

# Give them the Tools

A maneuver warfare approach to unit PME

by Capts Kenneth Sullivan & Jeff Phaneuf

**E**ducating 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 profes-

***“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.”<sup>1</sup>***

**—MajGen James N. Mattis**

sional 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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

The problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience (or by your men’s experience)—that is—the hard way. By reading, you learn through others’ experiences—generally a better way to do business—especially in our line of work where the

consequences of incompetence are so final for young men.”<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

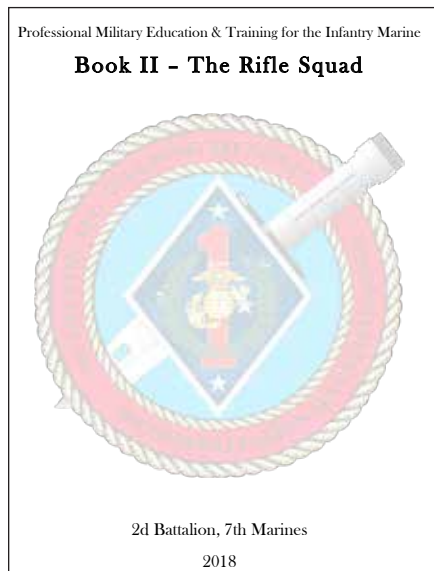
*History of the Fire Team/Squad/Platoon.* The next section comprised articles that explained the history and purpose of the small unit on which the particular book focused. This included former U.S. Senator and Marine captain James Webb writing about the fireteam, LtGen Paul Van Riper writing about the 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 audi-

	Book I Individual and Fire Team	Book II The Rifle Squad	Book III The Rifle Platoon
INTRO	<i>Six Seconds to Live</i>	<i>The Essential Thing is Action</i>	<i>The Professional Edge</i>
TACTICS	History <i>William Wallace and the Fireteam</i> <i>Flexibility and the Fireteam</i> <i>Brilliance in the Basics</i> <i>Terms and Graphics</i> <i>Orders Shorthand</i> <i>Individual Fighting Positions</i> <i>Fireteam Fighting Positions</i>	<i>Development of the Squad</i> <i>The Evolution of the Infantry Rifle Squad</i> <i>Auftragstraktik: Its Origin and Development</i> <i>Suppression is the Critical Infantry Task</i> <i>Why Doesn't the First Fireteam Rush</i> <i>Squad Fighting Positions</i> <i>Close Combat Marine Workbook</i>	<i>Evolution of the U.S. Infantry Platoon</i> <i>All Stations this is Kodaik Actual</i> <i>Suppression is STILL the Critical Infantry Task</i> <i>No Combat? No Problem</i> <i>Observations on Decision Making in Battle</i>
	Essentials of Small Unit Tactics		
LEADERSHIP	Ethics in Leadership <i>Law of War Principles for Small Unit Leaders</i> <i>Selected Problems in the Law of War</i> <i>-Feigning Surrender, Treatment of Wounded</i> <i>-Mistreatment of Prisoners of War</i> <i>-Rules of Bombardment</i>	<i>Priming and Framing for Ethical Actions</i> <i>ROE Scenarios</i> <i>Selected Problems in the Law of War</i> <i>-Status and Treatment of Occupants</i> <i>-War Crimes</i>	<i>The Farmer</i> <i>A Rap on the Door</i> <i>Selected Problems in the Law of War</i> <i>-Treatment of Wounded and Medical Personnel</i> <i>-Treatment of Prisoners of War</i> <i>-Conduct in Captivity</i> <i>-Treatment of Civilian Population in Occupied Areas</i>
	Leadership Philosophy <i>Six Leadership Styles</i> <i>Battlefield Psychology</i>	<i>What Color are your socks?</i> <i>Leadership (Doug Freeman)</i> <i>The Squad Leader Makes the Difference</i>	<i>Intrusive Leadership: Bad by Definition</i> <i>Primal Leadership: Hidden Driver of Great Performance</i> <i>First Team: How Effective Teams Function</i> <i>The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable</i>
	TDGs <i>Tactical Decision Training</i> <i>Poachers by the Bank</i> <i>Ambush at Dusk</i> <i>Offroading/Off Duty Cop</i> <i>Reconned by Fire</i> <i>Protecting the Golden Leaf</i> <i>Under Fire Amia Camera's Aim</i>	<i>Tactical Decision Training</i> <i>Contact at the Seven Mounds</i> <i>Trouble at the ORP</i> <i>Standoff in the Swamp</i> <i>To Ambush or Not to Ambush</i> <i>The Fallen Angel</i> <i>Ambush in the Square</i> <i>Ambush at Dusk</i> <i>Platoon Ambush</i>	<i>Tactical Decision Training</i> <i>Decision in the Streets</i> <i>One Balkan Evening</i> <i>Chaos at the Intercon Hotel</i> <i>Attack on Narrow Pass</i> <i>Attack on Narrow Pass, Continued: Bad to Worse</i> <i>Battery Six</i>
HISTORY	Unit History WWII-PFC Charles H. Roan & PFC John D. New Korea-PFC Hector A. Cafferata Vietnam-PFC Oscar P. Austin OIF/OEF-LCpl Brady A. Gustafson	WWII-Cpl Robert Woodrow Grove Korea-Cpl Lee H. Phillips Vietnam-Sgt Daniel R. Carl OIF/OEF-Sgt Marcelino Avelar	WWII-Plt Sgt Mitchell Paige Korea-SSgt Robert S. Kennemore Vietnam-SSgt Julius Blanchard Hopkins OIF/OEF-1stLt Arthur Karell

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

ence, 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.



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

*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:

**Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige**  
Easy Company, Machine Gun Platoon Sergeant

"I continued the trigger bursts until the barrel began to steam. In front of me was a large pile of dead bodies. I ran around the ridge from gun to gun trying to keep each gun firing, but at each emplacement I only found dead Marine gunners. I knew then that I must be all alone."  
-Platoon Sergeant Mitchell Paige

The President of the United States takes pride in presenting the MEDAL OF HONOR to  
**PLATOON SERGEANT MITCHELL PAIGE**  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry in action above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Division, in combat against enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands Area on October 26, 1942. When the enemy broke through the line directly in front of his position, Platoon Sergeant Paige, 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 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 personal valor and unyielding devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

BY FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

**Discussion**

- How can the actions of one man have effects on the outcome of an entire battle?
- What does this teach about battlefield initiative?
- What action can you take starting today to train your Marines to be more like Mitchell Paige?

**These two images show how pages were laid out.**

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.

He had been the platoon sergeant of Easy Company's machine gun platoon in the Solomon Islands in October 1942. To this day, Easy Company's machine gunners consider him their direct forefather, thinking of his name as they carry their heavy loads up the miserable, sandy hills of Twentynine Palms, and striving to live up to him on post in country.

## 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.



"Not today, ISIS"

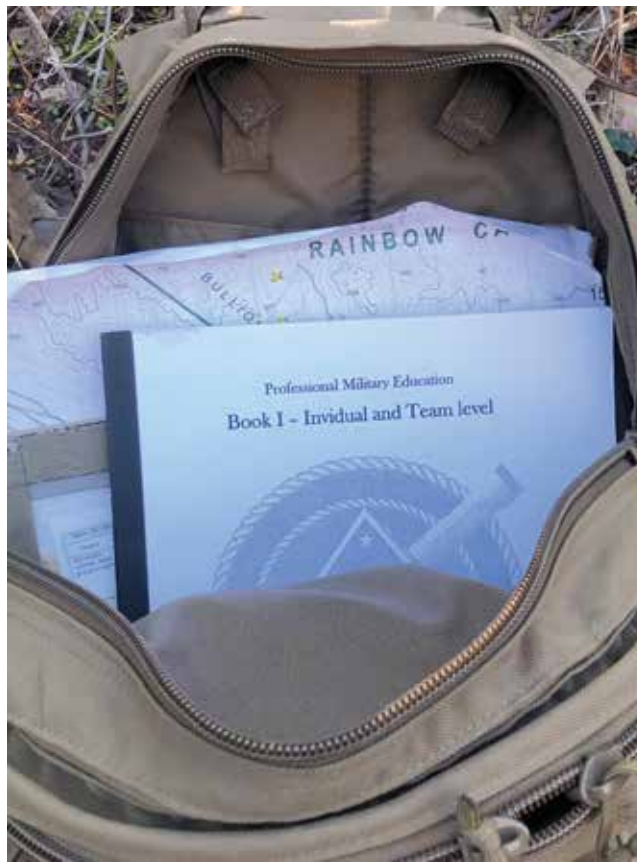
Realizing the power of connecting our Marines to the stories of men who had been in their battalion, maybe even held their very billet, we focused our history section on 2/7's storied past. For each major conflict in our battalion's 77-year legacy, we profiled a Marine of the book's unit level (a fireteam member, a squad leader, a platoon sergeant). Thus, we told the history of the Marine Corps through the Marines closest to our own 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



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

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

1. MajGen James N. Mattis, "The Professional Edge," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2004).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
3. "The Professional Edge."
4. Maj Breck L. Perry, "Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare Through PME: An infantry battalion model," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: March 2018).

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

