

Grand Illusions

It's all about concerned leadership

by Maj Paul Stokes, USMC(Ret)

Late summer 2013, the conference and follow-on dinner at Nellis Air Force Base, NV, had gone well and even though it was late, the Old Salt decided to head to his home in Yucca Valley, CA. After all, the weather was clear and the drive on the wide-open highways of the Mojave Desert would give him time to think and reflect. It took him about 30 minutes to get through the hustle and bustle of Las Vegas traffic, and as he drove into the darkness on the interstate, followed by a quick left turn onto the back road to home via Kelso Station, followed by Amboy, Twentynine Palms, and Joshua Tree, the illusions started to unfold before his mind's eye.

Privates Can't Be Trusted

Edson Range, California, August 1975. Platoon 1072 was 3 days into firing week and 1st Squad just finished its final string of fire on the 300 yard line of the Mod "B" Course. SSgt Viccas, 1072's platoon commander, realized that he had to get his platoon down to the butts as rapidly as possible in order to complete the changeover with the final three firing relays, so he decided to move his unit by squads. As soon as 1st Squad stepped off the line, SSgt Viccas growled, "Private Salt, take your squad to the butts pronto and relieve the knuckleheads on targets one to ten." Pvt Salt couldn't believe it—the platoon commander trusted him enough to take charge of 20 men and accomplish a mission. So after a quick "Aye, aye, sir!" he faced his squad, stood as tall and proud as an 18-year-old can, and in a loud

and confident voice, for the first time in his career, issued his orders: "Follow me, First Squad! We're double timing to the butts, and keep it tight!" Instantaneously the squad moved as one. The

relief went without a hitch and soon 1st Squad was experiencing the heat and monotony of butt detail, but that didn't matter to Pvt Salt because the seed of leadership had been planted into his



Privates can't be trusted. (Photo by author.)

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heart and soul, and the moment that happened, his life took on the purpose and meaning that he had craved before he enlisted in the Corps.

NCOs Don't Care About Their Marines

Camp Schwab, Okinawa, Japan, March 1976. GySgt Jones, the company gunny, ordered LCpl Salt to report to him after morning formation. As soon as LCpl Salt knocked on the hatch of his office, the gunny told him that he would draw a jeep from the motor pool, drive it down to Kadena Air Base, and pick up a new lieutenant arriving at the terminal that afternoon. LCpl Salt listened intently to the gunny, but when he asked, "How do I get to Kadena, gunny?" the gunny exploded. "Salt, what the @#\$\$ is wrong with you? Can't you follow a simple order? Now get down there and shut the @#\$\$ up!" Then the gunny strutted out of the company command post like a martinet. The company clerk, Sgt Giles, a former 0331 M-60 gunner who was awarded a Silver Star at Quang Tri Province in 1970, watched this whole event unfold and he could see the confused, hurt, and bewildered look on LCpl Salt's face. It wasn't Salt's fault that the gunny was being a jerk, and the fact remained that he still needed directions to Kadena, so he did what all good NCOs do. He smiled and said, "Hey Salt, come over here. Let me show you how to get down to Kadena." LCpl Salt looked up, and when he saw a roadmap in one upheld hand and a steaming cup of joe in the other, plus Sgt Giles' Cheshire Cat grin, he knew that he was an NCO he would follow anywhere.

These Marines Can't Be Trained, They Have No Discipline

Battery G, — Battalion, —th Marines, Twentynine Palms, November 1984. "Staff Sergeant Salt, the communications section has no clue as to what they're doing. The current comm chief has been on the Retired On Active Duty program for over a year and it's up to you to fix this—or else." With those stern words from his new platoon commander, SSgt Salt knew that the next few months would be challenging,



Marines can be trained. (Photo by author.)

but after 9 years of multiple overseas and stateside tours, the solution was simple—maintaining high standards of conduct and hard training. So after getting the go-ahead from his battery commander, he began a comprehensive series of rehearsal of standing operating procedure drills both in and out of garrison, reinforcing a cornucopia of

"Staff Sergeant Salt, the communications section has no clue as to what they're doing."

essential military skills, and, in time, the section came together. But more importantly, SSgt Salt's Marines came to realize that even though he was a strict disciplinarian who expected total commitment to the mission, he truly cared about them (especially when he kept them out of trouble—both on and off base). Through hard, unyielding training, dedicated small unit leadership, and teamwork, they became, in the words of the battalion commander upon completion of a 9-day battalion firing exercise, "the best communicators" in the seven firing batteries of — Battalion, —th Marines.

When You're Old, the Corps Won't Need You Anymore

Tinton Falls, NJ, June 1999. Capt Salt was just about done. He had completed 24 years of active service and was planning to retire. While attending a joint communications conference he met two of his former Marines, the Smilin' Top and CWO2 Lenny Loggie, in the reception area of the conference hall. As soon as they had exchanged greetings, the Smilin' Top said, "Sir, we need you at —th Comm! You have the passion, drive, experience, and knowledge to be the battalion S-3 [operations officer], and without you, the battalion in particular, and the MEF communications community as a whole, just can't be as good as they could be." Capt Salt looked at CWO2 Loggie and he was nodding in agreement. And after a long pause he said that he would think about it. (After all, he would go to hell and back with these Marines so there may be something to their idea—as implausible as it seemed.) The Smilin' Top and Lenny traded knowing grins and the three comrades-in-arms walked side by side into the main auditorium.

RAAF Darwin, Australia, December 1999. The U.S. forces of International Forces East Timor were into their third month of supporting Operation STABILISE, the Australian-led United Nations peacekeeping operation in East Timor.

Capt Salt was fully engaged as the J-6 (future operations officer/Defense Information Systems Agency, Pacific, liaison officer) when he received a phone call from LtCol Always Motivated, the battalion commander, —th Comm, on Okinawa. “Capt Salt, we need you at —th Comm as the battalion S-3. You come highly recommended by your J-6, LtCol Righteous Rabbi, your CO at Defense Information Systems Agency, Pacific, COL Full Support, and a whole slew of leaders across Pacific Command, and the bottom line is you’re simply the best man for the job.” At first, Capt Salt didn’t know what to say, but the realization instantly hit him that this was the job that he had been preparing for over the past 24 years and here was a second chance to lead Marines, and like “Red Mike” Edson before him—when he was offered the opportunity to form the 1st Marine Raider Battalion in 1941—he decided to seize it.¹ In a split second, the words were out of his mouth: “Yes, sir, I would be both proud and honored to become the S-3 of —th Comm.” “Good deal,” LtCol Motivated replied, “I’ll call the monitor and make it happen. You just make sure that you come home in one

piece because we need you, Captain Salt—more than you know.”

Marines Can’t Do More Than One Thing at a Time

Rockhampton, Australia, April 2001. —th Comm was in the middle of its largest deployment since Vietnam. Over 500 of its Marines, assigned to 6 detachments, were spread across Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, and

“I’ll call the monitor and make it happen.”

Australia in support of the Pacific Command’s TEAM CHALLENGE 01 series of exercises. As Maj Salt, the battalion S-3, looked at the campaign map in the “Rocky SysCon [Systems Control Center],” he was proud to see that the training program that he and LtCol Route Step implemented had paid off. Back in July 2000, —th Comm had hit a new low in morale due to an unfortunate liberty incident that occurred on the weekend right after LtCol Step assumed command. Needless to say, the

MEF Commanding General directed him to straighten out his Marines or he would do it for him. But all wasn’t lost. Providence had given him the vehicle to rebuild the battalion in the form of TEAM CHALLENGE 01, and that was 8 months down the road. In response, LtCol Step and Maj Salt resurrected the —th Battalion SOP/field order process and designed a comprehensive series of operational planning teams, classes, drills, forced marches, and field exercises, to include the reissuing of individual table of organization weapons—with a 30-day deployment to Korea thrown in for good measure—that ensured their Marines were ready. But as in most cases when a command goes “back to the basics” execution of this initiative wasn’t a bed of roses. “After all,” the naysayers griped, “this was —th Comm. We only execute two deployments a year. Does the battalion CO and S-3 really expect us to deploy simultaneously across the Western Pacific and take with us all of the battalion’s gear?” The answer was simple: Yes, they did. And through honest, aggressive, clearheaded, and pragmatic leadership and the establishment and enforcement of high standards, the battalion built itself back up to a level of professionalism that was unmatched in the MEF—as proven 3 years later when the battalion deployed to Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia as the core combined/joint communications unit in support of Operation UNIFIED ASSISTANCE, the Indian Ocean tsunami relief operation, from December 2004 to April 2005.

You Won’t Be Missed When You Hang Up the Uniform

Long Branch, NJ, October 2006. It had been a little over 4 months since Mr. Salt hung up his uniform for the final time, and while life as a contractor was comfortable, he still longed for the opportunity to lead Marines. Late one night he received a call from an old friend, LtCol Larry Lifeline, his old battalion XO at —th Comm, asking him if he would be interested in moving out to the Mojave Desert, becoming a civil servant, and serving as the deputy director of operations for the largest school in the Marine Corps—the Marine Corps



Promotions are special events. (Photo by author.)

Communication-Electronics School (MCCES). Mr. Salt couldn't believe his ears. Most people don't get a second chance to lead Marines, let alone a third, and he knew that this was his destiny. "You bet, Larry. What do I need to do in order to make this happen?" LtCol Lifeline went on to explain the application process. After a series of interviews, Mr. Salt was informed that he had been selected. Within a month, the Salt clan was on its way to Twentynine Palms, and by the end of January 2007, Mr. Salt was back in the saddle again, leading Marines, only this time as the mentor, teacher, and coach to the future leaders of the Corps—a calling that any retired Marine would give his right arm for.

One Marine Can't Make a Difference

Davis Center, Marine Corps Base Quantico, June 2013. Following in the footsteps of Joseph, son of Jacob, Mr. Salt, now the director of operations, MCCES, entered "the host of Pharaoh" and gave his command's MOS 0650 (cyber network operations engineer)/0689 (cyber security technician) Cyber Workforce Training Support brief to the Marine Corps Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership/Education, Personnel, Facilities, and Cost Working Group. The presentation he gave represented the planning efforts of the best and brightest of MCCES and its subordinate schools and he was confident in the knowledge that this meeting was an opportunity to shape the future of our Corps. The brief went well and 10 days after he returned to his parent command it was evident to all parties concerned that MCCES had an executable plan—all they needed were the resources (money, material, manpower) to execute. In the weeks that followed, Mr. Salt's Marines continued to work wonders as they answered "the rolling barrage" of requests for information from HQMC, Marine Forces Cyber Command, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Training and Education Command, and Training Command. After a determined effort, MCCES was given the seed money it needed to support this initiative, reinforcing the timeless principle that as long as a leader remains true to himself,



Yes, we can do it. (Photo by author.)

he can accomplish anything—even in the Byzantine world of the National Capitol Region.

Marines Just Aren't Like They Used To Be

Heading west on Highway 62, 5 miles from home. "How many times have I heard that one over the past 38 years?" the Old Salt thought. "Far too many, that's for sure." As he looked into his heart of hearts, he thought, regardless of what people have said, say, or will say, the fact of the matter is that your troops will always do what you expect them to do, which means that it's our sacred duty as leaders "to take care of Marines and support operations," whether ensuring that all of your liberty party gets back in their racks safe and sound after an evening of steaming and multiple shots of cheer; telling that young Marine that it's alright to head back to the ship and honor his marriage vows while his single buddies stay in town; doing your utmost to ensure that they have the best chow and barracks available under the existing conditions; taking care of their pay problems when their records are "lost" in the Sargasso Sea of the Consolidated Administration

Center; ensuring that they get promoted and awarded on time; maintaining high standards in discipline, conduct, maintenance, and training; or providing an ear to listen to their problems and providing wise advice/counsel based on your own experiences and the experiences of others. Most important of all, treating them fairly and firmly in the event they have to go in front of the captain's mast or to the CO's office.

A Figment of Our Imagination

Our great Nation has entrusted its youth into our care and it is time to see the illusions for what they are—a figment of our imagination. Once one accepts that fact, nothing can stop him from achieving immortality as a leader of Marines.

Note

1. Alexander, Col Joseph A., USMC(Ret), *Edson's Raiders*, U.S. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 2001, pp. 17–23.

