
Message to the Force 2017: *"Seize the Initiative"*



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

General Robert B. Neller
37th Commandant of the Marine Corps

Effective: 7 February 2017

CMC Message to the Force: “Seize the Initiative”

February 2017

I want to share my thoughts on what we accomplished in 2016 and where we need to go this year and beyond. This message builds on the initial guidance and priorities we outlined a year ago in [FRAGO 01 / 2016: “Advance to Contact.”](#) It also complements an updated [list of tasks](#) that I recently issued to the Deputy Commandants (DCs) in order to support you.

This message is an extension of my ongoing discussions with all of you. *It provides six resolutions for all of us to follow in 2017.* I expect all Marines to read this message and take action. I’m also directing all Commanders to discuss these resolutions and DC tasks within their units. I need our Small Unit Leaders to talk about this guidance within their teams. It is important that all of us appreciate what the Marines on our flanks are doing so that we work together and support each other. The foundations of our [Warfighting doctrine](#) are based on shattering the enemy’s cohesion through maneuver, a shared understanding of the mission, commander’s intent, and trust. These principles promote unity of action, increase tempo, and enable individual initiative. Every one of you must and will play a critical role in improving our Corps. *This is a team effort.* The Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and I look forward to hearing your feedback. Your responses and actions will help guide our course into the future.

Assessment of 2016: Sergeant Major Green and I spoke with numerous Marines around the globe last year. Based on your valuable feedback on FRAGO 01, we clarified and updated several policies, instituted promotion panels, and revised PFT/CFT standards in order to make ourselves better. We reinvigorated [Sea Dragon](#), our warfighting experimentation program. We also released our [Marine Corps Service Strategy \(MCSS\)](#), which outlines how we will organize, train, and equip our Marine Corps in the years ahead. We published the [Marine Corps Operating Concept \(MOC\)](#), which describes how we will employ our Corps and fight in the future. We made significant investments in our Marine Corps Force 2025 (MCF 2025) initiative, which will realign and shape the Marine Corps to meet future threats. All of these actions are generating momentum, yet much work remains to be done. *Together, we will strive to get better every day.*

Where We Stand Now and the Challenges Before Us: I’m proud of all of you and honored to serve as your Commandant. Marines today continue to perform exceptionally well in peace, crisis, and conflict—from humanitarian assistance efforts in Haiti, security cooperation operations in Europe, the Middle East, and Indo-Asia-Pacific, and embassy reinforcement in East Africa, to combat operations in Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq. *Our Corps remains ready, capable, and lethal.* Every Marine should be proud of their contribution to our Nation’s defense.

As professionals, we have to remember our ongoing success does not guarantee victory tomorrow. We must continue to confront and overcome numerous *internal and external challenges*. Externally, we must adapt to the operational environment and acknowledge the advancements made by our adversaries. Over the last 15 years, we primarily focused on counter-insurgency operations while peer and near-peer competitors watched us, learned, and improved significantly. The gap between us has narrowed—and in some cases, completely closed. From now on, we will have to fight not only in the domains of land, sea, and air, but also in space and cyberspace. We will have to fight for and with information on the battleground of perceptions and ideas. And we will have to win the battle of electromagnetic signatures in which to be detected is to be killed. We can never take our enemies for granted. *We will be tested.*

We must also tackle our *internal challenges*. We must improve our overall readiness—particularly in our aviation units. We continue to accelerate our purchases of new systems while maintaining current equipment. Right now, our “ready bench” is not as deep as we need it to be for crises and contingencies.

As we address our readiness shortfalls, we must simultaneously modernize our Corps. This is a tough, but necessary balancing act. We must be prepared to fight today *and* in the future.

Other internal challenges we face are more personal. We need to be brutally honest with ourselves and be accountable for our shortcomings. *We must be more disciplined*—both at the individual and unit level—and live up to our core values of *honor, courage, and commitment*. We need to police our ranks better and hold ourselves and our fellow Marines accountable, eliminate hazing and sexual assault, and reduce avoidable mishaps and abuse of alcohol. 152 of our fellow Marines died last year. This is nearly the equivalent of a rifle company. Only *one* of these Marines died in combat. We lost the rest mostly due to suicides, accidents, and reckless behavior. We are better than this. *We must do a better job of looking out for each other.*

Where We Need to Go: We have to continue to adapt, innovate, and change to meet future threats. We must always challenge the status quo and ask ourselves: Are we doing the right things? Are we doing them in the right way? What do we need to do differently? We need to approach our challenges with humility, an open mind, and a burning desire to win. To that end, we must all resolve to:

- 1) **Improve readiness because we need more Marines and equipment ready to fight now.** Our approach to readiness includes units, equipment, facilities, and individual Marines. Readiness begins with each of us. Ask yourself, are you prepared to deploy right now? If not, take care of your personal affairs. Is your gear squared away? Whether it costs millions or is basic issue, it's our responsibility to keep our gear ready at all times. Is your unit combat ready? *Always train hard.* I expect Leaders to challenge Marines with realistic training under adverse conditions against thinking enemies. Combat is the supreme test. Our training must reflect its uncertainty, stress, disorder, and violence. We will train as we fight—decentralized—relying on mission-type orders and the initiative of individuals.
- 2) **Modernize the force because our future readiness depends upon it.** As we shape the Marine Corps for tomorrow, we must evaluate and aggressively experiment with new equipment and ideas. We need you to provide your innovative ideas by participating in the [Marine Corps Innovation Challenge](#) as an individual or team. Get more “reps and sets” by training in simulated environments and embrace experimentation to test and validate new concepts. We must leverage technology and ideas to make us faster, smarter, and more lethal.
- 3) **Become smarter because your mind is your most important weapon.** True military professionals study and write. Commit to reading more. Read at least five books from the [Commandant's Professional Reading List \(CPRL\)](#) this year. Find other subjects you are interested in whether it's fiction, history, or news. Fiction builds creativity; history helps us learn from the past; and news keeps us up to date with the world around us. Just like it takes practice, repetition, and dedication to get to 20+ pull-ups, it takes hard work to sharpen our minds and think critically. Pursue educational opportunities and earn a degree. If you're already an avid reader and writer, take it to another level. Share your ideas in professional publications. *It costs us nothing to think.* In fact, our best ideas have historically come forth when our Corps was most challenged.
- 4) **Take better care of ourselves because combat is the most extreme and demanding test.** We're known for our toughness and endurance, but many of us eat poorly, smoke, dip, and drink alcohol excessively. This self-abuse plays into the hands of our enemies. *We need to drink less, read more, and PT smarter.* Take a hard look at how you are living your life. Be honest. Are you taking care of your mind, body, and spirit? Improve your PT program and make it more intense and balanced. If you're an endurance athlete, add core or strength training. If you're a weight lifter, add more cardio. Put down the electronics, get off the couch, and go to the gym. Promote and participate in intramural sports. Call out fellow Marines to join you. Rest more and eat better. Steel your spirit so that you can better deal with adversity. Prepare yourself so you will be ready for the decisive moment in combat.
- 5) **“Protect What You've Earned” because our success in battle depends upon teamwork.** Our culture, discipline, teamwork, and esprit de corps make us unique and unbeatable in battle. Just as we rely on each other on the battlefield, we must do the same in all aspects of our lives. Teamwork starts

with trust and mutual respect. Mentor and listen to your fellows Marines. Get involved and learn more about them...where they're from...the struggles they face...the ambitions they have. Every Marine has a story. Find ways to interact and talk to each other. Set goals for your team and yourself and lay out a path to get there. Identify and address each other's personal challenges early. Don't tolerate hazing and negative leadership because they destroy morale, erode trust, and stifle initiative. Never forget the pride you felt when you earned the title Marine—fiercely protect it. Continue to value and respect the dignity of all Marines. Protect and motivate each other. *We must fully leverage the potential of every Marine in order to be successful on and off the battlefield.*

- 6) **Have more fun as Marines because it is a privilege to be a part of this elite warfighting organization.** Along with always striving to be better, we should strive to have more fun together. Build and strengthen the bonds of camaraderie we share as Marines. *Resolve to spend more time socializing with each other.* Share your stories, grow with each other, and build friendships that will last a lifetime. Approach 2017 with a renewed sense of adventure. Get out and explore the world with your fellow Marines. Do things you've always wanted to do: learn to surf, master another language, play an instrument, run an adventure race, etc. Don't just sit on your backside in the barracks or at home. Enjoy the privileges and freedoms that you have sworn to defend. When you're in the field training, attack that too. Training is hard and sometimes miserable—as it should be. *Cheerfulness and a positive attitude in the face of adversity are traits we all need to develop.* Embrace the “suck” and laugh about it with your fellow Marines. The hardships that we suffer together build cohesion. They will be the moments we remember the most after we hang up the uniform.

Conclusion: All who have earned the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor have contributed to our reputation as the world's most formidable, feared, and respected military organization. This is our sacred heritage. Every Marine must protect it and own a piece of our success. Never forget that we exist to defeat our Nation's enemies. *The American people expect their Marines to fight our Country's battles and win—always. Victory is our legacy—in the past, now, and in the future.*

Remember, our enemies will never rest. In our business, there's no prize for 2nd Place. That's why we must remain a “Gold Medal Organization.” And that's why we all need to bring our A-Game every day. *Learn your job, and do it with maximum intensity and skill.* The next fight will evolve rapidly, and it will force us to be more agile, flexible, and adaptable. To win, we need *Marines who are smart, fit, disciplined, resilient, and able to thrive in the face of uncertainty and the unknown.*

Over our entire history, we have been an adaptive and innovative force. It was the Marine Corps that first developed Close Air Support, wrote the [Small Wars Manual](#), and developed the doctrine and designed the equipment needed to conduct amphibious assaults. We were the first to adopt maneuver warfare as the central tenet of our warfighting philosophy. Like the Marines of the past, we will continue to overcome challenges, remain flexible, and defeat all enemies. *We have been, and will continue to be, the Nation's elite expeditionary force-in-readiness.*

Through your initiative, we will impose our will on the enemy. We cross the line of departure together—seeking every day to improve ourselves, each other, and our Corps. What will you do in 2017 to up your game? Marines, the time is NOW; “*Seize the Initiative!*”



Robert B. Neller
General, United States Marine Corps
Commandant of the Marine Corps