Being a senior leader in the Marine Corps is both an honor and a privilege, but along with those things comes a great deal of responsibility. Part of that responsibility is to see to the continued success of the institution. It takes effort every day to ensure that the Corps continues to train and educate Marines so that they are equal to any challenge the Service may face in today's world. The Marines have a proud history of almost 250 years of service to the nation that we must ensure we live up to and this is something that is earned every day. The Corps cannot rest on its laurels based on past glories and it must keep on earning the trust and respect of the American public. We must also build and maintain trust within the Corps' ranks. Since the cohesion that comes from Marines trusting each other with their lives is essential to success in combat, anything that erodes that trust or takes away from our ability to win the nation's battles must be removed from our Corps.
Another, and equally important, responsibility is to ensure the well-being of our most precious assets—our Marines. The American public lends us these young women and men for varying amounts of time. Some spend only a short time in the Marine Corps, while others, like me, spend decades in uniform. Someone once said that the extent of one’s life is represented by the hyphen between the birth and death dates on a gravestone.\(^1\) The life of a Marine is the hyphen between the date they step onto the proverbial yellow footprints at Recruit Training or report to Officer Candidates School and the date when they take the uniform off for the last time. Once they have done so, that person never stops being a Marine at heart, though they no longer wear the uniform or are expected to live up to our standards and, most importantly, to go in harm’s way again. We, as leaders, try to ensure that, while Marines wear the uniform, they are the best Marine possible, but also when they take the uniform off, they return home better people than when they left.

The challenge here is that despite the rigors of Marine Corps entry-level training, not all our young men and women truly accept what we are trying to get them to understand and live up to. The best articulation for this issue can be found in *A Tactical Ethic* by Dick Couch. Couch states that all the efforts to inculcate the values of both the SEALs and the Marine Corps in those wishing to join the ranks are, for some, overcome in the first operational unit they join by *the need to belong*. They allow peer pressure and the desire to be seen as a member of the “gang” to persuade them to do things that run directly counter to all they have been taught up to this point in their career.\(^2\)

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1 The poem “The Dash” was originally written by Linda Ellis in 1996 and then published later as part of a larger work in Linda Ellis and Mac Anderson, *The Dash: Making a Difference with Your Life* (Naperville, IL: Simple Truths, 2017).
For the Marine Corps in particular, this is unacceptable. Our official motto is semper fidelis, meaning always faithful, which implies that we are always faithful to our country, our Corps, our fellow Marines, our families, and, for many of us, God. We are always faithful to the Marine Corps’ core values of honor, courage, and commitment. These concepts cannot simply be repeated and then quickly forgotten in the face of daily moral and ethical challenges or the need to belong. We strive to live up to being a Marine 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Marine Corps has some of the highest standards in the military and always strives to live up to them.³ It is what has set the Corps apart as a Service since it was originally established on 10 November 1775. It has also given Marines an esprit de corps that has enabled us to persevere through every fight we have been engaged in during the course of the history of the Service.

Unfortunately, not everyone who earns the title of Marine remembers what they were taught, and some forget what it really means to be a Marine in every sense of the word. This was graphically illustrated by the 2017 Marines United scandal when the national media exposed a secret site where both active and retired Marines were posting lewd pictures of their fellow Marines and making derogatory comments about them.⁴ Regrettably, while the Corps has made some progress in curtailing this behavior, it continues to be a problem for the Service. The actions of those posting hateful things about their fellow Marines do not represent who we are as a Corps. They seem to believe that whatever they post online exists in some sort of accountability-free zone, where they are not responsible for their words and actions. This is just one example of behaviors that do not belong in what should be a close-knit, cohesive fighting organization.

I remember a poster that was prominent when I was a young officer that shows a drill instructor pointing out from it like the World War I “Uncle Sam Wants You!” posters. At the bottom of the poster, it reads, “If you were accused of being a Marine, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It is this question that I want to ask Marines on a daily basis to remind them of those who have gone before us and all that we have to do to live up to the standard they set. This is especially true of those servicemembers who have altered the definition of what a Marine ought to be and how they ought to act.

The higher echelons of the rank structure receive daily reports of all the activities occurring that do not comport with the Service’s core values. Whether it involves a servicemember committing suicide, sexual assault, abuse, hazing, or irresponsible acts on social media, it can make for discouraging reading. None of these things are acceptable to a Marine and all are incompatible with what is required for success in combat—the absolute, life-dependent trust Marines must have in one another. Without trust, and the cohesion it creates, history demonstrates that combat units are brittle and tend to shatter under the pressure of conflict. An example of this was seen during the Korean War when poorly trained American units fell apart under the pressure of North Korean and Chinese attacks. It got so bad at various points during the conflict that American forces termed it “bugout fever.” Entire units would leave their vehicles, heavy weapons, and equipment and flee.⁵ We cannot allow these types of events to ever happen again.

Prior to my retirement, as I was reading these daily reports, I was struck by the desire to talk to these young men and women and help them see the consequences of their actions before they made poor decisions that took them down the wrong path. If I or any leader

could do this, I think we would not see so much of this self- and unit-destructive behavior. As a senior leader in the Marine Corps, I wanted to help them learn to be better Marines and people because that was one of my obligations. It is also essential to the trust we needed to build and maintain, which made me think back to the discussion my son and I had regarding the movie Secondhand Lions and the technique Robert Duvall’s character used to improve the young men he encountered. I believe that same approach could help the Corps, except that instead of a speech, I present what you are reading now.

In writing the earlier article and subsequently, this book, I wanted to clarify that I neither have all the answers to life nor could I live up to all that is written here to the fullest extent. I do not, but I will never stop making the attempt. In my experience, I have found that life is tough and frequently seems like a stroll (or dead sprint at times) through a minefield where you can see some of the land mines sitting on the surface, while others remain hidden from sight. We must acknowledge their presence and tread carefully around them to avoid the damage they can do personally and to those around us. No one is perfect though and all of us encounter mines in our daily lives, some big and some small. It is how we respond to these encounters that matters.

What I provide in the chapters that follow are the things that I personally believe in and that have enabled me to successfully deal with these land mines. The chapters are not long and this is by design. I want to gain and maintain the attention of a generation for whom studies show shorter attention spans than those who are not digital natives. After 34 years in the Marine Corps as well as a happy, healthy

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6 The average attention span of an adult has dropped approximately 25 percent to 8 seconds or less in recent decades. For more on the impact of digital technology, see Maria Vedechkina and Francesca Borgonovi, “A Review of Evidence on the Role of Digital Technology in Shaping Attention and Cognitive Control in Children,” Frontiers in Psychology (February 2021), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.611155.
marriage (33 years and counting) and family, I want to share what has served me well over the years. I offer what follows in the hope that the precepts do so for others too.

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Suggested Further Study


This book, though a short read, demonstrates how the need to belong can overcome the values instilled through some of the most rigorous indoctrination in any military in the world.


This book demonstrates the danger of units that are unable to trust each other and come together as teams. Time after time, U.S. Army units in Korea collapsed and fled instead of holding together and fighting. The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade in Korea had to repeatedly plug holes formed by Army units who had deserted the battlefield.


The movie that inspired the article and now this book.