

The Last Three Yards

Improving the MCMAP

by Kyle Nelson

In June 2010, Cpl Clifford Wooldridge of 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment was in the midst of a brutal firefight, out of ammunition, and facing a Taliban fighter only feet away. The corporal quickly grabbed the barrel of the insurgent's machine gun and slammed him against a wall. Both men fell to the ground in a struggle, but Cpl Wooldridge soon seized the insurgent's weapon. When it failed to fire, the Marine used its butt stock to bludgeon him to death.¹ Close combat engagements like this are why the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) exists. The Marine Corps defines MCMAP as an integrated, weapons-based system that incorporates the full spectrum of the force continuum on the battlefield and contributes to the mental, character, and physical development of Marines.² In practice, however, MCMAP as it exists today falls far short of this. Its curriculum ignores the physical and situational realities of combat, many of its techniques are too complex to be effective under stress, and it fails to integrate its techniques as a holistic fighting system. Fortunately, Cpl Wooldridge's heroism provides a case study through which MCMAP's deficiencies can be addressed.

Train As We Fight

Much of MCMAP is an amalgamation of techniques borrowed from traditional, competition-oriented martial arts,³ but a modern Marine's gear and equipment ("combat load") renders many of these impractical. Muay Thai's kicks, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu's grappling, and Judo's throws, to cite a few examples, are poorly suited for MCMAP because they were developed by lightly clad athletes for use in athletic competition. Techniques such as the

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round kick, hip throw, sweeping hip throw, triangle choke, and arm bar from the scarf hold are poorly suited to a Marine in full combat load because they all require, to varying degrees, an unencumbered body, superb balance, and

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empty hands. These are hardly realistic combat conditions. Perhaps this is why we so often conduct MCMAP training "slick," because to train wearing a flak vest, Kevlar helmet, and other gear would prove many MCMAP techniques to be of marginal utility. If a Marine cannot effectively execute a technique

in a full combat load, then it does not belong in MCMAP.

The physical realities of combat are only half of MCMAP's realism deficiency. Combat training must be weighted toward likely combat scenarios, not every conceivable one. For example, MCMAP's knife versus knife techniques are particularly absurd. The idea of a Marine with his Ka-bar confronting a dagger wielding jihadi may be motivating, but training for such an unlikely scenario is a poor use of time. A much more likely situation is an adversary grabbing the barrel of a Marine's weapon, but MCMAP's eight different rifle retention techniques are all executed from a port arms carry. Marines in harm's way do not carry rifles at port arms. They use the alert or ready carry, and rifle retention techniques should be modified accordingly. Cpl Wooldridge grabbed his enemy's barrel, but those roles could have just as easily been reversed.

Realism also dictates that a Marine in most close combat situations will still have his primary weapon even if, like Cpl Wooldridge, he is unable to fire it. MCMAP's own doctrine de-



Recruits are introduced to the Martial Arts Program. What they initially learn is simple and without cumbersome and awkward equipment. (Photo by Cpl Jericho Crutcher.)

scribes it as a weapons-based system⁴ rooted in the credo that every Marine is a rifleman.⁵ This begs the question why rifle-based techniques constitute only a brief portion of each belt performance test. Furthermore, if entry-level training stresses that all Marines are riflemen first, then tan belt ought to consist almost entirely of rifle-based skills. The bayonet techniques from brown and black belt, which feature individual maneuver and multiple combatants, are excellent and deserve more focus. Those who would argue that the modern Marine rarely carries a bayonet are lacking imagination. A piping-hot rifle barrel rammed into an opponent at high velocity will at the very least set conditions for, as a MCMAP instructor would say, “follow-on techniques.”

Most conceivable scenarios would begin with standing adversaries, so MCMAP should emphasize stand-up grappling just as much as ground fighting. The likely weight advantage of a Marine in a full combat load makes stand-up grappling especially germane. Considering how much MCMAP borrows from Muay Thai, it is disappointing that Muay Thai’s *clinch* is absent,⁶ especially considering that most “street fights” are won or lost in some form of the clinch.⁷ The Thai clinch is a form of stand-up grappling used to gain leverage by controlling an opponent’s neck and head and is an ideal platform for delivering knee and elbow strikes.⁸ The clinch can also be used for throws and takedowns.⁹ Throws and takedowns are important because a Marine on his feet versus an opponent on the ground is tactically preferable to both combatants being on the ground. Under the Marine Corps’ discontinued LINE fighting system, in fact, the primary goal of ground fighting was to regain a standing position.¹⁰ While MCMAP does feature some throws and takedowns, (tan belt’s leg sweep comes to mind) they deserve more emphasis. If MCMAP’s focus shifted toward preparing a heavily laden modern rifleman to face likely close combat scenarios, much of its current practicality gap would be bridged.

Macro-movements

MCMAP techniques must be as simple and intuitive as possible. Traumatic, life-or-death struggles can push a warrior’s heart rate over 175 beats per minute, inducing a physiological state known as *Condition Black*. A Marine in Condition Black experiences extreme loss of fine motor skills and reverts to those skills that training has most deeply ingrained.¹¹ Simple, easily mastered skills are conducive to this. Complicated MCMAP techniques requiring precision and finesse, such as the basic wristlock come-along, are not. This is not to question such techniques’ effectiveness but rather their ability to be properly and reflexively executed under extreme stress. This is why a unit’s most effective immediate action drills are often the simplest. Some of MCMAP’s most effective techniques, such as the counter to the front choke and the arm bar takedown, are also among its most simple.

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Cpl Wooldridge demonstrated the value of uncomplicated and intuitive techniques by making decisive, total-body movements that leveraged his advantages in weight and physical conditioning. Let us call them *macro-movements*. Recall that he grabbed the barrel of his opponent’s weapon and slammed him against a wall. The pair then ended up in a struggle on the ground, during which the Marine rolled on top of his enemy before seizing the insurgent’s weapon and fatally beating him with it.¹² There was no “trace the c” or “stir the pot.” Like a linebacker’s tackle, macro-movements utilize the entire body and rely on violence of action, large muscle engagement, and weight transfer more than precision and finesse. Such combat skills worked for Cpl Wooldridge, and I believe that his heroism highlighted a valuable lesson about the kinesiology of close combat.

I propose three new macro-movement techniques here, all based on Cpl Wooldridge’s story. Let us call them the *barrel grab*, the *body slam*, and the *ground and pound*.

The barrel grab entails grabbing an opponent’s barrel and yanking him off balance to set up a punch or takedown. The body slam is a rapid and violent transition of one’s weight to drive an opponent into a wall or other hard surface. The ground and pound, as the reader may infer, entails the mounting of a grounded opponent followed by the application of blunt force to the head and face. While I do not advocate distilling MCMAP down to mere shoving and grabbing, it ought to feature a bias toward macro-movements.

A Synergy of Disciplines

I remind the reader that MCMAP is envisioned as a “synergy of disciplines” and is not a collection of individual techniques.¹³ Cpl Wooldridge did not have the benefit of a compliant *uke* partner and an instructor reading carefully worded techniques off a clipboard. Viewing MCMAP as a collection of moves to be mimicked one-by-one for a performance test defeats its purpose and does little to build mental, moral, and physical character. Unfortunately, this aptly summarizes MCMAP in its present form. MCMAP should instead be holistic by stressing the integration of skills through dynamic, scenario-based training. To their credit, many MCMAP instructors take it upon themselves to implement such training. This is not enough, however. It must be the standard.

Stress inoculation must also be a MCMAP standard because mental fortitude is the sinew of a true combat methodology. Stress inoculation entails periodic, controlled exposure to high-stress situations in order to improve cognitive performance under real-world stress.¹⁴ There is at least one safe and effective method to accomplish this: boxing. Getting hit in the face, for those who may have forgotten, is a jarring experience for the uninitiated. It is painful and frustrating and can induce tunnel vision, reflexive closing of the eyes, and a mental freeze sometimes



Much of MCMAP is an amalgamation of technique. (Photo by Sgt Carlos Cruz, Jr.)

called *vapor lock*. These responses can be mitigated by controlled exposure to full-contact striking (also an excellent form of physical conditioning). Besides instructor courses, however, MCMAP mandates no stress inoculation. Consider that police officers must be sprayed across the face with pepper spray during training. This does not immunize them against it, but prepares them to maintain their composure if they are cross-contaminated during an arrest.

Stress inoculation training ought to be complemented by force-on-force bouts. These bouts should be extensively incorporated for both sustainment training and performance tests. These could begin as rifle skill bouts at lower belt levels, in which wooden bayonet trainers (*mokujus*) and appropriate safety equipment would allow Marines to be evaluated on bayonet techniques, blocks, and butt strokes in a dynamic environment. At higher belt levels, such bouts could expand to incorporate empty handed techniques, weapons of opportunity, and less-than-lethal force. Unlike pugil sticks, these bouts would be structured events requiring students to demonstrate specific skills and techniques. Standard tactical and martial arts protective gear would ensure minimal risk. Such training would force Marines to integrate proper execution of techniques with physical

endurance and tactical and ethical decision-making skills.

MCMAP will continue to be of limited value if it does not become a true synergy of disciplines. Mixed martial artists, for example, do not just learn how to throw a punch. They learn to combine strikes into combos and integrate them with ground fighting. They learn how put an opponent on the defensive and maintain spatial advantage. Although a mixed martial artist is not faced with the tactical and ethical complexity that Marines face overseas, he emerges from a fight not just as a victor but as a tougher, braver, and wiser person. By reforming MCMAP as a true synergy of disciplines, so too can we.

Conclusion

Flawed as its implementation may be, MCMAP is a worthy idea that deserves reform. It must truly become a holistic fighting methodology that realistically prepares Marines to prevail in close-combat engagements as Cpl Wooldridge did. It has been said that our Corps exists for the sole purpose of dominating the 300 yards of the assault.¹⁵ Likewise, MCMAP can enable us to dominate the last three yards. Let it be a program worthy of the heirs of Belleau Wood.

Notes

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3. Staff, "Marines Go to the Mat," *The Washington Times*, (Washington, DC: 18 December 2005), accessed at <http://washingtontimes.com>.
4. *MCO 1500.59*.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Reference Publication 3-20B (MCRP 3-02B)*, *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, (Washington, DC: November 2011).
6. *MCRP 3-02B*.
7. John Danaher, "Fighting in the Clinch: A Key Skill in Real Fighting," *RealFighting.com*, (2003), accessed at <http://www.realfighting.com>.
8. Roberto Redreira, "The Subtle Science of the Muay Thai Clinch," *Global Training Report*, (2004), accessed at <http://www.global-training-report.com>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Tank Todd, "Ron Donvito and the L.I.N.E. System," *Fight Times*, (2007), accessed at <https://magazine.fighttimes.com>.
11. Dale L. June, *What They Didn't Teach You at the Academy: Topics, Stories, and Realities Beyond the Classroom*, (Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis, CRC Press, 2013), 115.
12. Jim Michaels, "Man to Man Combat Still Key to Military Strength," *USA Today*, (Tysons Corner, VA: Gannett Company, 10 November 2012), accessed at <http://www.usatoday.com>.
13. *MCRP 3-02B*.
14. LtCol Dave Grossman, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*, (Mascautah, IL: Warrior Science Publications, 2004), 35.
15. BGen Daniel O'Donohue, "The Last 300 Yards," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: August 1993), accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.

