

The Importance of Discipline Within a Warfighting Organization

Without discipline, Marines can't live up to what is expected of them

by SgtMaj Brad A. Kasal

GEN George S. Patton once remarked, "There is only one kind of discipline—perfect discipline." He further explained that

discipline is based on pride in the profession of arms, on meticulous attention to details, and on mutual respect and confidence. Discipline must be a habit so ingrained that it is stronger than the excitement of battle or the fear of death. Discipline can only be obtained when all leaders are so imbued with the sense of their lawful obligation to their men and to their country that they cannot tolerate negligence. Leaders who fail to correct errors or to praise excellence are valueless in peace and dangerous misfits in war.¹

These words could not be truer today for the Marine Corps. Whether in garrison, field training, or in battle, discipline is the foundation of any successful military organization. Developing and maintaining consistent discipline is the only road to forming it as a habit.

Until discipline becomes second nature, it is very hard to permanently reprogram our auto-pilot systems. Practices and procedures that are not yet formed into habit can easily be forgotten.

It may seem that, as Marines, we are among the most disciplined individuals in the world. The Corps has certainly performed valiantly and meritoriously throughout our history, and we continue to do so today.

In some situations, however, a lack of discipline causes us to fall short of the level of performance expected of us.

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One example of a lack of discipline is how certain Marines react to the sound of morning and evening colors. Oftentimes, Marines scatter indoors to avoid standing at attention and saluting for a few short minutes. Another example would be Marines choosing to wear inappropriate attire into the PX and other public venues. We have undoubtedly all witnessed speeding vehicles along our roads on base and have read the reports of misconduct while off duty. Additional examples extend to training and combat environments, including patrol members not observing their sector during a patrol or failing to adhere to noise and light discipline in the field. All of these behaviors show a lack of discipline on the part of individual Marines.

This lack of discipline not only infects our junior Marines, but it is also evident in some of our leaders through their selective enforcement of orders and standards. The largest contributor to orders not being followed is orders not being enforced. When discipline problems are discussed, fingers are often pointed at our junior Marines. Discussions generally focus on "today's generation" and/or current societal fail-

ings as the reason for the problem. The hard truth is that society, and today's generation, produced an individual who raised his right hand to serve and defend. Therefore, neither the generation of our junior Marines nor current society is the problem. The accountability lies fully on the shoulders of our leaders, and leaders must be held accountable for failing to enforce regulations and orders in the same way that a Marine is held accountable for failing to adhere to those same regulations and orders.

For any leader who chooses to selectively enforce orders, or allows them to be optional, a question must then be asked—which of your orders do you allow your subordinates to disobey?

By allowing Marines to disregard even the smallest of rules, we, as leaders, place ourselves in a position where our own orders and commands may not be followed. How can we allow Marines the freedom of bending the rules and then expect them to follow our own orders?

Consistent leaders believe that all orders are expected to be followed and any breakdown cannot be tolerated. They professionally develop subordinates



“Reposing special trust and confidence in the fidelity and abilities of...” has special meaning for every Marine. (Photo by Cpl Jodson Graves.)

and accomplish the mission while still maintaining morale and *esprit de corps*. They are consistent in every clime and place. Their Marines always know what to expect, no matter the environment or situation, and they know, without confusion, which orders to follow—all of them.

No leader, or Marine, should ever misinterpret what discipline means to a fighting force. Often times, these misinterpretations are either for the personal comfort and convenience of the individual or leader or because leaders bend to the will of the masses by applying “liker-ship” rather than leadership. Leaders who aren’t working within standards themselves provide a poor example, teach bad habits to subordinates and are unable to enforce standards because of lack of credibility. Some reasons that leaders may fail to adhere to standards or regulations may be because of their personal opinions, they’ve been allowed to ignore the regulation, or they are just too lazy to adhere to the regulation. As an institution, we need to do a more consistent job of holding leaders, including senior leaders, accountable to standards. In a professional organization where trust, confidence in leadership, obedience to orders, and teamwork are critical to success, leaders who fail to meet expectations should not be tolerated.

While some Marines may avert standards if allowed to, I truly believe that individuals join the Corps wanting, and expecting, discipline. Every individual prior to enlisting watched a video or an advertisement depicting Marines training, fighting, marching, conducting physical training, and demonstrating discipline. These same Marines are then disappointed if we do not provide it.

Therefore, the question must be asked, “Why do we fail them?” When Marines graduate boot camp, they begin their careers with a basic foundation of discipline. If, over time, they lose that discipline, their leaders are at fault. Leaders who set a bad example by failing to adhere to orders and uphold standards themselves fail at maintaining discipline and enforcing standards, which means that they fail our Marines as well.

This ideology of discipline as the bedrock of all successful Marines is not anything new. Look no further than our own promotion warrant, where we are bound by obligation each time we accept a promotion:

You will lead your Marines with firmness, fairness, and dignity while observing and following the orders and directions of your senior leaders and enforcing all regulations and articles governing the discipline of the

Armed Forces of the United States of America.²

A key term in this text is “enforcing all regulations.” If a Marine does not want this obligation, or lacks the fortitude to uphold what the warrant requests, then they should not accept it. It is that simple. In order to be a Marine, individuals must play by the Marine Corps’ rules. The rules don’t change for us; we change for them. Each Marine is taught the Corps’ rules, orders, and standards on their first day of training. We volunteer to abide by them each day we wear the uniform. If a Marine’s personal values no longer agree with the Corps’ values, then he should not reenlist.

Why is achieving consistent discipline in garrison and training such a crucial trait for every Marine, even in seemingly perfunctory tasks? Because these same individuals who cut corners and disobey orders in training may also cut corners and disobey orders in combat. An individual who demonstrates a lack of discipline by not shaving on the weekend when he believes he is not being watched may show a similar lack of discipline in following the rules of engagement during distributed combat operations. Undisciplined individuals in training are not magically transformed into disciplined individuals in combat.

An undisciplined individual develops undesirable habits, such as poorly maintaining and handling weapons, failing to perform continuing actions in the field, falling asleep on post, or getting sick by failing to follow proper field hygiene. Additionally, failure of leadership within a unit to maintain the upkeep and appearance of their barracks, work areas, and common grounds will likely also fail to maintain upkeep of defensive positions in combat and conduct similar continuing actions in all phases of combat.

Undercutting the importance of discipline as a habit in everyday operations is a term we have all heard many times: garrison. This term emerged most recently when we shifted away from large-scale deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. The reality, however, is that Marines are still continuing to deploy into harm’s way, and they must



Discipline begins in recruit training and should never be set aside for convenience or expediency. (Photo by Cpl Angelica Annastas.)

be prepared to do so. As Marines, we never know when, or where, our next fight will be. If you have never been “punched in the face” in training, you’ll be less prepared for the hardships and brutality of combat. So, we train, re-equip, and deploy. Everything we do in garrison and training must be focused on increasing our preparedness to deploy and our proficiency to fight. Over the years, many individuals have given me credit for the trigger discipline displayed in a photo of myself while coming out of a house in bad shape. The truth is I don’t give myself credit. Give it to Cpl Jose Martinez and Cpl Robert Hall, who, through repetitious training and consistent enforcement of discipline, instilled into LCpl Kasal habits which became critical to success in a life and death situation decades later.

Discipline, along with continuously perfecting skills and tasks in training such as inspections, close order drill, and formations, are the same skills needed to perform tasks that are critical to success in combat. An example follows.

At 0730 on a Monday morning at Camp Pendleton, a squad leader steps in front of his squad and forms them for inspection. He walks the ranks, stopping before each Marine to inspect their uniform, haircut, and hygiene, asking

questions about their welfare, their knowledge of Marine Corps common skills, and their chain of command. Once complete, he gathers all hands around him as he briefs them on the plan of the day, any coordinating instructions, and provides words of inspiration.

Now, fast forward several months as this same squad is forward deployed in a combat zone. Before stepping off on a combat patrol, the squad leader gathers his squad together for pre-combat checks and inspections. He stops before each Marine to inspect their weapons and gear for accountability, operability, and cleanliness, asking questions regarding their welfare, their mental state, and their knowledge of the OPlan, comm plan, or specific assigned tasks. Afterward, he briefs the squad as a whole, giving any coordinating instructions common to all along with words of inspiration.

If Marines do not learn and consistently apply valuable skills such as these during peacetime, when will they learn and apply them for the first time? In order to outfight the enemy, you must out prepare them. You can’t just “turn it on.” In garrison, you conduct inspections, give PMEs, execute physical training to build mental and physical resiliency, instill character, practice gun drills, and take care of families and personal

readiness. In the field, you perfect your trade. How you trained, and how you prepared, is executed in combat.

Prominent military leaders throughout history from Alexander the Great, to Sun Tzu, Caesar, Napoleon, Gen Ulysses S. Grant, and LtGen Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller have stated the importance of discipline to a warfighting organization. Gen George Washington once stated that “nothing is more harmful to the service, than the neglect of discipline for that discipline, more than numbers, gives one army superiority over another.”³

With all of this said, the reality is that none of us are perfect. None of us has ever achieved the truly perfect discipline that GEN Patton described because we are all human. In our personal and professional lives, each of us will have goals that we do not reach and moments when we are not at our best. We’ve all allowed the weather, physical exhaustion, or other factors to sometimes get the better of us and, as a result, have slacked off when we shouldn’t have. We must, however, continuously strive to be disciplined in all that we do, and we must be consistent in the enforcement of that discipline. Only then will discipline become a habit. We are Marines, and these traits embody who we are. They are essential to our success in combat and in everyday life.

Notes

1. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers: 1940-1945*, (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 1974).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, “Non-Commission Officers Promotion Warrant,” in *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: August 2014).
3. “George Washington Quotes,” *George Washington: Biography, History and Facts*, (Online: Undated), available at www.georgewashington.org.

