

Innovative Advisors

Driving the Marine Corps toward Force 2025

by Capt Emani J. Decquir

“Challenge the status quo and innovate!” This call to action, by appearance, is incompatible with a military that trends toward risk-averse traditionalism; however it is now the stated expectation of the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC). The challenge is set to re-invigorate disruptive thinking within the Marine Corps to maintain lethality, agility, and relevance in the 21st century’s global security and develop into Force 2025. We have the ability to help the CMC accomplish a cultural renaissance of innovation across the Marine Corps by utilizing two primary resources: sourcing and promoting innovation from everyday Marines and the developing a vehicle for identifying, grooming, and empowering real entrepreneurial talent within the Corps.

Efforts are currently underway to promote innovation, as evidenced by the Tactical Ground Advisory Board.¹ However, the fatal flaw with an infantry- or aviation-specific innovation effort is that each community is forced to solve problems within the confines of his own perspective, problems, and resources. This restricts the very essence of innovation, which is inherently supposed to be cross-disciplinary, collaborative, and produce the best results that can be adapted across any battlespace whether air, ground, sea, space, or cyberspace. Any effective solutions, that are inherently also lasting cultural changes, have to be in principle and in practice applicable Marine Corps-wide.

Marine Corps culture needs to re-invigorate its own history of exceptional innovation. The military used to be a source of dynamic, entrepreneurial, innovative leaders. Some exceptional outside-the-box thinking occurred during the World War II era, such as

>Capt Decquir is the Series Commander, Company A, 1st Recruit Training Battalion, MCRD San Diego.

installing hedge-row cutters on the front of vehicles in Normandy to the endless frustration of the enemy. A common apocryphal saying attributed to a German soldier during WWII stated, “A serious problem in planning against American doctrine is that the Americans do not read their manuals, nor do they feel any obligation to follow their doctrine,”² there was an apparent willingness to break any convention or change any plan to accomplish the mission and save lives.

Today there are two fundamental differences from the WWII era: career-minded officers whose fitness reports incentivize playing it safe and a “pro-

tect your assets” culture in which well-meaning checks and audits smother any deviation from the norm. This mentality disempowers emerging leaders from embracing innovation by forcing them to seek permission for decisions that are within the scope of their authority. In this environment, viable, entrepreneurial ideas from a lance corporal or first lieutenant rarely make it past their direct supervisor, let alone up the chain of command. The rare ideas that are escalated often become altered, filtered, or reframed within the priorities of that particular leader or office and take months, if not years, to make it to the CMC or a similar position of execution authority. This stifles the innovation and disruptive thinking of the individuals whose input should be the most valuable to the Marine Corps: the Marines and officers at the liminal edge of policy and reality such as the pilots, the wrench turners, the 0311s—in es-



A motor transport Marine checking under the bumper of a Humvee onboard the USS Rushmore. (Photo by Cpl Danny Gonzalez.)

sence, anyone who seeks to improve his environment as a natural response to the desire to achieve mission success.

Some laudable top-down innovation efforts are under way. The Commandant's Innovation Challenges, the Hybrid Logistics Symposium (HLS), and Innovation Bootcamp are events that have been hosted for Marines to present ideas to senior leadership. However, more must be done to reach a broad range of Marines within the fleet and shorten the pipeline from innovator to implementer. In February 2018, Marines, Sailors, students, and industry partners met at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) to collaborate on innovation. With the primary focus being Marine Corps logistics, discussion topics included design thinking, geopolitical changes, additive manufacturing, expeditionary energy, artificial intelligence, and smart logistics regarding the future operating environment. Corporate industry leaders from companies such as Microsoft and professors from UCSD discussed a variety of issues including methods to improve maintenance cycle times, the possibilities of wearables, and drone technology. Cohorts were formed with a challenge to solve a problem within one of the five operational domains: air, land, sea, space, or cyberspace. One cohort presented a solution on how to sustain geographically dispersed expeditionary advanced bases, which would require new modes of logistics sustainment capable of supporting forward deployed units. The winning cohort looked outside the scope of the assigned challenge and provided a solution to the overarching issue within the Marine Corps: the lack of an organized community of innovators. Rather than try to solve perceived issues in one of the operational domains in the Marine Corps, the proposed solution sought to create a network of Marines who could collaborate through a web-based platform. Each community in the Marine Corps aims to improve individually, while success may be reached if innovations efforts are prepared as a combined MAGTF. Rather than focus solely on issues within the confines of the ACE, GCE, or LCE, it is imperative

that the root cause of lagging Marine Corps innovation be solved holistically as a MAGTF by connecting innovative Marines of all stripes.

In May, three cohorts from the HLS were invited to participate in the Innovation Bootcamp. Instructed to build from the winning presentation, cohorts at the Innovation Bootcamp focused on determining how to enable stakeholders to act on promising ideas within the Marine Corps. While all Marines are stakeholders of innovation, bottom-up ideas rarely make it to the gatekeepers: the Deputy Commandants. Currently, for a Marine to have his idea briefed to a gatekeeper, it must be staffed and approved through multiple echelons of commands. Ideas travel through the bureaucracy of this institution and are altered by the implicit biases of unit leaders; consequently, they may arrive to the Pentagon as an idea far different than the one originally created. This process impedes the flow of pure thought to the ultimate decision maker: the CMC. Cohorts at the Innovation Bootcamp aimed to link fostering a community of innovation with a method to enable stakeholders to act on promising ideas.

The participants and purposes of both the HLS and Innovation Bootcamp are still selective and filtered by leadership bias. The Marine Corps' best resource for innovation is tapping into the ingenuity of the everyday Marines rather than relying on the occasional highly filtered idea percolating up the chain of command to a few gatekeepers. The pervasive themes from the HLS and Innovation Bootcamp were twofold: that unit leaders were responsible for fostering a culture of innovation (and that they needed to be incentivized to do it) and that a designated specialist would be required to identify, promote, and advance innovation within the Marine Corps (thereby radically shortening the pipeline from innovator to implementer).

Marines do not fear innovation; they fear mission failure. The promotion of pure and unfiltered innovation must begin with the small unit leader. At present, unit commanders are focused on the mission and may be unwilling to accept undue risk when presented

with new ideas that may affect mission accomplishment. Uniformity explicitly defines the unit's overall capabilities within an assigned mission-essential task list. If innovation is implemented via self-selection, unit commanders and higher headquarters will be unaware of a unit's true capabilities. The Marine Corps must be a plug-and-play organization; an infantry battalion must have the same capabilities as another infantry battalion, for example. It is not Amazon or Google; some level of uniformity must be maintained. Including innovation as a graded section in the fitness report will hold unit commanders accountable to the CMC's directive for innovation by requiring them to implement new ideas within the appropriate authorizations for their unit. Additionally, it will identify outside-the-box thinkers who possess intellectual agility and advanced "creator" skills. Adapting our way of thinking is critical to competing with adversaries. Equipping Marines with the ability to innovate quickly will increase the Marine Corps' lethality. The challenge of blending the old and new becomes increasingly difficult every day. It is imperative to strike the balance of expecting unit commanders to implement innovation in their units with education and guidance to unit commanders on resources for implementation or the approval of ideas.

Innovation advisors (INOs) must be integrated into fleet units to provide Marines with a direct liaison to the gatekeepers of the Marine Corps. This is the next step toward creating Force 2025. INOs are creative thinkers identified through a board process and trained directly with leading industry partners to advise unit commanders. INOs will have direct liaison with other INOs across the Marine Corps and report directly to the Deputy Commandant for Combat Development & Integration (DC, CD&I), who will hold the approving authority for innovation outside of the scope of the requesting unit.

Establishing INOs as a secondary MOS nests within the CMC's directive for innovation and fostering an innovation culture within units. Building upon the idea of inclusivity, innovators will



The Marine Corps must focus on removing barriers to innovation within the institution. (Photo by author.)

be either a career-level officer or enlisted Marine. Ideally, officers and enlisted Marines will be selected through an innovation board convened annually by the DC, CD&I. Once selected, an officer and enlisted Marine will be paired to conduct a yearlong tour together with industry partners such as Amazon, FedEx, or Google followed by a two-year tour in a regiment or MAG.

A yearlong tour in industry is crucial for allowing innovators to experience different thought processes so they may be equipped to challenge the status quo. Allowing Marines a year outside of the Marine Corps will guarantee there is enough time to alter the “Marine” way of thinking, ensure the throughput of ideas, and offer more opportunities for Marines in the fleet to participate in the program. The goal of pairing an officer with an enlisted Marine from different elements of the MAGTF is to broaden their scope and knowledge so that they focus their efforts on innovative ideas generated from Marines in the fleet. The team’s follow-on tour together in a fleet unit will promote the free flow of ideas and provide guidance to unit commanders on how to implement innovation within the authorized lateral limits of their unit.

The U.S. Navy currently offers a program called the Secretary of the Navy Tours with Industry Program.³ Adopting aspects of the program into the Corps will aid Marines in learning different problem-solving approaches, leadership styles, and business models so that they may bring their experiences and knowledge back to the small unit level. Similar to the Navy’s program, officers accepted into the program will incur three months of service per month spent in the program, and enlisted Marines must reenlist so that they will have three months of active duty service following the conclusion of their payback tour. The goal is to attract Marines who will dedicate a career to the Corps if given the opportunity to have their ideas heard and the chance to implement substantive change. Providing Marines a change of environment with industry partners and direct access to key leaders will promote an innovation culture within the Marine Corps while also retaining talented assets.

In order to achieve Force 2025 and remain the most lethal force, the Marine Corps must continue to adapt faster relative to our enemies. INOs will advise commanders and promote innovative ideas from Marines to HQMC. The

tour with the industry program will foster the CMC’s goals for innovation while also advertising to individual Marines the Corps’ efforts to create a cultural change whilst staying relevant in today’s fight.

The CMC has expressed a willingness to adopt new ideas as long as they are both reversible and apply to the total force. The balance between control and innovative freedom is a fine line. Higher headquarters needs to specify the lateral limits in which subordinate commands can innovate and provide unit commanders with the tools for success. Unlike Amazon or Google, the Marine Corps is subject to Congressional oversight, entrenched government bureaucracy, and the American taxpayer. Determining how to manage our business of warfighting while also allowing creative fluidity within the institution is the only way forward for success. The Marine Corps must focus on removing barriers to innovation within the institution. A combined approach by assigning INOs to all regiments and groups will ultimately drive the Marine Corps toward Force 2025.

Notes

1. Capt Tyler B. Folan, “The Tactical Ground Advisory Board: The Birth of Bottom-Up Refinement,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2018).
2. Maj James M. Kimbrough, “Examining U.S. Irregular Warfare Doctrine,” Graduate Research Project, Air Force Institute of Technology, (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH: August 2004).
3. Secretary of the Navy, *SECNAV Instruction 1320.1, Secretary of the Navy Tours with Industry Program*, (Washington, DC: November 2015).

