Throughout the Marine Corps, there are impactful, impressionable, and motivating leaders who continue to inspire the greatest potential in those whom they have a privilege to lead. These leaders are transformational as they set more challenging expectations as organizations continue to achieve results above the standard. Transactional leaders are much more common within the Marine Corps; however, it could be argued they are more effective for a warfighting organization. Transactional leadership focuses on the exchange (transaction) that takes place between a leader and a follower. Leaders give subordinates direction, orders, tasks, or guidance, and if these are not achieved within standard, a punishment is associated; on the contrary, if accomplished, a reward could follow. Transactional leadership limits the growth potential of followers. In today’s society, young men and women literally have the world at their fingertips, accessible through a phone, which is an unlimited gateway to knowledge. Leaders at all levels within the Marine Corps need to exploit and adapt to an ever-evolving and changing societal culture. In order to create a new culture within the Marine Corps—one that maximizes innovation, increases resiliency, and adapts to the ever-changing characteristics of war—the transformational leadership approach needs to be applied at all levels of leadership.

I have served in the Marine Corps for 21 years. It took me almost ten years to truly embrace transformational leadership, and that is far too long, as I let too many opportunities to influence and impact Marines pass me by during those earlier years. In 2009, I was asked a question that forever changed my views and approach to leadership. At the time, I was serving as the SNCOIC of the Sergeant’s Course at the SNCOA aboard Camp Pendleton. Then, MSgt Frank Puebla came in to my office and asked me, “Mike, what defines you?” I hesitated for a minute, expecting him to elaborate, but all he did was re-ask it: “What defines you?”

I looked around my office and was mesmerized by all my plaques from previous assignments, especially the ones I received just three years earlier when I left the drill field. I responded to him with sure confidence, “I was a drill instructor!” With no response, he gave me the most disappointing look I have ever seen and walked out of my office. Once I gathered my composure and built up the courage to walk down the hall, I went into his office and asked him to expound on his question: “What did you mean, ‘What defines me?’”

He enlightened my outlook on lead-
He enlightened my outlook on leadership that day, and I experienced humility in the most profound way. He told me:

When you are gone, dead, retired, or simply move duty stations, and those which you had an opportunity to influence and lead are asked, ‘What defines GySgt Martinet?’ He was a drill instructor? Really? A moment in your life doesn’t define you. No matter what B-billet you held, or how many deployments you have, the Marines which you lead remember how you treated them, they remember how you cared for them, and, most of all, they remember the time you spent to make them better.

Revisiting that question daily inspires me to keep going, but I do not think I could ever truly answer it; only those who I had an opportunity to lead can. A leader is defined by the actions of his followers. A follower’s success is a leader’s reward. Leadership, in and of itself, is the opportunity to be a leader. This question, and the ongoing internal struggle to answer it myself, inspired me to write this article. Truly becoming a transformational leader encompasses the pure essence of being a Marine, taking care of those who we are entrusted to lead. Several individuals had a profound impact throughout my career and inspired me to accomplish goals that, alone, I could not have achieved. I want to be that leader to someone else, inspiring others to become better than myself.

Transforming a Culture through Leadership

The choice to become an effective leader within the Marine Corps starts first with a commitment to put others before one’s self and a constant drive to uphold the history and traditions of the Corps. Becoming a Marine is not an occupation; it is a commitment to a lifestyle and culture defined by the profession of arms. Within the profession of arms, strong leaders are essential to success on the battlefield, but their foundational leadership approach starts in garrison. Strong leadership is more profound than just an opportunity to exert authority; it is a responsibility to teach, coach, and mentor men and women throughout their lives and inspire them to achieve goals that impact them personally and professionally. It is a privilege to lead the sons and daughters of America and treat them as if they were your own. The Marine Corps’ mission is to defend the people of the United States at home and abroad. To do that, we make Marines who win our Nation’s battles and return as quality citizens.3 MCDP 1, Warfighting, states: “Leaders must have a strong sense of the great responsibility of their office; the resources they will expend in war are human lives.”

Marine Corps officers begin their transformation of becoming a Marine either at the Naval Academy or Officer Candidates School, whereas enlisted Marines either hump the hills in southern California at MCSD San Diego or fight off the sand fleas at MCRD Parris Island. Regardless of the starting point, the development of a Marine begins in a process known as the “transformation.” In its effort to bring together men and women from around the country with different social and economic backgrounds, the Marine Corps utilizes several techniques to strip them of their individualism and quickly develop a sense of cohesion. The Marine Corps shaves the recruits’ hair so that everyone is similar; the new recruits then take off their individual civilian attire, place it in a box not to be seen until recruit graduation, and are given a uniform so that everyone is dressed the same. From this point forward, the recruits are taught a new language—naval terminology—and instructed how to march the same and act in unison when given a command. This is the introduction into a vastly different culture than these young men and women are accustomed and one which is an integral part of their transformation from civilian to United States Marine. At this point, it is particularly important to implement a transformational leadership style—to expose and ultimately inspire these young Marines to adhere to the high standards and warrior ethos that have made generations of Marines before them successful. Terms and acronyms are ingrained into memory, and repetition becomes a common theme in order to make new practices the norm.

Before this lifelong journey begins, an individual must desire the challenge and thirst for the chance to become something bigger than oneself, to become part of an illustrious warfighting organization rich in history and tradition and commitment to upholding the legacy laid by many before them. Leaders must never let that desire burn out. On 28 June 1999, Gen Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, published MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation. MCRP 6-11D was later republished as MCTP 6-10A with change 1, on 4 April 2018. Gen Krulak emphasizes the importance of the lifelong transformation:

Our Corps does two things for America: we make Marines and we win our nation’s battles. Our ability to successfully accomplish the latter, of course, depends upon how well we do the former. We make Marines through a process called transformation. During this process, we change young men’s and women’s lives forever by imbuing them with our nation’s highest ideals. When we make Marines, we make Marines for life, we provide our nation with a legacy of productive citizens, transformed by their experiences while on active duty and enriched by their internalization of our ethos, ideals, and values.

Marines will always be synonymous with the Marine Corps’ core values of honor, courage, and commitment. The three words printed and defined on a red card carried daily by many Marines are reminders of the values by which Marines live. In order to effectively sustain the transformation and continue to be adaptive to an ever-changing battlefield, the Marine Corps will need to make a decisive shift in culture that promotes the transformational leadership style throughout every level of personal and professional development.

Throughout this article, culture is defined as a way of life in which beliefs, values, and behavior norms are accepted and practiced throughout an organization. Beliefs, values, and behavior norms are often exhibited without thinking and are developed through imitation and constant daily practice.
The leadership culture currently within the Marine Corps is dominated by the transactional leadership approach that stifles an individual’s full performance potential. Yet, in order to continue to develop and empower junior enlisted and junior officers to make decisions in the absence of senior leaders acting only on intent, transformational leadership will need to become the hallmark of Marine Corps leadership culture.

Transactional versus Transformational Leadership

Transactional leadership is the most common style of leadership within the Marine Corps and is also the first style presented to all new Marines once they begin the process of transformation. The classic scenes from the 1987 movie Full Metal Jacket, of GySgt Hartman instituted punishment in forms of retribution for recruits’ failure to perform to a set standard, is a common depiction of leadership within the Marine Corps. Although the theatrical illustration of Marine Corps boot camp is embellished, the application of leadership is correctly transactional. The shortcomings with transactional leadership are the failure to foster innovation and create an environment in which individuals can flourish to their fullest potential. In a transactional leadership approach, development of subordinates is not the priority; accomplishing the mission or task is the focus.

There are three components of transactional leadership: contingent reward, management by exception, and laissez-faire leadership. Contingent reward is the foundational framework for transactional leadership. Contingent reward is a practice through which the leader assigns a specified task and comes to an agreement on the end state with the subordinate; upon completion, a reward is presented based on satisfactory accomplishment. The other side of this component is the use of punishment as a direct result of unsatisfactory performance. Contingent reward is superficial leadership that can be effective in environments of unchanging characteristics.

The process of non-judicial punishment (NJP) is a tool for commanders to use in order to maintain good order and discipline within a unit, but unless the infraction is malicious, intentional, immoral, unethical, or illegal, then NJP should not be used as the first resource. Another tool for commanders is the process of a competency review board, a process used to evaluate the technical and professional competence of a Marine at his rank and billet. The board measures his effectiveness across a plethora of established standards. NJP and the competency review board process are very effective tools; however, these should not be used as punishment solely for failure but for sustained subpar performance after all other leadership tools have been exhausted. Employing transactional leadership, specifically, the component of contingent reward, goes against Marine Corps doctrine. The fear of punishment suffocates innovation. MCDP 1 stresses the importance of eliminating the perceived culture relating to the “zero defect” mentality throughout the Marine Corps:

The Marine Corps style of warfare requires intelligent leaders with a penchant for boldness and initiative down to the lowest levels. Boldness is an essential moral trait in a leader for it generates combat power beyond physical means at hand. Initiative, the willingness to act on one’s own judgment, is a prerequisite for boldness. These traits carried to excess can lead to rashness, but we must realize that errors by junior leaders stemming from over boldness are a necessary part of learning. We should deal with such errors leniently; there must be no ‘zero defects’ mentality. Abolishing ‘zero defects’ means that we do not stifle boldness or initiative through the threat of punishment. It does not mean that commanders do not counsel subordinates on mistakes; constructive criticism is an important element in learning.

Management by exception, which is less effective, is the second component of the transactional leadership approach and can be applied actively or passively. When a leader is actively employing the management by exception method, he regularly evaluates a follower’s progress throughout assigned tasks and interjects with corrective action before completion. The passive form of management by exception is the more detrimental of the two because the leader will not engage with the follower until an error has occurred. Within the Marine Corps, mistakes or errors can have terrible consequences, and the cost of passive leadership could be human lives. A catastrophic example of this approach was very likely the leading factor in the death of LCpl Jason Rother on 31 August 1988. LCpl Rother’s death was caused by a series of events in which the leadership at multiple levels failed to practice engaged, transformational leadership. Management by exception was the dominating application of leadership during this unfortunate incident; leaders applied a transactional approach with limited engagement. Prior to Rother being assigned to a road guard detail, he was treated numerous times at the battalion aid station for multiple problems: dehydration, back pain, and heat exhaustion. Additionally, he was prescribed Motrin and aspirin for his symptoms just days prior to his death. The corpsman attached to his platoon advised the platoon commander, 1stLt Allen Lawson, that the Marines were not being provided enough water in order to sustain the mission. The platoon commander disregarded the corpsman’s recommendation and proceeded with the mission, assigning Rother to the road guard platoon—which fell under another chain of command. There was no turnover between the platoon commanders regarding Rother’s past medical issues, nor was there a clear establishment of accountability. Shortly after Rother assumed his post alone with only “minimal water, no map, no compass, an 80-pound pack, weapons, and ammunition,” 1stLt Lawson was reminded by LCpl Adamson of the “two-man pairing policy” within the battalion. 1stLt Lawson responded...
with, “I’m the lieutenant and you are the lance corporal.” Lawson’s handling of the lance corporal’s criticism in regard to his clear disregard for the battalion’s SOP was a clear violation of the trust between a leader and a follower and, furthermore, displayed a positional leader’s approach using billet and rank as authority.

The following morning, upon conclusion of the exercise, the road guards began to be picked up. There was no pre-established pick-up plan for the road guards, and units were entangled throughout the training field because of multiple movements the night before. LCpl Rother’s company leadership assumed he was retrieved by an adjacent unit and did not immediately follow up. The failure of leaders to inspect what they expected from subordinates fostered a culture within 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, that allowed proper accountability and established SOPs to be violated repeatedly, and that eventually became an accepted practice. If leaders only inject when or after an error occurs, it could be too late. Established procedures can be ignored, and if leaders are not engaged, the practice can be accepted as the new norm. Sometimes there will be no visible infraction or negative effect to this behavior. If Rother’s leadership followed established accountability procedures, there is a possibility that his death could have been avoided. On 1 September 1988, LCpl Rother’s company commander held a company formation and received 100 percent accountability by all platoon sergeants. It was not until 1730 on that day that a discrepancy in the weapons inventory showed Rother’s weapon as unaccounted for. If proper personnel and weapons accountability had occurred — as assumed by higher headquarters leadership—immediately following the exercise, Rother’s absence would have been discovered instantly.

The search for Rother came to a devastating conclusion when his remains were discovered two miles away from a highway. An investigation into LCpl Rother’s death showed a failure of engaged leadership through all levels of his chain of command. The failure of the company’s leadership to hold the platoon leadership responsible in continuing to perform scheduled accountability and checks directly resulted in false reporting and actions down to the fire team level failing to account for its Marines. Within the Marine Corps, leaders do not have the luxury to be part time.

The laissez-faire component of the transactional leadership style is the “avoidance or absence” of a leader, and research has shown this element to be the least effective of all within the transactional leadership style. This approach, much like the passive tactic within management by exception, is ineffective to follower development because the presence of the leader is scarce or completely absent. Laissez-faire leaders only insert their presence when infractions occur and do not form relationships through constant interaction. This style can create a toxic culture within any organization because junior Marines can perceive the contact as negative if the interaction is only present to address deficiencies. Laissez-faire leaders become figureheads of a positional leadership platform that holds only the influential power of its billet or assignment. Leaders are not respected for who they are but because of their authority. Interaction between leaders and followers must be constant, as this allows for the development of the relationship between the two.

Transactional leadership can be effective if used in combination with transformational leadership as a tool to reward for outstanding performance and punish sparingly in order to maintain good order and discipline. If transactional leadership is the dominating style within an organization, followers perform tasks to avoid punishment or be rewarded and not because they have a shared commitment and desire into the end state of the task or mission. Transformational leadership encompasses a dynamic approach to developing persons to reach their fullest potential while improving efficiency.

Bruce Avolio and Bernard Bass write in their book, Developing Potential Across a Full Range of Leadership, that research studies conducted showed “transformational leadership was higher among Marine Corps commanders of highly effective helicopter squadrons than those of less effective squadrons.” Individuals can make the argument that other factors attributed to the overwhelming success of the more effective squadrons, but undoubtedly leadership lays the foundation of culture within any organization. The transformational leadership approach still allows for some principles of the transactional leadership.
style to be utilized. Rewarding achievements and punishing shortfalls have their benefits, but within the transformational leadership style, these actions are only tools and not the extent of the approach. Transformational leaders inspire followers to achieve results above the normal standard and many times exceed the followers’ expectations. Leaders who adopt a transformational leadership style establish more challenging expectations and foster a climate of innovation and creativity. Furthermore, they encourage followers to explore new methods in order to accomplish the objective.

There are four vital components that set this style apart from transactional leadership: idealized leadership, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The first component of transformational leadership, idealized leadership, is the crucial framework which allows this style to truly flourish among any group of individuals. Leaders who apply this style of leadership are “respected, admired, and trusted,” not only among those they have the privilege to lead but also among those they have an opportunity to influence. Simply stated, transformational leaders set the example.

On 3 January 1995, Gen Carl Mundy, Jr., the 30th Commandant of the Marine Corps, published FMFM 1-0, Leading Marines. The manual discusses the Marine Corps ethos, foundations, and challenges within leadership. In Chapter Two of Leading Marines, a quote begins the segment of setting the example:

> Leadership is a heritage, which has passed from Marine to Marine since the founding of our Corps ... mainly acquired by observation, experience, and emulation. Working with other Marines is the Marine Leader’s School.

Setting the example is the hallmark of a true leader, but this takes transparency and the ability to overcome insecurities. The Marine Corps has eleven leadership principles that are rooted in the minds of all Marines from the beginning of their careers. “Know yourself and seek self-improvement” is one principle that must be evaluated daily by leaders in order to set the “right” example for those around them. Within this component, leaders must be counted on to “demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct.” There is no place for authoritarian leaders within an effective organization that expects followers to act a certain way regardless of their own conduct and actions. “Leaders eat last” is a common expectation throughout the Marine Corps, and with a deeper perspective, it means a lot more than just allowing junior ranks to get food before those senior. It falls in line with transformational leadership, where leaders put the interest of their subordinates before their own and share their risks, failures, and achievements with their followers.

Inspirational motivation is a critical behavior of transformational leaders. Inspirational motivation takes more than just charisma; it is the genuine display and ability of a leader to demonstrate clear communication to followers. Clear communication is the ability of a leader to deliver his intent and guidance to subordinates effectively, allowing them to grasp the objective without confusion and uncertainty. Motivation and inspiration are fostered through a leader’s ability to challenge and place meaning underneath the assigned tasks. Offering the “why” behind given objects and inviting subordinates to partake in the development of plans creates a “buy-in” and shared commitment for all involved. This sense of purpose fuels the subordinates’ determination to excel.

As the Marine Corps continues to develop and train for future conflicts throughout the globe, innovation and fostering creativity will be essential to the continued success expected on the battlefield. Gen James L. Conway, the 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps, expressed the need for innovation in future battles in his vision statement found in a message to the Marine Corps, titled Vision 2025:

> The Marine Corps of 2025 will fight and win our Nation’s battles with multi-capable MAGTFs, either from the sea or in sustained operations ashore. Our unique role as the Nation’s force in readiness, along with our values, enduring ethos, and core competencies, will ensure we remain highly responsive to the needs of combatant commanders in an uncertain environment and against irregular threats. Our future Corps will be increasingly reliant on naval deployment, preventative in approach, leaner in equipment, versatile in capabilities, and innovative in mindset. In an evolving and complex world, we will excel as the Nation’s expeditionary ‘force of choice.’

Transformational leaders will be instrumental in order to achieve Vision 2025 as they promote intellectual stimulation. Leaders who encourage followers to question the way things have always been done and inspire them to reframe the original problems and restructure processes accomplish intellectual stimulation. This approach might be hard for some leaders because their own ideas will be challenged and questioned; leaders must show self-confidence in this approach because they will be challenged to accept ideas from followers that could have greater potential than their own. In order for this approach to be successful, a shift in culture is needed. Creating a culture where public criticism is not accepted stimulates a climate for followers to try and fail without humiliation. The senior leaders within the Marine Corps have shown a commitment to inspire Marines of all ranks to innovate and have created competitions in order to recognize these individuals. Gen Robert B. Neller, current Commandant of the Marine Corps, in his message to the force titled Message to the Force 2018: Execute, expressed the need for all Marines to continue to improve and look for innovative ways to develop as a Corps, “We are making key changes in all aspects ... I am willing to adjust course if there is a better way.”

The final component of transformational leadership is individualized consideration, which personifies each individual’s need for achieving success. This component epitomizes “teach, coach, and mentor.” Consistently evaluating subordinates’ performance and providing them constructive and individualized feedback will enhance their daily performance. Throughout
Regardless of circumstances, their leaders must be able to ensure their motivation and effectiveness are consistent. (Photo by LCpl Quinn Hurt.)
the complexity of the situation. It is a simple word that digs to the heart of any action. This is a key component to critical thinking, one which all leaders need to consistently practice. Leaders at all levels should not accept superficial answers to deeper problems but should try to improve norms rather than allowing subpar performance to fester. Asking “why” could draw out important factors that impact the Marine personally and professionally; getting to the root cause of the problem could allow the Marine to perform at his fullest potential. LCpl Johnson should still be held accountable, but imposing punishment or corrective action without addressing the root factor will never address the deeper problem. Asking the simple question, “Why?” will start the dialogue which leaders at all levels should initiate. Why were you late? I didn’t set my alarm. Why didn’t you set your alarm? I slept on the couch last night. Why did you sleep on the couch? My wife and I got into a heated argument. Why did you and your wife get into an argument? Because she has not been paying our bills, but started going to the casino during the day, and we are in a very bad financial situation, and I don’t know how to get out of it. Although this is a fictional scenario, comfortable with bringing up concerns and ideas. This method of asking “why” five times is not perfect, nor is it applicable to every scenario, but the concept is often relevant. Leaders must know their Marines beyond the uniform, establishing relationships that allow them the ability to see changes in their Marines’ day-to-day actions when personal and professional issues affect them. Transformational leaders who maintain constant contact with their followers achieve this intimate connection, establishing a culture in which Marines of any rank feel comfortable to approach their leaders, and then those same leaders, who show genuine compassion and care for their Marines, can prevent many situations from escalating. Knowing your Marines must go deeper than their rank and name, to who they are as a human being.

**LCpl Campbell**

Thirty days into a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan can start to showcase wear and tear in the minds and bodies of Marines of an infantry company that has been on regular security patrols in an area of operations where the threat of small arms fire and IEDs are constant. However, because it is not far from the reality that many young Marines face as a result of youth and inexperience, making poor decisions that end up harming their ability to perform well. “Why didn’t you come and talk to any of your leaders?” The response to the last question could be the most humbling of all.

Transactional leaders do not present themselves regularly and at times can be nonexistent or extremely difficult to approach, whereas transformational leaders initiate and encourage constant dialogue that makes followers more of Capt Tech’s leadership approach, his company did not decrease in its effectiveness, and motivation remained consistent throughout the duration of the deployment. He was very engaged and frequently walked the spaces of his Marines and was found almost nightly at the rack of some lance corporal reminiscing about back home. He was firm and expected maturity and discipline from all of his Marines. He was also well respected for his steady and genuine compassion. After a night security patrol, Capt Tech invited all NCOs, SNCOs, and officers to his tent for a meeting. A sister company was battling a rise of IEDs; available intelligence suggested the increase would start to affect his area of operations. Capt Tech challenged all of the Marines in the company with devising a better and safer way to patrol at night. He understood the mounting risk of patrolling in the dark but explained to the entire company his thought process and his intent to continue night patrols during the increased threat. The Marines understood his intent and saw that he shared risk with them. Because of his clear communication and his constant display of cohesion needed for success, the Marines burned inside with the same commitment to process improvement.

Two days went by with no new ideas, but then at chow, a lance corporal and his squad leader came running to the company commander’s table with the biggest smiles and puffiest chests he had ever seen. “Sir, sir, I got it!” Earlier, LCpl Campbell, who was the fire team leader for 1st Fire Team, 3d Squad, 3d Platoon, had gathered the members of his fire team and explained to them the company commander’s guidance. They had discussed multiple options and ultimately soaked Q-tips in a jar of broken infrared chemical lights, and the idea was a success. With this information in hand, LCpl Campbell explained to Capt Tech that a Marine, positioned behind the point man carrying the metal detector, will have a drop pouch filled with these Q-tips. He will mark the cleared zone to travel. Dropping the soaked Q-tips on the deck allows all members of the patrol to undoubtedly see the cleared path and, because they were infrared, the enemy could not see them until daylight. This method was a huge success, and the company had zero IED hits while on foot patrol for the entire deployment. The specific method was adopted by the entire battalion and written into their SOP as a tactic, technique, and procedure; it arguably saved hundreds of lives. LCpl Campbell was awarded a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal for his creative idea, but to Campbell, the privilege to carry the company guidon
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for the next month meant a lot more. The company guidon symbolized the heartbeat of the company and, through a culture that fostered team above self, meant his idea impacted everyone in the company.

Capt Tech practiced transformational leadership, and his Marines benefited from his genuine care. He fostered an environment of trust through his actions and practiced behavior of constant conversations with the most junior in the organization. He held every Marine in the same regard and shared the hardships with them. When he asked for their help and emphasized his concerns, he challenged them to revisit the problem, forget about the norms, and explore new ways to achieve success. LCpls Johnson and Campbell are two realistic examples of Marines experiencing different leadership approaches from their leaders. Drawing out the highest potential of subordinates should be a goal strived by all leaders. Leaders can add to and continue to reignite the flame of pride in their subordinates that started once they first set foot on the yellow footprints at recruit training. People join the Marine Corps for different reasons, but—undoubtedly—they all possess a sense of accomplishment and drive once they graduate recruit training and become Marines. Leaders who apply transformational leadership principles throughout a Marine’s career will be able to maximize their full potential as a man or woman and as a Marine.

Notes
2. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Developing Potential across a Full Range of Leadership.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. MCDP 1, Warfighting.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
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26. Ibid.
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30. FMFM 1-0, Leading Marines.
31. Developing Potential Across a Full Range of Leadership.
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>Editor’s Note: This is the first part of a two-part series adapted from SgtMaj Martinet’s submission for a master’s of military studies degree.