Re-Maneuverizing the Marine Corps

Looking back to move forward

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> *"We cannot assume that today's equipment, the way that we're organized, how we train, how we select leaders, all of our warfighting concepts, we cannot assume that they will remain relevant in the future. In fact, my assumption, my premise is they will not. This requires, I believe, unshackling ourselves from previous notions of what war looks like and reimagining how Marines will train, how we will operate, how we will fight."* [1]
>
> **—Gen David H. Berger**

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* identifies the "re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition," a weakening international order, and rapid and more readily accessible technological advancements as key characteristics of the strategic environment that have served to undermine U.S. military advantage, which the strategy claims can no longer be taken for granted. The strategy serves as a clarion call to awaken the DOD from "a period of strategy atrophy" and reset the force after almost two decades of armed conflict. Reenergizing PME and revising antiquated manpower management practices are crucial to developing leaders who can operate effectively in today's "increasingly complex global security environment." [2]

Multiple developments since the release of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* provide reasons for optimism that we are progressing beyond an industrial era mindset to prepare for great power competition. For example, the Department of the Navy has emphasized the importance of agility, education, intellectual preparedness, and talent management to our warfighting capabilities. [3] Similarly, Gen David H. Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG) identifies the need to fundamentally change the manner in which we train, educate, and manage the talent of the force, and the recently released *MCDP 7, Learning,* formalizes continuous learning as an institutional priority. The CPG even references the original *FMFM 1, Warfighting,* possibly indicating a broader re-embrace of the maneuver tradition.

However, despite these positive developments, there are some reasons for pessimism, too. For one, change in an organization is always difficult. Military organizations, in particular, have been accused of ignoring or misusing the past, [4] or even rejecting it outright, in order to avoid change. [5] To adapt and learn, organizations must maintain a balance between "the exploration of new possibilities and the exploitation of old certainties." [6] Unfortunately, exploration and exploitation compete over scarce resources, and in today's tight budgetary environment, which lacks additional resources to serve as a buffer, exploitation tends to crowd out exploration since feedback from exploitation in the short-term is greater, more immediate, and more observable. [7] Manpower policies that necessitate short tours only exacerbate this desire for short-term impact, control, and quantifiable metrics, resulting in an inherent bias toward training

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Marines only for the specific tasks they need to perform today instead of educating them for the decades to come.

Fortunately, organizational change and innovation are not new to the Marine Corps. We wish to share some of Col Mike Wyly's experiences concerning education, thinking, organization, and technology that can perhaps help the Marine Corps experience a richer and more authentic re-embrace of its maneuver tradition and avoid being led astray by the allure of quick fixes and the temptation to cut corners. We write this in a spirit of admiration for the maneuver warfare movement and its influence (if mostly temporary) on our Corps and with the belief the maneuver philosophy and the reform movement in which it was embedded are quite fitting for our times.[8]

Potential Pitfalls

On the heels of the Vietnam War, the United States faced a great power competition with the Soviet Union, the terrorist threat was burgeoning, inflation was ravaging the economy, and the military had to resolve the challenges posed by the All-Volunteer Force. Vietnam required an enormous manpower commitment over a long period time, cost the Corps over 100,000 killed and wounded, delayed modernization programs essential to the Corps' amphibious capability, sparked heated internal debate concerning the Corps' mission and standards, and led to unprecedented, reform-minded public criticism.[9] Unfortunately, while many Marines experienced the limitations of Marine Corps doctrine and centralized decision making firsthand and adapted, many at Headquarters wanted to put Vietnam behind them, forget any lessons learned, and revert to the "tried and true," pre-Vietnam concepts of conventional warfare. In the face of war with the Soviets, Col Wyly found this reversion to old ideas unacceptable.

Today, the Corps faces a similar crossroads, once again trying to modernize as it enters another great power competition following an even longer period of combat. Iran and its terrorist proxies remain a destabilizing influence, the novel coronavirus has disrupted

Today, the Marine Corps' culture of learning strives to develop Marines' critical thinking and decision-making skills. (Photo by Cpl Laura Mercado.)

the economy, the Corps is integrating female Marines into combat roles previously closed to them, and debate over the future Corps continues to be waged.[10] We do not intend to suggest a perfect parallel or to provide prescriptive solutions. Rather, we highlight a few potential pitfalls and provide some insights for how the Corps overcame them in a similarly challenging and transformative period in our history.

Dilemmas of education. There is a tendency to talk about education and learning in ways that are not really conducive to thinking and judgment. For example, requirements for schoolhouses to produce a certain number of graduates each year can emphasize the short-term at the expense of long-term development.[11] This focus on metrics strengthens the institution's desire to control, which can undermine feelings of ownership instructors have for their curriculum, the flexibility they have to adapt it to the needs of their students and the enthusiasm of the students. Col Wyly's experiences teaching highlight the importance of empowering instructors and developing military judgment.

After an initial tour as a platoon leader in Okinawa, Col Wyly checked into 1st MarDiv and was assigned to the Counterguerrilla/Counterinsurgency (CG/CI) School, where he grappled

with preparing students for how to think in combat. The school was the brainchild of LtGen Victor "Brute" Krulak, then CG, Fleet Marine Forces Pacific. It was Krulak's idea not only to establish it but also to grant instructors the freedom to exercise initiative based on the study of real war as it was emerging in the 1960s. Krulak provided guidance for how time should be divided between the classroom and field work, and he set the criteria for selecting instructors. However, he empowered the junior officers and NCOs on staff to take ownership of the education and training experience.[12]

The focus then was counterinsurgency because the Soviet Union planned to expand its influence by fomenting insurgencies worldwide. As a result, the staff became experts on the threat of communism and studied every counterinsurgency possible, including in Burma, Algeria, Nicaragua, Cuba, the Philippines, and South Africa. They hosted visitors from the French Foreign Legion, Royal Marines, the Republic of Vietnam, and Indonesia, and they traveled to schools and courses on psychological operations and counterinsurgency such as those taught at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School to inform and refine their curricula. They were able to do so because

Krulak freed them from bureaucratic hindrances, and they were thus able to develop the course as they saw fit, making it more tailored and relevant to their students.

In designing the two courses at the school—one primarily in the classroom (but incorporating some field work as well) for officers and SNCOs, the second a company course in Cleveland National Forest—Col Wyly found it counterproductive to offer "school solutions" at the end of problem-solving exercises. Such solutions were simply somebody else's idea of how to resolve a tactical situation the student may never encounter. Col Wyly and the staff viewed their task as making the students think, not telling them *what* to think. In doing so, they remained open to the students' ideas, knowing they might well be better than theirs. The staff motivated the students by injecting a healthy dose of realism. The company course, for example, culminated in a week-long exercise against aggressors played by the staff. The staff challenged the students with tactical problems, enabled them to experiment with new ideas while searching for their own solutions, and forced them to make decisions—even at the lowest levels.[13]

After two tours in Vietnam with 1st MarDiv, Wyly attended Amphibious Warfare School (AWS) in 1973. The curriculum relied on lectures and scripted tactical problems with schoolhouse solutions.[14] This left Wyly asking, "How do *they* know? And, what does it matter anyway when the likelihood of being confronted in real combat with the same scenario was slim to non-existent?" Rejecting this approach to education, Wyly embarked on a quest of self-study, spending most nights at Quantico's library reading military history. He did not focus on any one war or period in history but rather read about everything from Genghis Khan to Napoleon to Patton and Holland Smith. This experience reinforced his belief that a school's mission was to teach students how to think and not what to think. In all the battles, Wyly identified a recurring theme: finding the enemy's weakness and exploiting it—decisively.

Wyly's interest in military history grew stronger when he attended the Command and Staff College in 1976–1977. Following a WESTPAC tour, he was assigned to Quantico's Education Center and began attending a graduate program at George Washington University at night. Then MajGen Bernard Trainor, Director of the Education Center, took an interest in Wyly's war studies and named him Head of Tactics at AWS in 1979. Wyly quickly realized the curriculum had not changed since he was a student, and much of the doctrine was precisely what he had been taught at The Basic School in 1962–1963. Empowered by Trainor to do it his way and not fall back on doctrine, Wyly completely rewrote the curriculum, focusing on making decisions, broad reading, and nurturing questioning minds through active learning approaches, including historical case studies, sand table and map exercises, tactical decision games, terrain walks, and tactical exercises without troops.

> *Our ability to fight without becoming over reliant on technology is increasingly relevant ...*

These active learning approaches are based on the premise that there is a stark difference between a "manual" that functions as a "how to" rule book and a "story" relating facts and circumstances that enables readers to place themselves in the minds of the story's protagonists and relate the protagonists' decisions and actions to the decisions and actions they might be called upon to make in the future. Much in line with case-based and discussion-based approaches to teaching in general, Wyly never rejected a student's solution because it might not match the school's—even if it was drawn from history. Instead, he asked the student why he made the decision he did. For students, Wyly believes there is little more rewarding than watching a teacher whom he respects listen

to him, think over what he said, and congratulate him on the quality of the idea and the progress he is making.

Technologitis. Our focus (sometimes even fixation) on technology is nothing new, and neither are technology's limitations. However, we tend to overlook the latter to justify the former. Gen Berger attributes this capabilities-based mindset to the end of the Cold War and the corresponding lack of a threat against whom to base our analysis.[15] Technology has always offered the promise of new, seemingly more effective ways of fighting and shortcuts to get there, but we cannot know what these new ways are without a rigorous and systematic trial-and-error process. Unfortunately, this process is oftentimes short-circuited, and military organizations tend to engage in "peripheral borrowing," wherein the potentialities and efficient use of new technologies are not fully realized, as evidenced by the way the French in 1940 treated tanks as accoutrements rather than as an integral part of a coordinated military effort.[16]

Our ability to fight without becoming over reliant on technology is increasingly relevant given the potential for our adversaries to disrupt our communications and the need for smaller units of Marines to operate independently. Col Wyly understood that leaders need to be prepared to think critically and make decisions quickly in such an environment.[17] As such, he took a decidedly "people first" approach, prioritizing investments in our Marines. For example, when Wyly first took over at AWS, reading assignments consisted of excerpts from khaki colored manuals that established rules so thinking was not required. Upon this realization, Wyly went to LtGen Trainor's office and argued that when people go to college, the first thing they have to do is buy books, so the captains at AWS should have to buy (and read) books as well. The initial reading list consisted of B.H. Liddell Hart's *Strategy*; Robert Heinl's *Victory at High Tide*; Edgar O'Ballance's *No Victor, No Vanquished* on the Yom Kippur War; and Jeter Isely and Philip Crowl's *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War*.[18] Reading history, however, was not an end in itself. Rather, it was

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many wanted to put the Vietnam experience behind them and revert to concepts of conventional warfare. (Photo courtesy of the Marine Corps History Division.)

intended to provide vicarious learning experiences that enabled Marines more readily to recognize patterns and identify solutions to problems they encountered on the battlefield. This is necessary to enable the effective use of technology.

Under Wyly's tutelage, the captains transformed into avid readers. One of these captains, Bill Woods, executed orders to 2nd MarDiv as Gen Al Gray assumed command. Gen Gray had himself already adopted maneuver practice and thinking and knew Col John Boyd and his "Patterns of Conflict" lecture. Woods introduced himself to Gray in the Officers' Club at Camp Lejeune and discussed with him what was happening at Quantico. Recognizing the importance of organizational experimentation and the need to nurture ideas, Gray established the 2nd Marine Division Maneuver Warfare Board, which consisted of Woods and other mostly junior officers, and declared maneuver warfare the official doctrine (and way of thinking) for the division. Wyly also arranged for Gray to become a regular guest speaker at AWS. These (and other) activities helped maneuver thinking take hold in the organization. It was no longer just a "new concept" but rather a prelude to what many graduates would experience on assignment to the FMF.

Organizational Myopias. If thinking and learning are the foundations

for individual agility, experimentation and learning from failures are essential for organizational agility. Free play and force-on-force exercises in realistic training environments are most conducive to this type of discovery and help us avoid simply training to meet minimum requirements (e.g., mission essential tasks). Similarly, open inquiry, enthusiastic debate, and a willingness to hear the viewpoints of others, including outsiders, is critical for avoiding complacency and falling into a "competence trap."[19] This is especially important today given the rate of technological change.

While at AWS, Col Wyly invited Bill Lind, a congressional aide to Senator Gary Hart, down to Quantico to speak with the captains, some of whom wondered why they had to listen to a "civilian hack." Wyly, however, was open to ideas from everyone. Lind was well-educated, even if an outsider, and Wyly wanted his captains to hear every side of the maneuver warfare debate. When the subject of Lind having no experience came up, Lind gave Col Boyd's telephone number to Wyly. Wyly quickly formed a friendship with Boyd, another outsider, that endured. They compared their experiences (Wyly on the ground, Boyd in the air), thus forming conceptual comparisons that were instructive for Wyly's students.

Col Wyly also established a relationship with Col John Greenwood, the editor of the *Gazette* for 20 years, to use the medium to facilitate open inquiry and debate without fear of reprisal. Captains at AWS began meeting at each other's houses on Friday night to reflect, debate, and then write articles as they sharpened their ideas. This learning process was continuous; maneuverists never rested on their laurels, recognizing that strategy, organizational adaptation, and evolution are an ongoing process. For example, even as Gen Gray signed *FMFM 1* and maneuver thinking officially became the organization's way of thinking, maneuverists were already thinking ahead to how to make the movement broader and more enduring, refining their ideas along the way through an ongoing learning process. After all, no victory is permanent but, rather, must be won again and again.

> **"Everything starts and ends with the individual Marine."**
> **—Gen Berger [20]**

Re-maneuverizing the Marine Corps: Lessons From the Past to Inform the Future

Education and the ability to think critically, quickly, and decisively are critical warfighting enablers. While maybe not as intuitively obvious as the physical demands, Williamson Murray argues the military profession might also be the most intellectually demanding since military forces rarely get the chance to practice their profession.[21] *FMFM 1* similarly observes the centrality of the human dimension in war, reminding us, "No degree of technological development or scientific calculation will overcome the human dimension in war."[22] Recent rhetoric, strategic documents, and initiatives in the Marine Corps, the Department of the Navy, and DOD seem to embrace the need to move beyond our industrial era mindset. However, any change in an organization is fraught with challenges

and oftentimes succumbs to the well-intentioned bureaucratic tendency to develop processes to track, measure, and validate "progress" towards an objective, which usually only serves to stifle it. In highlighting the importance of a bottom-up approach starting and ending with the individual Marine, Col Wyly's experiences hopefully might inform these efforts.

As a teacher, Col Wyly was empowered by senior leaders who trusted him and removed bureaucratic obstacles instead of adding to them. This is not to say there was no resistance along the way. Rather, support from leaders like Trainor and Gray enabled Wyly to continue on despite pressures to revert to the old "tried and true" teaching methods and tactics. Realism and practicing decision making, implemented through active learning techniques, took precedence over accreditations, quotas, and degrees. Instead of relying on mundane lectures, Wyly took ownership of his curricula, and his enthusiasm proved infectious. He inspired (and prepared) his students for a lifetime of learning not to meet requirements but to live up to their professional calling. Col Wyly and likeminded maneuverists were always seeking to improve, even if this meant having the humility to take inputs from nontraditional (even eccentric) sources and from those they outranked. Perhaps most importantly, they placed their responsibility as professionals ahead of their own professional advancement. Adapting and overcoming is never easy, but we have a rich history that might help guide us.

Notes

1. David Berger, "Marine Corps Readiness and Modernization," *CSPAN,* (October 2019), https://www.c-span.org.

2. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

3. Department of the Navy, *Education for Seapower*, (Washington, DC: 2019); Former Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas B. Modly, "SECNAV VECTOR 7," (January 2020); Former Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas

B. Modly, "SECNAV VECTOR 16," (March 2020); John Kroger, "Charting the Future of Education for the Navy-Marine Corps Team," *War on the Rocks*, (November 2019), available at https://warontherocks.com.

4. Williamson Murray, "Innovation: Past and Future," *Joint Force Quarterly*, (Washington, DC: NDU Press, Summer 1996); Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr., "The Horse Cavalry in the Twentieth Century: A Study in Policy Response," *Public Policy,* (Cambridge, MA: John Fitzgerald Kennedy School of Government, 1958).

5. Williamson Murray, "Does Military Culture Matter?" *Orbis*, (Amsterdam, NED: Elsevier, Winter 1999).

6. James G. March, "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning," *Organization Science*, (Catonsville, MD: Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, March 1991).

7. James G. March, "Rationality, Foolishness, and Adaptive Intelligence," *Strategic Management Journal,* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, March 2006).

8. We focus on Col Wyly's experiences in particular, but we recognize he was just one member of a key group of people that initiated, participated in, and led the maneuver warfare movement. Others included Col GI Wilson, USMCR; Gen Al Gray; LtCol Bill Woods; Col John Boyd, USAF; and Bill Lind, among many others.

9. For more on the Vietnam War and its aftereffects on the Corps, see Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*, rev. ed., (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1991).

10. For examples of articles both implicitly and explicitly critical of Gen Berger's *CPG* or *Force Design 2030*, see Jim Webb, "The Future of the U.S. Marine Corps," *National Interest*, (May 2020), available at https://nationalinterest.org; Jake Yeager, "Expeditionary Advanced Maritime Operations: How the Marine Corps Can Avoid Becoming a Second Land Army in the Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, (December 2019), available at https://warontherocks.com; Mark Cancian, "Don't Go Too Crazy, Marine Corps," *War on the Rocks*, (January 2020), available at https://warontherocks.com; and Dan Gouré, "Will Commandant Berger's New Marine Corps Be a High-Tech Forlorn Hope," *Real Clear Defense*, (April 2020), available at https://www.realcleardefense.com.

11. For example, excessive hint-giving may help a student pass a test, but it undermines long-term progress. See David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World,* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2019).

12. In a similar effort, MajGen William F. Mullen, CG, TECOM, published a memorandum, "Training and Education Command Authority to Experiment With New Learning Practices Policy," to grant "to Formal Learning Centers (FLCs) the authorities necessary to experiment with new learning practices with respect to innovative curriculum design, development, and delivery."

13. When 1st MarDiv deployed to Vietnam in 1965, some elements of these units had experienced the training at the CG/CI School. Comparatively, they were a small minority, but to Wyly and others, their effectiveness exceeded those who lacked the training. Unfortunately, the CG/CI School instructors deployed with the division, so there was no such school left behind to instruct follow-on units and replacement personnel. As a result, over time, what might be described as "the Krulak tactics" gave way to the operational concepts established by GEN Westmoreland.

14. After each tactical game, students were provided a typed handout of "The School Solution," which was printed on yellow paper and thus became known as "The Yellows." The yellow paper was intended to make it visibly evident that what was printed on *this* piece of paper was special—different—the *answer*!

15. "Marine Corps Readiness and Modernization."

16. Oriol Pi-Sunyer and Thomas De Gregori, "Cultural Resistance to Technological Change," *Technology and Culture*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 1964); James J. Tritten, "Revolutions in Military Affairs: From the Sea," *Military Review,* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, March–April 2000). In highlighting the shortcomings of the technology-driven model of military innovation, Tritten notes that it assumes military organizations will always capitalize on new technologies and recognize the need for new doctrine or organization. Additional examples of this mistaken notion include the thought initially that sustained artillery fire would defeat the enemy; however, experience taught that intensive fire enabling infantry to close with the enemy and be "on top of him" before he could recover was more effective. The machine gun's sustained automatic fire was supposed to enable the attacker to attack and move through and defeat

enemy defenses. Instead, it proved more effective *in the defense* until such time as *light* automatic weapons that could be carried by infantry were developed. It was also initially thought that an enemy could be bombed into submission by flying over him and dropping ordnance, but the more effective employment of aviation proved to be providing cover for friendly infantry so they could move forward during the period defenders were "hunkered down" when planes were overhead. Especially relevant today, the introduction of electronics was supposed to enable all-knowing commanders in all-knowing command centers to command from there without ever having to venture out. This myth began with the invention of the telegraph, but it soon became evident that commanders who were not eye-to-eye with their subordinates were "out of touch" and often unaware of the drive and motivation (or lack thereof) of forces under their command. Thus, *FMFM 1* reminds us the "commander should command from well forward" in order to "sense firsthand the ebb and flow of combat, to gain an intuitive appreciation for the situation which he cannot obtain from reports." Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1989).

17. Leaders like MajGen David Furness, CG, 2nd MarDiv, have been working to address the problem of enemy actions in the electromagnetic environment and the challenges of command and control in denied or degraded communications environments. David Furness, "Winning Tomorrow's Battles Today: Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare in the 2d Marine Division," *Marine Corps Gazette,* (Quantico, VA: November 2019). That being said, "control" is something of a misnomer. Command is more a matter of seeking, identifying, and seizing opportunities.

18. Every year, Wyly added more books, which he picked up from the *Gazette* store and sold in the AWS parking lot out of the trunk of his car. The captains became very enthusiastic and started coming to his office to discuss what they read. Soon, the captains started initiating their own suggestions of what to read. Wyly added them to the ever-growing list, a prelude to the Commandant's Professional Reading List.

19. Daniel A. Levinthal and James G. March, "The Myopia of Learning," *Strategic Management Journal*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, Winter 1993). Careerism has a tendency to undermine debate and exacerbate competence traps. Marines and the institution must not define "career success" as getting promoted or retiring with a comfortable pension. On the contrary, according to Wyly's perspective, career success should be viewed as living a meaningful life and having accomplished the mission on which a Marine set out.

20. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance,* (Washington, DC, 2019).

21. Williamson Murray, "MCDP 7: On Learning," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 2019).
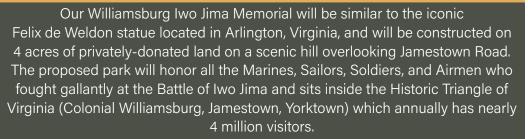
22. *FMFM 1, Warfighting.*