

Call Sign Chaos

reviewed by Maj Skip Crawley, USMCR(Ret)

“Why is this guy in the Marine Corps?”

—Then-LtCol Mattis to CO, Alpha Co, 1/7

“This is the worst PME book I’ve ever read.”

—Then-1stLt Skip Crawley comment about *Forgotten Soldier* during Officer’s PME

When then-LtCol Mattis took command of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines (1/7), I was down at Camp Pendleton participating in the regimental and divisional machinegun and mortar competitions. One afternoon shortly after the competitions wrapped up, I was in the Alpha Company Platoon Commanders’ office and our new battalion commander came into the office carrying my Officer Qualification Record. Obviously, I was the last officer the new battalion commander had yet to meet. We went up to his office. I do not know how we got on the subject, but I told my new CO, “We [the Marine Corps] have too many colonels and lieutenant colonels; we have 600 colonels and 1,600 lieutenant colonels.”¹ I also opined that there were officer billets with higher rank than necessary. He asked for an example and my response was, “I read in the *Gazette* that the division electronic warfare officer is a colonel’s billet.” LtCol Mattis heatedly responded, “I just came from Division G-3, and the Electronic Warfare Officer is a Major’s billet filled by a Captain.” Our conversation went downhill from there, prompting the aforementioned question to my Company Commander.

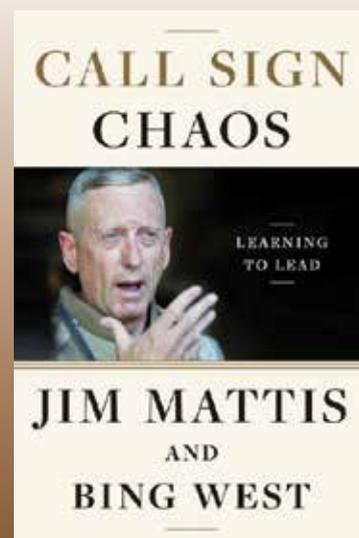
Spring 1990: Embarked Aboard the USS *Tarawa* (LHA-1) in Transit to Hawaii for KERNEL BLITZ 90

LtCol Mattis was conducting an Officer PME discussing the *Forgotten Soldier* by Guy Sajer. When he asked for opinions about the book, I stated the view above. Somewhat taken on-back, Mattis responded how the book illustrated what the German army could do with the manpower available to it.

Present Day

I served under Gen Mattis the entire time he commanded 1/7, including our DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM combat deployment. From the previous anecdotes, a person might conclude that I dislike Gen Mattis and are probably assuming this is going to be a relatively negative review of *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. In reality, while Gen Mattis and I got off on the wrong foot, I came to admire him

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CALL SIGN CHAOS: Learning to Lead. By Jim Mattis and Bing West. New York, NY: Random House, 2019. ISBN: 978-0812996838, 320 pp.

because he is a man of tremendous character and intellect whose profession is the art of war.

A book review should always answer the reader’s question, “Why is it worth my time to read this particular book?” I argue Gen Mattis articulates the answer best:

Reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or historian who—a decade or a thousand decades ago—set aside time to write. He distilled a lifetime of campaigning in order to have ‘a conservation’ with you. We have been fighting on this planet for ten thousand years; it would be idiotic and unethical to not take advantage of such accumulated experiences.

You may admire Gen Mattis or you may despise him; I have met plenty of Marines in both camps. But regardless of any personal feelings concerning Gen Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* should be read by anyone who desires to be a better practitioner of the art of war by taking “advantage of [General Mattis’] accumulated experiences”.

DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM: 1st Battalion, 7th Marines

On 31 July 1990, 1/7 was conducting the summer package at Bridgeport, CA. Fifteen days later, we were getting off airplanes in the middle of the night in Saudi Arabia where the temperature was still over 100 degrees. A couple of weeks later, 1/5 and 1/7 took up defensive positions on either side of the main highway leading from the port of Al Jubail to the Kuwait-Saudi border with 3d Light Armored Infantry screening to the north.² 1/5 and 1/7 were glorified “speed bumps.” As a student of military history, I wondered if I was going to be in one of those epic Marine Corps battles such as Iwo Jima or Chosin Reservoir.

After more forces arrived into theater and it became obvious that we were not fighting Saddam Hussein anytime soon, I noticed that some of my fellow lieutenants were no longer thinking of this as a combat deployment—as illustrated by comments such as, “This is like a UDP deployment except we don’t know when it will end.” One morning, I attended the daily battalion meeting. Alpha Company had just returned to the battalion from our four days back in the oil workers compound.³ No one told me that the morning before Gen Mattis had asked the question: “How many of you think we’ll be fighting the Iraqi Army in 30 days?” Apparently, very few (if any) hands went up; Gen Mattis’ response was both incredibly strong and negative.

When Gen Mattis asked the same question again the next morning, my hand was one of three that went up. I do not recall Gen Mattis’ response word for word, but it was something to the effect that anyone who did not think we were going to be fighting the Iraqi Army in the next 30 days had better get serious about our purpose in Saudi Arabia and get a certain part of their anatomy in gear.

As the day went by, I thought about this incident and it bothered me. I truly believed that we would not engage the Iraqi Army in the next 30 days. Would we someday? More than likely. Did we have to be ready to fight

at a moment’s notice? Yes. Was this a combat deployment, not a UDP? Absolutely. That afternoon, I went to Gen Mattis’ hooch and explained how I just did not really think we would fight the Iraqi Army in the next 30 days. “Skip, you’re one of the few people here that I don’t worry about their platoon being combat ready,” he replied.

I realized at that instant that Gen Mattis was concerned about the complacency I had seen and was taking steps to negate it. While I wholeheartedly approved of his action, I would have preferred not to have been a “friendly-fire casualty” of my battalion commander’s necessary action.

If a Marine bought *Call Sign Chaos* to read only Gen Mattis’ description of how he prepared us for combat, it would be money well spent. The many things he did to get us ready for combat, such as “imaging,” matching “personalities to anticipated tasks,” and “rehearsing” for combat vice generic “training,” serves as a tutorial in how to make a unit extremely combat effective.

I want to expound on one point Gen Mattis brings up. It may seem counterintuitive, but I have always felt that Bridgeport was the best training—except for CAX live fire—our battalion could have received prior to deploying to the desert. During the Bridgeport summer package, my platoon fielded twenty-plus Marines: about half the strength I had in the desert. But my eventual platoon sergeant and all three section leaders in DESERT STORM were at Bridgeport in lower ranking billets than they held when 1/7 rolled across the line of departure. The core of the platoon I lead into Kuwait was formed in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada. As Gen Mattis highlights, learning “the personalities” of the Marines you serve with and developing “tighter bonds” with them in one environment will carry over to combat, even if the actual combat is in a completely different climatic environment.

What Gen Mattis did as our battalion commander to make 1/7 as combat effective as possible is entirely con-

sistent with his actions later in more senior combat commands. Since I only have personal knowledge of Gen Mattis during his time in command of 1/7, I will leave to others who have served with or under Gen Mattis to express their views of him as a combat commander at higher echelons. However, I intend to discuss two paramount attributes that made Gen Mattis the combat leader he was: character and intellect.

Character

A few years after DESERT STORM, I went up to Twentynine Palms to see my former battalion commander, who was now the CO, 7th Marines. Gen Mattis told me that following DESERT STORM he spoke with another colonel about getting the awards for his 1/7 Marines approved. When the colonel expressed indignation in response to his effort to ensure that his Marines were given the awards they earned, Mattis then “suggested they take off their blouses and have it out.” This was the action of a commander who was concerned about his Marines getting the recognition they deserved vice being concerned about the potential negative effect it might have on his future career.⁴

Throughout *Call Sign Chaos*, Gen Mattis states numerous times he was “ready to go home” and how this mindset “freed me to not worry about my next command and focus instead on doing the best job I could in the one I had.” I can personally attest to this. During KERNEL BLITZ 90, part of Alpha Company conducted a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) at Schofield Barracks. The NEO scenario was poorly conducted by the exercise coordinators. For some reason, the senior exercise coordinator would not allow me to utilize the buses (standing in for CH-53s) to evacuate the “civilians” to the beach the day after we arrived. We were forced to wait until the next morning to evacuate the civilians. In an actual NEO, I could have chosen to disobey the order and conduct the evacuation immediately—if I was willing to accept the responsibility for my decision. As

we sat on the beach discussing this, Gen Mattis stated that if he was faced with a similar situation, he would have disobeyed the order and accepted the consequences. He continued to say that if his superiors disagreed with his decision and relieved of command, “I’ll just go home and be an onion farmer in Washington.”

Intellect

I want to highlight three aspects concerning Gen Mattis’ view of studying history. First, no matter how much combat experience an individual has, they cannot have personal experience of every possible tactical situation: “During planning and before going into battle, I could cite specific examples of how others had solved similar challenges.”⁵ Second, the nature of war does not change because neither does human nature. This is why reading and studying history is so important; no historical situation is a perfect analog for a present day challenge: “History teaches that we face nothing new under the sun.” Lastly, knowing history in and of itself does not directly accomplish anything; however, “reading sheds light on the dark path ahead. By traveling into the past, I enhance my grasp of the present.”

Recently, I was talking to someone else who served under Gen Mattis as a lieutenant in 1/7 during DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. He agreed with me that Gen Mattis had an affinity for those officers who viewed the Marine Corps as a profession, not a vocation, and endeavored to “study (vice just read) history.” But he made the sage observation that Gen Mattis looked for those officers who have that intellect while being able to “take a punch” in combat and keep moving. All the intellect in the world is useless if you are unable to apply it in combat. Without question, character is more important than intellect.

Conclusion

I do have one problem with *Call Sign Chaos*. At times, Gen Mattis examines things with an idealized view. In one instance he notes,

We [company commanders] worked out our command kinks without wasting the time of our subordinates, who were relentlessly rehearsing.

I personally observed some lieutenants who were not serious about preparing their platoons for combat until December when DESERT SHIELD forces were being doubled to provide President George H.W. Bush the option of invading Kuwait. The difference between an officer “relentlessly rehearsing” his unit in order to prepare it for combat and an officer who tries to convince himself a combat deployment is a UDP deployment is the same as someone who views being a Marine officer as a profession rather than a vocation.

It’s well known among Marines that our greatest honor is fighting alongside our fellow sailors and Marines. I know that our soldiers, airmen, and Coast Guardsmen feel the same.

Overlooking the reality that many “soldiers, airmen, and Coast Guardsmen” join the military for reasons that have utterly nothing to do with combat—in fact, that is the *last* thing they want—not all Marines feel “that our greatest honor” is combat. We want all Marines to join our Corps for the right reasons and manifest the attitude Gen Mattis states above; unfortunately, reality is often different.⁶

Call Sign Chaos is a book all Marine officers and anyone else who desires to become more proficient at the art of war should read *and* study. Gen Mattis has “distilled a lifetime of campaigning” in *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. Allow Gen Mattis to converse with you to make you more lethal on your next battlefield. I

enthusiastically recommended this for inclusion on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List.

Notes

1. I had recently read books such as “Fighting Power” by Martin Van Creveld and “A Genius for War” by Trevor DuPuy that discussed officer-to-enlisted ratios and other issues and how they affected combat effectiveness.

2. Following DESERT STORM, Light Armored Infantry Battalions were re-designated as Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalions

3. 1/7 established a 16-day routine: One rifle company (plus 1/3 of Weapons Company and H&S Company) would go back to a compound built for oil workers for 4 days to live in air conditioning and eat some real food. The last 4 days the entire battalion maneuvered as a unit to the new laager site.

4. General Mattis discusses the entire issue of awards and the letter he “wrote to the MEF Commander, Lieutenant General Robert Johnston, with my concerns” on pages 37-38 of *Call Sign Chaos*.

5. Not surprisingly, *Call Sign Chaos* is replete with historical examples General Mattis used to guide his decisions and actions.

6. In my weapons platoon, my platoon sergeant suddenly developed “back pain” in late November when it was apparent we were preparing to invade Kuwait and was allowed to go home. Shortly after we arrived in Saudi Arabia, a sergeant in my platoon claimed he had AIDS and had to go home. Shortly before DESERT STORM started, HQMC inexplicably allowed some Marines to leave if they had an end of active service within a certain date window. I had one Lance Corporal fall in that category. I tried to talk him into staying, but he took his “out”. I cannot call him a coward like the other two because the Marine Corps gave him that out. Furthermore, in my career, I have worked with SNCOs who have retired from the Marine Corps with 20-30 years of service—and not one day in combat.

