

The 11 Commandments and the Defense of Kandahar

by Capt T. Shane Tomko

'Promulgation of an order represents not over ten percent of your responsibility. The remaining ninety percent consists in assuring through personal supervision on the ground, by yourself and your staff, proper and vigorous execution.'

—GEN George S. Patton, Jr.

Nothing has stayed in my mind more clearly than the deep, resonant voice of my senior drill instructor, MSgt Joe Moore, USMC(Ret). That steamy summer in July 1983 he reminded me of the eternal value of my General Orders as we conducted a private "island hopping campaign" across every thrash pit of Edson Range. "You will never forget your General Orders, Private . . . side-straddle hops . . . NEVER . . . mountain climbers . . . NEVER . . . make it rain!" It was comparable to the scene in the movie *The Ten Commandments* when Charlton Heston first encounters the burning bush atop Mount Sinai and hears the voice of God for the first time. That was my moment of epiphany in this religion called the Marine Corps as I lay there blinded by sweat and sand—"I will never forget my General Orders," I swore to myself between gasps for air and clarity of mind.

Although the 11 General Orders are normally reserved for conduct of the interior guard, I have found that these orders have been the "11 Commandments" of my tenure as an enlisted Marine and officer. As a rifle company commander I have become increasingly dismayed at the lack of retention of these tenets for success in my Marines and elected to use my time in the defense of Kandahar International Airport, Afghanistan to apply these commandments and emblazon them forever upon my professional warriors' hearts. These applied guidelines must be the cornerstone of our

everyday work ethic and sense of duty as Marines.

(1) To take charge of this post and all government property in view.

Each Marine's fighting position was in fact his "post." Within that post he was responsible for his weapon; equipment; sector of fire; cleanliness (to include himself); his fellow Marine; his sleep, eating, and weapons maintenance rotation; and vigilant observation of his frontage. Although one of the shortest of the 11 Commandments, this encompasses the widest interpretation and can include anything that applies to that position. Most importantly, the words *take charge* denote ownership and command responsibility for that position—thus empowering the Marine to seize the day and be in charge of his environment. This commandment can be applied to any desk, training area, or office area. Make the Marines understand the importance of this order.

(2) To walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing.

Throughout my years in the Corps I have observed many tactics, techniques, and procedures in the defense, but in my 19th year I learned something new. (It is never too late to learn.) The commanding officer of Battalion Landing Team 3/6, "America's Varsity," Col (Sel) J.M. Lynes, proposed that each hole be manned during hours of dark-

ness by one man sleeping and one man awake. To this end, each and every position throughout the defense had a Marine awake and one who could be awakened quickly to respond to any contact. Throughout the night, one fire team leader or squad leader on rotation walked the lines of his squad, checking on each Marine in the fighting position. Hence, this coupled with the platoon and company leadership walking the lines, there was always a leader moving about from position to position, keeping the Marines alert and focused on the mission, guaranteeing full 50 percent observation throughout the defense as required at night. This can also translate in our everyday walk as Marines—we must carry ourselves as professionals, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, always observant and prepared to make professional correction and decisions as required.

(3) To report all violations of orders I am instructed to enforce.

All too often, this order is perceived or defined to be an instruction to "tell on someone." However, in the defense of Kandahar it was critical that all Marines realized the importance of crisp execution of their mission and promulgated orders. Thus, when a Marine was reluctant or remiss in his duty it was critical that the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) handled it justly and ruthlessly to ensure that the perimeter remained strong and secure.

This order also defines the requirement for information flow. Throughout the defensive perimeter it was critical that all information was passed up and down the chain of command on incidents on the lines, internal to the lines, and outside our perimeter. This provided for key information passing all the way to the Task Force 58 level of command influence. The information was normally originated by a lance corporal or private first class in a fighting hole who provided accurate and detailed reporting.

This commandment guarantees the good order and discipline of your unit in the execution of its mission. You must ensure that the Marines understand that we succeed as a unit and not as an individual. So, when one Marine is not performing his or her mission, it is our responsibility to report it for the progress of the whole.

(4) To repeat all calls from posts more distant to the guard house than my own.

During the hours of darkness, noise and light discipline are critical. When time-sensitive intelligence information was passed over the tactical nets, it was imperative that all Marines rapidly received the word in order to increase percentage levels of alert or inform them of changes to orders and instructions. This was easily carried out in the defense as fire team leaders, squad leaders, and platoon leaders would pass information down the chain of defensive positions. However, this order covers not only calls or orders—it is a charge to pass information at all times. How many times have we heard from a Marine, or even ourselves, “I didn’t get the word”? The all-elusive “word” has been a part of us since boot camp, Officer Candidates School, and The Basic School. The word ends up being our sermon notes for the next day’s execution of Marine Corps religion. Thus, impress upon your Marines to pass information continually. In combat environments, the word is food for the brain and keeps the Marines from concocting rumor or innuendo, thus reducing friction.

(5) To quit my post only when properly relieved.

As the defense progressed through multiple percentage levels of alert or changing of the guard at listening and observation posts, there was a mandatory professional handover between Marines. In that handover, all information was passed on any routine movement outside of the lines and within the perimeter as well as additional instructions as passed down by the company, platoon, or squad leadership throughout the conduct of the post.

There have been occasions where I have walked about my bivouac site at Camp Lejeune in search of the fire watch only to find someone slumped back as he fell asleep in the process of putting on his boots. Is he the culprit? No. It was the Marine who woke him up for his watch and then assumed that he was getting up and preparing.

No Marine can stand down until he has verbal and physical relief of his duties as accompanied by an NCO. I trust my Marines completely but also realize that they are human and as prone to err as I am—thus the importance of supervision by the NCOs in the conduct of all duties in regard to post and relief, just as I am supervised by my battalion commander in the conduct of my duties.

(6) To receive, obey, and pass on to the sentry who relieves me, all orders from the commanding officer, officer of the day, all officers and noncommissioned officers of the guard only.

This is quite simple to understand, so I will not belabor the point. It follows suit with the professional post and relief by the NCOs of their Marines on duty.

(7) To talk to no one except in the line of duty.

This is the “no smokin’ and jokin’” commandment. There is a definable difference between Marines engaging in conversation within the conduct of their duties and “gaffing off.” Human interaction is absolutely critical in combat environs. It reduces friction, “cocooning” or withdrawal, and alleviates the strain of prolonged

engagement. Thus, when Marines were not on the line, they were afforded the opportunity to relax. However, they had to be prepared at a moment’s notice to put on all gear and violently respond to any enemy threat. It was the responsibility of each individual Marine to comport himself as a professional while in the conduct of the defense. Is that to say we didn’t have any fun during the 30-plus days we constructed and sat in our holes? No, we had plenty of fun. We just ensured that we had fun, as only Marines can, within the priorities and parameters of: (1) mission accomplishment, (2) defend to the death, (3) dig deeper holes and trenches, and (4) never bring dishonor or discredit to your duties as a Marine. This being said, we cannot go through the entire day as a Marine without normal human interaction. There must be a balance in order to maintain decorum, our sanity, and motivation, especially during times of heightened friction, fear, and isolation.

(8) To sound the alarm in case of fire or disorder.

In the defense, sounding the alarm can be accomplished over the tactical radio nets via trip flares to the front or by launching pyrotechnics as secondary, reinforcing signals for any defined incident or contact. All Marines of the company throughout the Marine expeditionary unit (special operations capable) workup cycle were continually tested on their knowledge and retention of these signals to ensure they were able to conduct the appropriate battle drill in response to the signal. This can also be applied to simple misconduct interpreted as *disorder*. It is quite important that each Marine understands his or her responsibility to “shoot the red star cluster” in sounding the alarm for situations or events that are not conducive to good order and discipline. Many times Marines are hesitant to voice concern, disgruntlement, or disenchantment with how business is being conducted, especially if they are lower in rank. Regardless of

rank or position, it is each Marine's right and responsibility to be the honest broker, especially in regard to moral conscience and tactical and technical proficiency. I would not have sent out each of my squads through mined areas to ambush the enemy if I did not have complete confidence in my squad leaders' abilities. This same principle applies to everyday work, and you must ask yourself the question, "Is the leadership that I place in front of my most junior and impressionable Marines the same type of leadership I would want to follow?" If your answer is no, then you must *sound the alarm* and execute the appropriate battle drill of constructive leadership and education to build the junior leaders' proficiency and credibility in the eyes of their Marines.

(9) To call the corporal of the guard in any case not covered by instructions.

Remember the phrase, "no question is a stupid question"? Then why is the battalion silent at the end of each formation when the battalion commander is finished with his comments of motivation and asks, "Do any of you have any questions for me?" All you see are company commanders wincing at the thought of that one possible inane question that may erupt from a "problem child," platoon commanders looking sternly about their platoons with a look of "don't ask anything stupid," company first sergeants poised to spring at the young offender who would dare address the battalion commander himself. I personally remember leaving Amphibious Warfare School with a million questions that I wanted answers for but was too fearful, and too proud, to ask for fear of looking "stupid."

In a combat situation, there is no room for ego and pride or debasement of a Marine for asking a question. Moreover, those in leadership positions should always attempt to provide such a vast amount of information to cover all possibilities within the context of the mission that there should be no room for interpretation or question. The most difficult and dangerous aspect

to understand is in regard to rules of engagement (ROE). ROE can be interpreted many different ways, and it is absolutely important that each Marine understands what is required of him as his response, or lack thereof, could result in his death on the battlefield.

If you note, the commandment says, ". . . call the Corporal of the Guard . . .," thus, it is the most junior man above the rank and position of the Marine that he is to call. In that, it is much more comfortable to ask a question of someone one rank above you than it is a much senior officer or staff NCO. Bottom line—allow your Marines the latitude to ask questions tactfully and appropriate to the mission. It will serve to better your unit and the execution of the mission by those young warriors.

(10) To salute all officer, colors, and standards not cased.

Quite obviously, this order did not apply to my defense. However, I learned as a young Marine that it is the duty and obligation of every Marine to address a senior from 6 to 60 paces away. I remember again my senior drill instructor telling us, "We should always give the best salute and most motivated greeting as possible to let the officers know that we can salute better than they can and that we are better than them." I have grown weary of greeting junior Marines as they give me a head nod and a "what's up," nor do I allow it. Although we do not salute in combat situations, this does not mean we have to abandon the spirit of the commandment. We must always maintain that level of decorum that separates the Marines from the unruly horde of the lesser Services. Allowing phrases such as "dude," "man," "dawg," etc. diminishes us and our positions as corporals, sergeants, and "sirs." Words mean something, and the loftier we can present ourselves in communication, the loftier we think, and the loftier we perform. Before you know it, your Marines are communicating like educated young men and productive citizens of our great Nation.

(11) To be especially watchful at night, and during times of challenging, to challenge all persons on or near my post, and to allow no one to pass without proper authority.

The challenge is critical in the defense. From a distance, the signal plan designates the appropriate signal for the positive identification of friendly units. Upon closure of two units, the challenge and password may be used if the other force is not recognized visually during the day or by night vision devices during darkness. This challenge not only applies to the front but to the rear as well. As we defended the airfield, we also defended the detainee holding facility. There was always the chance that an escape could occur and that the enemy would do its utmost to get "out" of our lines from the inside. Rear area security for our own perimeter became paramount and battle drills were conducted to respond to such an incident. Thus, no one came near each Marine's position without identifying himself and/or being recognized after an appropriate challenge.

Finally, *the challenge*, it goes as follows: "**Halt! Who goes there?**" This must be said in a loud, professional voice as to be heard and clearly understood. There were numerous times when my own Marines startled me with their aggressive, no nonsense challenge. Walking up on a Marine's position should denote that you are coming up on a very dangerous person's territory. The advancer should state his rank and name. "**Advance and be recognized!**" At this point the Marine should already be at the ready, prepared to engage the unidentified person. Once the Marine recognizes the person, he may be allowed to pass or may be held at that position until such time as word is sent up the chain of command to the appropriate authority.

Of special note, at any given moment that a challenge is not responded to in the appropriate fashion, or in too prolonged a waiting period, the next sound that should be heard is the Marine's weapon clicking (identifiable sound even at night) from "safe" to "fire."

This commandment applies to Marines each and every day as we must always safeguard our equipment from pilfering, our barracks from destructive behavior, and our own workspaces to avoid loss, damage, or theft. We are responsible for our area!

Most Marines can quickly recite their General Orders from rote memorization. However, it is the very spirit of these orders that can be applied to any and all situations in our call to duty. I have found that my memoriza-

tion of the General Orders was never the real issue. Moreover, the real issue was how these General Orders were to be interpreted and how they could guide my conduct in my daily walk as a Marine. Now, 19 years later, I can fully comprehend why senior drill instructor then-SSgt Joe Moore wanted me to know those 11 Commandments. All he wanted of me was to be a good, disciplined Marine—a willing executor of my commander's intent. Thanks senior drill instructor—your words, your guidance, your pro-

fessionalism, and your teaching (even though it was oftentimes sandy, sweaty, and physically draining) will never be forgotten.



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