

The Commandant's Perspective

Embracing Innovation

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

If the Corps is to ride the 'dragon of change' into the 21st century, it must make a commitment to innovation.

When I assumed the watch as 31st Commandant, I promised that I would build upon my predecessor's foundation. My first command was "continue to march." I gave that command because I believe that we are on the right course. Today, we are the Nation's premier crisis response force, and we will remain so tomorrow and into the next century. I also believe that we can build upon where we are today and where we have been in the past.

But building upon our past does not mean doing things the old way. It is not an excuse to avoid developing new methods for organizing, training, and equipping the Marine Corps. What it means is looking at the ways we have responded in our past to new and different threats. "Back to the future" means looking at how the Marine Corps adapted to the new era of steam warships by becoming a force with the capacity to seize and defend the advanced bases and coaling stations needed by fleets operating independently of the winds. It means looking at how some in our Corps understood that a trans-Pacific war would require more than just an advanced base force, and how the Corps began recasting itself as an amphibious force.

Even a cursory look at our history will reveal that Marines are innovators, that we know how to deal with change, yet still maintain the momentum needed for long-term solutions. History also tells us that whenever we have stayed at the forefront of change, we have prospered. But it is simply not enough that we can point to a history of innovation. Marines must sustain that ability to innovate. This is one of our biggest challenges as an institution.

Innovation does not come about easily in an organization such as ours, which rightfully glories in battles and successes in the past and believes in its competence and capability in the present. Innovation is not comfortable or easy. It requires that we have the courage to challenge conventional beliefs. It requires that we investigate the possibility that our current ways of operating may not work in the future.

Innovation takes time. We must begin looking today for the solutions we will need tomorrow. The development of forces for expeditionary duty in the first part of this century, the development of the Fleet Marine Force and amphibious warfare doctrine in the 1930s, the push for the development of the helicopter and vertical/short take-off and landing technology, and our Maritime Prepositioning Force Program were all success stories that have changed the nature of how we fight wars. But they took time to achieve. The first full-scale amphibious exercises took place almost three decades after we began serious discussions on the concept of advanced bases. Earl Ellis' masterful work was finished in 1921, but we did not have a doctrine for landing operations until over a decade later.

Innovation requires risk. To achieve these breakthroughs, Marines had to challenge the conventional wisdom, they had to look beyond what was known and proven and comfortable. They had to experiment and risk that their ideas might be wrong. And indeed, many ideas tried in the course of such an effort *were* wrong. They persisted in "thinking beyond the moment and living beyond the day," in challenging, probing, and looking at the world in different ways. Successful innovators do not wait for failure on the battlefield to force the issue. If, in the next century, we are to have the kind of relevant and effective Corps that we have today, this is the outlook we must embed in our Corps.

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"If it ain't broke don't fix it" is a commonly heard phrase that originally meant "don't fiddle with something successful." While that is still sound advice, it does not mean "rest on your laurels; what was good enough before will be good enough in the future." Creativity and innovation are absolutely essential if we are to anticipate events and win across the spectrum of conflict. We must be ruthless in stamping out those things that restrict creative thinking or limit the development of new approaches to the challenges we face. We have already taken some important steps to achieve this, but we have more to do.

One way to begin the process is to integrate the new technologies that are already available today, but not yet in our hands, with innovative new organizations, doctrinal concepts, training and education that are appropriate to the many missions we will face. This is the starting point for one of our Corps' most important initiatives, the Commandant's Warfighting Laboratory, which was formally established on 1 October 1995. Just as we used the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico to redefine the science and art of amphibious assault during the interwar years, we will use the Warfighting Laboratory to help us chart our course through the different challenges we see coming in the 21st century. At the forefront of this effort is the testbed we call "Sea Dragon." Sea Dragon is not one particular innovation or idea, but rather a *commitment to innovation*. It is not a predetermined force structure and predetermined operational technique, but a method of evaluating potential structures and techniques. It is a model for future thinking and an umbrella under which ideas are born, tested, bear fruit, or die. Perhaps best described as a "quest" for solutions to the problems of tomorrow, it is an overarching approach to developing a whole host of new tactical and operational techniques and thinking involving both Marine and Navy forces. It is not a "done deal," but a means of dealing with what will have to be done in the future.

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The basic concept is to experiment by combining various operational techniques with enabling technologies that are already available to produce a force that can deal with new warfighting environments as they appear on the horizon. Of course, we must also identify and incorporate the impact these new approaches will have on all of the systems that support our operating forces. To do this we are forming a testbed MAGTF to actually work through the ideas generated within the Warfighting Laboratory as part of the larger Combat Development Process. As the Warfighting Lab articulates its ideas and findings, it is important that we not lose sight of the overall idea. The only thing

we know for certain is that the force we develop to fight our battles tomorrow will not look exactly like whatever force we pick to test our ideas today. By thinking about the future, and using Sea Dragon as a framework in which to think, we can prepare for the uncertainties that lie ahead.

This is not just another push for silver bullet, "whiz-bang" technology. We seek to equip our high quality Marines, not "man the equipment." I expect some of what we try to do will fail. Indeed, I will be disappointed if some things do not fail, because testing to failure is one of the few ways we can really know our limits. The new technology that is already at hand has huge implications for the future, and we need to take a hard look at how we can adapt to it before someone else shows us how . . . across a battlefield.

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One may ask, why are we referring to a process as a "thing"—as a "dragon"? The answer lies in the nature of change. The Chinese have a saying that "change is a dragon," and there are three ways to respond to that dragon. You can ignore him and hope he goes away, but no matter how many times you tell yourself that he is not there or how much you wish he would leave, the dragon that is change remains. If you continue to ignore him, he will eat you. You can try to control the dragon of change, try to force him onto a path of your own choosing. Push him and pull him. But the dragon is powerful and will not go where you want him to go. He will ultimately knock you down and eat you. But if you ride the dragon of change, you can avoid his lethal powers. You can survive, you can even prosper. Accept change, constantly anticipate and adapt to it, and always take advantage of the opportunities it brings. This is the strategy we must embrace. The Marine Corps has ridden the dragons of change in the past, and we must do so again in the years to come. I am absolutely convinced of that.

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Our Marines have grown up in a climate of explosive change. These young men and women are comfortable with high technology and ready to embrace the future. Around these Marines, we can build a package of capabilities that will make certain they remain the world’s premier crisis response force. We have only just begun to exploit the possibilities offered by less-lethal technologies, developments in chaos theory, virtual reality simulations, digital communications networks, miniaturization, precision guidance, and a host of other advanced technologies and new thinking.

But all of this potential will come to nothing if we do not accept that real innovation means more than just adding a new layer of technology over an existing organization. The future requires an outlook that values creativity, that rewards thoughtful, insightful critique, that encourages us to explore areas outside the box. It is a future that demands that we embrace innovation. I charge all Marines to think about our future. Only through collective effort and an institutional commitment to innovation can we ride the dragon of change into the 21st century.

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