

'Brilliance in the Basics' and Other Expectations of Combat Leaders

by LtCol B.P. McCoy

Adherence to basics provides success on the battlefield.

When the 1st Marine Division began preparations for deployment to Kuwait for what would later be known as Operation IRAQI FREEDOM I (OIF I), our commanding general, MajGen James N. Mattis, gathered his battalion commanders and described his vision of success. Part of that vision was being "brilliant in the basics." He went on to emphasize how difficult such a seemingly simple task is to accomplish, but that mastery of the basics was all it would take to whip anybody. As I contemplated "the basics," I began to write them down into bullets. I wanted to make a document that could be easily transferred down to the newest private first class, but my primary audience was my mid- and higher level leaders. What follows in this article is that list I compiled and titled, "Expectations of Combat Leaders."

I cannot stress enough just how elusive the basics are to accomplish. I personally briefed them to every noncommissioned officer (NCO) and above in the battalion to ensure there was a mutual understanding of the basics, emphasizing that when it comes to the fundamentals of discipline, there is no room for interpretation. Simply talking about the basics does not suffice. We internalized these basics through training and ruthless enforcement of the standards; we made them habit. Even then we experienced letdowns. I challenge the reader to honestly assess how well his or her unit does the basics, and then ask, "Can we do better?"

The contents of the "Expectations of Combat Leaders" are nothing less than the wisdom of those who have gone

before me—lessons written in blood by generations of Marines and sailors. I have never been accused of having an original thought; many of these bullets I incorporated from the wisdom of many of the Marines with whom I have served and from great historical figures, such as MajGen John A. Lejeune, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, and MG Carl von Clausewitz. This list of expectations—or basics—served us well in combat. I would not alter any of them as a result of our own experiences in Iraq. Upon our return from OIF I and again throughout our deployment to OIF II, I reviewed this list and reaffirmed that these basics are timeless and immutable. Any leader who strays

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far from them will sooner or later be taught a bitter lesson.

Expectations of Combat Leaders

Leadership. As leaders you are the standard bearers of our Corps' history, reputation, and values. Marines and sailors will look to you for their cues. Everything you do or say, or fail to do or say, will set the tone for your unit. You are *always* in charge.

Time off, better chow, and more creature comforts are secondary elements of troop welfare. First-rate training, dedicated leadership, and a sense of belonging to a tight unit are true troop welfare. Only when the latter is missing does the former take on importance. We often confuse mak-

ing things comfortable and homelike with troop welfare. Before the first boy-girl morale dance or softball tournament is scheduled at one of our camps in Iraq we should, at a minimum, ensure that every Marine and sailor is proficient with his weapon and well-rehearsed in the immediate action drills that will keep him alive when in contact with the enemy. Do any less and you will be a spectator to the slaughter of your unit.

Sometimes leadership means making people do what deep down they know they should be doing anyway but for some reason won't. It means being unpopular. Your Marines need a leader to follow, not a buddy. Making the "easy" or popular decision—instead of making the difficult and unpopular—but correct—decision—will reward you with mission failure and make casualties of your Marines. The second you neglect to cor-

rect a Marine doing wrong, you have sent a message that you are weak and have set a new and lower standard for your unit.

MajGen John A. Lejeune said:

Leaders must have a strong sense of the great responsibility of their office; the resources they expend in war are human lives.

Remember, the enemy, not an inspection team, will grade us on our capabilities.

Treat your Marines and sailors with respect. They are willing to execute your orders and die doing so. Get "negative" with a Marine as a last resort.

Stop rumors immediately. Do not allow the morale of your unit to rise and fall on the basis of the latest

rumor. To do so is to submit to "victimhood." You alone control morale as a combat multiplier.

Be Brilliant at the Basics; the Basics Will Be Habit

Clausewitz stated:

Habit hardens the body for great exertions, strengthens the heart in great peril. Habit breeds that priceless quality, *calm*, which, passing from rifleman to commander will lighten the task.

Great units do the basics well, with a high degree of proficiency, and as habit. *Good habits breed smart, tough, aggressive Marines and sailors who will win in combat. Bad habits breed timidity, and timidity breeds casualties and mission failure.*

Training. Everything is training, and never miss an opportunity to train. Training does not stop in theater. Make a list of your unit tasks/battle drills that you are most dissatisfied with and use that as your start point for "opportunity training." This type of training usually comprises most of your small unit training time. Accept the fact that you will not be popular when you force your unit to drill the basics, but you will keep them alive. *Focus on the basics and become brilliant at them.* Show me a unit that complains of not enough time to train their drivers with night vision goggles and I'll show you a unit that has previously chosen the easier alternative to drive through a training area with lights on. Ask yourself, have you really exploited every opportunity to train?

- **Physical training (PT).** PT is conducted daily in accordance with the situation. Life in a combat zone will present very few opportunities for formation PT above the platoon level, yet we must maintain our physical and combat conditioning. At a minimum, a 15-minute combination of stretching, calisthenics, rifle PT, isometric and resistance exercises, and martial arts will suffice for maintenance of conditioning. This sharpens the mind and warms the body. Develop a program and couple it with your daily monitored hygiene program; i.e., PT followed by monitored hygiene and laundry and weapons maintenance.

- **Combat marksmanship.** This is the

fundamental reason for our existence. Nothing will give a Marine more confidence to close with the enemy than the knowledge that he and his buddies will hit what they shoot at. You must enforce great battle sight zero (BZO) data that is verified periodically to include AN/PEQ-2s. You must ensure you are getting target feedback and applying it to a *standard*.

Conduct drills on Condition 1 reloads/reload drills. These must be routine and accomplished blindfolded, on the run, etc. This will save lives one day. Immediate and remedial actions are key and must be performed blindfolded as well.¹

Weapons. Ensure weapons and ammunition are cleaned and inspected at every opportunity. Do not allow slings to be removed from weapons or employed other than loop to swivel. The sling is there for a reason. When wrapped around the carrying handle it impedes one's sight picture and negates the use of a hasty sling. Allowing Marines to carry a weapon that cannot be properly employed is a leadership failure.

- **Weapons maintenance.** Most malfunctions and stoppages are self-induced by the shooter. Poor reloading and dirty weapons are usually the reasons, and can be overcome by NCOs doing their jobs. Before and after every action, NCOs will ensure that weapons are in the proper condition code, cleaned and lubricated, and BZO is set on the rear sight. Ammunition is checked, and grenades are inspected. Broken and malfunctioning weapons will be reported immediately. *Before doing anything else (eating, sleeping, etc.), weapons will be cleaned and ready.*

Precombat checks and inspections and postcombat checks and inspections are standing operating procedure and are at the *very heart* of leadership. These are basic habits. They are called precombat checks and inspections for a reason. They are not precombat questions and assumptions. Pre- and postcombat checks and inspections are not delegated below the squad leader level. Platoon commanders and platoon sergeants verify—no exceptions.

Allow no deviations from the command prescribed load and basic uniform—ever. Deviations, such as un-

blousing in heat, are conscious decisions by a commanding officer based on analysis of the situation, not personal whims. At a minimum Marines and sailors will have their gas masks and weapons on the body at all times.²

Discipline. Do not allow graffiti on uniforms, "do-rags," wristbands, or other forms of jackassery, period.

Helmets, when worn, will have the chinstraps on the chin, otherwise they will not stay on when needed most. Allowing a Marine to wear the helmet without a chinstrap is making the Marine wear useless weight on his head and is a leadership failure.

- **Communications discipline.** Enforce proper reporting and communications procedures. Use of procedure words, reporting formats, and proper radio checks cuts down on traffic and confusion.

- **Light discipline.** Strictly enforce light discipline. Use of flashlights in the open, smoking, and vehicle headlights from dusk to dawn are the commanding officer's decisions, not one of personal convenience. We have night vision devices. Use them. There is seldom a reason to break light discipline.

- **Hygiene discipline.** Prior to eating chow in the field, squad leaders will inspect their squads for proper hygiene, clean hands, clean weapons, and the prescribed uniform. Poor hygiene will rob us of combat power. All Marines and sailors will perform hygiene every day—shaving and brushing teeth at a minimum, with periodic foot inspections by leaders. Hand washing is mandatory and monitored. Squad leaders check; platoon commanders and platoon sergeants verify—no exceptions.

Security. Security must be a habit formed at home; otherwise, it will be an afterthought, and we will suffer for it. This is the premise of the "guardian angel" concept. I expect you to be naturally curious about your surroundings; you are always on patrol. *Never abdicate the security of your unit to anyone else.*

Never send Marines or sailors alone anywhere. Everything is done in buddy teams, even head calls. This is a fundamental that will not be violated.

Security is 360 degrees; from buddy team to battalion we will have 360-degree security. Be a hard target.

Contact With the Enemy

We are a combat unit that is expert in the application of violence. Trust your instincts and make a decision in accordance with the rules of engagement and my intent. I will support you 100 percent. Never make an "uncovered move" in the face of the enemy. From buddy rushes to bounding by platoons, always have an overwatch element prepared to deliver fires. Use combat patience, build a base of fire, suppress the enemy, and when you move, do it with a purpose, aggression, and violence of action intent on finishing the enemy. After first contact, the enemy will fear us more than they hate us.

We will take casualties in combat, and men will die. Accept that as fact now and resolve to stay above the emotion and remain focused on the mission. Do not allow casualties to slow our speed. The best way to take care of our wounded is to finish the enemy.

Encourage constructive feedback. Continue to use the after-action review as a means for this, especially in combat. Our best ideas and tactics, techniques, and procedures will come from our NCOs and junior Marines.

Treat the dead—friendly and enemy—with respect. Do not pose for photos with the enemy dead or otherwise desecrate their remains; it is cowardly.

Upon contact with the enemy establish violence supremacy and kill them. If they quit, then give quarter. Keep our honor clean. Do not allow atrocities that will sully our reputation, make cowards of our Marines, and stiffen the enemy's resolve.

Treat prisoners with dignity, but do not trust them. Be forceful and firm. Do not abuse prisoners; it is cowardly.

Treat the locals with dignity and be courteous, but never be "friendly"; it is a weakness they will exploit.

Make peace with your Maker, trust in your brothers, dedicate yourself to the unit and mission—then fight with a "happy heart."

Lead from the front. When conditions are worst is when you need to be seen the most.

Establishing Expectations

As I stated earlier, I would not change any of these bullets; however, after OIF, I added three additional

expectation bullets. Once again, there is nothing new, yet it is important to share and reaffirm these lessons. There are two ways a leader ethically imposes his will on the Marines he leads into combat and those are through his *moral authority* as a leader and by establishing *expectations*.

First, authority is granted by virtue of one's warrant or commission. On the battlefield, moral authority is established and cemented by leading from the front. Only by embracing the same hazards as the Marines and sailors you lead will you establish that critical bond of trust that is at the heart of a unit's fighting spirit. One must lead from within what GEN Matthew B. Ridgway called the "cone of aimed fire." Marines know that tough—and potentially dangerous—decisions are required in combat. Knowing those decisions were made from within this cone of aimed fire builds confidence in your Marines that their leaders know what is actually happening firsthand at the point of contact and have committed them to a course of action with the best possible chance of success. Nothing breaks down the walls of doubt and hesitancy and builds the bonds of trust and affinity faster than shared danger and hardship.

Second is the power of expectations communicated by ruthless enforcement of the basics and demonstrated in combat by example. In the battle of Thermopylae, the Spartan king, Leonidas, fought shoulder to shoulder with his band of 300 Spartans against the Persians and Xerxes' 10,000 Immortals. Leonidas chose to lead from within the phalanx as a fellow hoplite in the second rank. This was more than a gesture or simply striking a bold leadership pose and moving on. This was leading from the front and establishing the baseline example of his expectations. With such an example, a unit will emulate a leader's will and aggressiveness to move on the enemy and that aggressive spirit will permeate a unit. That is not to say that all leaders should be relegated to the role of a rifleman, but rather should embrace the role of fighter/leader. This is particularly important for a unit in its first fight.

The third expectation I added was borrowed from Vince Lombardi. For Lombardi the definition of mental

toughness was not only the ability to take pain but also the ability to inflict it. In the case of combat, as a leader you must be mentally prepared to inflict pain not only on the enemy—we are prepared for that—but you must be prepared to indirectly inflict suffering on the Marines and sailors who must go in harm's way to carry out your orders and accomplish the mission. GEN Robert E. Lee stated that the military leader must be prepared to order the destruction of the very thing he loves—his men. No other profession requires that conscious commitment. This is not just prose; this is the essence of the burden of command. On a conscious level we all know this, but are we really mentally and emotionally prepared for it? Even before the first shot in anger is fired, leaders must look themselves in the mirror and know they possess the measure of resoluteness necessary to order their Marines and sailors into harm's way. Furthermore, the real test is to look yourself in the mirror soon after young men who trust you are killed or maimed, do it all over again—day after day—and still not lose the will to continuously and aggressively close with the enemy. This requires mental toughness. The "emotional shock absorbers" to weather those blows and maintain your convictions must be developed in peacetime through study of the human psyche in combat and through vicarious experience.

Conclusion

On the surface these expectations may look simple, to the point of being a blinding flash of the obvious. This is the deceptive elusiveness of the basics—easy to talk about—and much harder to accomplish. The challenge for you, the leader, is to internalize these expectations in your unit, to engrain them so fully that they are habit, lest you be taught a bitter lesson.

Notes

1. 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, Standing Operating Procedures.

2. Ibid.

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