

**IDEAS & ISSUES (LEADERSHIP)**

2012 Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest: Honorable Mention

# SPMAGTF Leaders in Action

**Another example of what we do**

by LtCol Chris Richie

**N**othing seemed out of the ordinary on the morning of 30 July 2010 as I made my way to the landing force operations center; however, the look on our operations officer's face told me this was not a normal morning.

Sir, we just heard from the GCE [ground combat element] commander; he said Medical Site 2 is being overrun by a mob of approximately 1,000 Haitians. We have not been able to reestablish communications with him.

Several thoughts run through a commander's mind upon hearing such news. Our 505-Marine special purpose MAGTF (SPMAGTF) was embarked aboard the USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7) just off the coast of Port de Paix, Haiti, and only a few miles from Medical Site 2. Thirty-three Marines had been operating for 6 days from the nearby United Nations (U.N.) compound while providing security, convoy, and logistics support for two medical sites, two engineering sites, and CONTINUING PROMISE 2010 (CP-10) equipment and personnel.<sup>1</sup> The Marines' actions over the next several minutes were nothing short of awe-inspiring. Below is an excerpt from a note I sent to my chain of command the following day:

Fourteen Marines arrived . . . to find large numbers of Haitians gathered. Initial reporting indicated a hostile crowd of 1,000 people. The GCE Commander . . . dispatched another Squad . . . to reinforce. We fragged an aircraft to insert the only remain-

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ing interpreter (all others were on site) and to conduct airborne ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance]. When the interpreter arrived, he observed over 20 Marines with arms interlocked holding back an angry crowd of 300 people. Prior to this, a UN security guard used OC spray [pepper spray] which incited more anger. Ten Haitian Police attempted to

trained in crowd control. I could not be more proud of the Marines' actions and courage under these conditions. Every Marine had their T/O [table of organization] weapon; at no point did anyone go from Condition 4.<sup>2</sup>

A vastly outnumbered group of Marines averted a potentially devastating event and turned what would have been a story broadcast worldwide into a story never told—until now. They displayed hallmarks of Marine Corps leadership through detailed *preparation*, undaunted *courage*, and impeccable *character*.

***"The best form of welfare for the troops is first-class training, for this saves unnecessary casualties."*<sup>3</sup>**

**—Field Marshal Erwin Rommel**

disperse the crowd with their batons; however, our Marines persuaded them to let us maintain control peacefully. The local police were asked to pull the primary agitators out of the crowd and off the premises. Shortly thereafter, the medical site began to see patients which calmed the crowd. Afterwards, our interpreters spoke with the crowd. The general perception was that the Marines protected the Haitians from further OC spray and from being beaten by the Haitian Police. The Marines on site gained great respect and admiration from all. Of note, the police were amazed at the Marines' ability to control the crowd without using our weapons and asked to be

**Preparation**

I grew up greatly respecting my grandfather who served as a company commander in the Philippines and survived the Bataan Death March and over 3 years as a prisoner of war. He would often tell me to hope for the best but always prepare for the worst. Exactly 65 days prior to the event described above, SPMAGTF Marines were completing a self-imposed mission rehearsal exercise that culminated with a quick reaction force charged to subdue an angry crowd via non-lethal means. This training was led by a staff sergeant whose actions in Haiti helped save the day. Additionally, in the weeks leading up to our mission

in Haiti, Marines were given rules of engagement (ROE) classes based on realistic vignettes. We were not preparing for combat; we were preparing to maintain order for ill parents, children, and grandparents who sought free medical care provided by the U.S. Navy. Detailed preparation led to multiple discussions on ROE and expectations of acquitting ourselves as strong, professional, and compassionate warriors. It helped greatly that we had six Marines who had been raised in Haiti and spoke fluent French Creole. They became our pseudocultural awareness instructors as we conducted final preparations.

Following the event, the CP-10 commander sent a note to his boss including the comment that:

The Marines treated the people respectfully and addressed the situation professionally, and the situation was defused. (Of note, the SPMAGTF trained to this scenario during their field exercise prior to deploying and their training kicked in and kept everything well within control.)<sup>4</sup>

Preparation for worst-case scenarios instills confidence and fosters courage.

***“There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people.”<sup>5</sup>***

***—President George H.W. Bush***

### Courage

Marines are no stranger to Haiti. In the early 1900s, experiences there helped drive doctrine rediscovered in the *Small Wars Manual*, which espouses tolerance, sympathy, and kindness.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in order to be effective as a peacemaker, one must first be respected as a warrior. After 100 years of operations in Haiti, the word Marine has become synonymous with courage where we are well respected throughout the country. At the age of 16, one of our translators was so impressed by observing Marines (near Port au Prince) that he wanted to become one; he is now a staff sergeant.



**Marines prepare for the worst-case scenarios.** (Photo by Sgt Samuel R. Beyers.)

When acts of compassion are displayed by those who are strong, they are perceived differently than acts of compassion from those who are weak. As the Haitian National Police drew batons to assault the crowd, a Marine gunnery sergeant exhibited strong leadership and courage by not only stopping them, but in perfect French Creole, he told them to leave; they complied without hesitation. The Marine was operating from a position of authority that had been earned by generations of Marines before him.

Following the incident, several people in the crowd approached our Marine translators thanking them for protecting them from the police; the police approached our Marines asking them to train them in how to respond via non-lethal means. Courage breeds compassion; compassion from those in power breeds authority. In *The World’s Most Powerful Leadership Principle*, James Hunter discusses power versus authority:

Power is the ability to force or coerce others to do your will because of your position or might; Authority is the skill of getting others willingly to do your will because of your personal influence.<sup>7</sup>

He further asserts that authority is about who you are; authority is about character.

### Character

***“Our young Marines must be ingrained with the qualities of character necessary to permit effective, independent decision-making under extreme stress.”<sup>8</sup>***

***—Gen Charles C. Krulak***

Our 31st Commandant often spoke of the “three block war” concept. In addition to being men and women of character, he adds, “. . . decisions will be moral quandaries whose resolution requires a high degree of maturity, discretion, and judgment.”<sup>9</sup> The angry crowd grew even more incensed after a U.N. security guard pepper sprayed them. Just



**A relationship is established.** (Photo by Sgt Samuel R. Beyers.)

as circumstances had reached critical mass, and in the absence of riot control equipment (shields, baton, etc.), a staff sergeant (the same one who conducted the riot control training 2 months earlier) directed a human chain to be created. The Marine translators began walking the lines communicating with the people while one translator unpacked a bull horn and began directing the crowd. In a fine display of both courage and teamwork, Marines from the rank of lance corporal (an assault amphibious vehicle mechanic) to second lieutenant (aviation command and control) interlocked arms to form the human shield with weapons at sling arms.

The best method for leaders to “ingrain the qualities of character” in our Marines is to embody the virtues of impeccable character ourselves. All Marines displayed courage and strong character following the lead of their officers and SNCOs. After the incident, the Navy commander in charge of Medical Site 2 provided the following commentary:

If the Marines were not here, we could not accomplish the mission at all. When we rolled in, there were 3,000–5,000 patients. If you take the Marines out of the equation, none of this happens.<sup>10</sup>

One of the SPMAGTF public affairs Marines concluded that “a rifle on

the shoulder did not send the wrong message; it helped people get the right care.”<sup>11</sup>

### In Every Clime and Place

In response to the event on 30 July, one general officer commented that this was “just another example of what we do around the world every day.” Marines all over the globe are conducting themselves with distinction, many in combat zones, yet their stories are rarely told.

## All Marines displayed courage and strong character. . . .

They are simply being themselves; they are upholding the ethos articulated by our 13th Commandant that “the term ‘Marine’ has come to signify all that is highest in military efficiency and soldierly repute.”<sup>12</sup> Leaders must prepare Marines for worst-case scenarios, while exhibiting personal examples of courage and character. Although the actions of a few Marines at Medical Site 2 were noteworthy, it was hallmarks of Marine Corps leadership displayed by every Marine present that made the difference on 30 July 2010.

### Notes

1. Taken from CP-10 Haiti Warning Order, dated 23 July 2010.
2. E-mail sent by author on 31 July 2010.
3. Rommel, Field Marshal Erwin, as quoted in U.S. Marine Corps, *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, Warfighting*, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington DC, 1999, p. 85.
4. E-mail sent from Commander, CP-10, to Commander, Navy South, 30 July 2010.
5. Bush, President George H.W., inaugural address, January 1989, available at <http://www/awesomestories.com/assets/bush-41-inaugural>.
6. U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1940, reprinted 1 April 1987 by Headquarters Marine Corps.
7. Hunter, James, *The World’s Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How To Become a Servant Leader*, Crown Business, New York, 2004, p. 53.
8. Krulak, Gen Charles C., “The Leadership Imperative,” foreword in *Corps Business* by David Freedman, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2000.
9. Ibid. During Gen Krulak’s service as Commandant (1995–99), he coined the term “three block war” to describe scenarios where Marines find themselves engaged in operations from humanitarian missions, through peacekeeping and peace enforcement, to full-blown combat.
10. From Defense Video & Imagery Distribution System at <http://www.dvidshub.net/video/93128/spmagtf-supports-continuing-promise-2010>.
11. Ibid.
12. Headquarters Marine Corps, *United States Marine Corps Manual*, Article 38, Washington, DC, 1921 edition.

