Give them the Tools
A maneuver warfare approach to unit PME
by Capts Kenneth Sullivan & Jeff Phaneuf

Educating our Marines and ourselves about military history, maneuver warfare, leadership, and decision making forms a moral imperative for the combat leader. We owe our Marines a professional military education that prepares them for, and helps them adapt to, anything they may face on the battlefield. But far too often, we fail to prioritize professional military education (PME). This is unacceptable. Our doctrine requires the education of our leaders, especially small unit maneuver leaders. In Warfighting, we read that a “leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare—the intellectual content of the military profession—is a leader in appearance only.”

Former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis reflected on this while in uniform:

“We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years, and we should take advantage of the experience of those who have gone before us.”

—MajGen James N. Mattis

Despite this reality, Marine battalions often lose this essential education in the midst of all our other training and duties. As Maj Breck Perry, the former XO of 2d Bn, 6 Marines, noted in a Gazette article in March 2018, “perpetual turnover, fluctuating training exercise and employment plans, and surging operational tempo” have rendered PME a “nice to have’ instead of a priority.” Beyond that, we all-too-often approach PME with a checkbox mentality, sending Marines to courses and covering annual requirements but then failing to truly educate small unit leaders with the knowledge of maneuver warfare and their unit’s history.

As weapons and sniper platoon commanders at 2d Bn, 7th Marines (2/7), we addressed this problem by devising a series of tools that enabled leaders at the platoon level and below to easily, portably, and effectively lead PME. What began as a course to prepare our future squad leaders for the Advanced Infantryman Course became a series of PME books, each designed for distribution to all small unit leaders in the battalion. Leaders could bring them to the field, assign readings, or teach from them directly—and they did. Leaders of all levels, from lance corporals leading fire teams to lieutenants commanding platoons, brought these books to the field, filled white space in garrison, and used precious deployment packing space to continue to educate their Marines.

In this PME model, using maneuver warfare philosophy as a guide, we employed a mindset of centralized vision and decentralized execution. We polled the battalion’s senior enlisted Marines on the articles they had read that shaped them most as team and squad leaders. The platoon commanders, for their part, gathered for a discussion on the most influential articles that helped shape their command philosophy, training, and education. Once we compiled the material, we enabled the decentralization of PME in order to maximize its proliferation across the battalion, from the leadership down to the most junior Marines.

We created hard-copy books that could be brought to the field, allowing Marines at all levels to utilize white space to teach PME. This was especially critical in infantry units, where time spent in the field far outweighed time in garrison with a classroom and PowerPoint. Once a book was assembled and edited, the base’s Combat Camera unit would print and bind a copy for every fire team/section/shop in the battalion.

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For our purposes, we created three separate books: the individual/fire team, the squad, and the platoon. Each book contains seven sections:

1) Introduction/Commander’s Intent.
2) History of the Small Unit (Fire Team, Squad, or Platoon).
3) Writings on Small Unit Tactics.
4) Ethics in Leadership.
5) Leadership Philosophy.
6) Tactical Decision Games (TDGs).
7) History of the Unit.

Taken together, these sections provide a varied group of short readings and exercises that Marines of all ranks can easily study and use in the various places, conditions, and timelines of an infantry battalion’s lifecycle. Here is a deeper look at each section.

**Introduction/Commander’s Intent.**

Our introductory section included the commander’s intent for PME paired with a reading on the importance of self-education for the combat leader. These varied from Gen John Kelly’s speech, “Six Seconds to Live,” to a brief Gazette article by then-MajGen James N. Mattis on the importance of professional reading. This section also gave the battalion commander a chance to directly address the elements of PME that he found most important.

**History of the Fire Team/Squad/Platoon.**

The next section comprised articles that explained the history and purpose of the small unit on which the particular book focused. This included former U.S. Senator and Marine captain James Webb writing about the fireteam, LtGen Paul Van Riper writing about the squad, and other reflections on the place and purpose of these units within the infantry battalion. For combat leaders and their Marines, these writings establish the historical context in which they operate, helping them understand where their organizations have been, where they currently stand, and where they might go next.

**Essentials of Small Unit Tactics.**

From there, we selected short articles on small unit tactics, to include orders development, the use of suppression, communications procedures, and the theory of decentralized leadership. Each set of readings contained the appropriate level of complexity for the intended audience, with the fire team book examining basic order shorthand notes from decision making and PME thinker LtCol Brendan McBreen, USMC(Ret), and the platoon book containing McBreen’s thoughts on verbal orders communicated over the radio, under fire, in under one minute.

**Ethics in Leadership.**

The following section addressed the law of war, rules of engagement, and ethical decision making. We included scenarios for small unit leaders to read to their sections for discussion, as well as decision-forcing cases (DFCs) from warriors who experienced real-world ethical “gray area” decisions. DFCs are a great tool for a small unit leader. They allow their Marines to vicariously learn from another’s experience. Marines must formulate a solution to an actual wicked problem that occurred in the past, present it, and then defend that solution against their peers. As a bonus, DFCs (in contrast to TDGs) have an actual outcome—whether for good or ill, the solution drawn up by the case’s protagonist.

**Leadership Philosophy.**

The next section helped small unit leaders think through what kind of a leader they should be using a variety of articles about leadership styles, emphasis, focus, and philosophy. All these articles make for a quick read and an engaging discussion in the hands of our Marines.

**Tactical Decision Games.**

The tactical decision games and DFCs included in our PME books come from our own extensive engagement with these teaching tools. We sought to prime the decision making of Marines with realistic scenarios. We also included a primer, produced by LtCol McBreen, on how to most effectively facilitate TDGs in order to empower our corporals and sergeants to teach them.

**Unit History.**

Our history sections came as a result of the realization that, for Marines, the most important history is local history. In Iraq during 2016, Capt Phaneuf saw this firsthand:

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**An example of the content of the books that were created for battalion PME.**

**Book II - The Rifle Squad. Combat Camera unit would print and bind a copy.**

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I was checking the fighting positions manned by junior Marines who were providing security for an advise-and-assist mission. For them, it was a boring assignment with long hours on post, but it harbored the potential for real danger. One evening, a young machine gunner had his post well prepared and gave an excellent report despite the sweat dripping over his eye protection. When I complimented him on his motivating report, he retorted, “Well sir, my great-great-grand senior would allow nothing less.” Obviously, I thought, one of the sergeants who had trained this kid had done a hell of a job. “Which one?” I asked.

“Mitchell Paige, sir,” he told me. But Mitchell Paige was no longer in the platoon. He had not been a member of Easy Weapons in decades. In fact, Mitchell Paige died in 2003, as a retired colonel. “Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige,” his Medal of Honor citation reads,

Commanding a machine-gun section with fearless determination, continued to direct the fire of his gunners until all his men were either killed or wounded. Alone, against the deadly hail of Japanese shells, he manned his gun, and when it was destroyed, took over another, moving from gun to gun, never ceasing his withering fire against the advancing hordes until reinforcements finally arrived. Then, forming a new line, he dauntlessly and aggressively led a bayonet charge, driving the enemy back and preventing a break through in our lines. His great, heroic valor and superb devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

Commander’s Intent

The purpose of this PME is to provide our squad leaders a tool to make themselves and their Marines better decision makers. These books will cover tactics, education, and history, and allow them to learn lessons that leaders of past generations have experienced. History may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. The warrior monk, General Mattis, addressed the importance of learning, “through others’ experiences [as] generally a better way to do business, especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men.” Thanks to his reading, Mattis has “never been caught flat-footed by any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed (successfully or unsuccessfully) before.”

The method we will use for this PME will be three separate books, utilizing a building block approach and a history of 2/7 told through stories of our valorous Marines, broken down as such:

Book I: Individual/Fire Team
Book II: Squad
Book III: Platoon

The endstate for our squad leaders is that they and their Marines are better decision makers who take initiative in the absence of orders, and are better problem solvers through reading and discussing others’ experiences.

Realizing the power of connecting our Marines to the stories of men who had been in their battalion, maybe even held their very billet, we focused our history section on 2/7’s storied past. For each major conflict in our battalion’s 77-year legacy, we profiled a Marine of the book’s unit level (a fireteam member, a squad leader, a platoon sergeant). Thus, we told the history of the Marine Corps through the Marines closest to our historical lineage. Unlike names such as Chesty Puller or Dan Daly, known to all Marines but lacking a direct connection, tying Marines to a historical figure in their unit can inspire them every day to strive to earn their billet—and, like the case of the Easy Weapons machine gunner, make their great-great-grand seniors proud.

The battalion received our PME books well, with most platoon commanders requesting additional copies to distribute down to their team leaders. One 2/7 Marine stated that his
section leader used the books on deployment to teach during white space, in order to make well-rounded Marines, which was critical for the asymmetrical environment we were operating in.

The use of decentralized PME resulted in Marines at all levels having a firm grounding in our history, our warfighting philosophy, our ethical principles, and our capabilities to better prepare them for war.

PME is a moral imperative, but we cannot expect our junior Marines to pull it from thin air. Officers receive far more PME in Quantico and at their MOS schools than junior enlisted Marines do in their formal schooling. The onus, then, is on us as leaders to provide our Marines with proper PME tools. We propose that the creation of a unit PME program should be on every battalion XO’s to-do list. We agree with Maj Perry that, “as second in command of the battalion, the XO is responsible for the leadership and development of the staff and officers.” We recommend, therefore, that each battalion XO task a small group of lieutenants with creating a PME program that follows what we have outlined, especially one that can be easily disseminated in hard copy form and emphasizes the history of that particular battalion. Each battalion’s history is incredibly rich with Marines who have done the most with the least—we stand on the shoulders of giants. Through a unit PME program like this, we will not only remember their legacy but also seek the constant improvement of our once and future Corps.

Notes

>Authors’ Note: The authors are currently developing a podcast using decision forcing cases and lessons from the military to discuss leadership and crisis management.

The books can be taken to the field and used during down time to conduct PME. (Photo by author.)