

# Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare

Our priorities for manning, training, equipping, and educating should be on our close combat units

by MajGen William F. Mullen III

With the publication of *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, Warfighting*, our 29th Commandant, Gen Alfred M. Gray, cemented maneuver warfare not only as the Service doctrine but as a warfighting philosophy to guide all Marine Corps actions. It excelled at shaping how the Marine Corps prepared and pursued war as evidenced by the successes achieved during the Gulf War and beyond. Unfortunately, our ability to think and act as maneuver warfare adherents diminished during the steady state operational periods of the subsequent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and caused our 37th Commandant, Gen Robert B. Neller, to ask, “How do we reinvigorate Maneuver warfare?” This question caused me to

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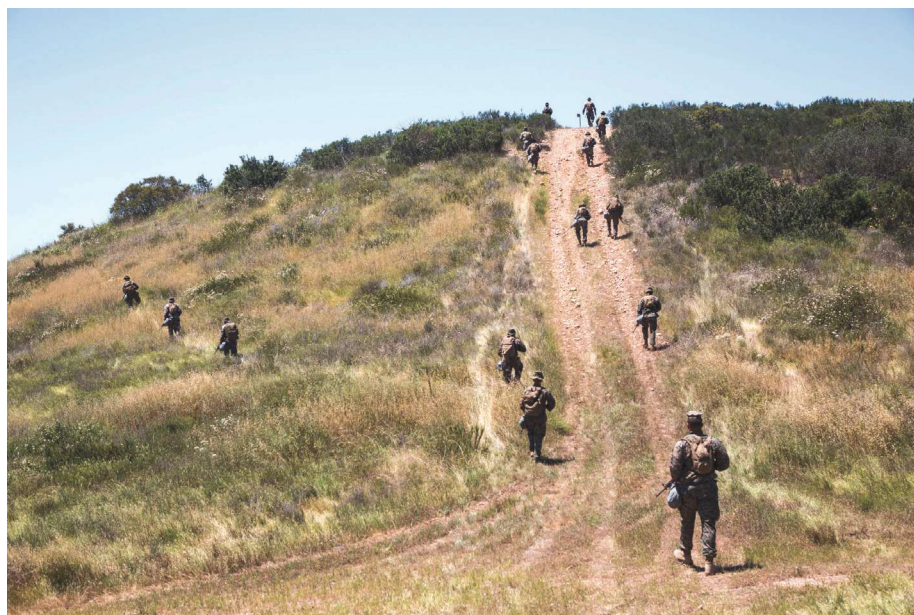
think long and hard, and the result was the conclusion that our Marine Corps needs to fundamentally change how it educates, mans, trains, equips, and even perceives its close combat forces. Before we get to those recommended changes though, we need to describe how we arrived at this point.

## The Decline of Maneuver Warfare

I believe Gen Neller asked the question regarding reinvigorating maneuver warfare for three primary reasons. First, the changes we have

seen in the Fleet Marine Forces over the past eighteen years of involvement in Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. After the successful maneuver warfare centric invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, counterinsurgency operations required Marines to “fight” from largely static positions. While small units employed maneuver warfare to gain positions of advantage during firefights, large-scale maneuvering was not required, which caused our skills to atrophy overall. These changes were compounded by the increased operational tempo, a great deal more prescription with training requirements, and less time between deployments. The result over time has generated small unit leaders who are less engaged with their subordinate unit leaders and leaders, in general, being more directive because of a lack of trust. These factors also engendered the belief on the part of many of our leaders that they had little to no control over the training in preparation for deployment, so they did not take ownership as much as they should. These factors have also led to a decrease in subordinate initiative where we have subordinate leaders thinking it is acceptable to merely wait for orders instead of taking intelligent initiative based on intent.

The second reason is the growth of technology that enables seniors to reach well down into the lowest tactical levels to direct actions they deem appropriate, as well as the extensive reporting requirements that only seem to grow from year to year. The ability to rapidly communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time is a tremendous temptation



Physical training involves more than the PFT and CFT. (Photo by LCpl Julian Elliot-Drouin.)



**We need to ensure our small unit leaders are competent.** (Photo by LCpl Devin Darden.)

that can, and often does, lead to overreach for non-essential and seemingly spurious reasons. Rather than increasing our speed, it causes hesitation and, in some cases, paralysis on the part of subordinates. Reporting is a major factor in this since control from above—real or perceived—inhibits subordinate confidence resulting in a reluctance to take the initiative and act on intent. The growth in both directive control and reporting requirements leads subordinates to feel they are not trusted, and this further undermines our maneuver warfare philosophy because these things lead to the perception that the leaders of our institution do not understand our own philosophy and that our institution itself does not act as if our philosophy matters.

The third reason is that, over the past few decades, our Corps has increasingly allowed a focus on expensive acquisition programs to dominate our thinking, investment priorities, and, even worse, to define who we are in our dialogue with Congress and the American people. While driven by the demands of the planning, programming, budgeting, and executing process and understandable to a point, none of these programs define the Marine Corps. Our Marines define the Marine Corps. Even if we had none of these programs, our ethos would enable us to find a way to get

the mission accomplished. By allowing the planning, programming, budgeting, and executing agenda to drive our narrative, our internal audience—our Marines—have focused more on the material things they believe they need instead of the requirement for personal professional development of our leaders and the pursuit of tactical competence across our units.

The three reasons mentioned above have also combined with an institutional obstacle that currently stands in the way of enabling maneuver warfare. This institutional obstacle is the way we man units that inhibits the timely building of cohesive teams. The “business rules” approach to manning almost guarantees a lack of available time to form a cohesive unit and build the trust that is essential to the conduct of maneuver warfare. Based on our strategic guidance, the units that need to adhere to our warfighting policy the most are our close combat units, but they consistently seem to be the lowest priority for ensuring the best quality leadership at every level, particularly at the small unit level. We spend a great deal of time and effort selecting lieutenant colonel-level commanders and sergeants major, while spending little to no time ensuring that they have a fully manned and qualified command team all the way down to perhaps the most important point—the squad level.

The challenge with all that has been stated is that there is perceived to be a “say-do” gap in that we profess to believe in our maneuver warfare philosophy, but in practice we are doing things that undermine our ability to adhere to that philosophy for a variety of reasons. This say-do gap creates dissonance within our ranks while undermining the credibility of senior leaders and belief in the institution overall.

### **Maneuver Warfare’s Essential Ingredients**

Our philosophy of maneuver warfare can only exist when essential ingredients are present. The first, most important, ingredient in maneuver warfare is having leaders who possess maturity, intelligence, and a coach/teach/mentor mentality. Also, these leaders must understand our philosophy thoroughly and possesses the ability to inculcate every aspect of it in their units. The lack of such leaders inhibits getting to even the rudiments of our philosophy because if the leader is not interested or does not understand it, no one else in the unit will care. As with just about everything else, it has to start with the unit commanding officer, and since we seem to be suffering from anti-intellectualism where so many of our leaders do not read and study their profession anywhere near enough, many leaders today too often lack the required level of understanding.

The second ingredient is unit cohesion. It comes from a team having all its key leadership positions filled and stable for the entire duration of its training, deployment, and recovery period. It also comes from a solid and challenging training regimen—based on a clearly understood higher purpose—that demonstrates to all on the team that each member can be counted on and assists all leaders in understanding the capabilities and the limitations of their seniors and subordinates. Sun Tzu told us to know ourselves, and this is what cohesion enables. Without knowing ourselves and coming together as a team, we would merely be lucky to beat any opponent.

The third ingredient is competence. Competence on the part of seniors and

subordinates needs to come both upon their arrival with a solid base of knowledge regarding the billet they will hold, as well as participating as part of the team during the training period that demonstrates the competence of all the unit's leaders. This demonstration of competence further enables cohesion. Without competence in the senior leader, subordinates doubt the capacity of the unit to accomplish any mission, and the effect is corrosive in the extreme. Without competent subordinates, leaders distrust their subordinates' ability to fulfill their intent in an effective way. In both cases, units experience difficulty in building cohesion, and their poor performance reflects this condition during training, or worse, in combat.

When you combine the ingredients above, you gain the trust between seniors and subordinates that is absolutely critical and which enables them to operate as a team with little more than intent to go by as the guiding premise. This trust enables seniors to know that their subordinates will take their intent and accomplish the mission in the best manner possible, regardless of changing conditions, and require little more in the way of guidance unless the intent needs to change. It also enables subordinates to trust that their seniors will not micro-manage them or pull the rug out from under them when they take whatever action is required to accomplish the intent provided. There is a reason why people refer to the speed of trust—when you have it, you need less communication, and it provides for a great deal more initiative which results in greater agility across the organization. Without it, you have leaders hesitant to make decisions and more oriented on protecting themselves than in accomplishing the mission as quickly and effectively as possible.

What is described above can best be stated as the maneuver warfare equation: Quality Leaders + Extended Cohesion + Core Competence = TRUST. This trust is essential to action maneuver warfare. Without trust, there can be no mission command. Without trust, combined arms is dangerous at worst and ineffective at best. Trust is the fundamental fuel that is needed for the fu-

ture fight. Our Corps' challenge is that almost every institutional process we utilize works against this equation, and when coupled with a high operational tempo, we will always fall short. With that said though, we do achieve this ideal in some cases with the commanders who "get it" and work to achieve this in the units they command. Absent the institutional processes that standardize and enable the equation above, we will fail to achieve consistent and predictable outcomes. In order to reinvigorate maneuver warfare, we have to change the way we educate, man, train, and equip our close combat forces, which is where we need this capability the most.

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**Reinvigorating Maneuver Warfare in the 21st Century**

To alleviate the challenges mentioned above and thereby enable the Corps to return to fulfilling our maneuver warfare philosophy, we need to treat the close combat forces of the Marine Corps differently. Given our strategic guidance, these forces are our Corps' direct bid for success when executing daily tasks in the current and future operating environments. As our strategic guidance specifically directs, these close combat units must be educated, manned, trained, and equipped differently from the rest of the Marine Corps. An analogy would be a NFL team. Everyone in the organization is a member of the team, but those who go out onto the field to engage with the opposing team directly are the ones who get the most focus, so they are treated differently from everyone else. They are the team's bid for success—they win the game through their actions on the field. It is the same for our close combat units, so they must be treated differently also. The changes recommended below apply across the Marine Corps in some cases,

but apply to our close combat force in particular:

*Education.* We need to establish career length PME continuums for our officers and SNCOs, with progress in them tied to promotion and strictly enforced. It has to be more than just attending a formal PME course or accomplishing it through distance education. All of our leaders need to understand that they have joined a profession and that there are career length continuing education requirements that must be accomplished to continue to be a member of the profession of arms. We are currently working on proposals for these continuums, which, if adopted, need to be sustained and enforced across the Marine Corps. We must have more intelligent leaders at every level who truly understand our philosophy and what is required to make it work. This becomes even more imperative as we increase in rank and responsibility. As former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis once said, "the price of a lack of competence in our profession is filling body bags until we figure it out." This has never been acceptable, but as the pace of change in the operating environment gets faster and the challenges get more complex, his statement is truer now than ever.

*Manning.* We need to prioritize stability and cohesion over a longer term in our close combat forces much more than we do now. As soon as a close combat unit returns from post-deployment leave, all of the new members they are going to get should be standing by and ready to join to enable the team to cohere and train throughout the entire work up period. This in particular means leaders at their normal table of organization rank, with the training they need to set them up for success accomplished before they arrive at their unit.

Each leader in a close combat formation needs to be periodically evaluated, to include 360-degree evaluations, to eradicate toxic leadership. These evaluations can be used with more junior leaders to influence them to be better leaders if there is a challenge, but as leaders become more senior, they get less of a chance for remediation, especially if they have been counseled earlier in

their career for the lack of appropriate leadership. Our Marines deserve only the best, most committed leaders we can provide, and we need to be ruthless in the pursuit of that objective. Again, leaders in close combat units have to be treated differently. We try as an institution to enable stringent screening of commanders, but we continue to see evidence that we still have room to improve.

We need to ensure our small unit leaders are competent and have something that sets them apart from the junior Marines they are leading. We can do this by making the advanced infantry training courses provided by the Schools of Infantry both required and “Ranger School-like” experiences for our junior leaders. This will cause them to realize that before they go, they need to be well prepared, and when they return, they are a different person from the Marine they were previously. The more junior courses should be a requirement for promotion to the next grade with the honor graduate promoted two ranks. This will generate a much better sense of confidence in our junior leaders and will enable the Marines they lead to truly look up to them as someone they can aspire to be—they will also be more likely to be the role model leaders that we need given the guidance we have re-

ceived. The Squad Leader Development Program is a step in the right direction, but it is not nearly enough.

We need to raise the required GT score as well as the lower age limit for membership in our close combat units so that we get the smarter, more mature Marines we need. The Information Age we are in has generated a sense of transparency through increased access to information which means that more people, to include our Marines, are “influence-able” by the dissemination of disinformation. This is especially true since many of our young Marines are not inclined to dig deeply or think critically about what they are mentally absorbing. If it rhymes with what they want to believe, they are inclined to accept it as fact. As we pursue our national interests across the globe, our Marines must understand the impact of their every action, or inaction, or we will continue to experience challenges in the operational environment. Whether willful or not, ignorance threatens our ability to accomplish our assigned missions, undermines public confidence in our institution, and erodes trust within our ranks.

An adjunct to what was stated above is that the more junior members of our close combat units need to understand that they are not *entitled* to be there.

They should have to earn their spot on the team, and keep it over time, through demonstrated performance in all aspects of training and being a Marine 24/7. Failure to comply means being warned and counseled at first then cut from the close combat team for failure to adjust. When cut, they should be placed in a pool of Marines who have also failed to comply. These Marines will continue to train in order to try and earn a spot in a different unit (as long as there are no legal or behavioral issues) and will have one more chance to be a part of a close combat unit if they are recommended for that chance by the leadership of the training pool. If they fail again, they are given another MOS or a job elsewhere supporting the fleet. This effort is designed to get at the “need to belong” that Dick Couch speaks of in his book *A Tactical Ethic* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010). If Marines know they will have to earn their spot, then protect what they have earned through continuous performance, just like on a football team, most will rise to the occasion with a corresponding rise in the competence and cohesion of our close combat units. Once they realize that they can lose their spot, they will work a great deal harder to stay there and the training pools will not be as large as some might think.

*Training.* Our close combat units deploy for different reasons and their training is, and should continue to be, oriented on the challenges they will face once deployed. That said, there still needs to be a culminating event that everyone recognizes will likely be more difficult than what they will face when deployed. Whether this is a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation or an Service-level training exercise, it needs to be standardized from the standpoint that the evaluators see many different units and can best judge the unit they are currently looking at by direct comparison. It also needs to be fully instrumented to enable the collection of every aspect of the exercise. This will enable data analysis for identification of trends that need to be fixed across the force. They should also train against a live, thinking enemy, and train to failure at every opportunity—with



**There needs to be a culminating event that everyone recognizes as the standard to be used for comparison with other like units. (Photo by Sgt Andy Martinez.)**

each event reviewed in the after-action review process and reset to be run again if needed to cement in the lessons that need to be learned.

The physical training for close combat units also needs to be different from the rest of the Marine Corps. To get to the warrior athletes we need, the regimen needs to include aspects of functional fitness as well as hiking and combat endurance courses as part of a regular routine for these forces. It should also include nutrition counseling and the involvement of athletic trainers to prevent injury and help with recovery when injury occurs. We have made a start in this area but need to do more. There should also be a different Combat Fitness Test for close combat units that involves some challenges and tactical tasks coupled with hiking and speed marching to ensure that every member of the team is in peak physical condition and able to keep up under combat conditions. Once again, different rules for the close combat units that are our bid for success on the battlefield.

*Equipping.* The way we spend money has to demonstrate what is most important to us and that means we should be spending a great deal more on our close combat units. By several estimates that were validated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation as well as listed in our strategic guidance, these close combat units take 90 percent of the casualties in combat, yet form the smallest percentage of our Marine Corps overall. An accelerated acquisition process coupled with prioritizing close combat units will enable them, and only them, to get the best equipment and technology available in the shortest amount of time. This focus on our close combat units will significantly enhance our chances of winning in combat, but it will also demonstrate to the members of those units that they are indeed our main focus. Special operations forces already have this focus, and the more we can approach what they do for their teams, the better. This is not to make our close combat units a close replica of special operations forces, but to give them more confidence in what they are using in combat and more confidence



**We have to dominate the fight.** (Photo by LCpl Jacqueline Parsons )

in themselves as a team. We have to ensure that any fight we engage in with our close combat units is not a fair fight in any way. We have to dominate and win every fight, or we will have lost in everyone else's eyes. The confidence that comes from clear dominance is priceless.

### Enabling and Sustaining

Bureaucracies follow certain predictable behaviors regardless of the requirements levied upon them. As a large, bureaucratic institution we struggle against organizational friction to enact lasting change—the recommendations contained in this article are no exception. Making some or all of the changes recommended in this article has the potential to reinvigorate maneuver warfare, but change of this nature also takes more time than most think—it is a generational shift that must be sustained over time. When we get distracted by a high operational tempo, we tend to lose focus. To prevent this, we should establish maneuver warfare tactical contact teams consisting of recognized experts who visit exercises, talk to the participants, observe operations, and provide relevant lessons learned to all concerned. These contact teams should be the conduit through which lessons are disseminated in all directions and can be the “directed telescope” for the Commandant to be able to measure and

influence progress toward enabling the maneuver warfare culture throughout the Marine Corps, but in particular, in our close combat units where it is essential to success.

All of this is a great deal to ask, but so is combat, especially when data indicates that the units we are talking about take the overwhelming percentage of casualties in any fight. Becoming a part of one of these units, as well as continuing to maintain one's position or move up in one of them has to be something different from the average Marine experience. There are those who will call these changes unfair but so is taking 90 percent of the casualties in any fight. Institutionalizing the measures required to reinvigorate and maintain a culture of maneuver warfare are vitally necessary to ensure that the next close combat fight we engage in is a crushing and thoroughly demoralizing experience for anyone who chooses to be our opponent in that fight.

