



MV-22B Ospreys from Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 163 deployed with the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard USS *Makin Island* (LHD-8) in the fall of 2016.



LtCol Browning addresses the Marines of his squadron during their deployment to the Pacific in 2017.

THE LEADER

Story by
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Photos courtesy of
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Editor's note: The following article is the first-place winner of the 2019 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the second- and third-place winners and honorable mention entrants.

Think for a moment, if you will, about your mentors. What makes them leaders? Do they set the example and inspire you to be better than they are? Which pieces of their style, ethos, or mindset are you taking with you when you take the reins of management? When they are gone, what caliber of leader will you be?

"Leadership is intangible, hard to measure, and difficult to describe," said General Clifton B. Cates, 19th Commandant of the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps prides itself on its ability to create leaders, but how does one truly know what makes a good leader, or what even makes an effective one? Leadership itself is defined in Merriam-Webster's dictionary as "the capacity to lead," and the truth behind gaining this capacity is that it is grown, not given, and cultivated through experiences, knowledge and failures. Regardless of the path to leadership taken, the Marine Corps wants great leaders. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Browning is one such leader.

Since his commissioning in 1997, LtCol Browning has had aspirations to be a commanding officer but did not let that define his career path. "I didn't make personal or professional choices based on what I needed to do to become a CO," he said when asked of his goals. "I knew that if I just did my job and took care of those whom I was given the privilege to lead, I may one day get the opportunity to command."

The separation of personal and professional is one that leaders should keep in the back of their minds as it can very often affect a person's judgment. Having a goal to work toward can generate passion and enthusiasm; however, some can be struck with a very selfish attitude when they only focus on their own goals. As far as the bigger picture goes, the Marine Corps is a team above all else. A leader must remain unselfish, even in the face of personal gain.



LtCol Christopher Browning

With his juniors beside him, LtCol Browning built a name for himself, accumulating more than 3,000 flight hours—primarily in the CH-46E and MV-22B—and serving multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He worked at Headquarters Marine Corps as the international plans and policy officer and MV-22B requirements officer and attended both Expeditionary Warfare School and the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, where he earned a master's degree in military studies. Building knowledge and experience is one of the cornerstones that cultivates an effective leader. Anyone can point fingers and tell another what to do, but a leader has a broad knowledge base that they utilize for the accomplishment of the mission. A great leader strives to know

more and do more, and is generous about using previous experiences to better their environment.

In April of 2015, LtCol Browning's command opportunity took shape in the form of MV-22B tiltrotor squadron VMM-163, the "Evil Eyes." After the initial excitement of receiving his orders to serve as a squadron commander, as most people thrust into a leadership position do, he reflected very heavily upon himself and his capabilities. "Was I going to be good enough? Am I going to fail? One of my first mentors told me right before I was about to take command, 'If you are worried that you don't know what you are doing or if you are even the right guy for the job, then everything will be OK.'"

Courage is vital for anyone in a leadership position, and despite its cut-and-dry definitions, is very fluid in its applications. A leader must have the courage to take initiative, the courage to do the right thing, the courage to make decisions and the courage to endure. A great Latin saying for this concept is "audentis fortuna iuvat," or "Fortune favors the bold." A leader must have a spine, despite the constant chance of failure, and must remember that indecision kills. As John Wayne once said, "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway."

The combined efforts of the more than 150 Marines in LtCol Browning's command, between the maintenance departments downstairs and the planning, logistics, and administration offices upstairs, kept the countless wrenches turning and the 12 aircraft of VMM-163 spinning. Heavy flight hour demands, an impending Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) deployment, and a building cacophony of setbacks could drive anyone in a command position to micromanage, but not LtCol Browning. "I always preached that VMM-163 was run by the captains and NCOs. Give them the tools, give them the guidance, and get out of their way. The key is not to give someone so much rope they hang themselves."

If you dig past the layers of mission accomplishment, it can be argued that the primary function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.

“Every Marine a leader” certainly reinforces that, and any self-respecting leader would not jeopardize that statement. If you are a leader in your environment, how are you training your successor? Are you giving them the tools and guidance without giving them too much rope? On the flip side, are you brushing against micromanagement, or are you doing it all yourself without letting them touch anything? “It is imperative that senior leaders set Marines up for success vice failure.” The key question you must ask yourself is this: are you willing to foster an environment to let your juniors become leaders?

LtCol Browning signs a final card, folds it up and tucks it away into an envelope before gathering the rest of them up. At well over 6 feet tall, he strikes an imposing figure as he walks down the hallways of VMM-163. He is out to deliver handwritten, hand-signed birthday cards. In one, he wrote that he hopes the private first class is adjusting to life in the fleet. In another, he asks the lance corporal how his wife is faring with a baby on the way. All the cards are redeemable for a free birthday day off, at the SNCO’s discretion. Some of the cards arrived early, some arrived late, but they always arrived. He made sure of it personally. He knows it is crucial for a leader to show subordinates that their leader cares about them beyond them being a name on a roster or a number in a system.

A leader is a human being before anything else, and becoming a leader does not change that fact. One of the best quotes for this mentality is by retired Army General Colin Powell, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State. He said, “The day the soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” This statement is as applicable to the military today as it was 50 years ago.

In the fall of 2016, with 29 aircraft and more than 550 Marines and Sailors, VMM-163 left on a deployment with the 11th MEU aboard USS *Makin Island* (LHD-8), but all was not “fair winds and following seas,” according to Browning. “The hardest thing was ensuring the squadron stayed focused. It only takes one instance to lose your focus to spell

LtCol Browning’s father, Col Darryl Browning, USMC (Ret), left, was also a Marine pilot. His mother, Jimmie, and brother, Drew pose with their Marines after LtCol Browning turned over command of VMM-163, June 23, 2017.





The entire VMM-163 squadron in formation during their deployment with the 11th MEU onboard USS *Makin Island* during the spring of 2017.

disaster.” LtCol Browning made a habit of walking around the ship and ensuring the Marines remained focused. Failures were punished accordingly, and aircraft difficulties, personnel injuries and sickness spreading across the ship were addressed as required. Even when an entire aircraft was lost, the efforts of LtCol Browning kept the squadron moving forward. When a Red Cross message arrived for a Marine, it was “heart-wrenching.” Thankfully, the squadron found a way to send the Marine home.

As leaders, it is incumbent to be able to maintain outlook and awareness when going through rough patches. It can be easy to lose morale when things do not go right, and seniors must ensure their juniors stay focused. Likewise, leaders must maintain fairness by appropriately punishing failures when focus is lost

but must accept when they are being punished because of their own failures or the failures of their subordinates. “S--t happens,” to put it eloquently, but leaders cannot let it alter the way forward.

Near the end of the deployment, family members were welcomed aboard the ship to participate in a “tiger cruise,” a week or so of observing life afloat. LtCol Browning did not stop or alter his pattern of leadership just because family members were around. “After the tiger cruise, I received a hand-written letter from a father who was on the cruise, personally thanking me for the leadership/compassion he witnessed.”

And as quickly as it came, the deployment was over. In the late spring of 2017, every aircraft of VMM-163 loaded up every Marine and flew back to MCAS Miramar, landing together in front of

friends, family, and loved ones. “We brought everyone home,” LtCol Browning recalls the moment heartily. “A huge sense of relief and pride that we accomplished our goals.”

The day was all smiles and tears as Marines were welcomed home. The chemistry of a successful mission boils down to the trust the team has in its leader and the willingness of the leader to apply themselves to the mission. Members of any kind of team like to win, and the job of a leader is to make sure the team achieves victory. Marines, young and old, have a natural competitive streak, and the great thing about Marines is that they have an overwhelming capacity to be leaders. If a leader falls, all are willing to pick up the torch.

Looking back, LtCol Browning has a few things he would say to Second Lieu-



LtCol Browning at the VMM-163 change of command ceremony on June 23, 2017. He assumed command of another Osprey Squadron, VMM-265, the following year.

tenant Browning if given the opportunity. “1. Marines are always watching ... up and down the chain of command. 2. Not every decision needs to be made immediately. Understand the problem, get as much information and varying perspectives as possible, then make the best decision with the facts that you have in front of you. 3. You have been given an opportunity to lead some of the finest individuals our nation has to offer. Mothers and fathers have entrusted you with taking care of their sons [and] daughters. That is a responsibility you can never take lightly. Don’t ever take it for granted.”

A leader must be aware of what they say and do because someone, somewhere, will notice. Leaders must avoid potential oversights and blind spots and make sure all of their decisions are well-informed and

well-thought-out. Marines are entrusted with leading fellow Marines, which is a great privilege unto itself. But just as a Marine leader might be someone’s son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother, so too are the Marines under their command. Everyone is human—this is a fact we must never forget.

LtCol Browning is praised by his seniors and his juniors as a great leader and an outstanding commanding officer. His integrity, enthusiasm, unselfishness, courage and endurance show in the faces and work ethic of Marines that have had the honor to serve under him and reflect in the countless successful missions that were left in his wake. Despite it all, LtCol Browning will always remain humble in his achievements. “Service over self should always be at the front of a leader’s

mind,” he said. “The sergeant major and I were just stewards of the flag and proud to be part of a fantastic team.”

Leaders must put themselves in the boots of one of their juniors and ask: Would you follow a leader like you? Would your actions inspire you to go above and beyond? What pieces of you will they carry forward when you are gone and they become leaders? What caliber of leaders will you leave behind?

Author’s bio: Cpl Taryn Brackett is from Greenville, Calif., and enlisted in the Marine Corps in August 2014. She deployed with 11th MEU in 2016-2017 and currently serves with VMM-362, 3rd MAW, as a flight equipment technician on the MV-22. 🇺🇸