

# MAKE IT RIGHT

By Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr.

SOME years ago at a change of command ceremony, the newly posted commander of a Marine regiment made a brief but eloquent statement. His theme was tradition. He acknowledged *this* regiment to be the finest in the Corps, and he attributed its glory to a keen sense of tradition. He was proud to become a part of this great heritage, and he asked all hands to work hard at maintaining the good regimental traditions.

Several days later the colonel was carefully inspecting his new responsibility. Company by company he moved through the starched and polished battalions. He spoke to each platoon commander and squad leader, asking questions the colonel of a regiment must ask to know his command.

"How do your men wear the chin straps on their helmets when debarking from a ship by cargo net?" he asked one squad leader.

"Unbuckled, sir," was the immediate reply.

"Why unbuckled?" asked the colonel.

"That's the way we've always done it, sir," explained the sergeant.

The colonel was a little more than irritated.

"Sergeant, remember this and remember it well. Never tell me you act or don't act in this regiment because of habit. You'd better have a purpose for everything you do, and it had better be a damned good purpose."

The colonel asked the next two squad leaders the same questions, but he didn't ask why. Finally at that moment of truth behind the rear rank, he turned to the platoon commander who had preceded him. "Lieutenant," he said, "can you tell me why your men unbuckle their helmet straps before going down a net?"

The young officer's pause was slight but definite. "Well?" demanded the colonel. "Tradition, sir," answered the lieutenant.

I certainly find no fault with the young officer's presence of mind, but I can't say I approve of his

**The top Marine offers guidance for building a strong, new Corps in the traditional image.**



definition of tradition.

Tradition is not an unthinking habit. Tradition is functional. It is a real and viable by-product of serving a purpose faithfully and successfully. It is the essence of past success carried forward to prime further success. If our training is traditionally tough, it is because the application of our purpose is tough—in combat and in being constantly ready to meet the stress of combat. If our discipline is traditionally exacting, it is because discipline is the key to winning and surviving in battle. If we traditionally demand pride in personal appearance and in unit integrity, it is because pride gives strength, and we must be strong to serve our purpose.

This is the real tradition of our Corps, and we are going to keep it. We are going to do everything to keep it, nurture it, and pass it on. Our future purpose depends on the maintenance of our tradition.

#### **The Time, the People, the Problems**

We are in a new time. America is changing because Americans are changing, or to be more specific, the American population is turning over. A brand new generation has emerged in our land, and in the ranks of our Corps. And if at first it appears that new and unreasonable demands are being made, examine them carefully. So far, in our Corps, these new Marines have asked for pride, recognition, dignity, leadership, responsibility, challenge, honesty, and justice.

What did the last generation of Marines seek? Where better can these demands be met than in our Corps?

This is our tradition, too, and it is the greatest promise we offer to those who would become Marines.

The pride of the Marine uniform has not been lost. The Marine Corps emblem remains a symbol of tough, demanding service. The dignity of Marine officers and noncommissioned officers is still based on the solid structure of leadership and

responsibility. And the honesty of a brotherhood steeped in honor promises justice to all who seek membership, and who are accepted. But all of these soldierly virtues are only illusions unless practiced perfectly. Their perpetuation is strictly in the hands of every senior officer and staff NCO who occupy positions of authority within our Corps.

How much pride can a man feel in himself if he is not recognized as an individual Marine? Where is the dignity of the company grade officer, staff NCO, or NCO without the trust of authority and responsibility—and a strong steady signal of personal interest? And can real justice be achieved through written memoranda?

We can't permit our Corps to become a mass of faceless numbers. We must maintain our character as a tightly-knit organization of individual Marines, working as a team under professional leadership. And we must not fall into the modern trap of replacing personal leadership with hooded bureaucracy.

#### **Marine to Marine**

There is one thing of which I am certain. All Marines—young and old, regular and reserve, active and retired—want the same Marine Corps. They all take pride in our real tradition and they do want to maintain it. The new Marine of this generation wants to be a real part of our tradition, not just an observer. And the old hand wants to pass it on as a legacy. But there seems to be some problem in communicating this joint hope, up and down.

Certainly we have all the right ingredients to build a strong new Corps in the traditional image of the old Corps. On one hand we have an old breed rich in the experience of the battles of the Pacific and Korea; and on the other hand we have the fresh strength of a better educated, better prepared new breed. And both generations, old and new, have shared the battlefields of Vietnam. There, the new generation of Marines has been

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tested and is continuing to meet the test. The results are obvious and rich. They are good, these new Marines. They are damned good.

They are cool and professional. There is nothing artificial about their conduct under fire, nor their achievements. And it is remarkable how this new breed and the old breed meld together in combat. Mutual respect is so real it can be felt. Communication moves up and down the chain of command smoothly, and professionally. It is in the more mundane environment of garrison that the blockage occurs.

There appears to be an explanation for this situation, although it smacks of the hapless lieutenant's reliance on tradition to justify wet-net safety. In combat all information carefully follows the chain of command right down to the leaders of the smallest units, and back up. In garrison there is a tendency to assume a more routine communications method, moving information by paper through the administrative chain, which stops before it reaches junior officers and NCO's. This produces good record keeping but it chokes facts, and cuts off leadership at the small unit level. The pattern such a system produces removes key troop leaders from the chain of command creating an unbalanced split—senior officers and junior Marines. Or worse, it divides a command into administrators and a mass of people.

This, very simply, is bureaucracy.

There is another significant loss to our Corps in such a system. We lose the feedback of the ideas of junior officers and NCO's.

Although most commands hold meetings and discussions with company grade officers and staff NCO's, the participants have been placed in the position of seeing a problem from only one side. As long as these key leaders are left out of the chain of command, they must look from the bottom up. Because of the breakdown in communications they know little of the problems they are addressing, and their recommendations sometimes appear to be ignored. We must improve the ways in which we communicate, by improving our responsiveness to questions and proposals generated by these key leaders.

### Professionalism in the New Corps

The Marine Corps of the 1970's is going to be leaner, tougher, more ready, more disciplined, and more professional than ever before. Every Marine must count as a producer on the team. We must reestablish the old tradition of in-depth professional insurance. Every officer and NCO must be prepared to command a unit at least one step above his current rank. And he must be able to do it in garrison and at sea as well as in combat.

We must begin now by closing the communications and professional gaps that exist. I want to establish a fully working, fully responsive chain of command from top to bottom and back up again. I encourage all senior officers to study carefully the structures of their organizations and activities. Make every effort to bring junior officers, staff NCO's, and NCO's into responsible positions. Help them, teach them, counsel them. Communicate with them, Marine to Marine.

There are many ways to implement solid Marine-to-Marine communications and foster a more professional spirit. Each organization and activity must adapt to its needs. But here are a few ideas that will work in any unit.

- Employ junior officers, staff NCO's, and NCO's in key positions in day to day operations, training exercises, and planning.
- Hold periodic meetings that encourage questions and ideas.
- Invite personal social calls, and return the calls.
- Conduct mess nights and other social events, to include commanders and senior officers attending Happy Hour.
- Hold drills and ceremonies in which key billets are filled by junior officers, staff NCO's, and NCO's.
- Educate our junior officers in the proper roles of staff NCO's and NCO's, from sergeant major down to corporal.
- Include staff NCO's, and even NCO's, in staff meetings and discussions when appropriate.
- Maintain a steady process of education of young Marines in the purpose of our Corps, and in the fundamental Marine traditions of toughness, discipline, pride, and loyalty.
- Educate young Marine wives in the purpose of our Corps, and in the missions and duties of their husbands' units.

All Marines really want the same Corps. A Corps that gives its members an environment of human worth. A Corps that recognizes the reality of its purpose—service in the toughest human test, combat, and trains and prepares its members to meet that test. In other words all Marines want a Corps that stands out as the model of military professionalism at its very best. We all want a Corps that matches all of our expectations and hopes.

Let's go to work on building the new Corps now. Let's make it even better than the old Corps. Certainly we have all the essentials. We are small; our purpose is clear; we have the best functioning traditions of any military organization in the world; and we have a superb battle-proven new breed ready to take over. All we have to do is make it so.

Let's make it so, and let's make it right, in '71.

USMC