

# Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps TROY E. BLACK: “Mission First, Marines Always”



SGT VICTORIA ROSS, USMC

**SgtMaj Black speaks to lieutenants at The Basic School at MCB Quantico, Va., Nov. 1. Throughout his tenure, he's enjoyed the opportunity to visit Marines at schools and units across the Corps.**

By Sara W. Bock

As the Marine Corps continues to modernize and reshape the force in preparation for the future fight, Sergeant Major Troy E. Black, the 19th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, describes the 2 ½ years he's served thus far as the senior enlisted advisor to the Commandant as “a period of innovation and change.” But the seasoned combat veteran—an infantryman by trade—refuses to lose sight of what he believes is the Corps' most valuable asset: and it isn't shiny new equipment.

“We have a tendency to think of re-

sources and innovation and modernization in terms of ‘things.’ You hear a lot about ‘5th-gen aircraft.’ You hear ‘shipbuilding.’ You hear ‘weapon systems.’ These are things,” said Black. “I would offer that the most important ‘thing’ is the individual Marine ... it's really all about people. Mission first, Marines always,” he added unequivocally.

During an exclusive interview with *Leatherneck* at his office in the Pentagon, Aug. 3, Black, a self-described “uber-optimist,” revisited this sentiment numerous times, taking it even further to include Marine families, who he says are part of the “fiber” of the Corps. He spoke at

length about the myriad challenges that he and General David H. Berger, the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, have faced since July 2019, when Gen Berger took command of the Corps and Black assumed his post. But he's quick to point out that while the events of the past two years have been unique, their predecessors all faced various hurdles that tested their mettle. “We're on number four or five right now,” Black said as he listed off the various circumstances that have arisen on their watch.

From a global pandemic to social unrest, a contentious election season, a change in administration and the official end to the 20-year war in Afghanistan—the latter of which hadn't occurred at the time of our interview, but we discussed over the phone in October—Black is midway through his tenure and appears to have taken these challenges in stride.

It becomes clear as Black talks about leadership in the era of COVID-19, which he believes “restricts training and innovation ... and being around people in groups where you can interact and actually innovate and move the force forward,” that he's the ideal sort of senior enlisted leader the Corps needs during these turbulent, largely unprecedented times. He comes across as levelheaded and seemingly unfazed by what he calls “the churn” of the job, while appearing disinterested in any of the fringe benefits his post affords him.

From his position in support of the Commandant, Black has had an up-close view of the threat that COVID-19 posed to the Corps' readiness and continued modernization, as well as a hand in ensuring that the Marine Corps remained

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SGT MICHELE HUNT, USMC

While serving as the battalion sergeant major with Combat Logistics Battalion 5, 1st Marine Logistics Group (Forward), SgtMaj Black, left, assisted LtCol Robert Meade in casing the battalion colors at Camp Dwyer, Afghanistan, in July 2012.



SgtMaj Black visits with Marines at Weapons Field Training Battalion, MCB Quantico, Va., in October 2019. The time he spends with junior Marines, he says, gives him hope for the future of the Corps. (Photo by Sgt Kelly L. Timney, USMC)

**“The Marine Corps is the most adaptive force we have in the United States. Last summer, I MEF, in the midst of all of the churn of COVID protocols in particular, deployed and returned 9,000 Marines. The mission didn’t stop—and therefore the training didn’t stop. And that’s all on junior leaders.”**

ready at a moment’s notice: “Our adversary didn’t slow down, they didn’t stop doing things—nor can we ... national defense doesn’t stop because of COVID,” Black said.

“The Marine Corps is the most adaptive force we have in the United States,” Black said with resolve. “Last summer, I MEF [Marine Expeditionary Force], in the midst of all of the churn of COVID protocols in particular, deployed and returned 9,000 Marines. The mission didn’t stop—and therefore the training didn’t stop. And that’s all on junior leaders. You want inspiration? It’s not us up here with fancy chevrons and stars on our collars ... I’m inspired every day when I see it. Every day. It’s the joy of the job.”

And while Black draws his own inspiration from watching young Marines take on leadership roles, he recognizes that there’s a certain inspirational value associated with the post he holds as well as a sacred responsibility.

“Millions have worn the cloth: only 19 have ever gotten there,” he said of the Corps’ senior enlisted billet. “It’s good for everybody else to see the different chevron and the pomp and circumstance—that’s powerful. But for those who are in the seat, there is work to be done.”

After 33 years of service to country and Corps, Black hasn’t lost sight of where he



SGT KELLY L. TIMNEY, USMC

**During a tour of Marine Helicopter Squadron 1, SgtMaj Black shakes hands with a Marine at MCB Quantico, Va., Oct. 9, 2019.**

came from and often calls to mind his own years as a junior Marine when he reflects on how the young Marines of today will lead the Corps of the future.

“I think sometimes we believe from generation to generation, ‘Oh, these generations aren’t as good.’ I can’t imagine what someone thought of me when I was Lance Corporal Black. ‘Oh, you guys

aren’t going to be able to do anything,’ and a year later we’re in Desert Storm. ‘You can’t make it,’ and then we’re in 20 years at war,” he said.

Having participated in the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989, Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield in 1990, and numerous combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, Black’s service



SGT VICTORIA ROSS, USMC

**SgtMaj Black takes a close look at the BRU-41/A Improved Multiple Ejector Rack with the help of LCpl Grace Wagner, left, during a tour of the Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron (MALS) 31 ordnance department at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, S.C., July 21, 2020.**



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**SgtMaj Black spends time in the field with Marines at The Basic School, MCB Quantico, Va., Sept. 10, 2020.**



USMC

**During a visit to MCRD San Diego, Calif., in February, SgtMaj Black observes recruits doing abdominal crunches. As the Corps prepares to abandon the crunch and transition to a timed plank for the annual PFT, Black emphasizes the importance of reevaluating the status quo to determine if there's a "better way."**

record is brimming with expertise, yet he recognizes that today's young Marines don't yet have the wealth of combat experience as those of recent decades past. But, he says, that doesn't mean they won't rise to the occasion when their nation calls.

"They know one thing—they know the non-negotiables," Black said of junior Marines, referring to his memo that was published in *Leatherneck* and *Marine Corps Gazette* in January of this year. His "non-negotiables": core values; discipline and good order; professional military education and professional and personal development; physicality and expeditionary mindset; training for the purpose of warfighting; history, tradition and protocol; leadership and leadership development; and drill and ceremony, are, in his words, resolute and fundamental to the identity and success of the Corps "regardless of the battles being fought or the generation of Marines fighting them."

And while the Marine Corps' warfighting doctrine is undergoing a period of drastic change, Black emphasizes that

these "non-negotiables" will remain constant.

"We locate, we close with, we fight, we train, we win, but we always teach Marines to say, 'OK, that sounds good—is there a better way?' Always," said Black. "That's not a new thing. The Commandant is harnessing the fact that that's just part of the nature of being a Marine ... that doesn't mean cut away our foundation of who we are as Marines, as a disciplined force."

This interwar period, Black insists, is an opportunity to hit the "reset" button, innovate and retrain the force in preparation for the next conflict. And it's no different, he says, than other similar periods throughout the Corps' history.

"We re-baseline ourselves, and what we come to find out is the things that made us successful on Sept. 12 of 2001, the day after 9/11, are the very same things that made us successful 15-plus years after. What are those things? It's the non-negotiables," Black said.

"We're in an adaptive period, which is exceptional, because that's where the

Marine Corps always finds itself in these interwar periods: adapting to the next fight while maintaining the lessons learned throughout history," he added.

In the weeks following our sit-down interview, all eyes were on Afghanistan as the U.S. pulled its last remaining troops from the country and the Taliban swiftly took control. Marines with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and Task Force 51/5 supported evacuation operations at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, and 11 Marines and one Navy corpsman were among the 13 U.S. servicemembers killed when a suicide bomber attacked the airport's Abbey Gate, Aug. 26.

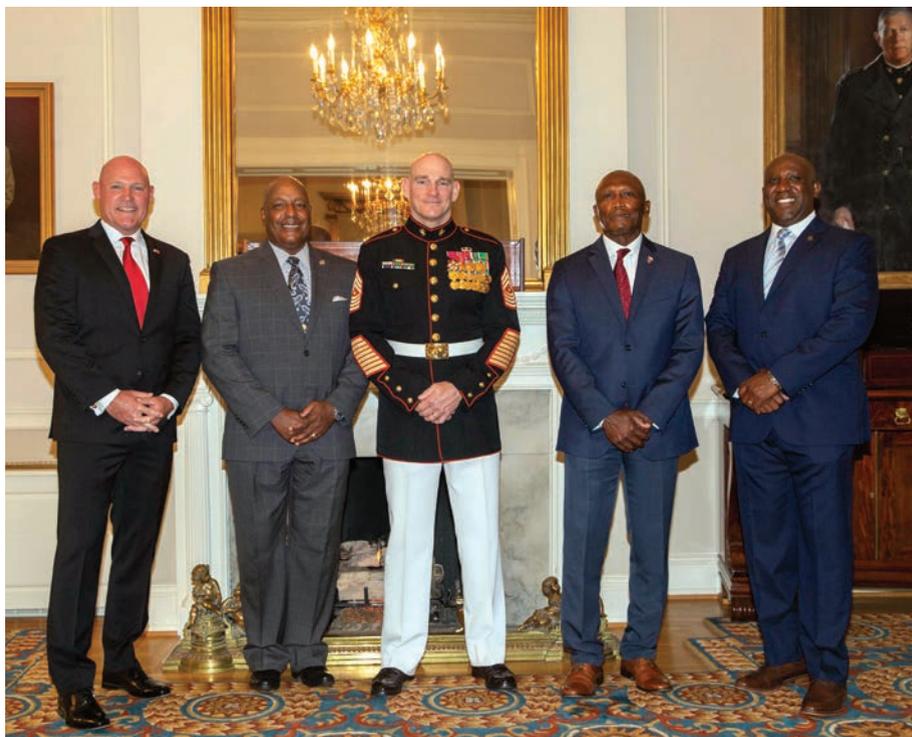
On Oct. 18, during a phone call with *Leatherneck*, Black had a message for all those who had served in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and subsequent operations in Afghanistan after combat operations ended in 2014, particularly those who may have felt like their service and sacrifice were in vain.

"Great job," Black said. "I've only seen the best out of Marines in that

Below: While visiting the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, D.C., in 2019, SgtMaj Black chats with a retired Marine resident.



SGT KELLY L. TIMNEY, USMC



SGT VICTORIA ROSS, USMC

SgtMaj Black, center, visits with SgtMaj Micheal P. Barrett, USMC (Ret), 17th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps; SgtMaj Alford L. McMichael, USMC (Ret), 14th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps; SgtMaj John L. Estrada, USMC (Ret), 15th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps; and SgtMaj Ronald L. Green, USMC (Ret), 18th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, at the Home of the Commandants, Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., in August.



environment ... the most impactful tour of my career was in Afghanistan in an infantry battalion, and just seeing those phenomenal things those Marines, those Sailors and their leaders there did. I'm impressed by memories of that experience every single day. I could go on and on, but at the end of the day, I don't think Marines should ever feel as if our time was wasted there."

Black is laser focused on the future. As Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, he

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has continually pushed for enhanced professional military education (PME) opportunities for enlisted Marines, ones that are centered on “the institution, our policies, practices, our warfighting methodology.” He sees these opportunities as crucial to equipping the enlisted force to take on more independence and responsibility at lower levels as the Corps shifts its focus to expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) in accordance with the Commandant’s Force Design 2030.

“How we develop the enlisted force is critical to how we’re going to fight in the future,” said Black. “By the way, fighting in the future is fighting today. In the time we’ll have this interview, there are Marines somewhere that are engaged with the enemy, an adversary. Whether it’s in cyber, whether it’s on the ground, whether it’s through a theater security cooperation

... we are always in competition, we are always in conflict somewhere.”

He points out that from day one of boot camp, Marine recruits are given leadership positions within their platoons as guides and squad leaders. “You’re in charge day one. Yesterday you had long hair. Today you have no hair. You’re in charge. And we build that trust continuum from day one of recruit training,” said Black, who previously served as a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., and later as an instructor at DI School.

Recently, while on official travel, Black ran into a group of Marine Corps poolees in an airport in Texas, headed for recruit training. One of the poolees was in charge of the others without any Marine recruiters present.

“They weren’t doing things they weren’t

**SgtMaj Black and his wife, retired Marine 1stSgt Stacie Black, attend a wreath laying ceremony at the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Va., commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, Feb. 27, 2020.**

supposed to do, they were in line, they had their paperwork, and it was a poolee getting other poolees on the plane. That’s not even a PFC or lance corporal. That’s a poolee,” said Black of his observations that day. “So absolutely it’s about the junior Marine because those junior Marines become sergeants major, master gunnery sergeants and general officers sometimes. You’ve got to start somewhere.”

When asked what his number one concern is regarding today’s Marines, Black didn’t hesitate for a second before replying, “Mental health.” He’s taken a



PFC ALLEN SANDERS, USMC

**From the left, Gen Berger, Donna Berger, SgtMaj Black, retired 1stSgt Stacie Black, SgtMaj Green and Andrea Green proceed down “Center Walk” at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., at the Friday Evening Parade, July 26, 2019, the day Black assumed the post of Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps.**

keen interest in human performance and what he refers to as the five “domains” of fitness: behavioral, mental, spiritual, social and physical. “All of those things affect mental health,” he said. Black expressed his gratitude to Gen Berger for tasking him with sponsoring a study on human performance and the resources and support the Marine Corps provides and should provide going forward—the results of which are expected soon.

“That one’s probably the one that’s at the forefront of my drive right now,” Black said.

“Being able to have a strategy to bring those things together and focus on you as the individual, so that you are part of the ‘team’ and the team collectively performs better, is why we win on the battlefield.”

Continuing the conversation regarding mental health, Black expressed his concerns about the lasting effects of the isolation associated with COVID-19 protocols, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic.

“One of the most consistent aspects of suicidal behaviors, whether it’s ideations,

attempts or actual suicide is isolation,” Black said. “Stay away from people, cover your face, isolate, communicate through social media, which we know for a fact can have damaging effects ... all those things are the only options in a fully restrictive COVID environment.”

Black makes it clear that he’s not debating the protocols, but that he’d be remiss not to take seriously the effects they’ve had on Marines and their families. He often thinks about family members feeling more isolated during deployments; young recruits who arrive at boot camp and have lacked social interaction over the last year-and-a-half; and kids, including his own, who have missed out on the traditional school experience.

When we followed up with Black during the October phone call, the Marine Corps, by order of the Department of Defense, was in the process of enforcing its mandate that all servicemembers become fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Reports suggested that the Corps lagged behind the other service branches in percentage of troops vaccinated.

“It’s been FDA approved just like every other vaccine,” Black said. “There are some nations that won’t allow us to come and provide us the ability to do our national security mission because we can’t even get into their countries now unless we’re vaccinated. It’s a 100 percent readiness issue. No politics involved in this.”

What keeps him going, day after day, amid the challenges of the job? Black cracks a smile and jokes that his staff would answer for him: “Coffee.” But his tone quickly changes to sincere.

“What keeps me going is I won’t let your Marines down,” Black said. “I don’t think it’s a sense of thinking that in four years all of ‘this’ has to be achieved. There’s absolutely no way to do that, otherwise you’ll fizzle out like a spark. There is an expectation that senior leaders in our Marine Corps are doing things that are in the best interest of the most junior Marines. I think what keeps me invested is that.”

Black also credits his family numerous times throughout our interview, often

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In his office in the Pentagon, SgtMaj Black looks at a photograph he took in Sangin, Afghanistan, on July 26, 2010, which he says was his “best day” in the Marine Corps.



SGT VICTORIA ROSS, USMC

SgtMaj Black speaks to leathernecks at Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., during his visit with 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing units, Feb. 11.

gesturing toward the wall beside his desk, which is lined with photos of his wife, retired Marine First Sergeant Stacie Black, and their four children. The couple met while both were drill instructors at Parris Island and were married in 2002. For his two children who are still living at home, the opportunity to live in the official residence at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., is a unique one, Black says.

There’s another photo in his office he takes down off the wall and brings over to the conference table. He took the photo, he says, on July 26, 2010, in the green zone of Sangin, a town in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province, while serving as the sergeant major of 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment. The photo depicts his battalion commander sitting alongside a company commander—a Marine captain—who is talking to his squad leaders over the radio, directing the fight.

“You can see the look on their faces, there are rounds inbound now, there’s lead in the air, and a battalion commander [is] allowing a subordinate commander to do his job,” said Black, motioning toward the individuals in the photo. “He’s directing that fight, and beside him is the battalion commander, there to support if necessary. That’s leadership.”

That day, Black says, was his “best day” in the Marine Corps. The rifle company he’s referring to was about a week into an operation that ultimately cut a path from the desert to the Helmand River, he recalls, something that had not been accomplished by those who had previously been operating in that area.

“Anything you can think of that can occur in 5 kilometers. I saw Marines telling jokes, Marines eating chow, lieutenant interacting in a KLE [key leadership engagement] with the local leader,” said Black. “I’ve been in the infantry my whole career, I’m an infantryman by trade. That day was probably the most intense combat I’ve been in ... when you want to see the machine work, it worked on that day. Everything. Combined arms, small unit leadership, initiative, resupply, air support.”

He makes no mention of it during our interview, but it was during that same deployment that Black earned a Bronze Star with Combat “V” device. On one of



**Black, right, and his wife, Stacie, host the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Ramon Colon-Lopez, USAF, and his wife, Janet, at the Friday Evening Parade at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., Aug. 7, 2020.**

dozens of missions he participated in, an improvised explosive device (IED) blast killed one of his Marines. According to his award citation, Black disregarded his own safety and ran across hundreds of yards of “unswept territory” to retrieve him, refusing to leave his brother-in-arms behind.

As we get into a conversation about the state of recruiting and retention, it’s apparent that Black still maintains the same mindset that drove him to recover that fallen Marine: each individual is valuable to the Corps.

“If the data is correct, fewer and fewer individuals in society qualify to enter service,” said Black straightforwardly. “If that’s true, and we maintain bringing in about 30,000 Marines a year, then what we have we have got to retain more of.”

He strongly believes that the process of recruiting and the process of retaining should not be viewed as separate entities. “They are the same thing,” he said.

“Every bit of time, education, training, learning, every bit of blood, sweat and tears from that individual is an investment,” Black added. “At the end of that four-year investment, the millions of dollars invested in that individual is not a commodity that you can just say, ‘OK, we’ll replace you with a PFC.’”

He points out that the Marine Corps has never in its history missed its recruiting goal, but retention is more of a challenge when the economy is strong and the civilian job market is likely to entice some Marines to leave active duty.

“If we don’t invest in retaining that Marine, they will definitely take all that experience, all that training, education and investment and use it outside. So, the thought that the lieutenant getting augmented is ‘just a lieutenant’ or that corporal that’s fighting for reenlistment is ‘just a corporal’—well, corporate America wants the lieutenant and wants the corporal ... we have to prioritize and talk about that more when we talk about retention,” Black said.

Black cites ongoing concerns about social media behavior among Marines and the relative lack of accountability involved when individuals are hiding behind a computer screen.

“Like everything else, if you want to solve a problem, you throw training at it, you throw leadership at it, you throw time at it. You throw all these things at it to at least educate the force on what’s right and what’s wrong. I don’t think anybody believes it’s right to say and do some of the things that they do on social media, whether they’re in uniform or out,” he

said with candor. “There’s a maximum effort campaign to educate the force on ‘you probably shouldn’t do that.’”

Overall, Black’s outlook on the current state of the Marine Corps is overwhelmingly positive. In fact, “exceptional” is the word he uses.

He alluded to the forthcoming change to the Corps’ annual physical fitness test (PFT), in which timed planks will replace the abdominal crunch. It’s yet another instance, he says, of examining the status quo and determining if there’s a better way—particularly one that is less likely to cause lower back problems, which he said is especially of concern for infantry Marines.

“If you see anybody in the modern fitness world, you don’t see anybody doing a crunch or a sit-up,” said Black. “If there’s better, let’s do better ... if we find that there are better ways to measure fitness then we will do things differently in order to develop that fitness.”

When asked about the progress that’s been made since formerly closed combat arms military occupational specialties were opened to female Marines, as well as about female recruits now training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego rather than only at Parris Island, Black treated it as a non-issue.

“How well are they doing? They’re Marines. There’s a standard—follow the standard,” Black said succinctly. “Recruits are recruits, regardless of gender, and they are coming in knowing nothing about the Marine Corps and they all leave being Marines ... Training day one’s training day one, no matter what squad bay you’re in,” he added.

At the end of the day, Black is energized by the enthusiasm he sees when he visits with Marines across the fleet. They’re receptive to the Commandant’s push for innovation and, despite continued concerns about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, seem excited to follow the Commandant’s directive to “move faster.”

“Every group we stand in front of, I see morale, I see motivation, I see esprit de corps, I see Marines working to be as proficient as they can at their jobs, and I see, overwhelmingly, a highly disciplined force,” Black said, adding with confidence: “I’d be a fool to think that there’s not hope for the future.” 🇺🇸

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