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General James Mattis

On Leadership Lessons (Pre-recorded)

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General Mattis: General Jim Mattis, 40 years in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Okay, all set?

Technical Staff: Whenever you're ready, sir.

General Mattis: All right.

Prompt: Marionette Young [ph] asked me a question about the toughest decision that I've ever had to make while I was in the Marine Corps: *Do you regret the decision, and would I have done anything differently?*

General Mattis: You know, Marionette, when we go into the Marine Corps we swear to obey orders and carry them out to the best of our ability, and defend the Constitution.



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So I've not regretted those decisions and -- and one of the toughest that I could mention to you was after being ordered to attack into the city of Fallujah. I was ordered to halt the attack deep inside the city. And during that first, and ultimately aborted attack, ordered to withdraw our marines and sailors out of the city they had fought for. And they had lost some of their buddies in that fight. So it was a difficult decision. It was a decision taken for reasons that had nothing to do with the tactical situation on the ground. I was concerned to a degree if the marines would lose confidence in their leadership because of it.

But they didn't.

I still recall a young SAW [Squad Automatic Weapons] gunner being interviewed by a television crew, talking about how terrible he must feel that he was being ordered out of the city. And he was a slow-talking marine from down south. He just calmly looked into the camera, said, "Doesn't matter. We'll just hunt 'em down somewhere else and kill 'em."

And I bring this up because ultimately it's about the spirit of the Marine Corps, that nothing, nothing really can stop us. And we just don't take refuge in self-pity or any of that kind of stuff. And so as a result, the Marine Corps remains a very feared organization in this world, as it should be. So, tough decisions, tough times, and sometimes things don't go our way. Doesn't have anything to do with the decision we make about how we feel about it. Every marine makes their own decision about how they're going to react [to] what happens to them. And that's what sets the Marine Corps apart, because when the times get tough the marines get tougher.

Prompt: Phil Clayborne [ph] wants to know: *How did I continue to stay motivated throughout my Marine Corps career?*

General Mattis: That's real easy, Phil. I'll tell you right up front, there were some jobs in the Marine Corps I didn't care for. I learned to hate minefields at age 21, when the Marine Corps trained me as a second lieutenant in the infantry to go through them; and I continued to hate minefields as long as I had to encounter them throughout my career.



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But the reason I stuck around the Marine Corps was the spirit of the marines. I knew I could make a lot more money doing something else, and I knew I could live a lot better quality of life and not be deployed all the time; but it was the spirit of the marines that kept me motivated. I never went to work feeling like, "Woe is me," that "Life is tough" -- or anything else. I looked forward to every day and it's simply because I stuck around the Marine Corps for the right reason -- and that was to serve alongside young marines.

Prompt: Joel Delf [ph] wants to know: *How do you keep improving as a leader to meet the demand of each role in your career? We all get promoted. You have different roles to play. How do you stay teachable as a leader?*

General Mattis: I think the most important thing here, Joel, is that you have to assume you must keep improving. If you make that your decision, that you must improve, if you look at every week in the Marine Corps as your last week of peace, and you must be better at the end of this week as a war fighter, then you'll push yourself on your three-mile run down to 18 minutes -- and you'll accept no excuses. You'll push yourself to 21 pull-ups -- and you'll accept no excuses. You'll push yourself to read the Commandant's [Professional] Reading List. You'll push yourself that, when the things are going tough in the field, you keep your spirit up and you're the man everyone can turn to, knowing that you don't give up.

And you just keep improving every day with the assumption that, if you're going to lead more marines in the future as you get promoted, they expect you to be the physically toughest, the mentally sharpest, and the spiritually -- just the most undiminished person that nothing, not cold, not rain, not enemy situation, not frustrating rules can get you down. And you just maintain this body, mind, and spirit improvement at all times.

You stay teachable most by reading books, by reading what other people went through. I can't tell you the number of times I looked down at what was going on on the ground, or I was engaged in a fight somewhere, and I knew within a couple of minutes how I was going to screw up the enemy. And I knew it because I'd done so much reading. I knew what I was going to do because I'd seen other similar situations in the reading. I knew how they'd been dealt with successfully or unsuccessfully. And so long as you continue along this line, so long as you remember somebody on the other side is watching, hoping that you're not at the top of your game, that you're not reading, that you're not working out, that you're not strong



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spiritually, then they're going to think they've gotcha. You want to always be the toughest, the sharpest out there.

Prompt: I've got a question here from Raul, J.R. [ph]., from Camp Rhino in 2001. It was in southern Afghanistan, right after 9/11, Raul, when you and I were out there. And you ask about a cold night in Afghanistan when I was walking the perimeter by myself, greeting a bunch of young marines and: *What was I thinking about?*

General Mattis: Well, I think I remember the night in question. If you'll recall, the mortars were firing in one direction and we had a lot of shooting going on at one side of the perimeter. And the reason they keep some of us grey-haired guys around is because it's not our first war; it's not our second war. And what I was doing was walking to the opposite side of the perimeter just suspicious if the enemy was perhaps feinting on one side and they were actually going to attack over on your side of the perimeter.

So I was over there knowing full well that the marines at the position we were being attacked would handle the enemy. I wanted to make certain we were ready for any surprises. So I was over there just checking on the marines, seeing how they're doing, and all of whom wanted to get over to the other side of the perimeter, get in the fight. And I said, "Oh, you boys just stay right here. There'll be plenty of fighting before this is done." So that's what I was thinking about that night, Raul, and thanks for being out there. It was a cold night.

Prompt: Jonathan Herrera [ph] wants to know: *What is the one leadership lesson you learned as a general grade officer that you would wished you had known your whole career?*

General Mattis: You know, you learn all the way through, Jonathan. At each rank you're learning more, and if there was one lesson that came more and more into focus over the years, it was one I learned by watching similar-sized units. Like for example, I watched dozens of platoons go through certain ranges; or I saw companies, dozens of companies, in fights. I always wondered what made one unit better than another. They were all well-trained. They all came through the boot camp. All of them --All of them had been recruited from America and they were quality young men.

So what made them different?



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It was the junior leadership, the junior NCOs, the junior officers whose coaching, whose animating spirits brought out the best in their troops; who had admired leadership. We all know that earning the trust and respect of your subordinates is critical. You -- You simply have to earn that trust. You have to earn that respect. You have to earn that every day, because when it's all over and done with you're not going to win any fights as a leader. Your troops are going to win those fights.

But there was another word I learned to prioritize as I evaluated units, and that word was *affection*. It's not popularity, with all the favoritism that comes with trying to be a popular person as a leader. That's a -- a road to failure. But affection that you create in a unit, an affection so strong that the troops will stick by one another; they'll carry out the mission even in peril. And I bring this one up because I believe that that kind of affection brings out self-discipline, where people don't want to let down the unit.

And I think that if there is one lesson I learned along the way -- that the more you can build that kind of affection in a unit, when the going gets tough, when people are getting shot down around you, it'll pull together; it'll pull through. And it'll be a lot smoother organization: It'll move more rapidly against the enemy, more fluidly against the enemy; and it will, generally speaking, have fewer disciplinary problems in garrison, whether they be DUIs, sexual harassment, or all that -- that stuff that you see some jerks do. And on the other hand, when you're in combat, you'll find that they really play hell with the enemy because [of] what they sense about each other and the conviction they have to supporting one another, their commitment to one another.

Prompt: Philly Best 36 [ph] -- Where do you guys get these names? -- wants to know: *What leadership books do you recommend?*

General Mattis: It's a great, great question because the Commandant's Reading List is designed specifically to identify the very best reading there is on leadership. If you go to that -- that reading list you'll find *Gates of Fire*. And when you read *Gates of Fire*, you find you, as a young leader, will never face anything worse than what fighters have faced in the past. If you read Eugene Sledge's book about -- *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, you'll find the spirit of the Marine Corps overcoming the most difficult combat conditions. And again, you'll find that you will face nothing new under the sun. You will be able to overcome it if you keep your Marine Corps training and your Marine Corps spirit foremost.



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It requires you to do a lot of reading because there are many different styles of leadership. You must stay authentic to who you are but at the same time we expect you to lead, in no uncertain terms. In the Marine Corps you're not paid to have a mid-life crisis, or ask people to help you through your mid-life crisis. You're there to give the enemy a mid-life crisis. And that means you put your marines together into a good, tough team. And by reading from the Commandant's Reading List you cannot go wrong in getting different leadership ideas that will serve you very, very well.

Prompt: SepiaAlltheThings [ph] wants to know: *What did you look for in your NCOs and how should the relationship between an NCO and an officer compliment one another?*

General Mattis: You know, Sepia, for all NCOs and petty officers in a fleet marine force, I look for two qualities. I knew I could trust marines. I made that assumption -- I can trust marines. So what I was looking for was initiative and aggressiveness. I wanted them to have the initiative to take charge, the aggressiveness to carry out whatever the order was. I wasn't interested in them saying that something was "difficult." I wasn't interested in the difficulty. Difficulty is -- is an excuse that the Marine Corps will never accept from its sailors and marines, its petty officers and NCOs. So I looked for the initiative and aggressiveness and the ability to bond with their troops, so that their troops looked at them as the admired leader, the toughest leader, the most capable leader that they could hope for.

As far as the relationship between an NCO and an officer, there are some things that rightly belong to NCO leaders. These are things that have to do with the daily functioning of the unit; while the officer should be more concerned with being the sentinel, looking further out, making certain that...the unit is ready for whatever is coming down the pike, whatever missions are coming. So he's always on the lookout for an enemy, for an ambush, this sort of thing, and creates that kind of combat-hunter mentality in -- in the Marines. But the NCO has got to make certain, the petty officer's got to make certain that the sailors and marines look and act like marines and are ready for whatever is coming; whatever the officer brings down as the mission, they are ready to embrace it and carry it out.

Prompt: Hey Del Bono [ph] wants to know -- again, where do you guys get these names? You know, I'm -- I'm going to come up with a few good ones for myself after this¹ -- Hey Del Bono asks: *What in your opinion is the most important leadership trait and why?*



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General Mattis: There is no way to separate out the leadership traits because if you prioritize one over the others then you actually become a weaker leader. You've got to look at all of them, and how they come together, that make you into the kind of leader that your troops want to follow, and are willing to follow, knowing you have the skill and the enthusiasm, you have the passion, you have the compassion that makes you the full package. Remember, what we want to do is make marines and win battles, and you do this by creating a Marine Corps that has no better friend and no worse enemy. You can't be strong in one leadership trait and lackluster in another and be a good leader. So the answer to the question about which is the most important leadership trait, I think it's how you put it together in your own authentic way so you stay yourself, but at the same time you recognize your responsibility to put all the leadership traits together in one complete package.

Prompt: Roy McVay [ph] asks: *What is the kill-casualty radius of my knife hand.*

General Mattis: Well, Roy, I would tell you that be -- once you get to be a high-ranking officer, the kill-casualty radius is whatever your marines make it. And by the time I got up to the senior ranks it was hundreds of miles. But I would just tell you that I -- I remain humbled that I was able to stay in the Marine Corps so long when young marines like you would make that kill-casualty radius very deep in enemy territory and carry out the marine's mission in a way that, by the time you're a high-ranking officer, basically your -- your reputation is carried, made, by you young marines who went into the fights with the enemy. So the kill-casualty radius, as far as you can throw it there, young man.

Thank you.

¹ He has a few to choose from already -- "Mad Dog Mattis", "The Warrior Monk", (callsign) "Chaos" -- should he be so-inclined.