

A Message to Garcia

Remove the book from the Commandant's Professional Reading List

by GySgt Joseph P. Conroy

A *Message to Garcia*, written by Elbert Hubbard, has held a place on the Commandant's Professional Reading List (CPRL) since its inception as the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program.¹ Originally recommended for sergeants (the junior rank addressed in the original ALMAR), warrant officer 1, and first lieutenant, then later for private, private first class, and lance corporal² (where it was categorized as a "memoir"), the book currently occupies the category of Commandant's Choice,³ making it required reading for Marines of all ranks, a distinction it shares with the likes of *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997) and *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-11, Leading Marines* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2002).

The official site of the CPRL—The Library of the Marine Corps Research Guides Portal⁴—gives the following summary of *A Message to Garcia*:

[The] Story of an American soldier charged with delivering a critical message to a leader of Cuban rebel forces during the Spanish American War. He delivers the urgent missive with no questions asked, no complaining, and no hedging. The enduring and almost unbelievably simple message of the essay is this: When asked to perform a task, don't ask How...? or Why...? or Wouldn't it be better if...? Just do it.

This unquestioning moral is particularly interesting for leaders who are reading the book, as it raises questions itself. Namely, "Why didn't the soldier ask how or why?" and "What can I do to replicate that kind of unquestioning confidence in my subordinates?" Sadly, the text of the book itself stops short of answering these questions, reading:

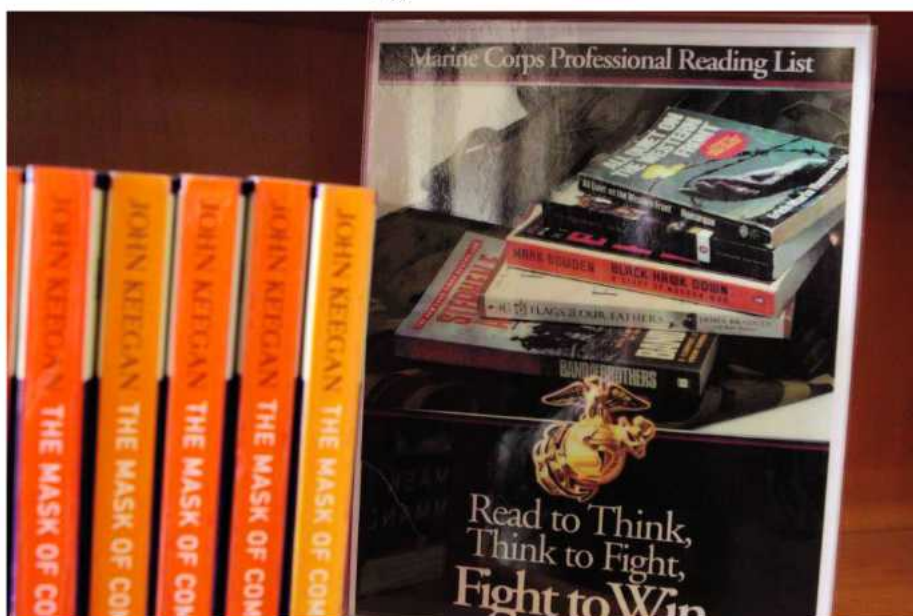
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Rowan was sent for and given a letter to be delivered to Garcia. How 'the fellow by name of Rowan' took the letter, sealed it up in an oil-skin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and having delivered his letter to Garcia, are things I have no special desire now to tell in detail. The point I wish to make is this: McKinley gave

Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, 'Where is he at?'

At this point, history is sidelined and the text transitions to a rant on "Slipshod assistance, foolish inattention, dowdy indifference, and half-hearted work ..." in early 20th century America. Hubbard expects the same from his employees and his readers alike. Do not ask "how" or "why."

Allow me to take this opportunity to bring the hero of the story back into his rightful historical context. "Rowan" was U.S. Army 1LT Andrew Summers Rowan, born 23 April 1857. Rowan graduated from West Point with the class of 1881 and served at a series of frontier posts in the western United States through the end of that decade. He then reported to the Division of Military Information for service in 1890–91. 1891 and 1892 saw Rowan performing as an assistant astronomer



There are better books to read than *A Message to Garcia*. (Photo by Cpl Jovane Holland.)

on an intercontinental survey through Central and South America, returning by an overland route via Mexico.⁵ In 1896, Rowan co-wrote *The island of Cuba; a descriptive and historical account of the 'Great Antilla'* before executing orders to serve as the military attaché to the Republic of Chile in 1897. It is through these details that we begin to understand why Rowan's name was suggested when President William McKinley mentioned the need for an individual to contact Garcia. Rowan was accustomed to hard frontier living, experienced in expedition, spoke Spanish, and had written a book on Cuba. Far from Hubbard's boozy accountant on an errand, Rowan, like Presley O'Bannon's commander, William Eaton nearly a century before, was a passionate expert with years of professional experience.

Biographical context aside, history is challenged further by Rowan's own account, *How I Carried the Message to Garcia*, published in 1922. In it, Rowan tells of being summoned to lunch by COL Arthur Wagner, then head of the Bureau of Military Intelligence. Wagner tasks Rowan with researching the next ship to Jamaica, and on Rowan's return provides him with the rest of the order: "Young man," he continued, "you have been selected by the President to communicate with—or rather, to carry a message to—General Garcia, who will be found somewhere in the eastern part of Cuba ... Means will be found ... to identify you in Jamaica, where there is a Cuban junta. The rest depends on you ... Quarter-master-General Humphreys will see that you are put ashore at Kingston." Wagner provided Rowan with an impressively "mission type" order for a 19th century military officer. Another, albeit trivial, bit of folly in Hubbard's book concerns the timeline itself, with Hubbard alleging "... in four days landed by night ... and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island." Again Rowan's account contradicts, stating his embarkation by train on 9 April from Washington, DC and his receiving of orders forward into Cuba on 23 April after spending two weeks in

Jamaica. On the extraction, Rowan's first quoted date is 7 May ("sighting the Curley Keys") already back at sea just two weeks after departing Jamaica.

The final nail in Hubbard's retelling is his illustration of a letter from the President sealed into an oil skin pouch and strapped over our hero's heart. There was no physical letter. Rowan takes care to explain in his memoir that COL Wagner, aware of the risk to life and strategy that accompanies captured dispatches, forbid any "Written communication, further than is necessary to identify you ..."

Now, let's speak briefly about Rowan's trip into and through Cuba, again using *How I Carried the Message to Garcia* as source documentation. By Hubbard's omissions, the reader would be led to

... you have been selected by the President ...

believe that all logistical considerations were left up to Rowan himself and he travelled alone. On the contrary, Rowan's account of the trip gives significant evidence that he entrusted himself to the Cuban Junta in Jamaica for transport, effectively making himself cargo on the Junta's ratline. While Rowan does state that he had a role in the planning process with the head of the Junta and his aides, he then mitigates that same role with statements like, "But the strangeness of it all! The order in which everything appeared to be arranged!" in regard to his two-relay carriage transport to a boat on the coast of Jamaica and, "By this time a number of ragged Cubans had assembled at our landing place. Where they came from or how they knew that our party was a friendly one, were problems too deep for me" regarding his initial minutes on Cuban soil.

But what if we treat the text as a work of fiction, taking Hubbard's Rowan at face value? Even then, the very moral of the story ("When asked to perform a task, don't ask How...? or Why...? or Wouldn't it be better if...? Just do it.") is problematic.

As Andy R. Lee wrote in the July 2008 *Gazette* article, "Message to Garcia in the Last 50 Yards,"

There are crucial times when asking for clarification or refinement in guidance is not practical and using one's own personal judgment and just completing the mission makes sense and is critical for victory. This has been perfectly executed time and again on the battlefield. Usually it is at a critical juncture, well understood as 'the last 50 yards' of the attack. Time is of the essence, and at the tactical level, command and control is broken down to the squad, fire team, or even individual level. Swift, powerful action is what will decide the outcome. Leaders engaged in combat in the last 50 yards must take whatever commander's intent they have and execute it to the best of their abilities. There is no time for questions; it is a time for action.

Lee continues:

Hubbard's point of carrying the message is well suited for this situation, but all of the planning and preparation leading up to the last 50 yards can be done better under a more efficient leadership philosophy. It is self-defeating not to give subordinates all of the information and assumptions available when issuing tasks and missions. Upon receipt of the task or mission, it is also our job as leaders to verify with higher commanders and, if necessary, refine our ideas of commander's intent. This is nothing new and is a part of our Marine Corps Planning Process. (See *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 5-1 (MCWP 5-1)*.)

In these last 50 yards, a well-trained Marine should have few questions. Hundreds of hours of training (during which direct questions are met with lucid answers) and realistic rehearsals should leave him confident in the purpose of the mission, the efficacy of swift movement, and the lethality of his team's tactics. When the last 50 yards have been covered and time is no longer sensitive, a professionally conducted debrief and after-action report provide the subordinate Marine the opportunity to tactfully question the details of an order. We demand feedback from that Marine on what he saw and how things

could be improved. Having a Marine ask “Gunny, why did we do X rather than Y?” isn’t insubordinate conduct; it’s courageous, intellectually curious, and gives leaders an opportunity to explain the decision-making process to aspiring professionals or to humbly admit mistakes.

Lee’s latter paragraph nimbly dismantles a bet Hubbard places:

You are sitting now in your office—six clerks are within your call. Summon any one and make this request: ‘Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Corregio.’ Will the clerk quietly say, ‘Yes, sir,’ and go do the task? On your life, he will not. By Hubbard’s stance, you should not provide the spelling, a biographical note to ensure the correct Corregio is found, or the timeline in which you want the task completed. Likewise, Hubbard sees questions like, “Don’t you mean Bismark?” and “What’s the matter with

Charlie doing it?” as insulting or undermining rather than facing the reality that sometimes we do mean Bismark, and sometimes we have left Charlie underworked. It’s in this arena of daily low-risk tasks that we should teach our Marines to ask the right questions, tactfully, articulately, and constructively, rather than banning them outright at the cost of efficiency.

As leaders of Marines in the 21st century, we are in a unique position to leverage the education, versatility, and intellect of our subordinates. Rather than shunning questions, we must teach Marines how and when to ask questions and embrace questions through the training and mentoring process in order to eventually deploy Marines who are confident in their leaders, their tactics, and their mission. I posit that *A Message to Garcia* runs contrary to those goals and should be removed from the CPRL, either without replacement, or to be replaced by *How I Carried the*

Message to Garcia, the true, firsthand account of Andrew Summers Rowan’s expedition into Cuba.

Notes:

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *All Marine Message 127/89 (ALMAR 127/89)*, *Marine Corps Professional Reading Program*, (Washington, DC: 11 July 1989).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 246/96, The Marine Corps Professional Reading Program*, (Washington, DC: 8 July 1996).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 001/13, Revision of the Commandant’s Professional Reading List*, (Washington, DC: 2 January 2013).
4. Gen Alfred M. Gray Research Center, (Quantico, VA), information available at <http://guides.grc.usmcu.edu>.
5. Information on 1LT Andrew Summers Rowan is available at: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu>.



MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest Boldness earns rewards...

The annual Chase Prize Essay Contest invites articles that challenge conventional wisdom by proposing change to a current Marine Corps directive, policy, custom, or practice. To qualify, entries must propose and argue for a new and better way of “doing business” in the Marine Corps. Authors must have strength in their convictions and be prepared for criticism from those who would defend the status quo. That is why the prizes are called Boldness and Daring Awards.

Prizes include \$3,000 and an engraved plaque for first place, \$1,500 and an engraved plaque for second place, and \$500 for honorable mention. All entries are eligible for publication.

* Instructions *

The contest is open to all Marines on active duty and to members of the Marine Corps Reserve. Electronically submitted entries are preferred. Attach the entry as a file and send to gazette@mca-marines.org. A cover page should be included identifying the manuscript as a Chase Prize Essay Contest entry and include the title of the essay and the author’s name. Repeat title on the first page, but author’s name should not appear anywhere but on the cover page. Manuscripts are accepted, but please include a disk in Microsoft Word format with the manuscript. The *Gazette* Editorial Advisory Panel will judge the contest in June and notify all entrants as to the outcome shortly thereafter. Multiple entries are allowed; however, only one entry will receive an award.

Be bold and daring!

Deadline: 30 April

Send to: gazette@mca-marines.org
Mail entries to: *Marine Corps Gazette*, Box 1775, Quantico, VA 22134

