Q&A with First Sergeant Thomas Ochoa: Growing into Leadership—Part 1: The Early Years

By Thomas Ochoa with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/to7thmar

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Thomas Ochoa's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Marine Corps or the United States Military. This article has been reviewed by two intelligence professionals with over two decades of experience and has been deemed to have no classified materials.

Introduction

First Sergeant Thomas J. Ochoa is a United States Marine with over twenty years of active-duty experience. He has conducted nine deployments, to four Geographic Combatant Commands, and over ten countries, including combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. First Sergeant Ochoa started off his Marine Corps career as a 0311, Infantry Rifleman with 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, and has held every enlisted leadership billet in a rifle platoon and rifle company, including team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant, company gunnery sergeant, and company first sergeant. He has conducted two tours of duty at the School of the Infantry-East, being a combat instructor for both Marine Combat Training Battalion and Infantry Training Battalion, where he trained thousands of Marines in the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the infantry. Today, he is the Headquarters Company First Sergeant for Combat Logistics Battalion 7.

First Sergeant Ochoa's two Q&A articles center on leadership. During his journey, he has led in combat and in garrison, with successes and failures along the way. He has seen excellent leadership in his Marine Corps career, as well as occurrences of the lack of leadership. Being an enlisted Marine, his profession requires him to lead down, laterally, and up. Along his leadership journey, he has grown into leadership in an effort to become the leader that he feels his Marines deserve.



Featured above is a candid moment of Lance Corporal Ochoa visiting the grave of his friend Lance Corporal Daniel Olsen, Fort Snelling National Cemetery, in 2007 (photo taken by Daniel's mother, Gwen Olsen).

You did not join the Marine Corps immediately after high school. What made you want to join?

This question is slightly loaded in my opinion. I don't believe that most people are honest with themselves and others when asked this question. Like many of my enlisted peers, I had vague ideas about what the Marine Corps was when I considered enlistment. I had seen war movies and the military on the news but was by no means all about the Service as a child. I was, however, in dire need of direction in my life, and the Marine Corps promised that and so much more. One of the biggest draws to service was travel and adventure. At the end of the day, I tell my junior Marines that, like most of them, I too was hustled by my recruiter. A much better question to ask a twenty-year Service member is, "Why did I decide to stay?"

While we all joined for a litany of reasons, most of us had no idea what to expect when we raised our right hand and took the oath of enlistment. So then, why would a Service member who knew what they were getting into, who had peeked behind the curtain, continue to raise their hand for continued military obligation? For me, it was service; I had stumbled into a career where I felt an immense amount of pride in what I was doing. Almost daily, I was teaching and mentoring young men and women, hopefully making a positive impact in the process. Every time someone shook my hand and said that I had made a huge impact on their life was confirmation for me that I was exactly where I needed to be.

Additionally, I found three things that, from my observations, elude most people: I felt like I was good at my job, my leadership recognized my hard work, and I was happy to go to work most days. These three aspects of a career seemed rare when I talked to my friends who had never joined the military or who had gotten out of the military. Why would I leave something that was treating me so well? Now, there absolutely were bad days, weeks, months, and even years; however, when I looked at things as a whole, leaving the Marine Corps never seemed like an option.



Featured above, from left to right, is Corporal Hitch, Lance Corporal Ochoa (kneeling), an unknown Amphibious Assault Vehicle mechanic, and Lance Corporal Frossard in Iraq in 2007 on the author's first deployment.

On your first deployment, a combat deployment to Iraq, you lost a good friend and fellow Marine. This loss caused you to become a better Marine and leader. Could you expound on this life-changing experience?

Early in my Marine Corps' career, I fell in with the wrong crowd. When checking into your first unit, the subpar Marines come out of the woodwork to befriend you. They are fun to be around, party frequently, and don't judge unless you say something "motivating." Further, a person wanting to be good at the military profession is frowned upon. Obviously, this type of friendship doesn't make you

any better. I found myself going nowhere, again; then I met a few genuinely good people.

Among my new companions were Daniel Olsen and Chad Perreault. I started to "calm down" as we hung out more often. The three of us would spend most nights playing computer games, eating pizza, and hanging out. During leave periods, we visited each other's home states and met everyone's families. Daniel would also take leave to fly home to help with his hometown church's Sunday school. In short, he was a good influence on those around him. Daniel also possessed a near-eidetic memory. He only had to hear or read something two or three times to remember it forever. It was remarkable to see in action.

We deployed to Iraq in 2007. Daniel and I were in the same thirteen-man squad, and Chad was assigned to an adjacent one. After weeks of no enemy fire or combat, Daniel and I had become complacent. One would think that getting complacent in a combat zone is impossible, but even combat gets repetitive after a while. On April 2, 2006, as Daniel and I were standing post together, I was talking to him and scanning our area of responsibility with binoculars when he was shot by an enemy sniper. I will never forget the moment he died; it fractured me in a way that I don't anticipate ever fully recovering from, even to this day.

To make matters worse, the event as it unfolded had been recorded by the enemy, was posted online, and was used as information operations against the United States. Additionally, I was struggling with the belief that I should have seen the sniper platform. "How did I miss the cameraman?" is a question that hounded me. After a few days of mourning and multiple conversations with my mentor, I decided that I had to make my life worth his sacrifice. Daniel was so intelligent and better than me in so many ways.

Warfare is not some game; it is life and death, brutal but honest. I dedicated myself to being the absolute best that I could be and no longer cared if I was popular or fun to be around in training, garrison, or deployed. As you may suspect, many previous friends stopped hanging around me. It was not "cool" to be motivated. I spent the following work-up training myself and every junior Marine whom I could to the highest level possible. I had learned a few invaluable leadership lessons the hardest way possible, and I wanted to make sure others didn't have to learn them the same way that I had. Complacency kills, and it doesn't matter how cool you are; it never did, and it never will. Whatever your given profession is, you should strive to be the best at it. In my case, I had to be the best so that everyone could make it home.

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Prior to their first deployment, Thomas Ochoa and Chad Perrault were able to meet Daniel Olsen's family. From left to right: Daniel Olsen; his younger sister, Shaina Olsen; his older sister, Shelcy Olsen; the author; and Chad Perrault.



Above is Lance Corporal Chad Perrault (left), Lance Corporal Ochoa (middle), and Daniel Olson's sister, Shaina. The three are paying their respects at Daniel's grave in Fort Snelling Cemetery, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota following 2d Battalion, 7th Marines' redeployment from Iraq in 2007.

Six months after returning from Iraq, you found yourself deployed to Afghanistan. As a young fire team leader (i.e., a unit of four Marines), you said you learned another valuable leadership lesson while on this deployment. Can you elaborate on that lesson?

In 2008, I had spent the better part of six months working myself and my fellow Marines to the bone. Being a lance corporal (third grade of enlisted Marine), I had lost my leadership position to a higher-ranking Marine who had just joined the unit. This Marine had zero combat experience and cared very little about the hard, rigorous training that I had become accustomed to in 7th Marines. While I was initially upset over losing my position, I remembered Daniel's death and that nothing matters more to me than bringing everyone home. I was determined to be a good example to the younger Marines, so I spent countless hours studying squad and platoon-level tactics and taught classes to anyone willing to listen, especially junior members of my own team.

By the time we deployed, I felt we were as ready as we were going to be. I was proud of my fellow fire team members. We even won multiple competitions against other small teams in tests of knowledge, physical fitness, and small-unit tactics. I felt that these wins helped reinforce to the junior Marines that dedicated hard work and extra effort paid off. Nonetheless, I learned that, however ready you may feel, the battlefield is chaotic and full of chance, as the story of my friend Lance Corporal Ivan Wilson proves.

Three months into the deployment, I was allowed to take over as a fire-team leader in an adjacent squad. I was sad to move fire-teams, but I was also excited that the hard work was being noticed and I would get to lead again after being removed earlier from the fire team leader position solely due to my rank. Lance Corporal Ivan Wilson was not only a rifleman in my new team but also a good friend I had known since day one in Basic Training. He was a hard worker and incredibly reliable. During a long mission and hard-fought operation, my new team found itself dismounting to provide security for the front of a large convoy while the platoon sergeant gave directions.

We started receiving enemy small arms fire and mortar fire. It was July 21, 2008, and this was my first major operation as a team leader. However, this was what we had prepared for months in the Californian desert for, and why I had trained and taught classes to almost all the junior Marines, including my new team. I knew exactly what commands were needed. I told my team to spread out and take cover behind a small wall facing the enemy's direction. Less than ten seconds after giving that command, Ivan took a knee on a mine and was mortally wounded. While I was attempting to save Ivan's life,



Featured above is Lance Corporal Ochoa (left) in Afghanistan on his second deployment.

the medical evacuation vehicle broke from the column to reach us and also ran over a mine. The back-up medical evacuation suffered the same fate, followed by a second squad that also tried to reach us. I called over the radio that my team would conduct the medical evacuation ourselves by dragging the wounded through our own footprints (to avoid additional mines) back to the convoy. I was later told that Ivan had died in transit.

I was furious with myself and the world. How could this happen? Unlike Daniel, I had done everything by the book, given the correct command based on the situation, and had trained my Marines to their fullest, and on that day, Ivan still perished. His death taught me that even if you do everything right, disaster can still strike. One cannot predict every possible outcome, and it would be wise to come to terms with this truth. Do your best to prepare but remember that the enemy will always have a say.

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Today, what advice would you give yourself in your early career on what it takes to be a leader, and why leadership matters?

I think the best advice that I could give my younger self about leadership is that you don't have to be in charge to be a leader. There is a good number of people who likely confuse leadership with being physically in charge of a unit. There is no truer statement than "the best way to lead is by example." When you lead by example, you become a leader in any room you enter. People will follow your example if it is a good one, and this is the one thing that I didn't fully realize

until later in life. Something that I tell my young leaders now is, "Would you act differently or do things differently if you knew someone was looking up to you? And, what if I told you that person may not even be in your section or unit?" The answer they always come back with is, yes.

Leading by example is the foundation of good leadership. A good leader wants to make the people around them better. We spend our entire lives looking for answers. How to be a better parent? How to be better at any given profession? There are even some deeper questions, like why we are here or what the purpose of life is. While you may not have all the answers, it is important to show people how to live life better, as we can always improve. Young Marines, like everybody, need direction and purpose. These young men and women look to their leaders and mentors to show them the way, as they are often far from home.

I remember thinking that my first squad leader, Sergeant Matthew Walker, was a great example. He worked and trained hard, so I started doing the same. He studied tactics, so I studied tactics. He did so many other things that I wanted to do as well. I ran into him a few years ago at a company reunion, and I told him how much he meant to me. He was blown away and said that he didn't realize how big a role model he had been. It was that weekend that I started thinking to myself, "Was I someone's, Sergeant Walker?" For the readers, there is likely someone looking to you for the answers. First, start living right through self-discipline, then show them the way.



Featured above is a candid photo of Lance Corporal Ivan I. Wilson during an operation in Nowzad, Afghanistan, in 2008.

You stated that the transition to squad leader from team leader was one of your biggest leadership challenges. What were some of these challenges, and how did you overcome them?

In the winter of 2008, I was faced with a decision: should I depart the Marine Corps or re-enlist? I decided that if I truly wanted to follow Sergeant Walker's example, then I had to re-enlist and strive to become a squad leader. I continued to train and study hard, and in the summer of 2009, I was given the chance to lead a squad; a position I would hold until it was time for me to execute orders to a new unit in 2011.

I was scared when I first got my chance to move up into the squad leader position (a billet typically held by a sergeant; fifth enlisted rank). Many of the Marines I was leading had known me for multiple years, and while I was now a corporal (fourth enlisted rank), the team leaders under me were also corporals. I was sure many of the other senior Marines were asking why I had been given the opportunity, and I was asking myself, "How do I get them to buy into my vision for the squad?" The answer to both questions was rather simple when I look back on it; I needed to read, learn,



The Marines of 3d Platoon, Fox Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, as part of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit in the South Pacific. On this deployment, the author was a squad leader and corporal.

train, and showcase that I not only knew what I was doing, but that I genuinely cared for my Marines.

I tore into every publication I could find and continued to train my Marines hard, while ensuring that absolutely no Marine in my squad would be treated poorly or hazed. Sergeant Walker had shielded us from hazing, and I was determined to do the same. It is hard to say that you care about your subordinates when you treat them poorly or allow someone else to do so.

Initially, leading was difficult, as people questioned my leadership. I decided that rather than fight another leader of Marines, I would work to convince them that we are all on the same team. Again, this takes displayed competence in your tasks and demonstrating that you care for your subordinates through action. I made sure my Marines ate together in the field and got to know each of them personally. My first two deployments had taught me that I needed the junior Marines ready to take over as team leaders, and the team leaders needed to be ready to take over for me.

Therefore, I let the Marines in the squad take turns leading different types of classes and training situations. These actions inadvertently led to buy-in. The goal of any great leader should be to ensure that each team member knows they are valued and have leadership potential. Regardless of your profession, these actions will create a legitimate team that cares about one another and the shared goals.

Early in your career, you led small units of action throughout your first three deployments, personally stating that decisiveness was the critical leadership trait. Why is being decisive critical for small unit leadership? How can being decisive be used in sports or business for certain positions?

As a small unit leader, you normally find yourself at the point of friction; therefore, almost nothing is more important than being decisive in battle. Often, you will have only seconds to react to incoming information or conflict. The winner of a firefight is typically the team that completes the OODA loop the fastest. This loop is a four-

step decision-making framework designed by Colonel John Boyd, United States Air Force (retired). It stands for *observe*, *orient*, *decide*, and *act*. The problem with being at the point of friction is that you may only have seconds to get through the loop. Therefore, nothing is more important than having the ability to make good decisions rapidly.

The important thing to remember, whether in business or combat, is that decisiveness must be taught and trained at the lower levels. These entry-level employees or Service members are likely to find themselves at some point in friction by the very nature of their positions, as they are closer to the "ground." A good example of this notion is a lower-level employee who consistently handles customer service. The saying *the customer is always right* is sure to throw a few surprises their way.

In combat, the enemy also has their own plans and ideas that can throw a curveball in any well-laid plan. The question then becomes, "Did you, the leader, teach and train your subordinates to hit a curveball?" Training and education should not stop after high school, college, or entry-level training. If you desire smarter, faster, efficient, and decisive subordinates, then I would suggest you train them continuously. This requires clear standards, assessments, accountability, and the ability for failure to occur, provided the failures are with intensity and effort, not apathy.

I do not consider myself a master trainer, and the past twenty years of my adult life have been in the military—not in the civilian-business sector. However, I feel that the basic ideas around training decisiveness would apply in almost any career field. After the basics of your position are mastered, a young Marine must then be exposed to the unknown and chaotic nature of their field.

Start the training slowly, and begin to build in the complexity of the situations, always ensuring that you add new layers of stress and unforeseen circumstances. After each training session, stop and evaluate how your team members did, then teach them the correct way to handle the situation and run the training again to allow learning and remediation to occur. After multiple training sessions, you will find your team making decisions faster, as they have gotten used to thinking on their feet and now have a solid foundation of experiences to draw on from the experiences that you created for them as their leader.



The Marines of 3d Platoon, Fox Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, are returning from an extended training event in the South Pacific in 2010.