

*A trio of Marines who know each other well will be sure of each other's reliability and consequently, of mutual aid. Add a leader who is close enough to coordinate their fighting and you have a unit as old as war itself—the fire team.*

# Fire Team—Comrades in Battle

by Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr.,  
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In a lecture delivered at the Junior School, Marine Corps Schools on 18 January 1952, Professor William H. Russell of the Department of English, History, and Government at the U.S. Naval Academy traced the origins of the fire team back 3,000 years to the 4-man fighting team of Greek Marines employed by Ulysses in cleaning up the Aegean Sea. During the Civil War in our own country, Gen Hardy of the Union Army introduced a four-man unit into the organization of the Union Army, by combining into groups four men who were adjacent to each other in rank and file. He noted that "comrades in battle forming groups of four men will be careful to know and to sustain each other." This basic organization was also adopted and employed by the Confederate Army. In the Marine Corps the problem of giving ground troops the maximum degree of fire availability has long been the subject of intensive study and experimentation. Although the term "fire team" is relatively new in the organization of a military group, the basic idea has had an evolutionary

growth under various conditions of warfare.

The beginnings of the "fire group" can be seen in the formal use (by the Corps) of small tactical units and patrols during the period from the Spanish American War to the formation of the Fleet Marine Force in 1933-1934. For example, in the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua, the Marines were faced with terrain and combat situations not covered by conventional tactical formulas. Bush warfare in these countries, where unusually rugged terrain of sand, rock, hills, or jungle features often caused troops to be trail-bound, forced these Marines to undergo a change in their concept for the use of firepower. The jungle made it impractical for traditional deployment, minimized the use of the time-honored scout formation, and made the old attack formation completely useless.

It was under these conditions that the idea of the four-man fighting team, the forerunner of the fire team, had its earliest practical conception in the Marine Corps. Early in the Nicaraguan Campaign (1927-1933), it became evident that a small point sent ahead of a Marine patrol to act as an advanced group could easily be lost on forking trails. Frequently, the enemy separated the point from the patrol by a cleverly devised ambush and annihilated it. The traditional formation of placing an

<sup>†</sup> Gen Greene reports that much of this article is drawn from a previously unpublished point paper prepared in the Marine Corps Historical Branch in 1955. To this material, he has add. J. is personal recollections and insights from other papers in his possession. Readers interested in the subject should see the related article by W.H. Russell in last month's GAZETTE.

automatic rifleman in the forefront of the patrol, or at the spot in the patrol where the attack was expected so that his fire could immediately be directed by the patrol leader, resulted almost invariably in an inconclusive firefight. The first concentrated fire from an ambush usually made a casualty of the automatic rifleman if he was near the front or an exposed flank.

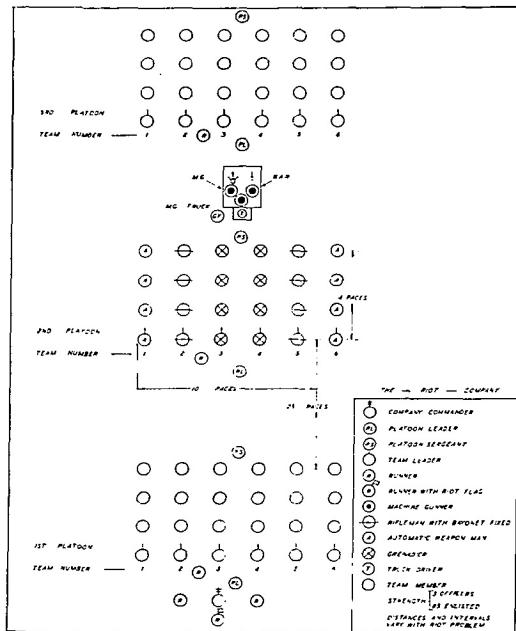
Consequently, the Marines, in their own units and in the units of the Guardia Nacional which they trained, often ignored the squad formation and divided patrols into more practical units of firepower. Lt Merritt A. Edson employed a formation that became somewhat of a standard in his subsequent patrol actions in Nicaragua. His unit patrolled in file formation and was divided into three sections or combat groups: (1) the point guard group consisting of three riflemen and one automatic rifle advancing in file, staggered on opposite sides of the trail; (2) the main body; and (3) the rear guard consisting of three riflemen.

Another variation used by Marines in Nicaragua seeking a better combat organization consisted of the six-man group. Three riflemen led the patrol followed by the automatic rifleman; behind him came the patrol leader with a rifle grenadier acting as rear guard. A large patrol would be simply a combination of such six-man units. This type of patrol approximated the idea of the modern fire teams, but it was, of course, a very informal use of it—and a use almost entirely limited to patrols. As a result of Marine combat experiences fighting bandits in Nicaragua, the extension course of the Marine Corps Schools put out instruction with lesson plans and student requirements for Marine Corps officers and enlisted men entitled "Small Wars Course." As a second lieutenant at this time stationed at the Marine Barracks in Portsmouth, N.H., "with day on, day off duty" as officer of the day and consequently with time to study my profession, I enrolled in this course and was fascinated to discover the part which the so-called "fighting team" of four men had played in small unit patrol actions. I viewed this development mistakenly as having been discovered by U.S. Marines on the ground in combat in Nicaragua. I deduced three things: (1) it helped ensure the continued operation and advance of an automatic weapon in combat, (2) it provided an established triangular maneuver organization of three teams for the squad, (3) it would serve to develop a large number of small unit leaders in any Marine Corps organization.

Using this concept, I immediately commenced experimenting with a platoon assigned to me at the Marine Barracks. The rewards were at once apparent even with a peacetime barracks platoon.

Transferred to sea duty and with my captain's O.K., I introduced the idea into the detachment's organization and training. The results made me enthusiastic as it did my men—the Marines aboard the USS *Tennessee*.

Moving on to Marine Barracks Guam, I was again assigned a platoon and able to enlarge my experience with actual patrol work, skirmishes, and ambushes on some nearby broken ground and jungle.



*Capt Greene's Shanghai company of 4-man fire teams.*

In answer to the rising emergency in China, I was hurriedly transferred to the 4th Marines in Shanghai in 1937 to become the assistant to then Maj Edson—the hero of the Coco River patrol in Nicaragua. I talked with Edson a great deal about his combat patrol experiences and my peacetime adaptations with the four-man fighting team. After a year at regimental headquarters, I succeeded in getting an assignment to the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines with LtCol Clifton B. Cates commanding. This battalion was located in what had been a closed-in Chinese family compound on Haiphong Road in the American defense sector. Here I became commander of Company E composed of 3 officers and 107 enlisted men. I immediately set about to organize my entire company on the basis of four-man fighting teams. Each team was built about an automatic or special weapon.

By trial and error, I shifted personnel within the company until each team was finally composed of four men who liked or respected each other. I billeted each team together in the same squad bay. I

assigned them guard duty, police work, athletics, as teams. I encouraged them to go on liberty together and to help each other at all times. The best man in each team and so recognized by his teammates was designated team leader. All members of the team in order of rank or recognition were taught to automatically take over as team leader in the event of casualties and to keep the automatic or special weapon in action at all times. If three men finally became casualties, the fourth with the weapon would join the nearest team.

I wish I could tell you just how the men responded to this scheme of organization and leadership. It was as if, being sports-minded American boys, they were joining an athletic team—in this case a four-man fighting team. The individual teams were designated by numbers or letters, and we often trained by calling out football-type signals to indicate a maneuver by the teams. These men and these teams through their own enthusiastic, shared, and dedicated effort eventually won the competition for the best company in the 4th Marine Regiment.

Later during the Marshall's operation in World War II, I came to realize from association with the 22d Marines in the attack against Eniwetok Atoll that patriotism and sacrifice were measured and understood by the individual Marine in terms of the fighting team in which he served. He could not let the other team members down, and consequently he did not let the Corps and his country down. Struck by a heavy Japanese mortar, cannon, and machinegun fire and also, through error, by some of our own supporting naval gunfire, as it landed on the western beaches of Parry Island, the 1st Battalion (LtCol Walfried H. Fromhold) was thrown into utter confusion in which control and communications were temporarily lost. In the melee, the fire teams knowing what they were supposed to do automatically took over and fought forward until the unit commanders could reestablish command.

Coming back to the Shanghai experience, although I had left his office, Maj Edson was greatly interested in this experiment. When Maj Evans F. Carlson came through en route home from his service with the 8th Route Chinese Army, where he had carefully scrutinized Chinese techniques in guerrilla warfare, he observed the operation of Company E and discussed the value of this 4-man small unit team or organization with both Edson and me. It is interesting to remember that both Maj Edson and Maj Carlson were to employ similar techniques in reorganizing the squads of the 1st and 2d Raider Battalions prior to the attack against Makin Island and the campaign in Guadalcanal.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, military thought on strategy and tactics became the main concern of the moment. With the subsequent employment of Marine Corps forces in the Pacific, new tactical developments came into being. As early as January 1942, Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb issued orders that selected personnel be assigned as observers to British commandos and to report back to the Marine Corps information that might be of use in developing similar organizations. Capt Samuel B. Griffith and I made up one of the observation teams. In our report dated 7 January 1942, we gave the details concerning the development, organization, equipment, administration, and training of commandos. A special interest to Sam Griffith and me was the organization of some of the commandos on the basis of two-man teams. Each pair operated as a single unit. This basic small unit organization performed very effectively in the field during infiltration or other passage of enemy lines and in bayonet fighting (2 men against 1!).

Another team, consisting of Capt Russell Duncan and 1st Lt William A. Wood, in their report dated 30 June 1942, presented facts and opinions concerning the history and organization of the commandos. The substance of these reports were in turn assimilated and implemented by the Marine Corps and put into practice in the newly organized 1st and 2d Raider Battalions. The effects of this action were given impetus by LtCol Carlson, who was assigned to command the newly formed 2d Raider Battalion. He advocated a fire team of three men, and this organization was used in the raider battalion's attack against Makin Island.

Carlson did not center his three-man fire team on an automatic rifleman. In the developmental phases of the Raiders, various types of armament were tried. Capt Kimball of the British Army, who spent about a week with the newly organized 2d Raider Battalion, recommended that the battalion be armed with more Thompson submachineguns than other weapons since the range of employment in jungle usually varied between 6 and 60 yards. He also stressed mobility. LtCol Edson, who was assigned to command the newly created 1st Raider Battalion, recommended improvements in the organization of the squad but dealt with the standard rifle squad then in use. After a few experiments, Col Carlson decided to use the automatic rifle as the base of fire.

The theory behind the 3-man group in guerrilla warfare was essentially quite different from that behind the first development of the fire group in Nicaragua, or the theory and practice finally de-

veloped on Guadalcanal and in succeeding operations. Thomas E. Lawrence, of Arabia fame, had laid down the principle upon which guerrilla fighting tactics were based. He tried to formalize the principles of guerrilla warfare in much the same way that principles had been standardized for regular combat. The most important feature in such fighting according to Lawrence was that the guerrillas, usually inferior in number, had to operate with few casualties in order to keep up both their strength and morale. Under this disadvantage, they had to avoid massive troops or allowing themselves to be drawn into large scale battles. The basic tactic of the guerrilla group was to strike and run, to destroy lines of communication rather than to conquer territory or kill the enemy. The second main feature of Lawrence's thesis was that whenever two men were together in guerrilla warfare there was one too many! This principle of course was a subsidiary to the first. Here he overemphasized his point. I believe what he undoubtedly had in mind was that to make guerrilla warfare successful, the soldier had to depend on his own resourcefulness; extreme decentralization of mobility and firepower were essential. This idea was reflected in the two-man team of the British commandos.

Col Carlson's fire team of three-men, then, was an extension of these principles, but with a different objective in mind, namely, achieving the maximum effect from small groups of men rather than from individual effort. Carlson visualized the battles of the war as many small firefights in which the general plan could be laid down by the squad leader, who could not control the individual points of battle or the movement of the units after they had opened fire. The three-man fire group was a simple division of a nine-man squad which allowed greater flexibility in the formation of the squad. In short, a triangular organization for fire and movement. Similarly, in the 13-man squad, the same features were provided by three 4-man fire teams. Carlson's three-man team was armed with the M1, Browning automatic rifle, and the Thompson submachinegun. This tactical organization was used by Col Carlson's 2d Raider Battalion on Guadalcanal in 1942.

Since the raider battalions were the newest type of military organizations put into the field by the Corps, it was natural that they were among the first to experiment with and adopt various forms of fire groups. In the heavy action fought by Col Edson's 1st Marine Raider Battalion in the Battle of Edson's Ridge, Guadalcanal, 12-14 September 1942, the three-man fire group was probably used for the first time in a major combat action. In December 1942 in summing up the results of his ac-

tions during his Aola-Point Cruz patrol, Carlson stated:

The internal organization of the battalion left little to be desired. The squad organization, with its three fire groups with three men each, worked beautifully. Worthy of particular note is a fire group, a team of three armed with the M1, BAR, and Thompson submachinegun, respectively, also developed in this battalion. The team of three was easily controlled when advancing by infiltration, and the group was useful in providing security for bivouacs.

In the summer of 1943, LtCol Homer L. Litzenberg, commanding the 3d Battalion, 24th Marines, and his staff began intensive experiments for the specific purpose of determining what structural and organic changes were needed to enable the squad to perform with maximum effectiveness. Prior to this time, most of the experiments in squad improvements were conducted within the framework of the existing tables of organization (T/Os). LtCol Litzenberg began his experiment at this point but went one step further. With Company L as his experimental unit, he formed the basic squad as follows: a sergeant squad leader; a scout group consisting of a leader and two scouts; two fire groups each with a leader and two men, one of whom was armed with an automatic rifle; and a support group made up of a corporal and a rifle grenadier.

These squads of Company L were then put through a series of squad exercises, each covering a basic tactical maneuver. The tendency of the exercise to become mechanistic was overcome by using different terrain features, similar to those that might be met in future battles. During the entire period of experimentation, the new formation showed up better in all respects than the old, in



3/24 experimented with fire teams at Camp Pendleton in 1943.

almost all situations. Within the old squad, individual action produced general confusion with the resultant loss of control by the squad leader. In the experimental squad, three-man groups worked as a well-coordinated team under the leadership of the best man in each group. Adaptations to immediate tactical situations were made quickly and surely with the least amount of confusion.

Application of fire in the new setup was a vast improvement over the old. The first duty of the group leader was to direct the fire of his men, which resulted in more hits with fewer shots. Other advantages were also apparent: the training of subordinate leaders, the development of teamwork within the squad, and more direct training in fire and movement. Throughout this experimental period, LtCol Litzenberg kept constant personal watch of the progress. Finally, after a series of demonstrations by one of the squads of Company L, he adopted the group system for the battalion. On 2 August 1943 he forwarded the results of his experiment to the commanding officer, 24th Marines, with the recommendation:

That the rifle companies of the 24th Marines be organized on the group basis for exhaustive tests of this method with a view to its possible adoption by the Marine Corps. Until such time as an additional member of the squad is authorized, the support group of each squad can function with two men instead of three. It is suggested that the 13th man should be armed with rifle grenades.

*LtCol H.L. Litzenberg, left, forwarded his recommendation for four three-man firing groups, augmented by a grenadier, to Col F.A. Hart, CO, 24th Marines.*



Meanwhile in the Vangunu Operation in the New Georgia group, 28 June to 12 July 1943, LtCol Michael S. Currin, commanding officer of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, had used his own three-man group system to good effect. He had worked out a series of formations for squad, platoon, and company actions, which kept in all cases the triangular formation of two units forward and one in reserve. In his September 1943 summary, he reported that the "organization of three-man fire groups, three groups per squad, and three squads per platoon, has proven completely satisfactory. The Thompson submachinegun is no weapon for a man on the frontlines."

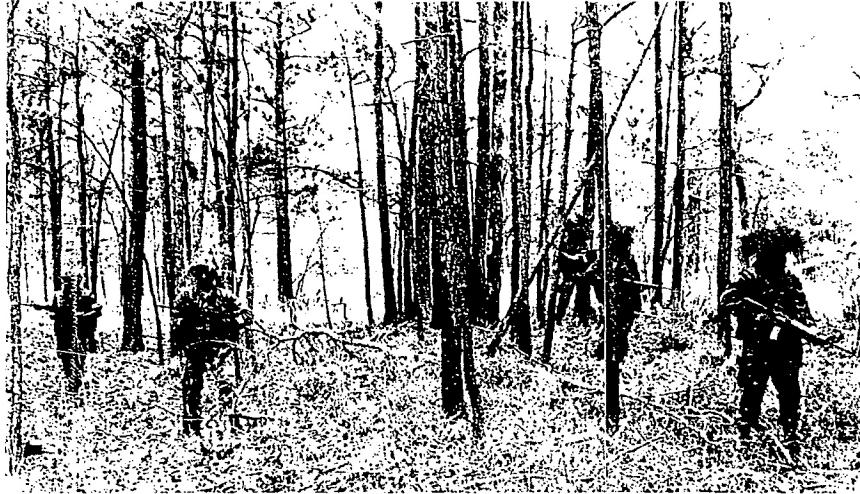
In October 1943 during the Choiseul diversion, the 1st Parachute Regiment, under the command of Col Victor H. Krulak, also used a three-man fire group with very good results. In his operation report of 4 January 1944, Col Krulak stated that the three-man fire group system provided:

... three cohesive jungle fighting teams, each built around a powerful automatic weapon. Arming one member of the group with a carbine is a practical means for providing a maximum of ammunition for the automatic rifle without materially reducing the firepower of the group. Inclusion of one antitank grenadier in each squad brings a powerful high explosive weapon directly to the frontline, providing an effective counter for the knee mortar and a powerful adjunct in the reduction of fixed defenses.

The special action report of the 3d Marine Division for the Bougainville operation (1 November-28 December 1943), submitted to the Commandant of the Marine Corps on 21 March 1944, contains as Enclosure F the special action report of the 3d Marine Regiment which reads:

The basis of all small patrols was generally the 'Four-Man Fire Team' (three riflemen and one automatic rifleman) in either the wedge or the box formation. For example, a reconnaissance patrol might form a wedge or box of wedges of four men each, with the leader of each team in the center. In combat, when contact was made by one of these teams with the enemy, the idea was that the automatic rifleman could cover the target. One rifleman would cover the automatic rifleman and the other two move in immediately to flank the target; the speed of reaction of the team generally measured the degree of success of the attack. Another important feature of the attack which was carefully observed was that the pair of flankers moved *inboard* of their formations so that their line of fire would be away from other fire teams in the formation.

As each report on experiments of squad reorganizations came in from the field, they were channeled to Headquarters Marine Corps. Upon



*New infantry battalion structure for the 1980s tested at Camp Lejeune proposed 5-man fire teams.*

receipt of a letter, dated 23 September 1943, from the commanding general, 4th Marine Division, concerning the reorganization suggestions of the 24th Marines, the Commandant of the Marine Corps on 14 October 1943 directed the Commandant of the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, to take up the matter. In December 1943, a board of officers consisting of LtCol Samuel B. Griffith II, Maj Lyman C. Spurlock, and Maj Thomas J. Myers was appointed to study the various reports on squad reorganization and submit its findings at the earliest possible date. Each of these board members had led troops in jungle operations, and each had experimented with various types of squad organization. They set as their main goal to find, through analysis and discussion, the type of unit that best combined maximum firepower and efficient, integrated control.

From the first, the basic question was whether there should be three or four men in the fire team. Both systems could be used in the 9- or 12-man squad. After many discussions, compromises, and criticisms, the four-man team was finally decided upon as a superior fire unit because it provided a little more flexibility. In the three-man team if one man became a casualty, the offensive action of the team was seriously endangered and the automatic rifleman was inadequately supplied with ammunition. Also, the three-man team provided no equal division of forces. Either the automatic rifleman had to stay behind and allow the other two men to make the flanking movement, or he had to hold one man with him as assistant ammunition bearer and replacement in case he himself became a casualty.

The question of armament also received a great deal of attention. It was early agreed that the BAR was necessary as a base of fire. It was also decided to arm the assistant automatic rifleman with an M1 rifle. Thus, all members of the team would use the same ammunition with the result that there would be a common pool, and confusion would be cut to the minimum. However, when the board

recommendation reached the Division of Plans and Policies, discussion centered around this point—what was the best arm for the assistant automatic rifleman? Two reasons were given against the use of the M1: (1) with all men armed with the M1s, the automatic rifleman might be left without an ammunition bearer in a fierce fight, and (2) the carbine was much lighter than the M1, and the ammunition bearer could carry just that much more ammunition for the BAR. Thus, Division of Plans and Policies recommended that the assistant automatic rifleman be armed with a carbine.

On 7 January 1944, the Board reported its findings to the Commandant, Marine Corps Schools. On 11 January, the Director, Division of Plans and Policies, issued a memorandum to the Commandant, in which he stated that from the many sources in the Corps, constructive criticisms had been gathered which would lead to a better and more efficient use of men and materiel. In paragraph two of this memorandum, he outlined the proposed change in the rifle squad. Six days later, the change was incorporated into tentative T/Os. These tentative T/Os in turn were sent out to Fleet Marine Force units in the field for comment. After return of the proposed changes with notes, comments, concurrences, and nonconcurrences, the subject was again discussed at Headquarters level. Finally, by the middle of March 1944, with the fine points ironed out from all angles, the new T/Os were promulgated.

The T/O for the rifle company was approved 27 March 1944. It was followed by Marine Corps Training Bulletins, Numbers 101 and 102 which described in more detail the breakdown of the fire team formation. The significant feature of the new rifle company T/O was the fact that it broke down the squad into subgroups, thus displacing it as the smallest integral unit of combat. The primary innovation was a shift from the 12- to the 13-man squad and the division of the squad into 3 fire teams of 4 men each. One sergeant, the squad leader, was armed with a carbine. A corporal,

armed with an M1 rifle, bayonet, and grenade launcher, was put in charge of each fire team and designated the fire team leader. The members of the fire team consisted of one rifleman armed with the M1, bayonet, and launcher; one automatic rifleman armed with the BAR; and one assistant automatic rifleman armed with a carbine. The new change left intact the triangular formation of three squads to a platoon and three platoons to a company.

In a large measure also the new T/O caused other radical changes that affected the entire infantry battalion. The BAR squad of the platoon was abolished along with the special weapons platoon of the company and the weapons company of the battalion. The new T/O forged more effective combat teams, each complete in itself and gave the squad and the platoon more maneuverability and a considerable increase in firepower. Each company was given as part of its organic structure six heavy and six light machineguns and three mortars. In the company weapons pool, each squad had available one flame thrower, one bazooka, and one demolition kit. An antitank rocket launcher, M1, was also included in the company weapons pool.

Although the new "F" T/O was officially established 27 March 1944, the wheels of actual organizational change began to turn with the transmittal of the Commandant's letter of 17 January 1944 to all units in the field enclosing proposed tables of organization, with a statement that the enclosed "change in organization of the Marine Division has been approved and will be accomplished when directed by this Headquarters."

After the Roi-Namur phase of the Marshall Islands Operation, in February 1944, the 4th Marine Division arrived at Maui, T.H., where it settled down for a well-deserved rest preparatory

for further operations. On 26 February the commanding general, 4th Marine Division, put into action the first stages of the reorganizational machinery, acting upon the tentative changes as suggested by the Commandant's order of 17 January 1944. On 1 March, he issued orders to his regimental commanders to "proceed with the reorganization of their regiments immediately." A month later, 5 April 1944, the commanding general, V Amphibious Corps in his report to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, stated that the 4th Marine Division had finished its reorganization.

At about this time, the 2d Marine Division had also begun the task of reorganization. After its conquest of Tarawa, Gilbert Islands, the division settled down on the island of Hawaii, T.H., for a period of rest and rehabilitation. From February to May 1944, the changes in organizational setup took place. During this period I was the G-3 of the 2d Marine Division and naturally had a great deal of interest in the new organization based as it was on the fire team. Doctrinally, then, as the invasion date of Saipan approached, the 2d and 4th Divisions were ready to put the results of their reorganizational changes to the acid test of battle.

In summarizing their actions on Saipan, divisional reports stated that the use of the fire team had definitely met and surpassed all expectations. Thus, from its official date of establishment to the present time, the four-man fire team with the exception of a few changes in armament, proved beyond a doubt its place as an important unit in the Marine rifle squad. In all the battles since its establishment, this Marine Corps team formation had functioned smoothly and efficiently.

This then, is the story of the four-man fire team and how it came about. Its validity has been battle-tested.

USMC

### Quote to Ponder:

### **Followership**

**" 'Followership' is a strict adherence to a personal code of conduct which upholds the standards and values of the organization. . . . Honesty and integrity are but two words that should guide you both as individuals and as members of an organization."**

**—Gen Paul X. Kelley**