NPS / NWSI hosts Maj Gen Mullen for a lecture and conversation on thinking, learning, and leading for Warfighters

Col Randy Pugh & Dr. Mie Augier

In July, MajGen Mullen, the Commanding General (CG) of Marine Corps Training and Education Command (TECOM), gave a talk entitled “PME on PME” and interacted with students in the class ‘Critical Thinking for Strategic Leadership’ around the topics of thinking, learning and leadership for warfighting professionals.

Though perhaps most well-known for his current job as CG of TECOM, Gen Mullen has written for years about the importance for military professionals to read, think, and learn. Two articles, ‘a warrior’s mind’ (https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Warriors-Mind.pdf) and ‘advanced reading skills’ (https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/Mullen-2.pdf) are
particularly useful for Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Soldiers interested in improving their thinking and learning skills.

Before speaking with NPS students, MajGen Mullen was introduced by Maj Sean Barrett (a recent NPS graduate) and NPS’ Senior Marine, Col Randy Pugh. Maj Barrett linked the themes of the presentation to his own relationship with General Mullen, noting that the general was a leader who was always willing and eager to learn. Col Pugh noted the importance of making learning an institutional priority and an essential element in achieving and maintaining ‘cognitive overmatch’ against potential future adversaries. All three noted the linkage to Gen Gray’s emphasis on thinking and learning, manifested in his founding of Marine Corps University, FMFM-1 ‘Warfighting’, and his constant emphasis on the maneuver warfare way of thinking.

In his talk and subsequent discussion with NPS students, MajGen Mullen emphasized themes such as the importance of dedicating oneself to learning as an essential element of professionalism and of viewing the brain as a muscle that, like other muscles, needs exercise to avoid atrophy. “Reading is like PT for the brain”, Mullen said, noting the importance of deliberately reading broadly both to cultivate intellectual range, insight, and the ability to think critically. The fields he said he found most valuable included systems theory, history, cultural anthropology, and military theory. He also noted that there are few excuses for not reading pointing out the many options we have today for reading, including audiobooks. Beyond self-improvement, he made an important point about how leaders need to foster a positive environment that incentivizes (but does not compel) reading. Emphasizing the different approaches to decision making – analytical, recognition primed, and intuitive – he noted that most decisions leaders, especially warfighting leaders, have to make are wicked problems made in ambiguous circumstances and environments. Good decisions in these cases often rely on the decision makers previous dedication to cultivating their thinking and the resultant intuitive decision making skill. General Mullen insisted that building thinking and learning into our PME curricula and our approaches to education in general will continue to be central to moving PME beyond the industrial era approach and to evolving to true active learning (also noted in the Commandant’s Planning Guidance).

General Mullen also noted the importance of lifelong learning. Because our profession of arms is in constant competition with the adversary’s profession of arms, one can never be well-read enough; our competitors and opponents are always trying to out-think us and find potential weaknesses. Particularly in the cognitive age, those potential weaknesses – and thus any basis for competitive advantages – are likely about critical and creative thinking and the learning process behind developing those skills. This aspect reinforces and details ideas also put forward in the CPG, NDS, E4S Study, and the USMC’s new doctrinal publication, MCDP-7.
After MajGen Mullen’s prepared remarks, students engaged him with questions on topics such as how to engage juniors in reading; how to cultivate the most difficult traits and skills underlying thinking and learning; how to help resident PME and unit-level professional development towards more ‘how to think’ education (rather than ‘what to think’ training); and how great power competition may necessitate even more focus on thinking and learning. The interactive and lively discussion included students from three different schools across NPS campus, who all proved enthusiastic about the general’s talk and their ability to interact with him.

Navy Lt Elena Williams, in the Graduate School of Defense Management, noted: “General Mullen’s discussion has forever changed and influenced my prior thinking regarding reading. One thing he said that stuck out was "Reading is important because of the wisdom that we accumulate through reading, which helps to come up with answers when faced with a challenge" and another was "We view reading as work and not a leisure activity". Personally, prior to his discussion, I thought of reading as work. I need to alter my perception and predetermined feelings towards reading to consider it an opportunity rather than a chore. She linked reading to the practice in leaders themselves and as central to developing future leaders: “Mullen said "honoring your intellectual edge", this rings true and as leaders, we can better lead others by honing our own skills, learning, and training our minds to
be open, inherently building our intellect. How can I influence juniors to read if I am not practicing what I preach? “

Major Garth McDermott US Army special forces and student in the Defense Analysis curriculum, commented on the increasing importance of thinking in the great power competition era: “As we shift towards great power competition, I found Gen. Mullen’s insights on how critical thinking and PME can be used as our strategic advantage illuminating. In the next war we may not have a numerical or technological advantage, therefore, we must outthink our enemies”.

Lieutenant John Bridgeman (National Security Affairs Department, Far East Asia Curriculum) also found Mullen’s emphasis on the brain as a muscle interesting: “I really enjoyed Gen Mullen’s discussion of the brain as a physical part of the body that needs to be exercised in the same way that our muscles do. It also rang true that, in the military context, we owe it to those under our command to be the strongest thinkers that we can be. Command decisions can be a matter of life and death, so leaders at all levels should proactively engage in cognitive development.”

And Major John Bailey (Graduate School of Defense Management) found inspiration in Mullen’s reading habits and emphasis in lifelong learning: “As the character of war evolves with greater complexity, Marines will face even greater challenges to understand their environment, decide and then act. Wisdom gained through reading, learning and the development of critical thinking skills can help reduce this complexity and increase our level of understanding. Last Monday, Gen Mullen offered valuable insight on the benefits, and quite frankly, the professional obligation Marines have to be lifelong readers and learners. As an avid reader who finishes about four books per week, he’s absolutely setting the standard.”

We hope this will be the first of several events and activities focusing on cultivating ‘first to think’ and the importance of recognizing interdisciplinary thinking and learning for developing warrior scholars and leaders as also emphasized by President Rondeau in her recent article, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/january/future-military-leaders-need-interdisciplinary-educations.

_The event and class was organized and taught by NPS’ NWSI faculty. NWSI is a newly established institute aimed to facilitate interdisciplinary and synergistic events, activities, and learning across campus, all focused on warfighter issues. GB3400 is a new class focused on critical and interdisciplinary thinking and learning for warfighting leaders._