Read the Red Cell's Playbook

Direct enemy studies at the tactical level of Marine Corps operations

by 1stLt Bryson A. Curtin

From the use of IEDs in the Global War on Terror to the Banzai charges of World War II, the Marine Corps and American military establishment tends to assume that the enemy thinks exactly like us. This is not necessarily born out of hubris or excessive pride but rather a simple human flaw of a failure to truly understand how our prospective enemies think until it is too late. Marines of all ranks and MOSs often encounter the adage from Sun Tzu in guided discussions and the much maligned "death by PowerPoint" sessions on doctrine and theory that "if you know the enemy and you know yourself, then you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Many times, we nod our heads, ponder it for a moment, and go back to scribbling notes—never stopping to consider whether or not the Marine Corps truly follows the touted adage from Master Sun, at least at the tactical level. Much attention has been given (and rightly so) to the tactics, techniques, and procedures of prospective adversary forces at the strategic and operational level, resulting in significant cultural shifts within the Marine Corps toward a coming peer-level threat—the 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* being a watershed moment in that regard. However, the increased interest in the methods and tactics of our prospective enemies has not moved down to the level of the men and women who do the direct and bloody business of fighting. There is much discussion of strategic and operational actions by adversarial actors in the Marine Corps: China's naval buildup in the South China Sea, of Russia's intervention in Syria and annexation of Crimea, or the saber rattling and increased tensions in the Persian Gulf are all frequent subjects of interest. However, there is seemingly little discussion of the on-the-ground TTPs of our prospective adversaries where the Marine Corps has the most relevant responsibility to win, and if there is any, it is too localized within specific shops or units, lacking consistent information. Therefore, I propose that we develop a program of tactical-level enemy studies that every Marine at the rank of lieutenant and up must complete, focused on a list of prospective adversaries created by the Marine Corps.

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Conceptually, this would be similar to the Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization program, in that the subject of each study would be selected at random and assigned impartially; this would create a wide field of knowledge about a unit's potential adversaries across the globe. Such assignments would come once a Marine arrives at their first command following MOS school. After being assigned a potential adversary, the Marine would then utilize the S-2 for guidance and for source material. These materials can and should be unclassified and open source when at all possible for easy reference. Marines would refer to the S-2 for sources, publications, and reports as required, with feedback and guidance

Marine force-on-force training may lack the on-the-ground TTPs that potential adversaries actually use. *(Photo by SSgt Richard Andrade.)*

being given as needed throughout the process and towards the most relevant information. For example, the S-2 for a LAAD Battalion could steer a Marine toward Russian improvements in Man Portable Surface to Air Missile technology and its role in anti-air operations in Ukraine and future A2/AD missions. Even when assigned a less conventional group with less obvious direct parallels like Boko Haram, direct observations and comparisons could be drawn to a similar Marine Corps asset. A communications strategy Marine, for example, could describe how Boko Haram uses the internet and social media to benefit their own ends. Once the Marine has sufficient information, they would then conduct a Socratic method-style roundtable presentation of their findings to the S-2 and to other Marines of equal rank, with the S-2 and all other participants asking questions and discussing the findings that they found interesting or particularly relevant to their unit, MOS, and the Marine Corps as a whole. Standards for completion should be the quality and quantity of information presented and the relevance of the material. Once this is complete, it does not necessitate any additional resources than the ones readily available in the average platoon and company office, with the notable exception of assistance and guidance from the S-2.

Instituting such a program would add practical experience for an underused community in the Marine Corps: intelligence. As discussed in a September 2017 issue of the *Gazette* in an article entitled "Why the 0203 MOS is Broken," then 1stLts John H. Boger and Austin J. Dahmer provide an in-depth analysis of the 0203 pipeline and the flaws that originate from it, specifically when newly minted ground intelligence officers arrive at non-infantry units. These young officers frequently, as they put it, "are just as likely to sit on the staff of an artillery or logistics unit as they are to lead Scout Snipers or Reconnaissance Marines." They further correctly identify this as a waste of taxpayer dollars and frustrating to the aforementioned young lieutenants. Such a program as the one I have put forth here would allow them to add value to their units beyond acting as simply one more staff officer and would provide these officers with relevant experience presenting intelligence to those who often need it the most yet are excluded from it.

When using SAM/MANPAD simulators in training, current A2/AD threat TTPs should be employed. *(Photo by Cpl Lisa Collins.)*

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Sadly, our enemies have already moved ahead on this earlier than we have. The People's Liberation Army currently fields a dedicated unit, the 159th Combined Arms Brigade, which acts solely as opposing forces for the PLA's major exercises. According to an article in the December 2017 issue of *The Diplomat* entitled "China's Americanized Military Threat," this unit is structured in a similar fashion to an American Brigade Combat Team and can restructure itself to fit the mold of different American units, including a MEU. Soldiers frequently read and train off of American publications such as *MCWP 3-11.2, MCDP 1,* and the *Ranger Handbook*, as well as don American-style uniforms such as Multicam and Desert MARPATs. They apply this doctrine in their exercises against the PLA, and because of the simulated battlefield successes of this unit, the PLA frequently undergoes after action reviews for both large and small units alike, shifting their training to counter however the "Americans" were successful.

Ultimately, the goal of this program should not be to add another requirement to the already busy schedules of our Marine leaders. The goal is to incorporate real-world enemies who, to a certain degree, will inevitably think and act differently from each other. The Marine Corps tends to assume that the enemy will organize, think, and act in the same way that it does, and consequently, it ends up "fighting itself." Exercises are organized, and ranges are built based on the perception of how the Marine Corps would act in the enemy's shoes, not based on how our enemies would act. We do so at our own peril and at the peril of those young men and women who do the dirty work of war.