

# Noncommissioned Officers Will Win This War

## The Battlefield May Change—But Our Values Are Timeless

By Gen James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps

Our Corps faces challenges today that are unlike any in our past. Never before have battlefields been more decentralized, our enemy more ruthless, and never have we had more potential for our small unit leaders to determine our success as a Corps.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the first battles of this Long War, we truly live in the era of the “Strategic Corporal”—where tactical action by a Noncommissioned Officer may have strategic consequences. To all our NCOs in the fight, make no mistake, your actions do have impact! You not only affect those serving on your left and right flank today, but also your fellow Marines who will follow you in future rotations.

Our NCO corps is the envy of professional militaries around the world; others can see the tremendous value of our small unit leadership in current operations. Whether fighting a complex insurgency, conducting major disaster relief, or rescuing non-combatants, the collective efforts of well-led Marine units have brought peace and stability to many regions during the opening battles of this Long War. That success will continue to rest on the shoulders of young men and women who wear Corporal and Sergeant chevrons—in the battles of today and the battles that will follow.

The challenges of combat demand strong leadership at all levels, but in particular where “the rubber meets the road.” This is where the Corps has its greatest strength—the steadfast leadership of our NCOs. These small unit leaders reinforce our Core Values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment—through example and action, and this value system is crucial to winning the Long War. While the battlefields may change, our values will not.

■ ***“The time always comes in battle when the decisions of Statesmen and of Generals can no longer affect the issue and when it is not within the power of our national wealth to change the balance decisively. Victory is never achieved prior to that point; it can be won only after the battle has been delivered into the hands of men who move in imminent danger of death.”***

**—S. L. A. Marshall**

### **Leadership**

The challenge to prepare our Marines for the complexities of a counterinsurgency battlefield, at its essence, is a leadership issue. Marine leaders must do what they have always done to coach, train, and inspire their Marines. Each level of leadership, if we are to function as a well-oiled machine, has a role in mission accomplishment.

*Officers*, particularly commanders, are responsible for leading their Marines with firmness, fairness, and dignity and creating a command climate that “powers down” responsibility to the lowest level. They must set a bold example for their Marines, particularly in combat. Officers must challenge their Marines to demonstrate moral and physical courage, and in the end, hold all accountable for their actions.

*Staff Noncommissioned Officers* provide the experience and mentorship that our Corps needs to maintain its high standards. Their toughness and determination form the bedrock of our combat formations. The genuine concern for Marines under their charge is frequently a reflection of leadership they received when they were young NCOs and pays huge dividends whether in training or in combat.

*The NCOs have the toughest tasks of all.* They are our 24/7 leadership. In garrison, they are tasked with the maintenance of good order and discipline. In combat, they make hard decisions at the point where strategy meets reality, linking commanders’ intents to the actions of their Marines—often in a split second.

### **Noncommissioned Officers**

*Marine noncommissioned officers are the critical link in battlefield leadership, they close the final 200 yards with the enemy—they make decisions where it counts.* When I speak with our young Second Lieutenants at The Basic School at Quantico [Va.], I advise them to listen to and learn from those combat-experienced NCOs in the units they will eventually join.

A brand-new platoon commander, by virtue of his rank and position, is indeed the recognized leadership and authority figure for that platoon. However, the battle-hardened Corporals and Sergeants are often the “informal leaders” within the unit. Frequently, they have one or two deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan under their belts. Many have scars from combat injuries; they have seen close friends killed or severely wounded, and they know the fears and harsh realities of war. In many cases, these NCOs have made life-or-death decisions, or decisions that have had strategic consequences. Marines will invariably look first to these leaders when their unit is in contact.

*I am convinced that Corporals and Sergeants are the best instructors when it comes to rules of engagement and battlefield ethics.* These combat-tested warriors have unique insights for young Marines going to the fight for the first time—they have “been there and done that.” Of course, with that responsibility comes the need for thorough understanding of the rules of engagement and an ability to teach them “by the numbers.” Examples and anecdotes are helpful for instructional purposes, but as a Corps, we must have unity of purpose and a common understanding of the overarching principles of something as important as the rules of engagement.



Gen James T. Conway, 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps

We all acknowledge that our NCOs have tremendous authority and responsibility in combat zones—our young leaders are literally responsible for the lives and well-being of our Marines. Yet, sometimes, when back in garrison, we strip them of that authority and responsibility, and fail to take full advantage of our NCO leadership. Good order and discipline, training, barracks life, and safety are just some examples of where I believe our Corporals and Sergeants can do even more than we presently ask.

The challenge for our officer and SNCO leadership is to find and maintain that “sweet spot”—where we maximize the skill sets of our NCOs while staying personally and professionally involved in the development and preparation of our Marines for war. I encourage all to keep working at it—we’re not there yet.

#### **Challenges of the Counterinsurgency Environment**

The Corps has a long history of successful operations in counterinsurgencies—the Banana Wars and our experience in Vietnam are the most notable—and our Corps rightfully takes pride in the innovation and aptitude we brought to these demanding and complex battlefields.

■ ***“We have good Corporals and Sergeants and some good Lieutenants and Captains, and those are far more important than good Generals.”***

**—General of the Army William T. Sherman**

Our enemy on the contemporary battlefield is a cunning and remarkably adaptable foe whose courage at times borders on fanaticism. There is little else about him, however, that commands our respect. He employs vicious murder and intimidation campaigns against civilian communities—and then hides in their midst when we approach. He uses women and children indiscriminately to support his aims—then howls to the media if they are wounded or killed by our fires. He distorts an entire religion to match his own extremist ideologies. This enemy follows no rules of engagement, wears no uniform, and is answerable to no form of higher authority. He murders his prisoners.

Confronted with this despicable conduct on the battlefield, we are appalled by these acts. The worst thing we could do, however, would be to respond to his savagery with our own acts of brutality, because in a counterinsurgency, our enemy is fighting to win the support of the people—he wants to portray us as the bad guys. When we act with the discipline of a professional warrior, we advance our cause and defeat the enemy. Discipline is the hallmark of the professional warrior.

#### **Ethical Mindset and Action**

Our success today in Al Anbar province comes as a result of many battalions and squadrons demonstrating, to a watchful population, our discipline and ethical conduct in a most difficult combat environment.

For us to succeed in this Long War, an ethical mindset is an absolute requirement. Success in a counterinsurgency comes from an ethical mindset in action—knowing right from wrong and having a firm moral compass that guides your actions as a Marine.

This mindset cannot—will not—be developed at the moment of action in combat; it must be ingrained beforehand by mature leaders, realistic training, and the steady resolve of a principled warrior. Marines must possess an “ethical muscle memory” to make instinctive decisions when rounds are impacting nearby, it’s 120 degrees, and your buddy is bleeding. An ethical mindset frames the problem—then it takes the moral and physical courage of a Marine to do the right thing!

#### **Conclusion**

The Marine Corps holds a special place in the heart of American society—and deservedly so. Our reputation is born of epic battles like Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, and Hue City. Each of these battles occurred in vastly different terrain against skilled and resourceful enemies. Yet, one thing was constant: our young leaders—Corporals and Sergeants—took the fight to the enemy. In these battles, and others, Marines fought with professionalism and discipline.

I am certain our reliance on our Noncommissioned Officers will lead to success—they are our strategic center. I challenge NCOs throughout the Corps to carry forward this noble tradition—established by Marines of years past and still alive in the men and women who proudly fight today. Your Corps depends on it!

