



Marines recapture the *Mayaguez*.

During the afternoon of 12 May 1975, Cambodian forces seized the *Mayaguez*. With the recent memory of the North Korean capture of the USS *Pueblo*, President Ford exercised a military option on 13 May. Although the Navy-Marine Corps forces that participated in the evacuation of Saigon 2 weeks earlier could have reconstituted in a matter of days, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command (CINCPAC)⁴ chose instead an *ad hoc* rapid response option consisting of readily available Marine ground forces supported by Air Force helicopters and close air support.

Intelligence throughout the operation was faulty. Although a US Navy P-3 surveillance aircraft tracked the *Mayaguez* to the island

of Koh Tang where the ship anchored around noon on 13 May, US forces never pinpointed the location of the crew. Repeated requests for photographic reconnaissance were denied.

The *ad hoc* nature of the task organization was compounded by an odd selection of commanders. The CINCPAC designated US Air Force Lieutenant General Burns, Commander, 7th Air Force, as the on-scene commander and US Air Force Colonel Anders, Deputy Commander, 56th Special Operations Wing, as the operational task force commander. The Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), designated Colonel Johnson from the III MAF G-3 (a spare colonel awaiting PCS orders) as the Marine Task Group Commander; Lieutenant Colonel Austin, Commanding Officer, Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/9 as the Koh Tang raid commander; and Major Porter, Executive Officer, BLT 1/4 as the *Mayaguez* raid commander. Despite his title, Lieutenant General Burns was never actually on scene. Adding to the friction, distance and poor communications later cut Colonel Johnson and Lieutenant Colonel Austin out of the decisionmaking loop. That these commanders had neither trained together nor had habitual relationships was a continual source of friction throughout the operation.

The plan called for 57 Marines from Company D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, plus augments, to board and recapture the *Mayaguez*. Simultaneously, 8 US Air Force CH/HH-53 helicopters would land roughly 180 Marines from BLT 2/9 into two zones on Koh Tang to seize the island and rescue the crew.

The plan went awry as soon as the company commander and one of the squad leaders leapt from the USS *Holt* to the *Mayaguez*. After the first two jumped, the surge that resulted from the *Holt* coming alongside pushed the two ships apart. For the next 5 minutes or so, Captain Wood and Corporal Coker were the only two Marines on the hostile ship. Sailors on the *Holt* quickly threw over lines allowing the men to lash the two ships together. More friction was generated by the senior level decision to saturate the *Mayaguez* with tear gas to incapacitate the expected Cambodian defenders. This “good idea” forced the boarding party to execute the difficult task of clearing the ship while wearing gas masks. The gas masks limited vision, increased exertion, and hampered communication; however, prior nuclear, biological, chemical training helped overcome some of the friction. To improve communication, the Marines lifted their masks, shouted orders, and then replaced and cleared their masks instead of relying solely on hand and arm signals. Fortunately for the Marines, the Cambodians had abandoned the *Mayaguez* earlier, which prevented the friction from becoming catastrophic. In the end, the Marines recaptured the deserted ship without firing a shot.

While the recapture of the *Mayaguez* was fortunately anticlimactic, the helicopter assault on Koh Tang, on the other hand, turned into a blood bath. Problems assaulting Koh Tang began in the planning phase. The intelligence available to Marine planners indicated there were 18 to 20 Cambodian irregulars on the island. Due to security procedures, higher headquarters did not provide the Marines with intelligence reports that estimated the enemy strength at 200 fighters armed with 82-mm mortars, 75-mm recoilless rifles, .30-caliber machine guns, and a rocket propelled

grenade launcher. In addition to the incorrect intelligence, there were no tactical maps available. Overhead reconnaissance imagery would have mitigated that shortfall, which was requested by the 7th Fleet, but higher headquarters repeatedly denied the request until it was too late to process the film. In the end, the only reconnaissance available to the BLT commander was an Army U-21. However, the Air Force restricted the U-21's flight to a 6,000-foot altitude and the only camera onboard was a Marine's pocket camera. Despite these restrictions, Lieutenant Colonel Austin identified two sites during the flight that were clear enough for use as landing zones.

On 14 May around 0900, an Air Force F-4 pilot spotted and reported a fishing vessel with what appeared to be Caucasians aboard heading towards the Cambodian mainland. Despite this report, Lieutenant General Burns and his staff continued planning for operations on Koh Tang.

On 15 May, expecting little resistance, eight Air Force helicopters flew toward the island. The first two helicopters that approached the eastern landing zone were hit by enemy fire. One helicopter crashed in the ocean; killing the copilot, 10 Marines, and 2 corpsmen. The other helicopter crash landed on the beach. In the western landing zone, the first helicopter landed unopposed and the Marines exited the first aircraft, whereupon the enemy opened fire with small arms, rocket, and mortar fire. The damaged helicopter barely made it out of the zone before ditching in the ocean. From that point, the situation continued to deteriorate. After the

insertion of the first wave, the Marines found themselves separated into three groups, struggling to coordinate their action.

Further complicating matters was the release of the *Mayaguez's* crew on the morning of 15 May. Concurrent with the launching of the second assault wave, the USS *Wilson* recovered the *Mayaguez's* crew from a Thai fishing boat. Upon learning of the recovery, authorities in Washington ordered an immediate cessation of offensive operations on Koh Tang. As a result, the airborne mission commander ordered the second assault wave to return to base. Desperate for reinforcement, the commander on the ground finally convinced Lieutenant General Burns to allow the second wave to land. For the rest of the day, the Marines worked through inter-Service friction to coordinate Air Force close air support missions and the Marines' withdrawal. By 2100 that evening, the last Marines to make it off the island lifted out of the landing zone. Several hours later, the Company E commander discovered three of his Marines were missing. The fates of Lance Corporal Joseph N. Hargrove, Private First Class Gary C. Hall, and Private Danny G. Marshall remain unknown. Additionally, the body of Lance Corporal Ashton N. Looney was unintentionally left on the beach. The cost of recovering the *Mayaguez* was 15 killed, 3 missing (later declared dead), and 49 wounded.⁵

Friction is inevitable and Marines must learn to deal with it; however, Marine leaders can minimize its effects. The *Mayaguez* incident makes it clear that senior leaders should establish command relationships that facilitate operations. Additionally, forces should be task-organized to take advantage of unit capabilities and habitual

relationships. Senior leaders should also be aware of the effect of a “good idea,” such as saturating a ship with tear gas, and the friction it induces into tactical operations. Finally, leaders at all levels can reduce friction through realistic training and rehearsals.

Among the many factors that cause friction, perhaps the moral and physical challenges to leading are the hardest to overcome. Together, they can produce obstacles that may prevent leaders and units from accomplishing their mission. Although they affect us in very different ways, the moral and physical elements cannot be separated. Moral factors play an important role in developing the physical capacity of individuals and units.

MORAL CHALLENGE

Leaders overcome moral challenges by exercising moral courage. As explained in Chapter 2, moral courage is the mastery of the fear of social consequences such as being perceived as disloyal, alienation, ridicule, punishment, job loss, or loss of social status. In some cases, the right choice is crystal clear. In other cases, the correct course of action is not so clear. In the end, leaders must always accept full responsibility for their actions. The following vignettes illustrate the actions of morally courageous leaders.

Gaining moral ascendancy requires that subordinates feel that their leaders genuinely care for them, that they are fighting for a worthy cause, and that their sacrifices are not made in vain. Acting

as a buffer to protect subordinates is a key responsibility of any leader. Consider the actions of the Second Division's Commanding General, during World War I.

One evening in November 1918, Major General Lejeune overheard one of his watch officers talking on the phone with higher headquarters. When queried, the watch officer told General Lejeune that Third Corps gave orders for Second Division to march the next morning. Knowing that his men were exhausted, he immediately got on the phone with the Third Corps staff officer. The staff officer told General Lejeune that Field Marshal Foch had directed the Second Division to begin the attack from Stenay, which required the Division to march 60 kilometers: 40 kilometers to cross the river at Dun-sur-Meuse and then 20 kilometers to Stenay. General Lejeune pointed out that the Division could cross at Pouilly, which would considerably reduce the marching distance. The staff officer countered that the Division could not cross there because it would require passage through German lines. General Lejeune then suggested the Division repair the bridge at Stenay, which would significantly reduce the length of the movement. The lieutenant colonel from Third Corps stated that he did not have the authority to change the order. When General Lejeune said that he would take it up with someone more senior, the staff officer replied that all the senior officers were asleep. General Lejeune then replied, "It is better to wake up one General than to have twenty-five thousand sick and exhausted men march sixty kilometers, and I will do so myself." In the end, Third Corps modified the

orders and the Division engineers repaired the bridge, saving many tired Marines and Soldiers unnecessary hardship.⁶

In another instance, this time in Vietnam, all that stood between the North Vietnamese Army 308th Division and Quang Tri Province was the bridge at Dong Ha, defended by a company of Vietnamese Marines. Realizing that the company would not be able to hold the bridge, the senior American advisor to the 3d ARVN Division (Forward), Lieutenant Colonel Gerald H. Turley, determined that the bridge had to be destroyed. The Deputy ARVN Division Commander would not give permission to destroy the bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Turley conferred with the VNMC Brigade 258 Commander who had local responsibility. The Brigade Commander said the decision would have to come from I Corps. Lieutenant Colonel Turley radioed the First Regional Assistance Command (FRAC) G-3 to gain permission. The FRAC G-3 denied permission and said permission would have to come from Saigon. Realizing the dire consequences of not taking action and knowing the career risk he was taking, Lieutenant Colonel Turley ordered Major James E. Smock, US Army, and Captain John W. Ripley, USMC, to blow the bridge. His decision to act prevented a regimental sized armor force from crossing the river, which blunted the North Vietnamese advance.⁷

The ancient philosopher Confucius phrased it this way, “To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage.”⁸ Moral courage is a private courage, a form of conscience that can often be an

even tougher challenge than physical courage, especially in peacetime. It serves not only as a foundation of our leadership philosophy; it is also a challenge that Marine leaders must face every day. If Marines do not have the moral courage in peacetime to meet consistently the high standards and expectations of the Marine Corps, then they are not likely to have the moral courage to make the difficult decisions that may determine the outcome of a battle or a campaign.

The following vignette highlights that moral dilemmas often are about conflicting loyalties that cause Marines to delay doing the right thing. As leaders, we must resolve these internal battles quickly to arrive at the right decision and must not be blinded by misplaced loyalty. If these dilemmas were easy, it wouldn't be called moral courage.

Note: The following is based on a true story; the names have been changed to protect privacy.

Sergeant Parilla was a member of an Inspector-Instructor administrative section along with two other sergeants. One day, Sergeant Parilla complained to Sergeant Adkins that Sergeant Vickers had never run a unit diary entry in all of their time together. Sergeant Adkins replied that it was just as well, since Sergeant Vickers would probably run illegal entries on himself. Those remarks seemed odd to Sergeant Parilla, so he checked the record. He discovered Sergeant Vickers entered basic allowance for housing (BAH) for San Francisco, CA, in the amount of \$2,100 for himself, which was well over the BAH for their area which was

\$780. Sergeant Vickers also backdated the entry, embezzling \$15,840 from the United States Government.

Upon discovering Sergeant Vicker's transgression, Sergeant Parilla told Sergeant Adkins that he would personally confront Sergeant Vickers and tell the First Sergeant. Sergeant Adkins asked him not to report the false entries, because he had run falsified diary entries on himself. In fact, Sergeant Adkins had run family separation allowance on himself and backdated it two years, defrauding the United States Government of \$6,000. Sergeant Parilla confronted the two sergeants. They told him not to worry and that no one would find out because they were about to get out of the Marine Corps. When Sergeant Parilla pushed the issue, the two sergeants threatened to kill him and later gave him \$2,000 to keep quiet. He didn't want the money, but he took it to buy time to figure out what to do.

Sergeant Parilla was conflicted. These Marines were his buddies. They worked as a team, their families shared meals, and they often went hunting together. They shared tough times, to include conducting more than 100 funerals. They looked out for each other. Sergeant Adkins had a wife and a 1-week-old baby. Sergeant Vickers had a wife and two children. Growing up, Sergeant Parilla learned not to "rat out" his buddies. He wrestled with what he should do. He knew what the two Marines had done was wrong. If he did nothing, the theft would likely remain undetected. If he told his chain of command, then two wives and three children would suffer and his fellow Marines would think he was

disloyal. He talked through these conflicting thoughts with his wife. Sergeant Parilla decided he needed to report the crimes, so he went for a drive to collect his thoughts and figure out how to tell his command.

In the meantime, his wife, concerned for her family's safety, called the training chief, Master Sergeant Powers, who immediately phoned Sergeant Parilla to confirm the facts. Together, they determined that calling the Naval Criminal Investigative Service was the best course of action. Agents arrested the two sergeants who were later court-martialed and sent to the brig. In the end, Sergeant Parilla realized that his loyalty belonged with the Marine Corps and his unit. By stealing, Sergeants Adkins and Vickers were the ones being disloyal.

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE

The physical demands of battle encompass more than being fit and these demands influence both the leader and the led. The effects of sleep deprivation, poor diet, poor hygiene, and, most importantly, fear have to be understood and must be a part of training. No one is immune to fatigue. As Marines become increasingly tired, they often lose the ability to make sound, rapid decisions and are susceptible to being confused, disoriented, and ultimately ineffective. Guts, pride, and energy drinks are not substitutes for fitness. A leader must be fit to concentrate fully on the mission or task at hand.

The exact limits of endurance cannot be determined, but physical conditioning is one method of reducing the effects of fatigue, increasing self-confidence, and reducing stress. The physical development of Marine leaders must include dealing with the natural fear of violence, which contributes significantly to the fog and friction of combat. Units, and unit leaders, that do not have the mental and physical strength to overcome fear will not be able to fight effectively and overcome friction. Captain John Ripley's actions at Dong Ha vividly depict the physical demands sometimes placed on individuals.



Captain John Ripley's heroic action at the bridge at Dong Ha. (Photo courtesy of David Burnett/Contact Press Images.)

As you may recall from the moral challenge vignette, as the North Vietnamese 308th Division pressed its attack south, Lieutenant Colonel Turley ordered Captain Ripley and Major Smock to blow the bridge at Dong Ha. Captain Ripley determined that 500 pounds of explosives would have to be placed under the girders of the bridge. A chain link fence, topped with German steel tape, surrounded the base of the bridge. The two Americans

quickly devised a plan. Captain Ripley would climb over the fence and emplace the explosives that Major Smock passed to him. Emplacing the explosives required Captain Ripley to hand-walk along the beams, exposing his dangling body to the enemy. For 2 hours, in the face of enemy small arms and tank fire, he set the charges. Finally, using the battery from a destroyed jeep, Captain Ripley detonated the charges, destroyed the bridge, and stopped the enemy armor in its tracks.⁹ Captain Ripley's superb physical conditioning allowed him to pull off this amazing feat.

First Lieutenant Kenneth A. Conover, during 6 days of intense combat in Afghanistan, demonstrated the physical stamina required of leaders under stress.

On 22 June 2012, First Lieutenant Conover led 1st Platoon, Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines on a night air assault into the enemy stronghold of Qaleh Ye Gaz, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. As the platoon established its patrol base, the enemy attacked with medium machine gun fire, automatic rifle fire, and 10 rounds of 82-mm mortars. During the engagement, a mortar round landed 15 feet from First Lieutenant Conover. Luckily, the soft earth absorbed most of the blast. For the next 6 days, multiple waves of fanatical enemy fighters attacked the platoon. Within the first 2 days, First Lieutenant Conover led his platoon through the loss of two Marines, the serious wounding of another one, and the evacuation under fire of all three. He continued to lead his Marines through 23 direct fire engagements, 1 grenade attack, 2 indirect fire attacks, and 10 enemy attempts to overrun his position. In relentless pursuit of the enemy, he

directed the employment of 38 tank main gun rounds, 4 artillery rocket strikes, 4 close air support strikes, 5 AT-4 rockets, and 2 anti-personnel obstacle breaching systems. His efforts resulted in clearing 2 square kilometers of enemy fighters and the capture of a high-value Taliban leader along with two other fighters.¹⁰

Not every Marine will face the same physical challenge as Captain Ripley nor will every Marine lead a platoon in combat like First Lieutenant Conover, but some will. Marine leaders understand this and work continuously to condition the Marines under their charge so that they overcome the physical challenges presented to them. A critical responsibility of every leader “is to ensure that members of his or her command have every survival



First Lieutenant Kenneth Conover on patrol in Afghanistan.

edge that can be provided. If people lack the coordinated response that comes only from long, varied and rigorous exercise, they will lack cohesion in action, have much higher combat losses and uselessly expend much of their initial velocity. . . . The gain in moral force deriving from all forms of physical training is an unconscious gain. Will power, determination, mental poise and muscle control all march hand in hand with the general health and well-being of the individual.”¹¹

ADAPTABILITY

Adaptability has long been our key to overcoming challenges. Although it is synonymous with flexibility, adaptability also embraces the spirit of innovation. Marines constantly seek to adapt new tactics, organization, and procedures to the realities of the environment. Marines identify deficiencies in existing practices, discard outdated structure, and make modifications to maintain function and utility. The ability to adapt enables Marines to be comfortable within an environment dominated by friction. Experience, common sense, and the critical application of judgment all help Marine leaders persevere.

Marines have long known how to adapt and overcome: 30 December 1927, a Marine patrol near Quilali, Nicaragua, engaged a large Sandinista force and suffered heavy casualties. The patrol was in desperate need of supplies and 18 Marines required medical evacuation. Marine pilots airdropped the equipment that was needed to

clear a 500-foot-long makeshift airstrip. Between 6 and 8 January 1928, First Lieutenant Christian F. Schilt risked his life to make 10 flights onto the airstrip in the besieged town carrying in a replacement commander and critical medical supplies. He also evacuated the 18 wounded Marines by strapping them to the wings in order to fly them out. His feat is even more incredible since



First Lieutenant Christian Schilt.

the Vought O2U biplane had no brakes, which required Marines to arrest it by grabbing onto the wings and dragging the aircraft to a stop as soon as it touched down.¹²

Another example of innovation born out of the need to adapt was the use of Navajo Code Talkers. In the days before portable, tactical cryptographic devices, radio operators either had to transmit messages unencrypted risking enemy interception or laboriously encode, transmit, and decode messages. During World War I and after Pearl Harbor, the Army made limited use of Choctaw and Comanche speakers to transmit messages. Always on the lookout for innovative ideas, the Marine Corps followed the Army program with great interest. After a successful proof of concept, the Marine Corps enlisted 29 Navajo men for service as communicators. In keeping with Marine tradition, Commandant Thomas Holcomb insisted that the recruits receive the same basic training as other



Privates First Class Preston Toledo and Frank Toledo, Navajo Code Talkers, attached to a Marine artillery regiment in the South Pacific.

language that reduced the time required to encode, transmit, and decode messages from 4 hours to about 2 minutes. As a result, the Navajo Code Talkers were combat multipliers in every campaign in the South Pacific, from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.¹³

Many years later, as Marine forces began to expand their lodgment during Operation Desert Shield, one of the greatest concerns was overland transportation. Faced with an acute shortage of trucks and other vehicles, Marine logisticians applied an unconventional approach to motor transportation. In addition to receiving 246 trucks from the Army, the Marines began leasing as many civilian vehicles as they could. In the end, they obtained 1,414 assorted trucks, which included 50 colorfully decorated 10-ton lorries

that the Marines dubbed “circus trucks.” Additionally, the Marines used 214 commercial buses and 465 sport utility vehicles to transport personnel.¹⁴

Adaptation happens most frequently at the small unit level. During early August of 2010, Company L, 3d Battalion, 1st Marines attacked to clear the Taliban stronghold of Safar Bazaar in the Garmsir District of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The Taliban who defended the bazaar saturated the area with IEDs. The lightweight, compact metal detector soon proved utterly useless against nonmetallic IEDs.

Prior to the execution of the operation, the company came up with multiple nonstandard solutions to clearing the bazaar, one of which was water hoses. Safar Bazaar was conveniently located on a canal off the Helmand River so a nearly unlimited supply of water was available. The S-4 procured water pumps and hoses. It took 2 weeks to completely clear the bazaar using multiple kinetic and nonkinetic techniques, each complementing the other: line charges, Holley sticks (a field expedient stick and hook devised by Gunnery Sergeant Floyd Holley), and water hoses.



“Circus Truck” pressed into service during Operation Desert Storm.