U.S. Marine Corps

General James F. Amos, 35th Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps

An Interview with James F. Amos

JFQ: *On a number of occasions, you have remarked that you were surprised to have been selected as Commandant. How has your perspective changed now that you are sitting as the Commandant?*

Col William T. Eliason, USAF (Ret.), interviewed General Amos at his Pentagon office.

General Amos: I was surprised because we've got 235 years of doing business one way in the Marine Corps. Until General [Alfred M.] Gray [29th Commandant of the Marine Corps], all of the previous Commandants had been infantry officers—and General Gray was an artillery officer. So I certainly had no expectations of becoming Commandant. When I tell people that, it's usually couched with, "I wasn't out seeking this job; I wasn't politicking for this job; and I wasn't looking for this job." I was busy being the Assistant Commandant. I was surprised when I was asked because we've never before had a Commandant from a community other than ground combat arms. I have a lot of love for the Marine Corps and I had no desire to try to be a "glass ceiling breaker."

Fast-forward: I've been in this job now for 8 months, and I think I've settled in. I feel

really good about the Marine Corps and what we do for our nation as its crisis response force. When I look at the last 12 months at all the things the Nation has asked us to do, I feel a great sense of pride at the accomplishments of our Marines and Sailors. Many people don't realize how many other missions we've accomplished outside of Afghanistan in that timeframe.

A little more than a year ago, we had the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit [MEU] off the coast of Pakistan assisting flood victims ashore. We sent the 26th MEU 30 days ahead of schedule to relieve the 15th MEU of their flood relief duties. On September 9, 2010, elements of the 15th MEU embarked on the amphibious warship USS *Dubuque*, recaptured the MV *Magellan Star* from Somali pirates, and rescued the 11-man crew. Later in January, we took 1,400 Marines off the 26th MEU and put them ashore in Afghanistan to reinforce the success of the previous fighting season—all the time the rest of the MEU was still flying combat operations off of amphibious ships into Afghanistan and continuing Pakistani flood relief operations.

As trouble brewed in North Africa, the 26th MEU left their 1,400-Marine ground combat element in Afghanistan, sailed to the Mediterranean Sea, and linked up with the majority of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, in Souda Bay, Crete—who had deployed there with less than 20-hours notice from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. With a full complement of Marines, the 26th MEU took station off the coast of Libya and began flying combat missions in support of Operation *Odyssey Dawn*. A few days later, these same Marines from aboard the USS *Kearsarge* rescued a downed F–15 pilot. This mission of two STOVL [short takeoff and vertical landing] AV–8B Harriers, two CH–53Es, and two MV–22 Ospreys briefed, launched, and recovered that pilot in less than 90 minutes.

That same month, the Japanese experienced a terrible earthquake and tsunami that devastated one of their nuclear reactors, and we sent Marines from Okinawa to help with that emergency response and recovery.

From the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, to the 2006 NEO [noncombatant evacuation operation] in Lebanon, and Haitian earthquake in 2010, we've demonstrated that we are America's expeditionary crisis response force, and I'm very pleased with that. I think our stock is high. The Marine Corps is a wonderful institution with great young men and women who are almost always held in high regard. It's a true honor to sit at the top of this organization.

JFQ: *You just returned from a rather intense visit to Afghanistan. Seeing firsthand the many pressures of the mission for the Marines there, what surprised you about your visit?*

General Amos: It wasn't a surprise, but I came away feeling better and better about what's going on. Most of my experience on the ground in combat has been in Iraq, and so I've passed in and out of Afghanistan for the last 3 years. I've watched Helmand Province in Regional Command Southwest steadily improve over time. At the end of the day, Helmand is not going to look like an American city or county, but I've seen areas that were once very, very dangerous change into much safer villages with open marketplaces and schools. Marjah is a classic example.

On February 15, 2010, Operation *Moshtarak* started in Marjah, and the whole world watched it because it was the first major operation as a result of the plus-up of 30,000 U.S. forces. It was a tough fight from February to June, and there was nothing easy about it. Marjah's not so much of a city as it's a big agricultural county, and it was just loaded with IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and Taliban. People began to doubt if it was going to turn.

I tell the Marines, think about what the press was saying in June and July, and even in August 2010—they were saying it can't be done. But it started turning in September and October. Just last Christmas [2010], Sergeant Major Carlton Kent [16th Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps] and I were there, walking through the streets of Marjah in camouflage utilities wearing no body armor at all. Marjah is almost turning out to be a model for how it can be done in Afghanistan. They actually paved a road in Marjah about a month ago—*paved a road*. Markets are open. They have about 2,700 kids going to school now, including girls. None of that was there in February 2010.

So I look at that and I'm optimistic. I agree with what Dave Petraeus has said—that it's fragile and reversible. I think that's accurate. But it's reversible only if we haven't trained the Afghan army, if we haven't trained the Afghan police, if we haven't set standards and respect for rule of law and given them a sense of confidence that one day we're going to be gone, and they can do this on their own. But what I was seeing in the leadership of the police and the Afghan army was pretty impressive. They've got a corps commander down there who is former mujahideen, and he is a tough guy. He's got three brigades, and there is no doubt in their mind that they do their mission—none. We just need to make sure all that we've done is sustainable. I think it is.

I've even seen progress in Sangin, which has been a tough battle. We lost more Marines in Sangin than we have anywhere else in Afghanistan. And yet things have

General Amos speaks to Marines at Forward Operating Base Payne, Helmand Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (Keith R. Durao)

settled down significantly there. Others like Nawa, Lashkar Gah, Delaram, and even Now Zad, which had been under complete Taliban control for about 4 ½ years, have improved. About a year and a half ago, we cleaned Now Zad out, and the district governor and army came in. Now kids there go to school. So now even Now Zad is one of the proof-of-concept areas.

Does the Afghan system need to model America? No, it can't. Theirs is a tribal system. A short vignette: there was a tribal chief from northern Sangin near the Kajaki Dam area who told our two-star commander on the ground that he didn't care about electricity—he just wanted a road. He said it doesn't have to be a paved road, but that he'd just like to have a road where the people from his tribe could transport their vegetables and sell their goods. He just wanted to have some fresh water and some security so that his tribe could be free to move around. That's all he wanted. So we're not Westernizing Afghanistan.

At the end of the day, I'm optimistic. I know it can be done. I really feel good about what the joint force is doing all across Afghanistan—it really probably is the best joint team I've ever seen in my life.

JFQ: *Given those impressions and what you have learned as one of the Joint Chiefs, how will the experiences of these wars—first Iraq, and now Afghanistan—impact the Marine Corps' role in a post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan security environment?*

General Amos: When the Marine Corps comes out of Afghanistan, we're going to reset the force and get back to our role as America's crisis response force. Even with our commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 10 years, we've shown that we can do anything. We did crisis response in Japan during their tsunami/nuclear crisis and also off of Libya during Operation *Odyssey Dawn*. Now, we didn't put forces on the ground in Libya, but we wanted to send a very strong signal with our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] partners to the rest of the world that the United States is a leader. So we sent amphibious warships off their coast, and then we flew airplanes out of Aviano and other places when the no-fly zone began to be enforced. That's what we do.

We can also go ashore for a protracted period of time, just like we did in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I make no apologies for that because we were directed to do that by the President of the United States—as we've done throughout our 236-year history. But America funds a Marine Corps in order to have an immediate crisis response force—what I call a hedge force. When we start thinking about where the world's going over the next two decades, America may want to try to influence things so that we do more war prevention instead of war intervention. I think America buys a Marine Corps to be out there on ships, forward deployed and forward engaged, to be its insurance policy.

When you take a look at where we're headed fiscally—within the Federal Government, the Department of Defense, and the Service budgets—you naturally start thinking about areas where you can take risk as a nation. We can't afford to have everything. So we need to ask what it is we can afford. Everything else becomes a function of risk. So the question is, how much risk is acceptable, and is there a way we can mitigate that risk. The Marines provide our national hedge for risk.

We maintain a high state of readiness, and we fight very hard every year to avoid pressure to bring the Marine Corps' readiness down to what is becoming tiered readiness in other Services—where units return home and their readiness is reduced to 50 percent of what it should be only to be rebuilt with people, training, and equipment for future

General Amos congratulates Marine after awarding him Purple Heart at Forward Operating Base in Musa Qal'eh District, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (Lindsay L. Sayres)

deployments. That works, I think, for probably most forces, if you're on some kind of systematic deployment cycle. But for us, when a Sendai happens or a Libya happens, you can't look around and say, "Okay, we'd like to send in the Marines," and then have the Commandant say, "You know, that's great, I'm really happy to hear that. It's going to take me about 60 days to build a force and cobble that together, and then get a quick training package put together, and then we'll be ready to go." No, we want to be able to do it today. We respond to today's crisis with today's force, today. I just talked to the [National] War College and told them that in real-world crises, as opposed to academic wargames, it's not always immediately clear what the National Command Authority should do. So we first establish our presence and then begin to figure it out. That's why America has a Marine Corps. We are a hedge against risk. We buy time for the national leadership to determine what the next step is.

I'd like to go down that path a little bit because I think it's an important point. As we start getting into budgets and roles and missions, it's important to understand that I don't want the Marine Corps to do the roles of the other Services. For instance, the Air Force's domain is in the air, space, cyber, and it's the greatest air force in the world, second to none. The Army's domain is the land, half a million strong, and they're pretty damn good. The Navy's domain is the sea, both on it and below it. Those three domains all overlap like a Venn diagram. So then you ask, how does the Marine Corps fit into that. We Marines don't really have a domain—we have a *lane*, and that lane is crisis response. I told my fellow Service chiefs, I'm not interested in poaching on your domain at all. But ours is a lane that cuts across all of these domains. If there is some duplication, I think it's not only affordable, it's necessary.

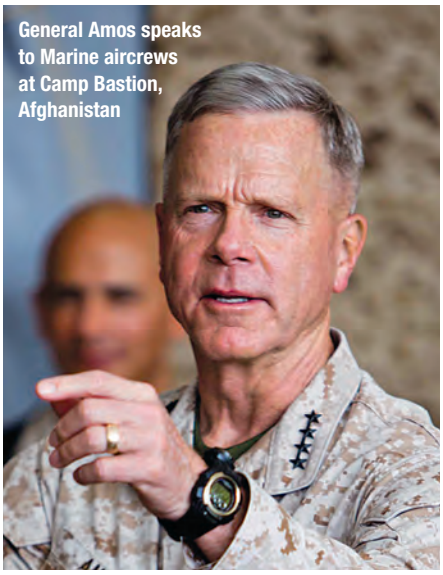
If a nation is going to have flexibility in war planning and in engagement, some duplication is what we want. What we don't want to have is just-in-time delivery capability. It works well if you're Federal Express or Wal-Mart, but for a commander on the ground or the National Command Authority, it doesn't solve their problem.

Also, I am more than happy to be the enabler for some type of coalition force or some other type of joint force or interagency capability. I don't have to be the lead dog. But because we're forward deployed at a high state of readiness, and have all our logistics with us, and we're trained and willing to live pretty austerely, we're ideally suited for crisis response and enabling future operations and follow-on forces.

JFQ: *You have spoken publicly of the recent force structure review you directed and how you view the Corps in the immediate and near future as building a "middleweight force." Can you tell us what this means in support of national security policy?*

General Amos: It's interesting, because unless you put it in context, people will come away with whatever their interpretation is. When we sat down to define this expeditionary force in readiness, we had to start with what we thought the world was going to look like in the next few decades, post-Afghanistan. When I was down at Quantico as a three-star, I worked combat development issues and wrote General [James] Conway's strategy and vision for 2025. We spent almost a year trying to predict what the future security environment would look like. Strategically, you've got to have some sense of what the world is going to look like before you make decisions. You're not going to get it right, but you can't afford to get it completely wrong. So based on that, we said, "What should the Nation, the Department of Defense, the Marine Corps do in that kind of environment? What is our contribution?" And that's where we began to develop a mission statement for the Marine Corps as an expeditionary force in readiness, forward deployed and forward engaged, ready to respond to today's crisis with today's force. We're a middleweight force able to get there quickly, but with enough punch to be able to carry the day upon arrival.

When I talked with Secretary [Robert] Gates about this early on, he said, "Jim, I see the Marine Corps' value to the Nation as the force that's kind of in the middle of the range of military operations." He said, "As you build a Marine Corps in a post-Afghanistan environment, focus your efforts primarily in the center, where everything kind of comes together." It's the most likely environment we're going to operate in—hybrid warfare, fourth-generation warfare—it's almost a nexus of different types of things that are going on. Some are more dangerous than others and some are more humanitarian. He said, "I want you to build a force that takes some risk on the high end of the range of military operations. Let's build a force that's going to be flexible for our nation for the most likely kinds of things we're going to do."


General Amos speaks to Marine aircrews at Camp Bastion, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (Mallory S. VanderSchans)

And so we did. In the force structure review, we examined the future security environment, and our mission statement, and built a middleweight force—one that found the sweet spot between special operations and heavy conventional forces and complements the capabilities of both. So when you look at it in that context, that middleweight force still has the capability to work at the low end, and also still has the capability to work at the high end. In many ways, we will be even more capable than the force today, but smaller—from 202,000 down to 186,800.

JFQ: *You and the other chiefs have been given guidance to cut an additional $400 billion from the Defense Department budget in the coming years. What can you tell us about how this will impact the Marine Corps?*

General Amos: I'm not sure yet because we're working our way through this thing, and I suspect that by the time this article is published, we'll have a lot of history on it. I've got my staff focused on looking at how these predicted budget cuts will impact us in personnel, operations and maintenance, and procurement.

I think the really good news is that Secretary Gates has begun this effort with a strategy review and now Secretary [Leon] Panetta and my fellow Service chiefs are attacking it head-on. It's important that people understand that this isn't a math problem. You have to begin with strategy, and then introduce

math and reality into the strategy, and that gets back to the risk we talked about earlier. The whole concept of risk and how you hedge against it is so critically important. If you understand that, then you can make good decisions down the road. But we need to begin with strategy. My sense is that we're going to get into the issue of how much is enough, and what is it that our nation absolutely has to deliver. That is, if we ever fail at being able to do these things around the world that our nation absolutely has to be able to do, we will have failed at our mission, and our nation may fail at being a superpower. So let's parse out roles and missions across the Services and avoid fear of overlap. There needs to be some overlap within the joint force for flexibility and to provide options. The good news is that the Service chiefs are all friends. Budget battles have a way of testing friendships, but I think everyone here is approaching this from a joint perspective, which is refreshing.

JFQ: *One of the areas all Services are working hard to improve is in energy cost reductions. Can you discuss some of the efforts the Corps has undertaken both at home and in combat to address this challenge?*

General Amos: The effort of trying to change our energy culture began around 2009 at our bases and stations where we've had notable success. For example, at Barstow, California, one of our two big depots, we have a one-megawatt wind turbine and are developing a large solar power project. At Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego and several other bases, we've placed solar panels on many of the buildings. At Miramar, there's a big county refuse dump on the southwest corner of the airfield where we're installing a landfill gas generator to produce power for the base. We are also exploring geothermal resources in Southern California. I feel pretty good about where we're headed.

In 2009, General Conway started looking at the idea of reducing our energy requirements in deployed environments. He started asking how we could make ourselves more combat effective by improving efficiency and reducing the number of generators and amount of fuel. Something around 70 percent of the lift that comes into Helmand Province, Afghanistan, is carrying water and fuel, and the rest is dry goods. We thought, we're along the Helmand River Valley—maybe we can make our own potable water. Now we are. We thought, we're in an area that certainly has a lot of sunshine—maybe we can use solar power. Now we do. How do we heat and cool our tents? We've tried spraying foam on the tents—it just doesn't work well. Then we tried using radiant liners in our tents and found they make a dramatic difference. We had 4,000 generators running on the ground in Afghanistan when we started this. Many were running at about 15 to 20 percent capacity, sucking up fuel. So, on our larger bases, we figured how to network them together into a grid.

We set up an experimental site in Quantico and stood up an expeditionary energy office in the Pentagon led by one of our absolutely brightest colonels. He's connected with [the Defense Department] and industry, and we had a "show-and-tell" where big and small corporations from across the country came and showed us their products. We ended up evaluating about 16 products, and sent 6 of them out to Twentynine Palms, trained the Marines on them, and took them to Afghanistan.

Radios and batteries are a big deal to us; if you go out for a 4-day patrol, you have to carry a lot of batteries. Now we don't have to. We have these solar panels that roll up. They're lightweight, and each weighs just a few pounds. Marines on patrol will have one or two stuffed in their kits. So when they go out on patrol, they don't need as many batteries, saving weight. When they get to where they're going, they lay out the solar blankets, plug them in, and run the radios off them. I think we're making progress.

The goal is to create a more capable force: lighter than today, less dependent on liquid and battery logistics, with greater operational reach at less risk. We aim to reduce our energy use by 50 percent by 2025, and I think we'll do it well before that. We're just on the cusp of this; we're about to do another one of these expeditionary energy evaluations with small suppliers, select the products that seem to have the most promise, and take those products down to Twentynine Palms and give them to a unit to train with.

Think about this. If you go out on a logistics patrol right now or a convoy resupply, and you leave Camp Leatherneck and head to the southern part of Helmand, it's 4 days down and 4 days back—in some cases being interdicted along the way with IEDs while you're hauling stuff. If you could reduce the number of vehicles you have by 50 percent, that's 50 percent fewer young men and women who are exposed. I think that's pretty significant.

We're trying to change the Marine Corps to a culture of efficiency, and that takes a while but it's changing. We recently had a battalion in Sangin, Afghanistan—in the middle of all the fighting—that deployed with all this solar gear. About halfway through the fighting, they break it out to see if it worked. They became addicted to it because they didn't have to carry as much weight, and it made their lives a lot easier. So I think the transition to a cultural mindset of valuing resource efficiency is probably easier for today's generation of Marines than it would be for my generation.

JFQ: *As a member of the Joint Chiefs, can you give us your impression on the future of jointness and what, if any, work remains to be done to achieve the goals of Goldwater-Nichols?*

General Amos: My sense right now is that there's a greater willingness and understanding and appreciation for what the joint community brings. Institutionally, each of our Services has at one time or another dug in and said, "This is mine, and I'm the only guy that can do this mission, and I'm going to make sure I'm the only guy that can do this mission." The fact is, there's so much going on, and everything is so expensive today, that it drives us to a joint solution for just about every problem. It doesn't matter if what's happening is off the coast of Libya, or in Afghanistan, or in Japan. It drives the joint force to come together to accomplish the mission. My sense is that we're better than we've ever been.

I think there's a willingness and an appreciation and understanding from all Service chiefs that there's goodness to this. We don't have to sit around and become territorial and wring our hands. I think some of that played out in 2002–2003 with the air piece of OIF-I [Operation *Iraqi Freedom* I], where we all began to understand and appreciate each other's abilities that the joint force could capitalize on. I think the danger right now could be that, and I'm a big Goldwater-Nichols guy, is that I see a potential for forcing a decision to be made that doesn't make any sense in an effort to call it joint. I'm not being a hypocrite. I'm saying we've come so far now, and I think we're getting pretty close to where we ought

to be. What we wouldn't want to do is say that every single thing we do from now on has to be joint. I think OIF I was a tipping point in joint operations. I think people try to think it was *Desert Shield/Desert Storm*. I think there was still enough parochialism going on then. I don't sense that now—not one bit. There's plenty of room for everybody, and if we all have capabilities, we can put them together, and the outcome is pretty significant. I feel good about that.

JFQ: *With some 10 years of combat, all Services are experiencing a number of concerns with the long-term health of their Servicemembers and their families. Can you offer us some of your thoughts on what the Defense Department and the Marine Corps in particular are doing well and what more needs to be done to address the concerns you may have on this issue?*

U.S. Marine Corps (Mallory S. VanderSchans)

Commandant gives pep talk to Marine team participating in Wounded Warrior Games in Colorado Springs

General Amos: When we started bringing back our wounded, our medical care was second to none, and it's still that way. We can save lives. I never hear anybody talk about not getting the right kind of medical care; 99 out of 100 families all say the care is great. We're lacking with the families. You've got two entities here. You've got the young Marine, Airman, Sailor, Soldier who comes back through Landstuhl into one of the major facilities and then you have the families. If it's a minor injury, and everything is going to be fine, then life kind of becomes normal again, but I know mothers who have lost their jobs because they didn't leave their wounded son's side because he needs an advocate. So we weren't prepared for that.

Different organizations have come along to help. We have one in the Marine Corps called the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund that was founded because of the need to take care of families. We also formed the Wounded Warrior Regiment to take care of the Marines themselves. My sense is we're doing a pretty good job of taking care of our wounded warriors.

One thing to note is that the nature of the wounds today is significantly different. We worked hard to get through the burns and all the things we were seeing from Iraq—the IEDs with fuel packed around them and accelerants and propane that were burning the Marines. Today, we have 15 Marines that have lost at least 3 limbs—11 triple amputees and 4 quad amputees with no limbs at all. A large number of them are married. We've got young wives now trying to take care of their wounded husbands and it's very difficult. Even when it comes to just household stuff, basic cleanliness and just living—that spouse has to do everything for them. The needs of these triple and quad amputees are vastly different than those of our other wounded, and we haven't quite worked our way through that yet. It's become clear to me that this is a different category of wounded, and this is going to take an extraordinary effort. We're going to have to change some laws and some procedures.

For instance, we have a policy now where we provide a stipend to non-military/non-family attendants to care for a wounded person, and it's really just there to pay their expenses. If you're a spouse, you don't qualify for it. So we're dealing with one young sergeant, a triple amputee, his wife's a nurse, and they have two young children. They're from another country, their family lives outside the United States, and she's a wonderful wife, and he's a great young sergeant. She wants to make some income for their family because she can't work now—all she does is take care of the husband, and she takes care of the two children. They need some help here. We need to recognize that triple and quad amputees are not the same as some other injuries, and there's a psychological penalty to this not only to the wounded warrior who's missing limbs, but to the family members who have to take care of them.

Just this morning, I learned of a young wife who's talking about taking her life. Not because she doesn't love her husband, but because it's come to the point where it's overwhelming her; she didn't know what to do. We need to change that. The system is not set up for that. In the next few weeks, I'm going to get some of the folks from the VA [Department of Veterans Affairs], Tricare, some of the Service reps in here, and we're going to discuss this. I'm more than prepared to go to Congress with this, because if you even mention something like this to Congress they're going to help you.

The other point I want to tell you is that there's so much capability on the civilian side of medicine across the United States. In some cases, they don't even know how they can help because they don't know that there's a need. But once they find out, they volunteer their medical services, their hospitals and medical teaching universities, their material, their bed spaces, their surgeons, and their nurses. There's an enormous capability of untapped goodness across this country. There's some who think that the Department of Defense is going to solve all of these major medical issues with our wounded, and I think that's wrong. I know a lot of these folks in the civilian medical community, and they feel it's their way to contribute to the defense of our nation. They may not wear the uniform, but love helping, and in some cases, it doesn't cost the Department of Defense a dime. I think there's more that can be done by the American medical community, and I think they want to do it. **JFQ**