



# Marine Corps Maneuver Warfare

The historical context  
by Marinus

This article is the first in a series we call *The Maneuverist Papers*, discussing maneuver warfare doctrine in the Marine Corps. Under the leadership of Commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray, the Marine Corps first codified maneuver warfare as Service doctrine with the 1989 publication of *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 (FMFM 1)*, *Warfighting*, although the significant intellectual effort that produced the underlying concepts had begun well over a decade earlier. In 1997, Gen Charles C. Krulak oversaw the revision of *Warfighting* as *MCDP 1*, which clarified and elaborated on select ideas from the original but did not change the essence of maneuver warfare in any way. Maneuver warfare doctrine has thus served the Marine Corps for over three decades. Much has happened in those years, especially two lengthy wars that saw significant changes in the conduct of warfare. In contrast, during the same period of time, U.S. Army doctrine has evolved from *AirLand Battle* to *Full-Dimensional Operations* to *Full Spectrum Operations* to now *Unified Land Operations* over a span of nine capstone field manuals. Now the Marine Corps is set to undertake arguably the most dramatic changes to structure and capabilities in over a half century.

This begs the question: Is it time for the Marine Corps to revise its doctrine? Several *Gazette* articles in recent years have argued so. The aim of *The Maneuverist Papers* is to energize that conversation. *The Maneuverist Papers* will continue the discussion begun with “What We Believe About War and Warfare” in the June *Gazette* by describing the development of and elaborating on key maneuver warfare concepts, providing historical context for the development of *Warfighting* and the maneuver warfare movement in general, and discussing recent changes to the face of war that may justify a doctrinal revision.

The maneuver warfare movement must be judged as an institutional success in that maneuver warfare became Marine Corps doctrine and has remained so for over three decades. Moreover, the movement brought other lasting changes—most notably in the area of professional military education—in full view today. In some areas, such as training, the impact of maneuver warfare, with its emphasis on free play, force-on-force exercises, arguably has been less enduring. In other areas, such as personnel management, the movement seems to have had little impact at all. A broader issue is operational and tactical success. From Grenada in 1983 through the Gulf

Maneuver warfare doctrine has served the Marine Corps for over three decades. (Photo by LCpl Cedar Barnes.)

War to Afghanistan and Iraq, the historical record has been mixed. But is this an indictment of maneuver warfare itself? Is it a result of the Marine Corps no longer embracing maneuver warfare in practice? Or never having truly embraced it in the first place, as some have argued? Or is the mixed record the result of some completely external factors, such as the growing ineffectiveness of combat as a decisive factor in resolving conflict in general? That is a topic for another debate.

### The Historical Context

It is important to understand that the maneuver warfare movement emerged at a particular moment in history. After the Vietnam War, the Marine Corps underwent a period of institutional introspection. The maneuver warfare movement was a response to the institutional and operational dysfunction of the Vietnam experience that sought, among other things, to put the Marine Corps approach to war on a solid historical and theoretical footing.

Gray, of course, was the leading exponent of maneuver warfare, providing impetus and top cover. Retired Air Force Col John Boyd was the movement's intellectual godfather. Civilian Bill Lind was chief provocateur and proselytizer. But the core was a grassroots movement comprising a combination of Vietnam veterans who had remained on active duty after the war to see things set right and young officers who saw maneuver warfare as empowering. Of the active duty maneuverists, Col Michael Wyly was the most prominent. Other early thought leaders included then-Capts Stephen Miller, G.I. Wilson, and William Woods.

The Marine Corps was not alone in reforming. Each of the Services, and the broader Defense establishment, responded differently to the Vietnam experience. Not surprisingly, the Army and Marine Corps, which bore the brunt of the war and experienced its dysfunction most keenly, eventually enacted the most extensive reforms, although the first reforms actually came out of the Navy, or more precisely the Naval War College, where ADM Stansfield Turner reformed the curriculum almost immediately upon assuming the presidency in 1972. Three curriculum reforms were most significant for our purposes. The first was the reintroduction of strategic thought, which the Services had mostly abrogated to civilian academics by then and which had largely become focused on nuclear strategy. The second was the rediscovery of the great Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose theories at that time had been all but forgotten in favor of the more formulaic and geometric approach of the Swiss military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini. The rediscovery of Clausewitzian theory, made much more accessible by the Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation of *On War* in 1976, was foundational to maneuver warfare theory. The third was the revival of the study of military history, which had virtually been removed from military education after the Second World War in favor of operations research and procedural training. This revival also proved important to the maneuver warfare movement.

For the Army, reform meant, among other things, returning to what it considered to be its primary mission: defeating a Soviet invasion of Europe. A new, post-Vietnam edition of

the Army's capstone doctrinal manual, *Field Manual 100-5 (FM 100-5), Operations*, introduced the doctrine of Active Defense in 1976. Active Defense met with immediate and widespread criticism within the Army as being too defensive and mathematical. A coordinated, Army-wide effort to develop a more offensive doctrine ensued. A new *FM 100-5* introduced AirLand Battle doctrine in 1982, and a revision followed in 1986. Neither manual directly mentioned Europe or the Soviets, but it was clear that was the problem space. AirLand Battle was a rigorously reasoned doctrine—arguably more so than any of the Army doctrines that have followed. Never executed against its envisioned enemy, AirLand Battle turned out to be highly effective against the Iraqi army during Operation DESERT STORM in 1991. Moreover, AirLand Battle, elevated to the multi-Service level, became the *de facto* joint doctrine.

Where the Army undertook a coordinated and methodical effort to develop AirLand Battle, the maneuver warfare movement took on more the character of a back-alley brawl conducted on the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette*—which in retrospect is probably appropriate. Col John Greenwood, the editor of the *Gazette* at the time, deserves a lot of credit for encouraging and managing the debate. Being able to focus on a particular threat in a particular theater allowed the Army to write in more specific and concrete terms. As the Nation's force-in-readiness in the 1980s, the Marine Corps did not enjoy that luxury, and one consequence is that *Warfighting* is more abstract and theoretical than the Army capstone manuals have tended to be. It was, as Gray wrote in the foreword, more a "philosophy for action" than a traditional doctrine. Maneuver warfare as described in *Warfighting* was designed to have very broad utility but required significant judgment



Gen Alfred M. Gray. (Official Marine Corps photo.)



**Marine readers may be looking for more specific guidance from *Warfighting*.** (Photo by LCpl Shane Beaubien.)

in application, which has been a source of frustration for some Marine readers looking for more specific guidance. Conversely, as a result, *Warfighting* could be written in more enduring terms, which goes some way in explaining why the Marine Corps has not found the need to update its doctrine as frequently as the Army has.

A second aspect of the historical context of maneuver warfare is that it is a product of the Cold War era and implicitly reflects that paradigm. *FMFM 1*'s default was the classic military force-on-force model. It did not explicitly exclude irregular warfare, but it had nothing specific to say about it either—one of the criticisms of both editions of *Warfighting*. The 1997 revision acknowledges the possibility of nonstate belligerents but offers no additional insights into nonclassical warfare. It is a credit to the Corps that countless Marines have extrapolated the classic theory of *Warfighting* to decades of irregular warfare. Arguably, *Warfighting* reflects a worldview that became dated when the Berlin Wall fell—or, alternatively, possibly one that is just now coming back into relevance.

### The Maneuver vs. Attrition Debate

Perhaps the biggest controversy to arise during the development of maneuver warfare was the maneuver warfare vs. attrition warfare debate. The early maneuverists chose to describe maneuver warfare by comparing it with its opposite, which they called attrition warfare. In retrospect, this may have been an operational error that delayed the eventual acceptance of maneuver warfare. The simplistic interpretation of the argument was: maneuver good, attrition bad. In reality, the problem was partly semantic. All warfare involves attrition—that is, incremental degradation of combat power

because of accumulating losses. And all warfare involves relational movement, if only to bring weapons into position to cause more attrition. Maneuver and attrition are not a matter of either/or, but that is how proponents came to frame the issue. The Marine Corps split into two camps: the maneuverists and the attritionists. The maneuverists thought they were simply advancing ideas on a better way to fight, but the attritionists felt (with some justification) that they were being painted as Neanderthals for wanting to kill the enemy. How could attrition inflicted on an enemy possibly be bad? The attritionists thought the maneuverists were unnecessarily complicating what should be a straightforward proposition: find the enemy, destroy the enemy. (Frankly, and unfortunately, part of the attritionists' motivation also was a reaction to the confrontational Lind, who was closely associated with the maneuver vs. attrition construct. The term "attrition warfare" assumed a pejorative connotation, so naturally some Marines adopted it as a badge of honor to show their opposition.)

The issue was not whether it was better to maneuver or to inflict attrition, because both again are inherent in warfare. In retrospect, the issue is what you choose as *the mechanism by which you propose to impose defeat on the enemy*. The important concept of *defeat mechanism* was not explicitly recognized at the time. (A later article will address defeat mechanisms.) The defeat mechanism of attrition warfare was inherent in the name: you inflicted defeat by cumulatively eroding enemy personnel and material strength or psychological resolve until he gave up the fight or eventually was eliminated. The maneuverists pointed out that this tended to be a time-consuming and costly approach. Moreover, it did not work well if there was a marked asymmetry of interests:

if one belligerent was fighting merely a war of choice while the other fought a war of survival (read: Vietnam), the odds were significantly stacked.

The defeat mechanism of maneuver warfare was much harder to put your finger on. It certainly was not inherent in the word *maneuver*, which many understood narrowly to mean relational movement, but which the maneuverists imbued with deeper meaning that they sometimes struggled to explain. (A popular attritionist joke was that maneuver warfare sought to win not by defeating the enemy in battle but by “driving in circles and confusing him to death.”)

For some, the “maneuver” in maneuver warfare suggested that the doctrine was defined by the forms of maneuver it employed, namely envelopments, penetrations, and turning movements—basically anything other than a frontal attack, which by implication was considered stupid. This was a gross misunderstanding. Attritionists complained that the maneuverists could not lay exclusive claim to select forms of maneuver, and they resented the implication that they favored only frontal attacks. Others equated maneuver warfare with mechanized warfare, likely based on the tendency to associate maneuver warfare with the German blitzkrieg of the Second World War. (More about the German influence shortly.) The iconic image of Gray in utilities with desert goggles on his helmet probably reinforced the misconception.

We now understand that the defeat mechanism of maneuver warfare is *systemic disruption*—eliminating the enemy’s ability to operate as a coherent and cohesive whole. According to *FMFM 1*:

Maneuver warfare is a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope.

Boyd used to talk about “tearing the enemy apart from the inside.

In other words, where attrition warfare attacks the components of the enemy system to degrade them, maneuver warfare attacks the relationships between those components to break the coherent functioning of the system.

Maneuver warfare is a systemic doctrine, which was a hard sell in 1989. The emergence of complexity theory in the 1990s, with a host of popular books on the subject, greatly enhanced the understanding of complex systems. (It also greatly enhanced the understanding of both Clausewitz and Boyd. Alan Beyerchen’s masterful “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” published in *International Affairs* in 1992, argued convincingly that Clausewitz intuitively understood complex nonlinear dynamics but lacked the language to describe them. Likewise, the language and concepts of complexity theory helped us to realize that Boyd’s thinking had been even farther ahead of its time than we had previously appreciated.) The 1997 revision of *Warfighting* was much more explicitly systemic in its description. It was still a hard sell.

Finally, complicating the issue was the often-misunderstood annihilation-attrition strategic construct. The German historian Hans Delbruck (1848-1929) posited two basic types of strategy: *Ermattungsstrategie* and *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, which were mistakenly translated in English as strategy of attrition and strategy of annihilation. The English terms are problematic because they are practically synonymous. In fact, most American readers were probably introduced to the terms in Russell Weigley’s 1973 classic *The American Way of War*, in which, the author later acknowledged, he had got the terms confused. The former strategy is probably better termed strategy of *exhaustion*, which Delbruck argued was a viable option for a weaker belligerent that lacked the ability to defeat the enemy outright and instead sought a limited objective—to raise the enemy’s costs so high that he was willing to settle on your terms rather than continue to fight.



**Maneuver warfare attacks relationships between components to break down the coherent functioning of the system. (Photo by Cpl Tanner Seims.)**

The latter is better termed a strategy of *incapacitation*. (The German literally means “taking-down strategy,” as in a take down in wrestling. It does not require reducing the enemy “to nothing,” the literal meaning of “annihilation” from Latin.) The latter strategy involved the outright defeat of the enemy’s ability to resist, which Delbruck argued involved the adoption of an unlimited military objective and was available only to the stronger belligerent.

## The German Influence

Another controversy during the maneuver warfare movement was the German influence. The maneuverists, some more than others, were fond of using German historical examples and terminology. They made two arguments. The first was that the German army had in fact achieved tactical and operational excellence using maneuver warfare and was one of the few modern armies to do so. The second was that the German army was the only modern army to codify its maneuver doctrine. As a result, any primary source documents tended to be German. For the maneuverists, both arguments made the Germans worth studying. The maneuver warfare canon thus was filled with titles like Mellenthin’s *Panzer Battles*, Guderian’s *Panzer Leader*, Manstein’s *Lost Victories*, Rommel’s *Attacks*, and Schell’s *Battle Leadership*.

*Schwerpunkt* (main effort or center of gravity), *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics), *Flaechen und Luekentaktik* (tactics of surfaces and gaps), *aufrollen* (rolling up enemy forces from the flank after a penetration), and *Fingerspitzengefuehl* (literally “finger tips feeling,” meaning intuitive flair or instinct) found their way into the discussion, often getting mangled in pronunciation in the process.

Fueling the debate was the 1982 publication of Martin van Creveld’s *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (although it was available several years earlier as a DOD-funded study). Van Creveld did an extensive statistical

analysis of 87 engagements between U.S. Army and German forces in the Second World War and concluded that German ground forces were tactically and operationally superior to U.S. forces. The oversimplified lesson that some took from *Fighting Power* was that German troops were 1.5 to 2.0 times better than their American counterparts, which did not sit well with many American readers and may have helped to push some into the attritionist camp. Last, but not least, the controversial Lind was an unabashed Germanophile (Prussophile is probably more accurate), and this alone produced antibodies.

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In the end, *Warfighting* intentionally avoided the use of German terminology. Thirty years of subsequent experience has reduced the need to rely on German examples, and the controversy has largely blown over.

## Why the Maneuver Warfare Movement Succeeded

There are several reasons for maneuver warfare’s institutional success, and those may provide lessons for today’s situation.

- *The maneuver warfare movement came from a point of real institutional pain.* The origin and motivation of the maneuver warfare movement, as mentioned, was the pain caused by the dysfunctional experience of the Vietnam War. It was this motivation that sustained the movement. Maneuver warfare was not merely an intellectual exercise,



**Heinz Guderian.** (Photo taken in Poland, Photographer unknown.)



**Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.** (Bundesarchiv\_Bild\_146-1973-012-43\_Erwin\_Romme.)



**Field Marshal Erich von Manstein.** (Bundesarchiv\_Bild\_183-H01757\_Erich\_von\_Manstein.)

although clearly it contained an intellectual element. In contrast, many capability development initiatives today seem like purely intellectual exercises not motivated by any institutional pain. They appear to be change for change's sake.

- *The discourse was extensive, open, and transparent—and frequently messy.* This was critical. The argument took place in the open over more than a decade. It got ugly at times, but this forced the maneuverists to strengthen their case and in the end helped garner widespread support for the doctrine. Maneuver warfare was not developed in secret by some high-level “working group” and then imposed on the rest of the institution. In today’s parlance, we might say it was crowd sourced. The open discourse went a long way toward socializing, strengthening, and eventually vetting maneuver doctrine.

- *The movement operated as a classic insurgency.* While the discourse took place in the open, the maneuver warfare movement itself operated like a classic insurgency, employing an inkblot strategy to gradually expand its influence over time, increasing its profile as it grew stronger. The maneuverists thought of themselves as insurgents, working to subvert the existing order. Maneuverist cells popped up spontaneously around the Marine Corps. With Gray’s succession to the Commandancy, the insurgency became the regime.

- *The movement enjoyed a combination of strong visionary leadership and bottom-up, grass-roots commitment.* Gray provided a compelling and unifying vision as well as critical top-cover for the insurgents. Meanwhile, Lind drew most of the attritionists’ fire, providing additional cover for the rest of the movement. But the ultimate driving force was the growing number of Marines who supported the new concepts. Maneuver warfare would not have succeeded to the extent it did without both the top-down and bottom-up dynamics.

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- *Maneuver warfare had strong historical and theoretical foundations.* A key attribute of the maneuver warfare movement was the strength of its intellectual foundation. The maneuverists did their homework. People might have bemoaned the number of German historical examples, but there was no shortage of examples. Meanwhile, maneuver doctrine rested on a solid philosophical foundation of Sunzian, Clausewitzian, and Boydian theories. (One of the early criticisms of *Warfighting* was that there was “nothing new” in it. LtGen P.K. Van Riper used to respond that that was true: there was nothing in *Warfighting* that wasn’t in Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, or Boyd. The trick of *Warfighting* was that

it managed to synthesize those three disparate theories into a coherent whole.) In contrast, too many contemporary warfighting concepts appear to be no more than PowerPoint deep. Moreover, many seem to be anti-historical, implying or openly asserting that some technological or other innovation has so “changed the fundamental nature of war” that there is nothing to be learned from the past.

- *The process involved significant experimentation.* Long before there was a Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, Second Marine Division became a maneuver warfare laboratory when Gray took command in 1981 and declared at an all-officers call at the base theater that maneuver warfare was the division’s official doctrine. The pinnacle of experimentation was the annual Combined Arms Operation at Fort Pickett, VA, a completely free play, force-on-force exercise pitting some combination of battalions against each other. At ENDEX each day, all officers and staff NCOs would drive back to the base theater at mainside for an extensive hotwash moderated personally by Gray, with Lind in attendance like a Prussian Nestor. The Combined Arms Operation and similar exercises went a long way toward creating additional maneuverists.

### Conclusion

To understand where you are and where you are going, it is important to know where you have been. The future evolves from the past. This short history of the development of maneuver warfare in the Marine Corps may illuminate some worthwhile questions for the Marine Corps today as it faces yet another transition after long period of war: Is there institutional pain today sufficient to drive doctrinal and other reform? Is that pain even a necessary ingredient now as it was then? (Arguably, the effort that led to the initial development of amphibious doctrine in the 1930s was not based on institutional pain but simply on a clear-eyed assessment of the future security environment.) Must any successful reform involve a bottom-up grass roots movement, and must it too take the form of an institutional insurgency? Will there need to emerge another Gray, Boyd, Wyly, or Lind? Should or how should maneuver warfare adapt to recent and emerging changes in warfare? Or, more fundamentally, has warfare changed sufficiently that the Marine Corps should reconsider its basic doctrine? Most Marines would instinctively and emphatically say, “No!”—but does that mean the question should not be asked?

