

Martial Art

Sustaining a leaner, meaner Marine Corps

by 1stLt Andrew E. Petrevics

As a Cub Scout, I could not define the word *thrift*—I guessed it meant “clever.” Founded in 1910 by a British war hero, Boy Scouts say this:

A Scout works to pay his way and to help others. He saves for the future. He protects and conserves natural resources. He carefully uses time and property. On Scout camp outs you will learn to live comfortably with little more than the clothes you are wearing and the gear in your pack. Likewise, you can live other parts of your life simply and well, taking care of what you have and being generous to others. Paying your way with money you have earned gives you independence and pride. When you save your own money to buy a Scout uniform or something else you need, you learn the real value of those items. You will also be sure to take good care of them. Even if you only have a few dollars, get in the habit every month of saving money in a bank account. Share what you have with others, too, and talent is just as valuable as donating money. Do all you can to minimize waste.¹

Art of War vs Science

Listening to Gen Joseph Dunford and the other Service chiefs testifying before the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) concerning the 2016 fiscal year defense budget² was most enlightening: “Most of what was expected of a lieutenant 15 or 20 years ago now falls on the shoulders of a sergeant,” explained Gen Dunford. This means not only increased responsibility and knowledge, but increased “trust and confidence in the ... abilities” of Marine leaders—the art of making winning teams out of limited resources, including eligible Americans. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus addressed the strategic and operational levels when he said the Services agree that “requirement



Gen Dunford and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter testifying to the HASC. (Photo by MCS1 Tim D. Goodbee.)

after requirement after requirement” during acquisition often adds no value to a weapons system. Increasing trust at all levels is essential to combating unnecessary cost. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James reflected this fact when she said,

I know the tendency when things go wrong is to put more processes and more oversight in place, but actually again from a business perspective, the less in this case, the better. Trust people and hold them accountable when things go wrong.

Personnel management also benefits from fewer processes and more genuine concern.

A congressman also noted that, while many concerns are tied to adequately funding the Armed Forces, some

concerns money cannot fix—namely strategy. If it is unethical to send in troops who are underequipped or undermanned (budgetary concerns), it is also unethical to send them into harm’s way without a strategy (a non-budgetary concern). Although this congressman was not impressed by descriptions of our current strategy in the Middle East, I mention this not to critique, but to establish that while budgets can fund the science of war, they cannot fund the art of war.

Victory—Earned, never Bought

While it is tempting to enter debates concerning issues above our pay grades, including women in the infantry and foreign strategy, we can do our part by reducing waste, working hard, and rest-

>1stLt Petrevics is a Student Naval Aviator (pilot) with Training Wing 5 in Milton, FL. A MCMAP instructor-trainer, he acknowledges Sgt Willie Floyd for mentoring him with the concept that Marines are artists, creative by trade.

ing adequately in order to be productive (and not merely busy). If victory could be bought we would not need a Marine Corps. Rubrics cannot ensure victory. Artists are creative, and only martial artists can create the conditions for victory against a *thinking* enemy. Money may be a factor, but history testifies to how well equipped armies often lose to poorer but more efficient ones.

Our superior officers—congressmen—applaud the thrift of Marines. With a mere 6 percent of the defense budget, Marines provide 21 percent of America’s infantry units and 15 percent of fighter/attack aircraft. We know that war is not an arithmetic difference between forces, but a matter of who shows up. Marines do more with less, and we must be prepared to do more with even less in the future. This is an art. If sergeants are doing what lieutenants used to do, and if infantry units which, according to Gen Dunford, used to “defend a frontage of 3,000 meters and attack on a frontage of 600 meters” are spread across six countries as part of a special purpose MAGTF, how should we train privates first-class and second lieutenants?

Art and Culture

Although TBS provides a solid foundation in the science of war, the cost must not outweigh its benefits. Games ended in Phase I at OCS, but TBS does not “trust (lieutenants) and hold them accountable when things go wrong” even though “most of what was expected of a lieutenant 15 or 20 years ago now falls on the shoulders of a sergeant.” What Gen Dunford said about acquisitions can be said about TBS: “Today we’re actually responsible for requirements and resources and not outcomes. I think that’s where I’d zero in on—[our] responsibility for outcomes as well.” Outcomes—quality officers—are more important than quantities of officers. To cultivate a force-in-readiness, TBS should tolerate less nonsense from students and staff commanders—everyone. People treated like adults act like adults. Student officer billet evaluations should be more formative than remarks such as, “Your floor wasn’t mopped” or “You got ac-

countability of your platoon fastest.” They should be reflective and Socratic: a) How did you build a sense of responsibility in subordinates? b) What was your greatest challenge in this billet? c) What did you do about it? and d) What could you do better? Fitness and test grades may be quantified; the rest should be *qualified*. Ranking students on each and every task merely adds “requirement after requirement” but not value. Games—wasting hundreds of man hours in daily formations—are unbecoming of an institute vested with a “trust and confidence” to do more with less and to provide faithful leaders to America’s sons and daughters: enlisted Marines.

If Americans don’t have kids, and if they don’t educate their mental, physical, and character aspects, Marines will be as historic as a statue, even if it resembles the flag raising on Mount Suribachi. Consider that 75 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 are ineligible for military service for lack of the three disciplines: they have medical concerns, mostly obesity (physical), lack the education standards (mental), or they are in the criminal justice system (character). Perhaps Aristotle was right when he stated that the basic political unit is the family—the environment that cultivates the body, the mind, and the soul. We

have problems that money alone cannot solve.

Readiness: Our Basic Warrior Stance

Service chiefs consider three categories when making decisions: end strength, readiness, and modernization. Investments in these categories are, respectively, short-term, mid-term, and long-term. End strength is the most flexible. On the other hand, modernization initiated 10–15 years ago is only now materializing. Yet the area of concern to most Marines is a mid-range goal that we must sustain daily: personal and unit readiness. Physical fitness, mental vigor, and character strength are not destinations, but lifelong journeys. We spend most of our time and effort creating conditions and a few moments capitalizing on them. Being ready means setting conditions today for winning in any clime or future time.

Readiness is a team effort. Personnel contribute only a fraction of the internal friction generated by a bureaucracy like the Marines. Policies are more pervasive. Working within the same constraints, different people will produce similar results. Readiness depends on the wisdom of policies that shape our culture, norms, and habits. Increasing trust and decentralizing leadership is the most efficient way to sustain the Corps—in fact



We’ll be expected to do more with less. (Photo by CW02 Paul S. Mancuso.)



Enlisted Marines are expected to shoulder more responsibility. (Photo by PFC Maxton G. Musselman.)

the only way to fight across six countries and several decades. Decisions made today directly shape future problems that appear years after a Marine separates. Gen Gray said, “It doesn’t cost anything to think.” We must commit to that scary T-word and work smarter, not lavishly. We cannot ask our Marines to do what we are not willing to do.

A Marine is Thrifty

One aesthetic that attracted me to the Marine Corps was a tough shabbiness, an unpolished wear characteristic to Marine Corps gear—pull-up bars with ripped tape. I admired how Marines made do without: two retired Marine drill instructors at my church shared stories of how Marines instructed them to save nails from discarded shelves and to straighten them with a hammer if necessary. They thought it was a joke—it wasn’t. That was the 1980s. Even my officer selection office in Lansing, MI, possessed this no nonsense “shabbiness” just across from opulent Michigan State University—tiles had been removed in the drop ceiling above the pull-up bar to make head room, the address—507 *and a half*—was located via a hidden staircase sandwiched between shops because the officer selection office had no street frontage. For training we *borrowed* the Army’s ROTC facility on

State’s campus when Army cadets were at the football game—on Saturdays. Training with shabby gear and fighting with shabby gear are two different things, but the familiar absence of perfect equipment teaches skills integral to our Marine ethos: improvisation and resourcefulness, making do, and “all that is highest in military efficiency and soldierly virtue.” Shortages in garrison better prepare Marines for battle by developing a familiarity with incongruities, dilemmas, and the necessity to improvise and communicate. Sharing requires coordination and builds trust and efficiency. By doing more with less, Marines can preserve resources for future training and save dollars for truly necessary acquisitions.

If returning unused blank rounds, for example, is “too much work” then we are training Marines to be both lazy and wasteful, cultivating a culture of the disposable. Food service used to employ Marines to serve chow and clean blackened pans at no added cost to the taxpayer. Now we pay profit-seeking contractors. Before an audit this concerns Gen Dunford and others because we cannot control or account for Federal funds allocated to contractors. If civilians can profit from our wastefulness so can the enemy. This lack of self-reliance, born from surplus, reflects how the American lifestyle has changed.

An American family used to maintain what it owned and operated. A man was expected to change his own engine oil and conduct routine repairs on his car, to mow his own lawn, and fix his own plumbing. A man valued the tools he purchased, but he was valued not for his expensive equipment but for his *usefulness* with those lifelong *investments*. A haircut was a treat and dining out was reserved for special occasions. But today we pay other people to do everything for us: we hire a lawn service and then purchase a gym membership to keep active. We are reduced to a single function. We cease to create because we give up on artistry in this Age of Science. But “processes” and mere “numbers” do not win battles—or hearts. We may wonder with T.S. Eliot, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”³ In the Marine Corps this is unacceptable. We must empower subordinates and mentor them to replace us. We must train apprentices in the art of war. This only costs us genuine concern and humility. The Nation in general and Marines in particular must rediscover the old American art of thrifty self-reliance, and there is no time to lose.

To win the future we must pull together—Gung Ho.

Notes

1. Information accessed at: ascoutis.org/thrifty.php on 23 March 2015.
2. Service Chiefs Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee broadcast 18 and 20 March 2015 on C-SPAN Radio 3.
3. T.S. Eliot, author’s quote, accessed at www.goodreads.com.

