

One Day, One Choice, One Leader

A unique set of experiences

by Maj Eric Navarro, USMCR

I first learned about the true nature of leadership on 11 September 2001. I am not referring to the displays of heroism by the police and firemen who braved nightmarish conditions to try to save people from those giant burning buildings. I am also not referring to the volunteers who dug through the piles of twisted steel and smoldering debris to look in vain for survivors of the attack. Neither am I referring to the way many of our elected leaders, such as Mayor Rudy Giuliani or President George W. Bush, were able to stand resolute in the face of a national horror. No, I speak of how I learned about leadership through my own personal journey before, during, and after that day.

Prior to that day, I had always wanted to join the military; but, in retrospect, I was not ready to make the commitment. More precisely, I did not entirely grasp what was required to serve and to lead others who served. Like so many other young people, I was immature, often focused on my own selfish desires, and lacked a sense of purpose that could sufficiently motivate and focus my energies toward a worthwhile goal. As a result, I bounced in and out of college and made several unproductive career choices. I was aimless, uncertain of my place in the world.

By the time the morning of 11 September arrived, I was unemployed and living in Manhattan with no way to support myself. That morning featured a clear, blue, and almost perfect sky. At least, that is what I heard; I was too busy sleeping off another bender from the night before. Yet another night of searching for answers at the bottom of a bottle.

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Suddenly, an endless series of rings from the phone woke me from my stupor. No matter how far below the pillow I stuck my head, the ringing would not stop. Finally, out of pure frustration, I stomped out of bed and answered. It was my brother. He asked if I was watching television. I said no and asked why. His answer was short, to the point, and prophetic: "We're at war!"

Once I turned on the television, I saw the events that had just transpired, the events that must have been going on

right outside my apartment. The news replayed the scene of the second plane hurtling into the tower over and over again. I stared in morbid fascination, my mind reeling from the ramifications of what I was watching.

By now, everyone knows the events of that day. I experienced some of them firsthand. I remember the streets being empty except for emergency vehicles. I remember thousands of people just walking straight up the FDR highway on the east side of the island. I remem-



Marines bring out the best in one another. (Photo by LCpl Antonio Garcia.)



We become better leaders by building on foundational principles and leadership traits. (Photo by Kelly Rodriguez.)

ber F-15 fighter jets screeching over the skies of Manhattan. I remember running downtown to see if I could help anyone. I remember the dust and debris as well as the empty skies where the towers once stood. I remember at night, sitting at a bar—as there was no where else anyone could go—and watching the President deliver his initial remarks and immediately understanding that a conflict of epic proportions was about to be embarked upon. Lastly, I remember trying to go to sleep that night and the wind shifting North so that we could smell that scent of burning buildings. It was the scent of death.

Overnight and into the morning, I contemplated what I could do. My country was in need. It seemed this was our generation's call to duty. I tried to give blood at the nearby hospital, but they were already over capacity. I tried to offer my services for the rescue and recovery effort, but they had all the men they could handle. I just wanted to do something.

I can recall, later that same day, thousands were just walking the streets of Manhattan with no destination in mind. I was there too. But, by now, after hours of soul-searching, I was different. I had determined that I had a destination. I walked to Times Square and approached the famous military recruiting

station. There was a long line, but not as long as I thought there would be.

Standing in line, I thought to myself how could I turn away from my Nation in its hour of need. I wondered why others should fight for me. How could I live with myself later when the history had been written of this coming time of conflict? The answers to my questions all pointed in one direction. It was then that I first set upon my journey to become a Marine officer.

You see, no one, not my family, not my friends, no one else that I knew decided to serve during this time of war. No one.

When I informed my friends and family of my decision, most were very respectful, even awed by what they called my self-sacrifice. But I recall thinking to myself that what I was doing was not special or, more precisely, should not be viewed as special. I was merely doing what should be done. The fact that others viewed it as special spoke more about them, and the larger populace, than it

did me and my fellow OCS candidates.

No one else that I knew—not my family, not my friends—decided to serve during this time of war. They were just like the vast majority of Americans who, while grieving, still went right back to their business and their civilian jobs as soon as the dust settled. They gawked at the pit of Ground Zero as it smoldered and then kept walking, going about their days.

Looking back at these experiences—my initial failures leading up to that day, and the choice I made on 11 September—I now understand what it means to be a leader and what are the foundational principles for a successful career leading other Marines.

Beyond the books and the training, I understand that the best way to lead Marines is to follow simple rules: treat them like men first, then as Marines, and then by their billet or rank. By understanding that each Marine comes to the Corps with a unique set of personal experiences and by respecting him as a man first, I could—in turn—gain his respect, loyalty, and confidence in my leadership abilities. By remembering that I have failed before in my own life and was imperfect at times, I was able to effectively understand that Marines make mistakes and can be taught, through impassioned and enthusiastic instruction, how to best learn from those mistakes to avoid them in the future.

Furthermore, by applying this ideal to each and every Marine in my charge, the entire group could come to a common judgment about my effectiveness as a leader. This would, in turn, further enhance my ability to maximize the entire unit's potential. One man treated with respect is an encouragement. An entire platoon or company of men, all treated as men first, is a force to be reckoned with.

After respecting each Marine as a human being, I know it is important to recognize that Marines are—and will always be—different than the rest of the population. Here I rely on my earlier recollections of how no one I knew made the choice to serve as I did, even though we all went through 11 September in similar ways. By choos-

ing to serve in this day and age, the young men and women of the Armed Services of the United States of America separated themselves from their peers. Within this select group, I argue that Marines distinguished themselves to an even greater degree as the most cohesive and effective operating force.

Whether this last point is true will always be up for debate. Regardless, by reminding those in my charge of these ideas, about their own attributes as military volunteers and Marines, I hope I was able to tap into their internal sense of pride and bring out the best in each one of them. In this manner, I was also able to foster a camaraderie and *esprit de Corps* that permeated all of our training and operations.

The final approaches, and ones only used in specific situations, were to make it a point to focus on my Marines' billet or rank. I say billet over rank because I found it was often more important to put the best man in the best position to succeed. For example, I once replaced a less than stellar sergeant with an outstanding corporal in the role of squad leader. I thought the best person for the job was more important than what rank he was. This of course has its limits, but this concept continued to help me focus on what was more critical to the unit's success: accomplishing the mission over placating someone because of their rank.

With regard to treating the Marines according to their rank, it was necessary to remind Marines of their rightful place in the organization only in specific situations, such as settling disputes or distributing punishments when necessary. But it was always important to keep these sorts of interactions to a minimum so that when employed they would have the maximum desired effect. Plus, if I had already gone through the previous steps of treating my subordinates as men first, then as Marines, then according to their billet, I would have had a reservoir of respect built up which could only increase the effectiveness of the punishment or decision making. This worked especially well, if everyone in the unit saw my concerted and fair approach to each situation.

While I do not profess to have mastered the art and science of leading Marines, I do argue that I have been able to distill the lessons of my aimless youth and the life-changing decision I made to join and serve following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. I have never ignored my past failures nor forgotten my place in this world and country. I am but a man and a Marine officer.

Eighteen years after raising my right hand and pledging to defend the Constitution, having served two combat tours in Iraq and now a newly promoted major in the United States

Marine Corps Reserves, I share this story not to highlight my own accomplishments but, rather, to explore the human dimension behind the choice to serve and lead Marines. My journey is but one small example of what makes the Marine Corps an important, necessary, and elite institution; I was simply one of many thousands who had similar stories concerning why they decided to serve. While many did not have 11 September as the crystallizing event, they all heard that silent, inner call to duty. They all answered when most others around them either ignored it or cowered from it. In short, we took the lead when others shrunk from the responsibilities of American citizenship.

Leadership is defined by who we are and the choices we make.

>Author's Note: This article was originally written in 2013 from a senior captain's perspective. However, the leadership principles and personal experiences detailed have held firm throughout my career, allowing me to continuously perform at a high level leading Marines in whatever capacity the Marine Corps, and the Nation, require.

