



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY  
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS  
3000 MARINE CORPS PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, DC 20350-3000

ACMC  
1 Aug 23

WHITE LETTER 1-23

From: Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps  
To: All Marines

Subj: GUIDANCE TO THE FORCE

1. Situation. Until the Senate confirms our 39th Commandant, this guidance will serve as our reference point. I cannot predict how long this process may take, but waiting is not an option for Marines, so we will move out as a team – just as we would in combat. We are always strongest as a team.

The trajectory set by Force Design 2030 is in place and helps us to deter conflict and prepare for the next war – and if called upon, to fight it against a peer adversary. We will continue our modernization efforts to be ready for that fight, and simultaneously ensure that we remain ready for any contingency across the globe. Refinements to Force Design, or any plan, are constant. We make those refinements from our campaign of learning where we develop concepts; evaluate them through wargames; experiment with the concept to improve it or reject it; and then provide feedback to the chain of command. We will continue this rapid process. Balancing current readiness with modernization is incredibly difficult, but we became Marines to do difficult things. It is in our DNA.

2. Purpose. This guidance maintains our momentum and confirms the direction of our Corps. It is intended to leave space for a future Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG), so it is intentionally broad. Success means all Marines understand who we are, what we do, and what is expected of us.

3. Who We Are and What We Do. We are offensively oriented and aggressive in all we do. "First to Fight" is more than a slogan, it is our heritage. This is who we attract, who we train, and who we are. We are a Corps of warriors who fight from the sea and campaign in forward locations in pursuit of our Nation's interests. The American people trust that we will always do the right thing, and that we will win every time. We are willing to give our lives for our country and for each other if needed. We never lower our standards.

We train and fight as Marine Air-Ground Task Forces that master combined arms to win battles. Our three Marine Expeditionary Forces are our principal warfighting organizations and are balanced to meet the requirements of our national strategy. Embarked aboard Amphibious Warfare Ships, the Marine Expeditionary Unit is our crown jewel, enabling us to be on scene, ready to fight as a self-contained Marine Air-Ground Task Force.

We prepare for the worst-case scenario – the pacing threat. If the day comes that we must face that threat, we will be ready. We accept some risk now to be ready for the future. This is what professional organizations do: prepare for the future.

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We must be the force of choice for our combatant commanders when they seek to campaign to a position of advantage against our adversaries, or to respond anywhere on the globe to a natural or man-made crisis. Marines can and will accomplish any assigned mission.

We are a naval force, biased towards the high-end fight, but capable of responding across the spectrum of conflict. We have a legacy of fighting ashore, from Belleau Wood to Helmand, but we are and must remain naval in nature – always with an eye toward the sea. We enable naval and joint force maneuver by being both forward deployed and rapidly deployable. We are expeditionary so that we can stand-in when others must pull back, to enable joint, naval, allied, and partner fires and maneuver.

We are a learning organization that requires Marines at every rank to understand the strategic implications of their actions. We must increase our knowledge every day. Education makes us more adaptable; adaptation builds advantage; and advantage leads to victory on the battlefield.

Above all, the strength of the Corps lies in the individual Marine. We are all, first and foremost, riflemen. That will never change. Our daily professionalism and conduct are what makes others seek to train and serve alongside us. Our actions in and out of uniform must always reflect our core values. We are and must remain examples for our fellow citizens. To that end, our main effort remains our personnel – how we treat them, train them, and improve them every day.

Bottom line: We became Marines to fight, and we work hard every day to be *first to fight*.

4. Expectations. First, I am incredibly proud of you and all you have accomplished. I believe in you and trust you to do the right thing. You strive to bring credit to our Corps each day. We are a great Corps, full of great Marines. You need to hear that directly from me. Thanks for what you do.

Marines deserve to have leaders who are well educated, mature, competent, firm, fair, and compassionate. Leading from the front is an expectation – not a goal. America trusts us with her sons and daughters, and we must earn that trust through a professional culture that is free from destructive behaviors that weaken our ethos and reputation. A positive command climate is not simply the lack of destructive behaviors, but rather an environment where Marines thrive. We lead our Marines by example, sacrificing everything for them if needed. Servant leadership is Marine leadership, a tradition given to us by Marines of every rank and generation. Leaders eat last.

I expect all Marines to contribute to our individual and collective professionalism by representing the warfighting ethos and resolute discipline synonymous with the title “Marine.” I expect all of us to maintain and exceed standards – Marine Corps standards. In my 36 years as a Marine, the best units I have seen in combat were the ones that took pride in their high standards, rigorous training, and ironclad discipline. Those units were full of Marines who challenged and pushed each other to be the most proficient in their MOS, to be the most physically fit, and to *constantly* seek self-improvement.

They forged these traits in peacetime, so they were ready for war. In the fights ahead, our enemies will not provide us with advanced notice of an attack, so we must be ready 24/7. Leaders at every level will morally, mentally, and physically prepare their Marines for combat.

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This is the foundation of our Marine culture. We are America's "fight tonight" force, and we must prove our worth to our Nation every day.

Discipline is the currency of our Corps. Our orders and regulations, developed over hundreds of campaigns and battles, make us better warriors. They force us to pay attention to detail each day so that we do so automatically in combat, where precision matters most. That discipline is equally important to the Aviator, Administrator, or the MARSOC Special Operator. Those with significant combat experience know this to be true. Our profession of warfighting is unforgiving, with no margin for carelessness. Errors in combat lead to defeat, and Marines do not lose.

To focus on warfighting, we must eliminate the things that pull us apart and deprive us of the unity that wins battles. Drugs, DUIs, sexual assaults and harassment, hazing, and other criminal behavior are not who we are, or have ever been. We are Marines, and we are better than that. I ask and expect that you always stand up for what is right.

Our standards apply equally to our newest Private, to you, and to me. I owe you a command climate where honest mistakes can be made, where Marines are treated like professionals, and where discipline is central to who we are. I owe you the best balance of barracks, chow halls, housing, weapons, and training possible. While these elements of military life will never be completely satisfactory to every individual Marine, I ask that you trust that my decisions are based on the best interest of our Corps, our mission, and our Marines.

What I require is that when decisions are made, we move out as one to attack our problems together. Those decisions will be made after hearing from Marines and their leadership. I encourage and will reward innovation which aims to capitalize on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and additive manufacturing. No Marine has ever told me, "Sir, this weapon shoots too far" or "This equipment is too light." We will continue to experiment and modernize, always with a focus on our requirement to win in combat.

5. Where We Are and Where We Are Going. We are in a good position to accelerate our lethality and modernization while we tackle the challenges that confront our combatant commanders, allies, and partners. My warfighting priorities are:

a. Balance Crisis Response with Modernization Efforts: Accelerate and streamline our modernization so that Force Design is understood as the journey toward a ready force for a peer fight. This journey includes the best training, equipment, and people. Simultaneously, our ability to rapidly respond to crises is a required capability for the Marine Corps and must be maintained.

b. Naval Integration and Organic Mobility: We will partner and integrate with the Navy at every level possible to provide the joint force with sea based expeditionary forces that are task organized to deliver combat power from the littorals to points further inland. I remain focused on our requirement of no fewer than 31 Amphibious Warfare Ships (10 LHA/D and 21 LPD), in concert with the Landing Ship Medium to provide the organic lift required to enable fleet and joint maneuver.

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c. Quality of Life. To recruit and retain the best, we will focus on improving our barracks, base housing, gyms, chow halls, child development centers, and personnel policies. I view quality of life improvements as direct contributors to a more capable and lethal force. Marines can always do more with less, but it is my job to make sure you do not have to do so with your living conditions or those of your families.

d. Recruit, Make, and Retain Marines: We will continue sending our very best to recruiting and instructor duty so our newest Marines benefit from the best role models very early in their careers as warriors. We will reward those who choose to stay Marines with quality retention options and incentives.

e. Maximize the Potential of our Reserves: An appropriately resourced Reserve Component that is ready, responsive, and relevant enables us to fight and win. Marine Corps Forces Reserve possesses a wealth of expertise and esprit, and they have my gratitude. We must make it easier for Marines to transition from active to reserve and back again. There is only one kind of Marine, the fighting kind.

6. Conclusion. Everything I have offered in this initial guidance is about warfighting and combat expertise. It is not meant as a lecture; it is simply setting expectations so that we use our limited time in peace to be prepared for the next fight. Small unit leaders should discuss this guidance with their Marines and seek their input before offering their insights up the chain of command. Additional detailed guidance will be issued to commanders directly via the chain of command and will then be passed to you. I expect leaders to keep their units informed. It is a privilege to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor and I ask each of you to stand with me as we earn it every day. I trust you, and I am immensely proud to serve alongside you. Semper Fidelis.



Eric M. Smith