

# Enlisted Marines are Professionals

A rebuttal to SgtMaj James D. Willeford's article,  
"What is a Military Professional?"

by Sgt Daniel Wessel

**W**hat is a professional? In the September 2014 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, SgtMaj James D. Willeford argued that while Marine officers are professionals, enlisted Marines do not meet the necessary qualifications to hold that title. He referenced reputable authors, research, and journals. Using these sources, SgtMaj Willeford built a strong case. While one might successfully argue that some of his points are wrong, he is entirely correct that many enlisted Marines lack formal education past the baccalaureate level, access to apprenticeships, or the autonomy to self-regulate standards of practice. By his metrics, enlisted Marines are not professionals.

That being said, I disagree with the metrics SgtMaj Willeford used to ar-

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rive at his conclusion. His metrics may make sense for professional white collar workers; they do not make sense for professional warfighters. Marines like GySgt Carlos N. Hathcock prove that one does not need to be offered graduate-level education to become a "professional." What this tells us is not that SgtMaj Willeford is wrong, but that he was referencing a definition of professional and a checklist that doesn't meet the metrics that apply to a modern warfighter. SgtMaj Willeford himself

admits that his references come from early societal standards for older professions formed to separate university educated practitioners of medicine, law, and religion from provincial healers, debaters, and laymen who performed the same functions.<sup>1</sup>

These metrics are now outdated (with civilian jobs that used to require a high school diploma now requiring a bachelor's degree and jobs that used to just require a bachelor's asking for master's degree holders) and don't apply to a modern military where the strategic corporal fighting the three-block war has to not only know how to shoot a rifle, but also call in an airstrike, conduct humanitarian missions, and maintain thousands of dollars of gear. Building a proper definition of a professional warfighter requires us to go back to the dictionary. According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of a professional is:

- Someone who does a job that requires special training, education, or skill: someone who is a member of a profession.
- Someone who is paid to participate in a sport or activity.
- Someone who has a lot of experience or skill in a particular job or activity.<sup>2</sup>

By these standards every Marine—enlisted and officer—should meet the dictionary definition of a professional by the end of their first term of enlistment. We all do jobs that require special training, receive pay for our jobs, and get plenty of experience in our specific career fields.

## What Is a Professional Warfighter?

Now that we can agree that all Ma-



Enlisted Marines receive professional military education throughout their careers. (Photo by Cpl J. Gage Karwick.)

rines, enlisted and officer, meet the definition for a professional by the end of their first term, we come to the question of what makes a professional warfighter different from any other type of professional. While a professional lawyer or doctor might require graduate education, forcing graduate education into the definition of a professional warfighter is overkill. Some military members need graduate degrees, individuals involved in high-level systems development and engineering for example, but they are not necessary for the vast majority of those who will go to combat and win wars. Keeping this in mind, I have created the following checklist to determine if an individual meets the criteria to be called a professional warfighter.

- Attendance at a uniform entry level training;
- Held to ethical and professional standards throughout one's career;
- Regularly trained in standardized warfighting tactics appropriate to Ser-

vice missions, increasing in complexity with promotions;

- The opportunity to increase rank based on merit and skill, leading to increased responsibility;
- Personal embodiment of esprit de corps;
- Loyalty to a clear and properly established chain of command;
- Creates deterrence against tactical-level adversaries leading to strategic deterrence;
- The ability to fulfill assigned warfighting tasks in a combat environment.

Reviewing these standards, it is clear that all Marines meet the definition of a warfighting professional.

*Attendance at a uniform entry level training.* The recruit depots and TBS fulfill this requirement. Although TBS does not cover the same training regimen as Parris Island or San Diego, it also trains for a different type of job. The important part is that all managers

(officers) and the entire labor pool (enlisted Marines) receive the same training upon entering the force.

*Held to ethical and professional standards throughout ones career.* No matter who he is, every Marine is held accountable under the same Uniform Code of Military Justice, Federal criminal code, and Marine Corps Orders throughout his entire career. Without this, an organization risks misdeeds and corruption at all levels.

*Regularly trained in standardized warfighting tactics appropriate to Service missions, increasing in complexity with promotions.* Starting with recruit training, every enlisted Marine is introduced to the basics of a fighting hole; however, they do not learn how to best set up a defensive position based on weapons, terrain, and adversarial capabilities until later in their career. Similarly, while officers might learn a higher level of tactical training than enlisted Marines at TBS, they don't learn how to plan

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theater warfare at the strategic level until much later in their careers. Additionally, the fact that the training is standardized allows different units from different geographic areas to operate together within or across disciplines (the MAGTF concept is especially well suited toward this bullet).

*The opportunity to increase rank based on merit and skill, leading to increased responsibility.* Unlike some countries where rank is obtained through personal connections and bribery, the Marine Corps has a promotion process that seeks to promote based on merit and measurable skills.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, our most experienced Marines are the ones with the most responsibility.

*Personal embodiment of esprit de corps.* This is necessary for a successful fighting force. It allows us to face the horror of war without hesitation because we have pride in our organization and see ourselves as personal extensions of the group. To quote Father Kevin Keaney, a 1st MarDiv Chaplain during the Korean War, “You cannot exaggerate about the Marines. They are convinced to the point of arrogance, that they are the most ferocious fighters on earth—and the amusing thing about it is that they are.”<sup>4</sup> It is this group mentality that assists us to fight and win wars while other armies without it disintegrate in the face of the enemy, like the Iraqi army did when ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) first pushed in from Syria.

*Loyalty to a clear and properly adhered to chain of command.* There is no question as to who outranks whom, and at the end of the day, our Marines follow the orders issued by the civilian leadership. While some countries do have questions regarding where their chain of command ends (e.g., the Pakistani army which has a history of overthrowing its civilian leadership), the Marine Corps does not have that problem. This allows for a clear understanding of who is in control of our forces from the most tactical decisions through the most strategic decisions.

*Creates deterrence against tactical level adversaries leading to strategic deterrence.* To quote *To be a Warrior* by Bob McDowell, “A true warrior does not want war; he prays that his mere

presence will deter the enemies of his people.”<sup>5</sup> Our reputation is such that many of our enemies purposely avoid engaging with the Marine Corps on both the tactical and strategic levels. There were anecdotal stories of Somali fighters in the 1990s who refused to shoot at the Marines, identified by our rolled sleeves, because of the ferocity with which we would engage them. Our adversaries fear the individual Marine to such an extent that when grouped, we create a strategic deterrent to our country’s adversaries. When we place a MEU offshore from a country, they are not afraid of an institution invading them: they are afraid of the individual Marine with an M-16 and what he will do.

*The ability to fulfill assigned warfighting tasks in a combat environment during sustained operations.* While Americans may take this for granted, it is important to remember that even among NATO members not every military is able to complete its warfighting missions in a sustained combat environment.<sup>6</sup> If it wasn’t for the ability of every Marine to fulfill his assigned warfighting tasks in an expeditionary environment, from riflemen to mechanics, then we would not have been able to accomplish all that we have in the last decade and a half. While this is not entirely an individual attribute, warfighting is not an individual effort. No individual has ever won a war: wars are won by teams.

### A Professional Warfighting Organization

Regardless if one disagrees with the metrics that I developed to define a professional warfighter, it is impossible to deny that all Marines are professionals based on the dictionary definition. While I understand SgtMaj Willeford’s interest in sharing his research and opinions through his article, I feel that he should have considered using metrics that are more closely aligned with the requirements of a warfighter. We are professionals by any standard built around the warfighter.

We are constantly told to act like professionals and are trained to the highest standards. Enlisted Marines have to go through countless hours of professional

military education and weeks (if not months) of training iterations each year on top of our normal training regimens in order to gain and maintain proficiency in warfighting. While many Marines and other Western military professionals may not consider this to be a difficult standard to obtain, they should remember that we were lucky to live in countries that have strong professional military traditions that the rest of the world views as best practices.

While enlisted Marines may not meet the standards for a professional set forth in SgtMaj Willeford’s article, we all fit the standards for professional warfighters set forth in this article. Personally, as an enlisted Marine, I would rather be a professional trained to win wars than a professional with access to a graduate education and apprenticeships.

### Notes

1. SgtMaj James K. Willeford, “What Is a Military Professional?” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico: September 2014), accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette>.
2. Definition of professional accessed at <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.
3. Blake J. Rice, “In Iraq, Switching Allegiance Once Again,” *The New York Times*, (New York: 25 June 2014), blog post at <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com>.
4. Loveday Morris and Liz Sly, “Iraq disintegrating as insurgents advance toward capital; Kurds seize Kirkuk,” *The Washington Post*, (Washington, DC: 13 June 2014), accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.
5. Bob McDowell, “To be a Warrior,” undated, posted on warriorbrotherhood website, accessed at <http://warriorbrotherhood.net>.
6. “War is boring: the Dutch can barely support 10 F-16s in the Middle East,” *medium.com* post on 7 October 2014, accessed at <https://medium.com>.

