

# Duct Tape Leadership

Enabling Small Unit Leader Initiative

by Capt Devin D. Fultz

***I am convinced that there is no smarter, handier, or more adaptable body of troops in the world.<sup>1</sup>***  
**—Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Britain**

**T**he following vignette is a compilation of multiple experiences that every young platoon commander undergoes during their first time at Integrated Training Exercise prior to deployment.

The training plan for the day was simple to allow the platoons to run their own rehearsals while the company commander and fire integration support team leader (FiST) were taken to the Combined Arms Simulation Trainer in preparation for the Motorized Assault Course.<sup>2</sup> The Marines company-wide were critiqued by the Tactical Training Evaluation Control Group Coyote's on the basic principles of fire and movement as well as weapons employment in the days prior during Range 410A, a platoon reinforced live fire range, and Range 401, a company reinforced live fire range. The platoon commanders and platoon sergeants were tasked to find an "innovative way" to teach the Marines new methods to correct their deficiencies, some of whom had joined the same week the unit had left for the exercise. We needed an answer sooner rather than later. I then observed the same battle drill of "buddy rushing," which was reminiscent of what someone would see at MCRD Parris Island or in the hills of Quantico at the Buddy Pair Fire and Movement Course. I did like seeing that our squad leaders built a small maneuver course with Meals Ready-to-Eat boxes and assault packs to simulate micro-terrain, but I continued to hear the loud shouts of junior fire team leaders yelling at their Marines to

rush as opposed to getting up and moving. They were robots, not the flexible fire team leaders that our Corps strives to build at the at the School of Infantry. The company commander said before he left, "We have to teach our team leaders the 'fighter-leader' concept." and I then remembered the article, "Why Doesn't First Team Rush," by Capt Michael F. McNamara and Paul J. Kennedy that I read at TBS. I then thought of a solution, we could put duct tape on the fire team leaders' mouths and then the Marines would follow the tempo of their team leader and the rest of the squad would then follow the base unit without talking. This would inherently cause a problem running on a live fire range in full gear and in the sweltering heat. No tape was subsequently used, but it was not a quick fix or remediation that we needed to teach the fire team leaders about fire and movement or weapons employment, but an institutional problem that spans all small unit leaders who need to understand their commander's intent and put the intent into action in both a garrison or combat environment.

One of the first tactical drills all Marines regardless of future MOS execute while at recruit training or Officer Candidates School is the buddy

**>Capt Fultz is currently serving at Officer Candidates School. He wrote this article while he was a rifle platoon commander.**

pair rush. There is nothing inherently wrong about the process; however, we are not teaching initiative. The ditty, "I am up, He sees me, I'm down," gets burned into the mind, and this mistake is not caught until those young privates step into leadership roles or even new platoon commanders are looking for a simple way to teach the basic concept. I would give a piece of duct tape to the recruit and the officer candidate. Instead of mindless yelling, Marines need to learn to work off the base unit from the beginning. Assign one man to be the senior man of the buddy pair from the start and have his buddy rush solely based off observation of actions and not verbal commands. It is said that when there are two Marines, one is in charge, this kind of leadership needs to be identified and fostered from training day one when moving from place to place or during tactical drills. Changing this mindset at entry level training will ensure that we subconsciously instill a mindset that will enable success during their careers when elementary concepts of fire and movement graduates to fire and maneuver when sounds of combat drown out the frantic yells of leaders trying to get their Marines to move forward to the objective.

## Platoon Level

For squad leaders, to their utmost amusement, the piece of duct tape goes to their platoon commanders during execution of training or when a task needs to be completed. Commander's intent and mission-type orders are the foundation of maneuver warfare found in *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, and their principles serve as the base of how orders are given and subsequently executed. One of the worst things a young platoon commander can do is heavy hand his subordinates to the point that they are

constantly communicating back and forth to him and not the adjacent squad leaders and supporting units. Trained either in the schoolhouse or unit training, the Infantry Squad Leader should fundamentally know how to adjust fire with mortars and artillery, and in most cases can communicate with both close air support and assault support from the ACE. The platoon commander should “let the dogs off the chain” and enable the squad leader to fight the Marines as they seem fit in order to achieve the commander’s intent while the leader focuses on pushing as many assets that are available to augment the unit’s combat power. This level of proficiency down to the squad level will require a change in the prioritization and funding of mission essential tasks for a company to focus training at the squad level as opposed to the platoon level during pre-deployment training. It is commonly said that great squads make great platoons which then make great companies and battalions.

### “Higher”

The last strip of duct tape goes to the battalion headquarters after a decision has been made and the balance of command control on a subordinate unit leader. Professional military education schools from the Marine Corps University and the last seventeen years of combat have filled our company and field grade ranks with more combat veterans with small unit experience since Vietnam. Through the crucible of combat, these leaders—using the same analogy as for squad leaders—need to let loose their subordinates to fight their Marines and supporting units.

By the end of all of the battalion-level rehearsals, like the Combined Arms Simulation Trainer and battalion concept rehearsal, I saw a glazed over look in my squad leaders eyes—the Marines who are actually conducting the critical actions—and even the same look in some of the officer ranks by listening to page after page of orders and coordinating instructions from a white binder. There was no yelling or knife hands, but the effects of higher headquarters dipping too much into the company commanders’ role was reminiscent of

the fire team leader yelling “Rush!” to team members. This heavy hand continued through execution as I overheard on the radio my company commander and FiST get denied fires as all “command and control” was stuck back on some piece of canalizing terrain or priority was given to a sniper team that was the secondary observer with no better eyes on target than our company level FiST. Command and control could still be maintained by higher headquarters by taking the positive feedback of subordinates and only making adjustments and modifications as required based off the situation from the subordinate commander on the ground. *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, outlines this perfectly. Command and control is a reciprocal influence: command as initiation of action, and control as feedback.

### Our Ethos

Our ranks are filled with those men and women who have volunteered to serve their country. They have trust in the institution that they will be well-trained when the phone calls comes to be ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. Furthermore, in return, our Nation expects the Marine Corps to return our Marines to society better than they were when they came into service. Knowing this expectation, we cannot pay lip service to warfighting principles like “violent and aggressive execution” and “fighter-leader.” We do our best to build Marines of character with all of our sexual assault training, ethos training, and substance abuse control training. This annual training does bear fruit, but our Marines are first and foremost warriors regardless of MOS. “Every Marine a rifleman,” is not just a phrase, but a reality in our Corps that needs to be sustained by crushing a lack of a decisiveness in leaders and fostering decision making and immediate actions at the lowest level. Field mess Marines, administrative clerks, supply Marines, and motor transport mechanics augmented the fight during the breakout at the Chosin Reservoir so many years ago. It was the PFC who rallied groups of Marines from various dispersed companies to form squads to take out pill boxes throughout the Pa-

cific Theater in World War II. It was the mythical “Marine” with uncommon valor who chose to close with and destroy the enemy on Iwo Jima, turning the fight through action and imposing his will on the enemy. No duct tape is required for these small unit leaders, whether appointed or who rise to the occasion, who are our Corps’ center of gravity and define who we are as the protectors of our Nation.

### Conclusion

The imminent challenges of our fiscal budget and the training schedules as we move forward will always put our small unit leaders in a crunch for time as they try to execute the commander’s intent. White space at all levels is “the water” in a bottle filled with rocks and sand of annual training and other mandated quarterly training requirements. Let us not forget all the “back in the saddle training” and other annual training, though important to mission and material readiness, steals time from tough physical training, the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, classes on a unit’s history, ethics training, and tactical decision games run by small unit leaders. The challenge is to pour out the bottle that mandates training from the top down and fill it up with the ideas from the small unit leaders who provide bottom up refinements. We must put on the duct tape as leaders and let our subordinates thrive and win in execution. They are our bid for success.

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### Notes

1. Sir Winston Churchill when describing the U.S. Marine Corps in WWII. See Sgt Gary Haun, USMC (Ret), *Marine Corps Magic*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013).
2. Exercise STEEL KNIGHT in 2012 was a predecessor to the Integrated Training Exercise. ITX under the new name started around 2013, which was previously called MOJAVE VIPER, CAX, etc., for the “old Corps”.

