

# First to Fight

reviewed by Capt G.W. Myers

As the Marine Corps celebrates 243 years, Marines across the globe will join together to share in tradition and remember our history. Regardless of where this celebration takes place, no matter the unit or the MOS, one will surely hear two things during the course of the ceremony. First, all will gasp at the age of the youngest Marine present. Comments like, “I have cammies older than that Marine,” are sure to be spread around. Second, conversations will begin with, “Back in my day ...,” and Marines will describe how we have changed for the better or the worse. These two topics of conversation are as much a timeless tradition as the Marine Corps Ball itself, and they allude to the concept of building resiliency in this new Corps of 21st century Marines. When asked the question of how we build resiliency in this new generation, one need not reinvent the wheel. We have already been given the answers.

LtGen Victor “Brute” Krulak concludes his 1984 book, *First To Fight*, with a warning to the next generation of Marines about the immediate threats facing the Corps.

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His ability to predict these future challenges with Orwellian accuracy is alarming, but it adds weight to the solutions he provides. While all Marines today would most likely agree with LtGen Krulak’s conclusions, the benefit of 34 retrospective years allows

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for a deeper look into those factors in order to find other creative solutions to the question of building resiliency.

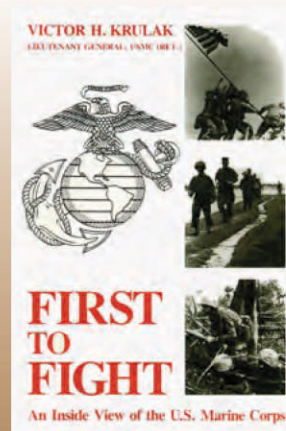
The first and most important external factor that General Krulak attempts to convey to future Marines is the constant influence of threats pressing in on the Marine Corps. Threats have accompanied the Marine Corps since its inception and come in many forms. The Marines faced the threat of fratricide from the other Services in the wake of post-World War II military reconstruction. The Army, chief among those who wanted the Marine Corps to be dissolved, was aided by a political landscape that was not friendly toward the Corps. A skillful and pugnacious core of Marines, consisting of then-LtCol Krulak and his peers, were forced into the uncharted territory of politics to fight off those who would see the Corps rendered ineffective.

From this, we learn that external threats are an important forcing function for success. The Marine Corps was built to deal with threats. It uses them to make better thinkers, innovators, and leaders. This has helped build a martial culture that is

aggressively oriented on the enemy. Threats are the gravity that all the Armed Services operate in, and the Service that can contend with the most gravity is the strongest. Those who do not have the needed pressure of threats are like astronauts whose bodies atrophy in space because of a lack of force pushing them down. Had the Marine Corps not been subject to the threats it faced in war and peace during the 20th century, it would not have fostered the developments seen in the areas of tactics, techniques, and procedures, technology, and equipment.

All great civilizations, America included, have faced threats, but, more often than not, those great societies that fell succumbed not to external threats but to threats from within. Gen Krulak listed America’s top threats as “an erosion of the work and [S]ervice ethics, a general failure to provide incentives for excellence ... and ... a degraded sense of national commitment—a reluctance to fight.”

Although those words were written more than 30 years ago, they could not be truer today. The Marine Corps must draw its warriors



**FIRST TO FIGHT: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps.** By LtGen Victor H. Krulak, USMC(Ret). Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999 (Reprint). ISBN: 978-1557504647 272 pp.



from a population that is moving closer and closer to the proverbial cliff, thus making it increasingly difficult to maintain the standards of “dedication, professionalism, and patriotic commitment” required in a fighting organization. Gen Krulak contends that the strength of tradition and reputation will continue to attract those who want to be the best. This is true so long as the Corps does not compromise its values and continues to deliver on the promises it makes.

To the entry-level Marine, this means structure and hard, realistic training. No civilian joins the Marine Corps because he is seeking an easy career. Training must be tough and challenging. To the American people, this means that the Corps continues to be as ruthless on itself as it is on those who would do this country harm.

The second external factor that Gen Krulak mentions is the ebb and flow of austerity. As uncomfortable as fiscal austerity can be, it often acts as a forge, purging those who cannot stand the heat and hardening those who remain. During his service, Gen

made amphibious operations training minimal or nonexistent, limited supplies, and forced Marines to incur certain institutional costs themselves. But these hard times have proven to the country that the Marine Corps is, as Gen Krulak wrote, a “frugal and altogether reliable investment.” By being a Corps of penny pinchers, the Marines have managed to finagle themselves into additional conflicts such as the Seminole War and the Mexican War primarily because they could do the job more cheaply than the Army. While some might see future austerity as a threat to the Marine Corps, others see it as an opportunity to trim the fat and get back their roots. Those Marines who were raised in a Corps that wanted for nothing were cheated out of a valuable experience. Resilience is built during hard times.

The third factor described by Gen Krulak is perhaps the most dangerous. Unlike the first, which can be battled and overcome through force of will and institutional pride, or the second, which is a necessary evil, the third

many governmental layers that exist above it; the Corps’ niche in modern warfare has already been made, and that is where it must focus its efforts.

The future of warfare looks like an NCO who is well acquainted with technology and knows its deadly capabilities but is not solely reliant on it. He is resilient because he is not handcuffed by a risk-averse command structure. He knows that it is better to make mistakes taking a course of action than to do nothing. The Marine Corps’ tactics, technologies, personnel, etc., will constantly change and adapt; they are the less important “how.” Being an expeditionary fighting force that can project power on short notice across the globe is the Marine Corps’ “why.”

It is easy to get caught up in looking for a futuristic solution to the question of resiliency, but sometimes the solution to our problems is not as complex as we may think. Leaders must instill work ethic, provide incentives for excellence, foster national pride, embrace a fighting spirit, and, most of all, breed a bias for action. The Marine Corps should not suffer fools who wish to make this organization a social experiment. We are about fighting our Nation’s wars and killing the enemy; somewhere that was lost. Embrace austerity when it comes; use it to trim the fat because, in the end, it results in a net positive. The Marine Corps differs from all other Services in that it does not have time to focus on a bureaucratic fight. So long as the Corps keeps its focus on performance, it will not succumb to the whims of political change. We have the benefit of Gen Krulak’s clear warning, and we are on the precipice. We have the answer to our question. Now we need action.




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Krulak saw the faucet of government dollars go from a torrent to a trickle and back again, much the same way that it does today. It is easy to dedicate yourself to the Corps during times of government surplus, but the true character of our Marines is revealed when money is tight and resources are low. It requires a strength and resolve not common to all to make do in times of austerity. This is where conventional wisdom and the Marine Corps differ; austerity is not always a bad thing. The problems that come with a strict post-war budget are real and cut deep. Reduced budgets have

is a problem that will continue to grow no matter how hard it’s fought. Governmental growth and the bureaucracy that accompanies it are expanding at a complementary rate and show no signs of slowing down. Gen Krulak’s assessment that the Marine Corps has “neither the instinct nor the time” to handle the pressure of bureaucracy is as accurate then as it is now. The only way Marines can combat the driving force seeking to snuff out initiative and resourcefulness is to constantly strive for the readiness to go and win. The Marine Corps is not equipped to fight through the

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