marines. Units returned from weeks of combat with one chance for showers and hot chow, but the sergeant major stood at the chow hall door turning away Marines without pressed cammies and eight-point covers. Combat Marines had stowed these uniforms. Whatever the general's role in this, he was responsible.

Do not play favorites. You will attack soon. First will lead, Second will support, and Third is in reserve. Weighing your units' priorities, you give twenty percent more supplies to First, withheld from Third. Sounds logical, right? However, it is also logical to your subordinates. After five levels of this, low-priority units—such as mine in Iraq—get one MRE daily, while favored ones get seven and a half. That is why tankers burned cases of MREs during our famine.

Consider your legacy. We remember Gen Gray for maneuver warfare and LtCol Anthony Gale for disgrace. How will we remember *you*? I suggest, "Didn't he finally pound commander's intent through the skulls of enlisted Marines?" It beats, "Did he change from crew-neck to V-neck shirts, or vice versa?"

>Author's Note: For more on followership and leadership, see MGySgt Miller's book, Stepping Off, *(Sydmor Press, 2019), ISBN: 978-0692191392.*

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