

We Must Get Back to Mission Tactics

Practicing what we preach
by Capt Michael Hanson

The Marine Corps prides itself on being an organizational practitioner of maneuver warfare, a method of warfare that emphasizes speed and tempo to out-cycle an opponent and neutralize his ability to resist before he can react effectively. According to *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, it is the Marine Corps' official style of warfare. However, a significant contradiction currently exists between what our Corps practices and what it preaches. When it comes to teaching subordinate leaders about taking initiative and rapidly exploiting opportunities to achieve maneuver warfare's fullest potential, we indoctrinate them in the classroom and in our professional writings with an expectation that we do not honor in the field. This will not serve us well in combat and, in the next

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fight, may deny us victories and even lead to defeat. To prepare for war with a peer adversary, the Marine Corps must return to its doctrine or risk being outmaneuvered by a bolder opponent that allows his subordinate leaders to practice real maneuver warfare while we give lip service to it.

Evidence of this disconnect can be found in the lessons we draw from *Infantry Attacks* by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. In it, the author offers a collection of vignettes from his own personal experiences as a first lieutenant in World War I. In addition to a simple

yet engaging prose, the author includes many detailed maps and sketches that illustrate terrain, enemy dispositions, effects of fires, and friendly movements that clearly explain his keys to success and define the tenets that made him a legend among infantrymen worldwide. As such, this work is probably the finest example of maneuver warfare in practice below the battalion level of any book on the Commandant's Professional Reading List. Likewise, the book is regarded as something akin to holy gospel among infantry Marines, as it is frequently quoted in professional writings and referenced in debriefs.

It is easy to understand why this book is so prized: Rommel's results speak volumes to his style of leadership and the tactics, techniques, and procedures he employed. In summarizing his greatest victory in this war, he wrote:

The capture of Mount Matajur occurred fifty-two hours after the start of the offensive near Tolmein. My mountain troopers were in the thick of battle almost uninterrupted during these hours and formed the spearhead of the attack by the Alpine Corps. Here—carrying heavy machine guns on their shoulders—they surmounted differences of eight thousand feet uphill and three thousand downhill, and traversed a distance of twelve miles as the crow flies through unique, hostile mountain fortifications.

In twenty-eight hours five successive and fresh Italian regiments were defeated by the weak Rommel detachment. The number of captives and trophies amounted to: 150 officers, 9,000 men, and 81 guns. Not included in these figures were the enemy units which, after they had been cut off ...



To practice maneuver warfare, the Corps must enable and trust the informed initiative of junior Marines. (Photo by Cpl Sarah Anderson.)

voluntarily laid down their arms and joined the columns of prisoners moving toward Tolmein.¹

Rommel's fantastic conquest—whether measured in speed, distance traversed, or the number of enemy personnel and equipment captured—is all the more amazing considering the extremely low price he paid in contrast to what he inflicted on his enemies:

The losses of the Rommel detachment in the three days of attack were happily low: 6 dead, including 1 officer; 30 wounded, including 1 officer.²

Rommel's capture of Mount Matajur, the culminating event in the aforementioned series of actions, won him his country's highest military award—the Pour Le Merite, or the Blue Max—as well as prominence in the annals of war long before he became the Desert Fox.

One of the most common themes from this work, and one that is relentlessly drilled into the head of every Marine leader, is the ability to function amongst chaos in order to capitalize on any momentum before the enemy can react. Marine leaders are expected to recognize opportunities and ruthlessly exploit them to gain and maintain tempo over an opponent that cannot keep up and to deliver the fatal finishing blow to the enemy in the most expedient manner. This is the personification of maneuver warfare, and Rommel's book is essentially an instruction manual for platoon and company commanders on how to conduct it. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps does not currently live up to some of the ideals it espouses when promoting this book.

The Marine Corps talks a great deal about small unit leaders taking initiative in an uncertain environment but in practice halts subordinate leaders, like Lt Rommel, before they attain the effect that they are taught to strive for. The seminal events of the entire book—the remarkable battles in the Tolmein Offensive high in the Julian Alps in the fall of 1917, specifically the herculean feats that young Erwin Rommel accomplished—would not happen in today's Marine Corps in a similar setting. It is quite a bold statement, but one worth repeating in more detail: a first lieutenant or Capt Rommel in today's

Marine Corps would not achieve the breakthroughs, the deep penetrations, the exploitations, the pursuits, or the capture of so many enemy troops and equipment as the actual Rommel did in Italy in 1917. He would not accomplish these exploits because he would be stopped cold by a rigid and unforgiving higher headquarters command structure that seeks control at the expense of opportunity.

The 21st century Marine Rommel would not be able to exploit the fleeting opportunities before him because he would be required to consult his higher headquarters before acting. He would be forced to wait for a decision from higher, which could come entirely too late for him to affect the coveted exploitation, whereas in 1917 young Rommel simply decided and acted on the spot. The methods of communicating back then were field telephones and runners. Telephones required each end to be physically connected by a hard wire, while runners took significant time to move between nodes—especially in such harsh mountainous terrain. As such, commanders were comfortable not having instant communications with their subordinates and trusted them to make decisions on their own and act on them. So, in a sense, Rommel in 1917 was quite fortunate not to be burdened with the communication technologies of today. If the Marine Corps were fighting the Tolmein Offensive today, our young Rommel would not seize anything beyond his initial objective because the windows of opportunity on anything beyond it would close before he received approval to exploit.

Furthermore, if this same battle played out today, lieutenant or Capt Rommel would not dare move forward without clear communication with his higher headquarters—though not because *he* would be uncomfortable with losing the ability to communicate with his higher command but because *his higher command* would be uncomfortable with him moving forward without the ability to communicate back. Herein lies the greater problem, and it is systemic. One would think that the proliferation of light weight portable radios would enable small unit leaders

distributed across a wide battlespace to rapidly identify and exploit opportunities, whether by coordinating supporting fires or vectoring follow-on units into their path to reinforce success, but the truth is quite the opposite today. Instead, the multitude of radios that exist at the platoon level act as chains that tether combat power to a distant command post that constantly requests more and more information from all of its various units. This system produces an overwhelmed command node that attempts to alleviate its uncertainty by demanding even more information which only strains itself more and saps tempo through a form of paralysis by analysis in the process. The ultimate result is very often clogged lines of communications, slow orientation on situations, late decisions, and missed opportunities.

Once again, in a contemporary Tolmein Offensive, our young Rommel would be halted in his tracks with the loss of communication to higher headquarters. He would not move forward without this link and would in fact turn back from his objective in a frantic search for a suitable location to reestablish communication. This could cause him to forfeit the very tempo that is vital in maneuver warfare. This abdication of the tactical initiative is entirely self-imposed by a rigid higher headquarters system that values control over mission tactics—the very thing that enables maneuver warfare. Amazingly, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, warns against this very phenomenon where it states plainly and definitively that “equipment that facilitates or encourages the micromanagement of subordinate units is inconsistent with our command and control philosophy,” because “such technological capability tends to fix the senior's attention at too low a level of detail.” Though *MCDP 6* very presciently identified today's problem it also offers tomorrow's solution:

The reality of technological development is that equipment which improves the ability to monitor what is happening may also increase the temptation and the means to try to direct what is happening. Consequently, increased capability on the part of equipment

brings with it the need for increased understanding and discipline on the part of the users. Just because our technology allows us to micromanage doesn't mean we should.³

Therefore, higher headquarters that command like this do not practice maneuver warfare and are out of compliance with Marine Corps doctrine, as *MCDP 1, Warfighting* states:

It is essential that our philosophy of command support the way we fight. First and foremost, *in order to generate the tempo of operations we desire and to best cope with the uncertainty, disorder, and fluidity of combat, command and control must be decentralized.* That is, subordinate commanders must make decisions on their own initiative, based on their understanding of their senior's intent, rather than passing information up the chain of command and waiting for the decision to be passed down. Further, a competent subordinate commander who is at the point of decision will naturally better appreciate the true situation than a senior commander some distance removed. Individual initiative and responsibility are of paramount importance.⁴

In practical terms, this means that we must not strive for certainty before we act, for in so doing we will surrender the initiative and pass up opportunities. We must not try to maintain excessive control over subordinates since this will necessarily slow our tempo and inhibit initiative. We must be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances and exploit opportunities as they arise, rather than adhering insistently to predetermined plans that have outlived their usefulness.⁵

MCDP 1-3 Tactics warns of the dangers that excessive control can inadvertently breed: Attempts to impose control also can easily undermine the initiative upon which Marine Corps tactics depends. Marines can become hesitant, they may feel they must wait for orders before acting. We are not likely to move faster or gain leverage over a competent opponent unless Marines at every level exercise initiative.⁶

Unfortunately, we are already there. Marines are in fact hesitant and wait for orders before acting. They are hesitant because they have been conditioned to

be. They wait for orders because their higher commanders expect them to. Fortunately, we already possess the solution to this systemic problem: mission tactics derived from clear commander's intent. It is high time that the Marine Corps follow its own doctrine. The characteristics of modern warfare demand it, specifically in the communication degraded or denied battlefields we expect to fight on in the future.

Higher headquarters nodes must become comfortable with their units operating out of communication. A unit out of communication for two hours should not be the cause for all adjacent units to drop what they are doing and begin searching for that "lost" unit. Had that been standard operating procedure in the Tolmein Offensive, the Alpine Corps would not have experienced any success. Likewise, higher headquarters must become comfortable operating out of communication as well. As recent force-on-force exercises have demonstrated, it is the higher headquarters nodes that are frequently targeted, destroyed, or forced to frequently displace lest they be targeted and destroyed.⁷

Finally, the realistic nature of combat operations in harsh terrain, such as the Julian Alps, makes radio communication unreliable due to intervening terrain between communication nodes. Whether from the restrictions imposed by the physical environment or by enemy activity, we should expect communications to be limited and train to operate with as little reliance on them as possible. Regardless, if the next fight is in the mountains, the jungle, a large

city, or across a wide area where units are so distributed that they cannot range each other with radios, higher echelons of command must ease up on such rigid expectations of control.

Adherence to mission type orders and trusting subordinates to use their own best judgment is essential in the future operating environment. Doing so will free the current lieutenant and Capt Rommels across the ranks and enable them to conquer the next Mount Matajur.

Notes

1. Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, (Provo, UT: Athena Press, 1979).
2. Ibid.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: 1996)
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
5. Ibid.
6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
7. Personal observation of the author as an observer/controller with TTECG during multiple force-on-force exercises.



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