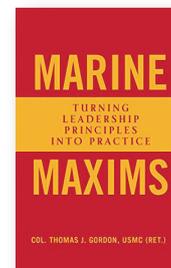


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Marine Maxims: Turning Leadership Principles into Practice*

by Col Thomas J. Gordon, USMC (Ret.)

Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland; 2021; 332 pp; ISBN 9781682476970 (hardcover); RRP \$24.95 (USD); Ursula Davidson Library call number 813 GORD 2021.



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*Marine Maxims* is a collection of fifty principle-based leadership lessons that Thomas J. Gordon acquired commanding Marines in the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in a career spanning three decades.

The book is premised on a belief that leadership can be learned. Experience might be the best teacher, but Gordon is motivated by his belief that you can also learn how to become a good leader outside “the school of hard knocks”, by study, with due reflection on the experience of others.

This is not novel. There are many books that seek to come to grips with the complexities of “Leadership”. The subject is staple fare for the personal and professional development of both commissioned and non-commissioned officers and is on the curriculum of most, if not all, of the world’s military schools, from basic training to senior staff college; such is the importance of good leadership, especially for those entrusted with the lives of others. Indeed, Gordon readily acknowledges there is nothing new or novel in the maxims he identifies and that he relies on others, as much as he does on his own experience, to gather and share his insights.

What perhaps distinguishes this publication is that Gordon succeeds in packaging a lifetime of learning into a succinct and very readable book. At its core are the 50 maxims gathered during Gordon’s 30 years in uniform, presented as a collection of practices and behaviours that can be applied today, accompanied by insights taken from an eclectic mix of books touching on the subject of leadership and reflections based on his own experience and observations.

For the military reader, Gordon’s experience is most relevant, and current. He graduated from The Citadel<sup>1</sup> in 1991 and was commissioned into the USMC. His command assignments included service with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalions, assuming command of 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division in 2008. His staff assignments included service in senior headquarters in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bangladesh, coordinating force rotations, coalition support and disaster relief operations. He deployed with the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) (Forward) as the Lead Planner and Liaison Officer for the drawdown in Afghanistan, and in 2014 assumed Command of II MEF Headquarters Group, which became responsible for executing combat opera-

tions and providing world-wide communications, intelligence, electronic and cyber warfare capabilities, force protection, and supporting arms integration for all MEF deploying from the East Coast of the United States. He retired in June 2021, taking on the position as the Commandant of cadets at his alma mater, The Citadel.

When Gordon was a cadet at the Citadel, he began what would become a life-long practice; keeping a written record of the leadership practices he observed, recording those he admired, and those he did not, in his standard-issue, green, clothbound notebook. As he assumed command of larger organisations, he continued the practice and kept notes of the “best practices” of not only the leaders he worked for, but also from the subordinates he was serving. From these he selected his 50 maxims of leadership.

One of the strengths of *Marine Maxims* is that it cuts through the theory to focus on the practice. It is primarily aimed at Marine officers but has broader appeal, with insights drawn from publications on politics, business, religion, and sport, including books such as *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy; *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us about the Business of Life*, by James Kerr, which provides many practical tips on creating a cohesive team and a culture of continuous improvement, and even from the *Bible*.

Another strength is that the book is helpfully divided into 14 functional areas, such as “Building Cohesion” and “Taking Command”. These, in turn, are divided into chapters, each addressing a specific maxim, for example: “It Is Not about You”, “Keep Little People Little”, “You Said It, but That Doesn’t Mean They Heard It”, and “Don’t Expect What You Don’t Inspect”. The chapters are pithy, and each conclude, under the heading: “Saved Rounds – Some Thoughts and Tips”, with insights, comments, and reflections, presented in short bullet points; followed by a list of recommended books for those looking to explore the chapter’s themes in greater depth.

In Chapter 8, addressing the maxim “Do Routine Things Routinely”, Gordon emphasises the importance for officers of reading military history and encourages them to be intentional about their professional education. If you want a thoughtful summary of what it means to be a leader, with practical reflections, based on relevant experience and sound scholarship, *Marine Maxims* is a good place to start for any aspiring leader looking for a concise overview and “hands on” tuition.

Kim Turner

<sup>1</sup>The Citadel is a military college established in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1842, only some forty years after the founding of the US Military Academy at West Point.