The
Strategic
Corporal
Marines must be prepared to meet the Nation’s challenges when the Nation is least ready. The Strategic Corporal concept is about preparing all Marines to handle the full range of missions in an uncertain world. The Marine Corps must continue to create an expeditionary, flexible mindset that enables individual Marines to excel in any mission or environment. These missions and tasks may range from conducting large scale amphibious landings, being immersed in the gritty reality of urban combat or feeding Third World earthquake victims. More often than not, Marines will have to accomplish these missions simultaneously. To this end, the Marine Corps and our Marines must continue to be adaptive, flexible and responsive to overcome both today’s and tomorrow’s challenges.

Marine Corps small unit leaders are the key to our success. This means that the Marine Corps must prepare small unit leaders to be multicapable, able to accomplish a range of tasks. This requires leaders to be technically and tactically proficient, savvy in both customs and languages, physically hard, capable of meeting ethical and emotional challenges and ready to change missions quickly. These expectations are not easily met. To meet these challenges, our institutions must continue to prepare individual Marines to meet the world’s challenges and conflicts. The Strategic Corporal concept is a contributing part of that effort.

GEORGE J. FLYNN
Lieutenant General
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As a Corps, we must remain faithful to our enduring mission — to be where our country needs us, when she needs us, and to prevail over whatever challenges we face.
34th Commandant’s Planning Guidance

Introduction
The purpose of the Strategic Corporal is to describe the institutional commitment necessary to prepare our junior leaders to be a strategic corporal. This concept will also describe the broad array of missions the Marine Corps will face, the challenges that our individual Marines need to tackle in an uncertain world. This concept applies to all junior leaders from combat squad leaders to convoy commanders and advisors and trainers. As the United States confronts the dynamic problems of a world in conflict, the Marine Corps must continue to prepare and enable individual Marines to accomplish a dynamic array of missions, with the highest degree of skill and initiative. While these tasks are no different from those undertaken by Marines in the past or from skills outlined in the Small Wars Manual, the faster tempo and decentralized nature of future conflicts demand that Marines be better prepared.

The idea of Marines tackling multiple, varied and simultaneous missions is not new. The Marine Corps historical ability to excel as the Nation’s force of choice is the stuff of legend. Whether battling Barbary pirates, fighting fires, guarding the US mail or winning the Nation’s small and large scale conflicts, the Marine Corps has proven time and again that it can handle the challenges of an uncertain world. The 31st Commandant, General Charles Krulak, wrote about Marines needing to be prepared to conduct humanitarian assistance operations, peace-keeping and traditional warfighting in a “Three Block War” and of the flexible and adaptive “strategic corporal,” instrumental in accomplishing these missions. The idea of the strategic corporal expands the idea that a Marine’s actions at the tactical level may have strategic consequences. This concept also builds on General Krulak’s work by describing the preparation of all Marines, adding development as a fourth mission area. As importantly, the current approach highlights the notion that most of these missions may occur simultaneously vice sequentially.

Central Idea
The United States Marine Corps is a multi-capable force, historically called to tackle any challenge across the globe. Both units and individuals must be trained and prepared to discharge a broad array of competencies. These competencies include conducting persistent forward naval engagement, responding as the Nation’s expeditionary force in readiness, conducting integrated combined arms operations across the range of military operations, and providing forces and specialized detachments for service aboard naval ships, stations, and operations ashore. Additionally, the Corps is prepared to conduct joint forcible entry operations from the sea across the range of military operations, facilitate the integration and application of all instruments of national power and is the “force of choice” to conduct complex expeditionary operations in the urban littorals and other complex environments.

To master these competencies, all Marines must continue to refine their traditional skills to better prepare themselves for the conflicts of today and those we anticipate for tomorrow. The Marine Corps’ institutions must continue to prepare individual Marines to be multipurpose and ready to accomplish a broad array of missions in any environment. Moreover, leaders need to grant Marines at all levels the necessary trust, authority and autonomy to operate independently. This is especially important for small unit leaders whether they are in the barracks or conducting small unit operations in austere environments.

The Strategic Corporal’s Flexibility
Marines must have a multi-capable and expeditionary mindset, ready to deploy and engage in the full range of military operations anywhere in the world. Being multi-capable refers to a Marines’ ability to be flexible, adaptive.

and ready to accomplish different types of missions. In some cases, leaders and their Marines may need to accomplish different types of missions simultaneously vice sequentially.

The Strategic Corporal Defined
The strategic corporal is a Marine who has mastered Marine basic skills, is tactically and technically proficient, is morally and ethically adept, savvy in both language and culture, mentally agile, physically fit, prepared to act and lead in a decentralized environment and is empowered by the trust and confidence of his seniors and subordinates.

The Marine Corps must prepare our Marines’ to have a skill set that is like a thermostat, able to easily dial in the skills and force necessary to accomplish the mission. We must prepare Marines from across the MAGTF, regardless of rank, to be strategic corporals, flexibly and adaptively recognizing key aspects of the bigger picture, making the right decisions at the critical moment. We must set our Marines up for success by giving them an institutional foundation of career long learning to help them remain creative, adaptive and expeditionary.

We must prepare them to understand when a mission is morphing from handing out food to keeping rival factions from killing each other. We must ready them to see they are not only relieving hardship and keeping peace, but also developing relationships and winning a generation of people’s trust. We must prepare them to understand that their actions at the tactical level may have strategic and even global consequences. Our Marines must be prepared to be strategic corporals, knowing when to shoot and not to shoot, when to detain, when to move in support of another unit or when to stay focused on his specified task. Our Marines with the strategic corporal’s skills, must be prepared to anticipate the signs of change, ready his Marines for a dynamic environment and steel their hearts for the action to come.

Some of the tasks that Marines will face include assisting those in need, participating in development operations, taking on an enforcement role in peace operations, and engaging in complex expeditionary operations against hybrid adversaries. Below is a brief description of each mission set.

Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief (HADR). Marines may take part in HADR both domestically (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) and on foreign shores (e.g., the 2004 South East Asia tsunami). Because of the unpredictable nature of natural disasters, most of these operations are rapid response and require a great deal of flexibility. During these operations, Marine Corps forces usually face intense human need and suffering, while working hand-in-hand with host nation and nongovernmental organizations.

Development. Development operations can take many forms and range from dental and medical missions, teaching another nation’s military how to secure its borders through Security Force Assistance (SFA) missions, and teaching a government how to create the utilities like sewer, water, and electricity that Americans take for granted. The purpose of development operations is to create and strengthen relationships with other nations so they can become more self-sufficient and capable, better enabling our access and influence. These types of missions usually involve working with other government agencies, other countries’ militaries and are some of the most important types of missions that Marines can take part.
**Peace Operations.** These operations can be more ambiguous and often more perilous. These missions often involve stopping rival forces, organizations or groups from harming one another, looting or destabilizing a government. These missions can be dangerous because, while the Marines are there for the good of the people and stability, it can easily escalate from peace keeping to conflict when frustration or anger is turned upon US forces.

**Complex Expeditionary Operations.** Success in complex expeditionary operations is the foundation of the Marine Corps. Much of the time these operations will result in some level of combat and violence. Combat is the chaotic collision of wills that may take the form of counterinsurgency operations, small wars or major combat operations. While these operations may have different aspects, they all involve killing a determined enemy through the use of discriminate force. These operations may be short or long in duration and may be just one element of a larger campaign. While engaged in these types of operations, our Marines must understand that the situation can easily change with little or no warning. Marines must adapt quickly to the demands of this dynamic environment. They must also understand that they may have to conduct several other types of missions simultaneously. Below is a short vignette that describes how Marines in the Banana Wars applied operational flexibility to conduct both counterinsurgency and humanitarian disaster relief operations.

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**The United States Marines in Nicaragua: A History of Operational Flexibility**

In March 1931, the United States Marine Corps was engaged in a counterinsurgency fight against the leftist Sandinista rebels who sought to overthrow the democratically elected government of Nicaragua. The Marine Corps Second Brigade was engaged in a series of actions across Nicaragua, ranging from combating the Sandinistas, to developing the Guardia Nacional, to building infrastructure in otherwise impoverished areas.

This mission changed abruptly on March 31st as a 6.0 magnitude earthquake shook the capital, Managua. The quake’s epicenter was in the center of the busy city, whose rickety buildings were all but destroyed by the quake and resulting fire. With $15,000,000 in damage, 31,000 residents displaced and 4,950 people killed or injured, Managua was a humanitarian disaster that needed immediate attention.

The Marines quickly shifted from prosecuting combat operations to “rescuing the wounded and carrying them to the impoverished first aid stations…hastily erected by medical officers…[helping] those who would otherwise have been killed by falling walls or burned to death.” The USS Lexington, an aircraft carrier harbored in Havana Harbor, got word of the earthquake on the evening of March 31st and immediately made preparations for sail, delivering a contingent of doctors, corpsmen and supplies. By April 2, over 100 major surgeries had been performed in the makeshift field hospital, with 400 more recorded by the end of the Marines’ involvement. By April 3, the combined efforts of the Marines, Nicaraguan forces and attached US Army engineers had subdued Managua’s fires and repaired the local airstrip, opening a vital lifeline with more robust facilities in Panama.

By April 7, the Second Brigade turned over all humanitarian assistance operations to the American Red Cross and returned to counterinsurgency operations, winning great political capital with the Nicaraguan people. As a result of the Marines’ dynamic flexibility and heroism, the Nicaraguan people’s support of the Sandinistas waned, allowing for the Nicaraguan forces to regain control, freeing most of the Marines to return home successfully by the end of the summer.

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**Implications for Combat Development and Implementation**

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2 Scott D. Welch *A Historical Survey of United States Marine Corps Disaster Relief Operations During the Twentieth Century* (Pepperdine University, 1999) Pg 33.
Marines fully expect to succeed in every clime and place. Whether conducting an HADR mission, strengthening other nations through foreign internal development, or conducting non-combatant evacuation operations, Marines have always risen to the challenge. In the Banana Wars from 1915-1934, Marines tackled a variety of missions that often changed as the operating area’s infrastructure or political situation changed. Most of the key actions were accomplished by junior leaders, NCOs and informal leaders who rose to meet the challenge. These leaders were usually operating in a decentralized command climate, without solid lines of communications, acting on commander’s intent. Regardless of the circumstances, the Marines of this era did it all. More to the point, they accomplished these missions and demonstrated great agility with little institutional training, preparation, or specialized equipment. The lessons of these Marine are enduring and were captured in The Small Wars Manual of 1940.

The Nation still relies on junior leaders to meet the commander’s intent, but the consequences and the implications of their actions are often magnified. While a firefight in the Banana Wars may have taken weeks to be reported due to technological restraints; conflict today is routinely reported within minutes or witnessed live by a global audience. For this reason, the Marine Corps must continue to institutionally enhance, develop and prepare Marines to understand their roles and responsibilities so they may operate successfully in the Long War and beyond. The following is a historical vignette highlighting the unique contributions junior leaders can make on independent duty.

### Junior Leaders in Haiti

During the summer of 1919, the United States Marines were embroiled in a counterinsurgency campaign against Caco insurgents led by Charlemagne Peralte in Haiti. Concerned about Charlemagne’s offensive actions and growing popularity, the senior Marine Commander issued a two word order to Marine Sgt Harold H. Hanneken, “Get Charlemagne!”

With this guidance Sgt Hanneken developed an audacious plan to topple Cacos’ leadership. Sgt Hanneken remembers, “It was a pretty big order. It meant running down one Haitian out of several millions of Haitians in a country as big as the state of New York…operating in a country almost entirely sympathetic to him…protected by a fanatical body guard, who never slept two nights in the same place, and must be run down in a tangled maze of mountains and valleys and jungles, of which there were not accurate maps. ”

Using a strong knowledge of the local culture and language, Hanneken and his deputy, Marine Corporal Button, worked with the Haitian gendarmerie and the local population to develop an information and deception plan that made Charlemagne believe that a number of locals had deserted the gendarmerie to join this organization. Once his plan was in place, Sgt Hanneken and Cpl Button had the Haitian “deserters” work to gain Charlemagne’s trust and ultimately convince him to attack the town of Grande Riviere.

Hanneken and Button planned to ambush Charlemagne’s headquarters element on the road while he was enroute to Grand Riviere, but this plan went awry when Charlemagne failed to pass along his normal route. Instead, Charlemagne traveled to the rebel camp by another route and surrounded himself with 1,000 loyal Caco soldiers. Understanding the urgency of mission accomplishment to stave off a Caco offensive, Hanneken picked 16 Haitian gendarmerie, and set off in disguise with Cpl Button, hiking through the night and treacherous terrain to reach the camp. If Charlemagne and his subordinates would not come to the hunter, the hunter would go to Charlemagne.

Hanneken’s party passed through numerous checkpoints until they were able to locate the informants who discretely pointed out Charlemagne’s headquarters. The disguised band of Marines and Haitians walked through the camp of armed insurgents and engaged Charlemagne and his armed body guards, killing him and 9 soldiers in the first volley. Immediately, 1,000 enemy foot soldiers turned towards the ruckus and unleashed a hail of bullets on the small unit of Marines and gendarmeries. Sgt Hanneken realized that the only thing more important than eliminating the Caco leadership was being able to prove the leadership’s

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3 Heinl, Robert, Colonel, USMC, Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1175-1962 (Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1991) pg 238
demise. In the ensuing melee, Sgt Hanneken placed Cpl Button in charge of their defense while he safeguarded the rebel leader’s body. 

Marine and Gendamarie reinforcements soon arrived, dispatching the disorganized and leaderless Cacos, allowing for Hanneken and Button to carry the rebel leader’s body to town on a captured mule. As result of Sgt Hanneken and Cpl Button’s actions, the rebellion collapsed less than a year later in the summer of 1920 and the pair was awarded the Medal of Honor for their heroism and initiative. Sgt Hanneken received a field commission to 2nd Lt, ultimately rising to the rank of Brigadier General.

As illustrated in the vignette, Sgt Hanneken and Cpl Button did many things that today’s Marines are accomplishing with little formal education or training. They composed an intelligence network, worked with host nation forces, developed and executed an information plan. Additionally, they learned the language and culture in order to pit the Marines’ strengths against the enemy vulnerabilities. Moreover, these Marines had their leader’s trust and confidence to accomplish numerous tasks with great autonomy, living and working amongst foreign forces and the people. Just like these heroes of the old Corps, today’s Marines will continue to accomplish these tasks and exercise independent judgment.

The Marine Corps needs to continue to centrally focus training and preparation so Marines can be ready for both the known and the unknown. Our robust training and education establishment with the support of senior leadership are capable of ensuring this preparation. The Marine Corps must maintain a rheostatic training mindset, quickly dialing up or down training objectives and intensity in order to ensure rapid and effective preparation. It needs to be flexible enough to train Marines to succeed in all types of missions with little or no institutional spin up time. It must seamlessly teach culture, basic skills, MOS skills, and a host of other tasks that may include running a company level intelligence cell (CLIC), company level operations center (CLOC) or calling joint fires during the conduct of small unit Enhanced Company Operations. Below are some areas that need continued development by the Marine Corps to prepare Marines and better enable commanders to handle to challenges ahead.

### Individual Preparation

**Marines must continue to be trained, educated and prepared to improvise, adapt and overcome in dispersed operations.**

**Marines must be ethically and morally sound, mentally agile, physically fit, culturally savvy and trained to lead in the rigors of combat, knowing what to do in a complex, fast-moving environment.**

### Leadership and informal leaders

The Marine Corps must continue to build upon its leadership and ethical principles to provide Marines with a common vision of warfighting and a capability of independent and bold action in all missions and environments. These ideals must be understood not only by the small unit’s formal leadership, but also by its “informal leaders,” who often wield strong influence and can be a powerful resource for less experienced leaders. In the vignette above, Sgt Hanneken was in command of a gendarmerie detachment, planning and executing missions, but it was his corporal, who when the going got rough was put in charge of staving off the Caco attack. While a unit’s command leadership carries the responsibility for their Marines’ lives and actions, frequently the unit’s informal leaders have more experience and time in the unit, providing stability for the junior Marines.

Often it is the steady Lance Corporal who excelled in the battle for Fallujah or the Sergeant on his fourth deployment who lends the most revealing insights and provides the lieutenant with the best advice born from

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4 Conway, Gen James, *CMC Bullets*, October 10, 2007
experience. These combat hardened Marines can provide a new platoon commander or small unit leader an exceptional source of information when his own experiences may be limited.

While a small unit’s informal leaders’ impact in combat is significant, the biggest achievements are often behind the scenes, in less obvious situations. The impact of informal leaders is felt often in counterinsurgency or in assistance and peace operations where the rules of engagement and battlefield ethics seem ambiguous or blurred.

“I am convinced that these informal leaders can be our best teachers when it comes to rules of engagement and battlefield ethics.”

General James Conway

In these situations, seasoned leaders create a calming influence that extends into garrison, lending maturity and perspective in challenging scenarios. They help maintain good order and discipline, ease tensions between rival factions, know when to shoot and realize that a keen understanding of a foe’s culture can be an effective weapon. Although informal leaders may not necessarily hold the rank or position, they nevertheless can command respect due to their operational experience.

**Physical Fitness**

Operations in a complex and uncertain environment heighten the need for every unit to utilize an institutionalized combat conditioning program that improves general physical conditioning. In the vignette above, Sgt Hanneken planned for a static ambush. When the ambush did not materialize, Hanneken and his crew sprinted through the night, laden with equipment over treacherous mountains, to get to the rebel camp and ultimately accomplish the mission.

Implementing a combat conditioning program at the small unit level can help prepare Marines for the physical rigors of combat. Marines must train their bodies to accomplish their regular tasks and to safely train around their injuries when injured. When designing a program, leaders should have the expertise of unit combat conditioning specialists to ensure that their program is personalized to meet the needs of their unit’s missions and includes injury proofing exercises to stave off injury and speed recovery time. Through these methods, Marine leaders help keep their Marines ready for the fight and decrease the risk of injury or re-injury.

**Ethics and Decision Making Capability**

Marines must receive extensive and progressive education and training in tactical and ethical decision-making and cognitive skill development to enable them to operate independently. This training should not stop at the entry level. This should be seen as a career long progression that continues to reinforce character development, the warrior spirit, and moral and ethical decision making. Hanneken and Button did not have the luxury of the formal education and training that today’s Marines have at their disposal. When the ambush failed to materialize, Sgt Hanneken and Cpl Button made the decision to enter the Caco camp, knowing it could well mean their certain death. Sgt Hanneken understood that attacking the rebel camp and killing its leaders was not just a tactical action supported the Haiti

5 These ideas are taken from a *Concept for Functional Fitness*, MCCDC, 9 Nov, 2006
campaign’s information campaign. These two Marines made the right decision in both instances, placing their lives on the line for what they knew to be right. Ultimately, it came down to young Marines making hard decisions based upon their sound judgment of right and wrong.

Marines generally make the correct decision like the two NCOs in the vignette. However, we can do a better job of preparing our Marines for the unknown. Marines should continue to be given the freedom to exercise decision making ability both in garrison and in the field. This includes Marines taking charge of simple garrison tasks and being educated through training scenarios, role playing, and simulator training, including ethical dilemmas. This will allow them to be able to recognize problems and respond to them in the correct manner in accordance with the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Geneva Conventions or service policies. These exercises and ethical dilemma’s shouldn’t have clear cut, school book answers, but present realistic situations so that the Marines will be prepared to make the best choices. All Marines, especially leaders, must be mentally agile enough to evaluate the situation and choose the hard right over the easy wrong.

Cultural and Language Training
In the vignette, Sgt Hanneken owes much of his success to the Haitian gendarmerie, who not only fought beside him, but put themselves in great peril by going undercover to deceive the rebels. This could not have been done if Hanneken and Button had not learned both the culture and language of the local populace. Marines must be willing to cross the language bridge in order to gain true understanding and earn the people’s trust. Moreover, Marines cannot simply study a culture but must learn about it in context to pit our strengths against an opponent’s weakness.

Marines must be trained to read cultural road signs. They must be taught to distinguish threat from customary behavior in people whose customs may seem strange. Marines must take part in cultural and language training that enables them to communicate and understand the context of the environments in which they operate. While understanding culture and language is erroneously dismissed often as an unnecessary “soft skill,” a contextually based cultural understanding of the human environment is a capability enabler and is a long standing trait of successful warriors. Culture and language training helps lift the mystery and suspicion that can inhibit forming ties with a population the US needs as a friend.

Equipment Innovations
Sgt Hanneken and Cpl Button often found themselves alone, unable to contact seniors or peers due to great distance and limited technology. Frequently, they did not know what was around the corner or even over the next hill. Even though we are in the digital age, it is not uncommon for today’s leaders to find themselves in similar situations. The capacity for effective, independent operation means that the strategic corporal has a greatly increased need to plug into the information network, communicating up and down and across the chain of command. This means that Marines need equipment that is lightweight, reliable over long distances and harsh terrain, easy to use and durable so that any Marine can use it in nearly any conditions.

Marines need to have improved intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance assets assigned to small units, much lighter weight body armor and more rapid distribution of intelligence. Improved fire support communication suites, more capable light vehicles, navigation assets and more functional command and control assets capable of matching the higher speed of maneuver also are required to provide the needed flexibility demanded of our young leaders overcoming unforeseen challenges. These assets, matched with continually improving training, will better enable our young leaders to succeed in an environment where they may handle varied tasks.

Training and Education
While Sgt Hanneken’s time in the Marine Corps was a period of PME revolution, he did not have access to vast educational resources, like the Marines of today. Through the decades, the Marine Corps formal training and
educational institutions have proven to be highly resilient, adaptive, and capable to meet future needs. To maximize effectiveness, the Marine Corps needs to continue to assess and, where necessary, revamp its professional military education programs, increase resourcing and throughput adjustment to better develop Marines to perform as strategic corporals.

As a part of this process, the Marine Corps must focus its officer and enlisted PME programs to emphasize more combat skills, combat leadership, cultural aspects of operations, ethical decision making and working with partners. We must look at the training and education continuum as a career long learning endeavor across the ranks. “Our training and education must ensure sound, rapid decision making, as well as proficiency at applying the capabilities of the MAGTF. We must be fully integrated in our approach, individual and collective, training and education, individual unit through task organized elements of the MAGTF, and the MAGTF itself, regardless of mission, condition or environment.” This includes designing and building innovative capabilities to augment the operating force’s needs to prepare for missions across the range of military operations such as teaching Marines to develop partnerships with emerging nations or even conduct of amphibious operations.

The Marine Corps must give commanders more support in getting Marines the requisite training and trust them with the discretion to place qualified Marines in rank or age-restricted positions. This will ensure that the organizations’ best and brightest are put in the right positions based on ability. It is vital that commanders be able to place the right personnel in the right positions. At the small unit level, rank is not as important as having the most capable people in the company’s leadership, CLIC, CLOC and joint fires roles.

**Conclusion**

It is likely that today’s global conflicts will be persistent and dominate our Nation’s approach to international security well into the future. This new security environment demands that the Marine Corps prepare its Marines for complicated situations, austere environments and small unit operations requiring independent action. By preparing Marines to be strategic corporals, the United States Marine Corps strengthens its ranks and enhances its capability to maintain its core competencies. Ultimately, the Marine Corps is only as strong as the sum of its parts. All Marines must understand that their tactical actions may have strategic consequences. They must be able to lead Marines into the fight, build partner capability, enforce the peace, and support humanitarian relief efforts simultaneously. It is incumbent upon the Marine Corps to continue to refine its institutional preparation of Marines to meet tomorrow’s challenges. It is incumbent upon every leader and institution in the Marine Corps to strive to develop our Marines into the strategic corporals and leaders of the future Corps. We must earnestly prepare them to be the leaders that Marines deserve. Nothing less is expected and nothing less will do.

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6 *Vision and Strategy, June 2008*
Provide feedback on this concept to:

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