

# Maneuver Warfare

## The way forward

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**T**wenty-eight years ago, the Marine Corps published *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, Warfighting*, solidifying maneuver warfare as its warfighting doctrine and philosophy. *FMFM 1* has since been renamed *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, and its writings have stood the test of time through the last eighteen years of combat in the Middle East and beyond. Marine Maj Ian Brown published a book entitled *A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare*,<sup>1</sup> the most comprehensive history of the Marine Corps and its relationship with maneuver warfare. This work highlights the level of acceptance of maneuver warfare throughout the Marine Corps, as well as Marines' reservations with the concepts in application. Today, it is generally accepted by the Marine Corps that practicing maneuver warfare in both its physical form and as a mindset will continue to elevate the Corps as a warfighting organization.

The problem with the current outlook, however, is that, although the Corps has made it clear verbally for the last three decades that we prepare and fight wars under the philosophy of maneuver warfare, it is rarely seen in practice in training environments, at our schools, in the Fleet Marine Force, and—most important of all—in combat. Therefore, going forward, the Marine Corps must address the current level of understanding of maneuver warfare, the current implementation of maneuver warfare inside the Corps today, and how, through training and education, we can transition the responsibility of maneuver warfare to the small unit leaders of the Marine Corps.

### Where We've Been and Where We Are

The *Correlates of War* database has recorded 464 conflicts since 1815, with 82 percent occurring between state and non-state actors.<sup>2</sup> The most well-known

of these wars include the French-Algerian War, the Irish "Troubles," the Vietnam War, and the Philippine Insurrection. These four among many other hundreds of conflicts show a trend falling further away from conventional state versus state warfare. The Marine Corps, however, continues to place the majority of its peacetime training focus on state versus state fighting. To reinforce the point of misplaced focus, for the last fifteen years of combat, Marines have not faced a single uniformed or "state" enemy force on the battlefield. Furthermore, Marines are tasked to remain flexible enough to deal with multiple types of operations ranging from stability operations to high-intensity combat. These are tall orders for young men and women who, in most cases, possess a still developing prefrontal cortex.<sup>3</sup> At face value, both the United States and the Marine Corps demand its Marines embody the traits of the professional warrior and practice our warfighting doctrine in order to defeat the enemy, and yet the Service does a poor job of explaining, teaching, and assessing the concepts of maneuver warfare in both training and educational environments.

Presently, while maneuver warfare is acknowledged as the Corps' warfighting philosophy, the authors have identified a significant disparity between the level of understanding between the officer corps and enlisted community. This disparity stems from the lack of implementation of maneuver warfare in both its physical form and as a mindset in the daily lives of Marines. Having been through every level of enlisted PME that exists today in the Marine Corps, the authors argue that the vast majority of enlisted Marines, regardless of MOS, possess a severely deficient understanding of maneuver warfare. This requires im-

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mediate attention. One of the greatest problems is that Marines who serve outside the GCE believe that the principles of professional warfighting either lie outside of their level of expertise or do not apply to them. And yet, according to *MCDP 1, Warfighting*,

Every Marine has an individual responsibility to study the profession of arms. A leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare ... is a leader in appearance only.<sup>4</sup>

This is where we are now.

### Where to Go from Here

Having acknowledged where the ideas and concepts of maneuver warfare have been and where they are now, our next logical step is to recognize and implement methods that will better prepare us for war. Before continuing, however, we ask you, the reader, to reflect on these two questions:

- What are the timeless qualities that we require from our warfighters?
- How do we cultivate those qualities?

These questions will likely produce a variety of answers from leaders across the Service; however, instead of answering them directly, the authors propose a focus in three areas that will develop qualities that will serve well in any kind of conflict. The areas include personnel management, focused and purposeful training, and command sponsored PME.

*Personnel management.* This is one area that has not improved, updated, or evolved fast enough since the adoption of maneuver warfare by the Marine Corps. Marines continue to be placed in billets based on a number of questionable criteria with temperament, ability, and intellect falling very low in that ranking system. Too often, Marines are placed in billets and in geographical locations simply because a position has opened, they just so happen to be up for rotation, or the needs of the Marine Corps dictate that move. While these factors may indeed have an effect on our manpower model, they should not be the dominant determining factors for billet assignment. *MCDP 1* states:

Since war is at base a human enterprise, effective personnel management is im-

portant to success. This is especially true for a doctrine of maneuver warfare, which places a high premium on individual judgment and action. We should recognize that all Marines of a given grade and occupational specialty are not interchangeable and should assign people to billets based on specific ability and temperament.<sup>5</sup>

In order for the Corps to effectively educate Marines on the tenets of maneuver and develop technical and tactical proficiency, the right men and women must be placed in key billets around the globe. This is particularly true for instructor billets at the schoolhouses. Through student-centered learning and exercises that focus on problem-based decision making, the right instructors can inculcate in young Marines a thirst for lifelong learning that will eventually begin to change the culture of the Marine Corps.

*Focused and purposeful training.* Standards-based training that seeks to mimic the rigors of combat has long been the mantra of our warfighting institution. Too often in the FMF, however, training simply becomes a checklist-based execution of tasks that are pulled from the training and readiness manuals with almost no tie-in to actual modern combat. To be clear on this point, a Marine *does not* need direct combat experience to create tie-ins. This can be done by retrospectively analyzing the experiences of warriors who have gone before us. Take combat marksmanship as an example. There have been proven methods that focus on intuitive gun fighting that are utilized across the world in many allied armies, particularly their special forces communities. These methods seek to perfect the basic fundamentals of shooting combined with a relentless combat mindset to increase speed, accuracy, and overall lethality against the enemy. The Marine Corps, however, continues to practice annual rifle training that has remained fundamentally unchanged in the last 20 years, and, what is more, it is only conducted *once a year* for every Marine. Focused training implies that one must spend hours conducting the task via thousands of repetitions. If there is any hope of achieving a level of proficiency in marksmanship that

modern combat demands, it is imperative that the entire model of training be revamped. The type of focused training that contains a “why” behind it will also act as a “gateway drug” when introducing the ideas of maneuver warfare to young Marines. By reaching the deepest parts of their thought process with an exercise like shooting and perfecting an employment technique, we can exploit their interest to facilitate conversation about the art of war and how the task they are currently performing relates to it.

Yet another example of this focused and purposeful training would be the 2019 1stMarDiv Infantry Rifle Squad Competition, won by a rifle squad from 2d Battalion, 7th Marines (2/7). During the course of the 7th Marine Regimental Squad Competition and subsequent training at Camp Pendleton leading up to the Division competition, the squad from 2/7 scarcely focused on performance examination checklists or rigid/structured training per the infantry training and readiness manual. Instead, the squad, guided by four SNCOs and NCOs from the regiment, concentrated on scenario-based live fire and patrolling exercises, tactical decision games, discussions of maneuver warfare, and non-standard approaches to combat marksmanship. These reinforced perfect repetitions, intuitive gun fighting, and employing a combat mindset at all times. The squad members unanimously attributed their victory at the Division competition to the non-standard training. This preparation was solely based on commander’s intent and a ruthless focus on developing a mindset for winning in combat, not winning a competition.

*PME.* “Self-directed study in the art and science of war is at least equal in importance to maintaining physical condition and should receive at least equal time.”<sup>6</sup> In conjunction with focused and purposeful training—or more simply put, deep knowledge of and skill in the science of warfare—PME should be vigorously implemented at every level of a Marine’s career. Furthermore, identifying those who have a particular aptitude for the art, history, and theory of warfare is a responsibility that lead-

ers cannot take lightly as these are the men and women who will shape the way we fight in the future. Some maneuver warfare-focused PME programs exist in the FMF. The members of 2/5, over the course of the last two years, were able to develop a thirst for PME inside their battalion that directly related to increased lethality during training and on deployment. Several SNCOs and officers of the unit identified a need to distribute Marines with a passion for the art of war and education throughout the maneuver companies. Former instructors from the School of Infantry and graduates of Infantry Small Unit Leaders Course were dispersed based on temperament and ability. They then easily developed effective training events, making the events interesting and opportunities to explore warfighting concepts in a manner that generated buy in or retention from the Marines. The focus that these key individuals placed on professionalism, history, current events, progress, and competition fostered an environment where Marines willingly sought out education in maneuver warfare, which subsequently resulted in a greater efficiency in the execution of warfighting skills.<sup>7</sup>

According to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*,

What we need is an approach that is focused on active, student-centered learning using a problem-posing methodology where our students/trainees are challenged with problems ... We have to enable them to think critically, recognize when change is needed and inculcate a bias for action without waiting to be told what to do.<sup>8</sup>

The Commandant charges the Marine Corps with developing a more effective approach to learning and becoming better decision makers with a bias for action. This is not a new idea. In fact, a young infantry staff sergeant submitted it as a proposal to the Commandant's 2017 Innovation Symposium 2017. The submission was awarded as a winner. The staff sergeant's proposal focused on institutionalizing decision-forcing cases, tactical decision games, and sand table exercises into not only PME schools but also the FMF. This plan was widely recognized by the Marine Corps as a vast

improvement to the current model of instruction.<sup>9</sup> After receiving such praise, however, nothing happened. It seems counterintuitive that the staff sergeant's proposal has not been institutionalized and ruthlessly enforced at the education facilities, even after receiving the Commandant's endorsement.

The authors invite all Marines to challenge the ideas in this article and use it as a catalyst for discussion. By no means do we think that the above-mentioned training and education methods are *the* answer to building maneuverists—there is no set recipe. We only hope this sparks honest, frank, and fruitful discussions for implementing more effective means of developing a culture of maneuver warfare throughout the Marine Corps.

### Conclusion

Gen Alfred M. Gray, LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, and Mr. John Schmitt once spoke in an interview about the intellectual renaissance that took place within the Marine Corps during the post-Vietnam era.<sup>10</sup> Each spoke of the difficulties they encountered with the lack of acceptance of maneuver warfare at an institutional level. Even with a growing acceptance of the ideas throughout the last three decades, practice and study of maneuver in not only its physical form but as a mindset is slow going in implementation across the force. We as a Corps need to institutionalize the concepts that have been solidified as our doctrine for so long and adopt more focused, purposeful, and adaptive training and education methods that assist in the preparation for combat. Gen Berger recently reinforced the fact that outdated training and education models will not be enough to defeat the enemy in future asymmetrical battles when he stated,

As good as we are today, we will need to be even better tomorrow to maintain our warfighting overmatch. We will achieve this through the strength of our innovation, ingenuity, and willingness to continually adapt to and initiate changes in the operating environment to affect the behavior of real-world pacing threats.<sup>11</sup>

The Commandant has clearly communicated his intent. It is now time for this warfighting organization to go forth and execute.

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### Notes

1. Ian Brown, *A New Conception of War, John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2018).

2. Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen, "An Actor-centric Theory of War. Understanding the Difference between COIN and Counterinsurgency," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011).

3. Experience and the developing prefrontal cortex; information available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>.

4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

5. *MCDP 1*.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Personal communication between GySgt Joshua Larson and author on September 2019.

8. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

9. Innovation Symposium 2017 Award Ceremony; information available at <https://www.dvidshub.net>.

10. MAGTF Instructional Group, "Warfighting Panel," YouTube video, 1:23:29, (March 2015), available at <https://www.youtube.com>.

11. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*; and *MCDP 1, Warfighting*.

