

# Wasted Opportunity

What we should be getting out of force-on-force

by Maj Joshua Burchfield

**T**he Marine Corps is wasting the MAGTF Warfighting Exercise (MWX) due to the focus of our debriefs. Here is what I mean: MWX is designed to be the premier force-on-force training exercise in the Marine Corps—if not the entire DOD. What is the purpose of force-on-force training? Well, it *should* be tactics. We simply cannot train and evaluate the application of tactics on a live-fire range against inanimate targets. However, force-on-force training gives us the unique ability to train and evaluate our application of tactics against a thinking enemy with similar if not equal capabilities as our own. It would logically follow that this should be the focus of MWX, but based on the debriefs, it is not.

The debriefs I participated in have carried over the same flavor as the debriefs I received after every live-fire event since I was a second lieutenant: they focus on techniques and procedures, *not* on the application of tactics. For instance, the company commander debrief at the end of MWX is structured after the warfighting functions. Minimal (if any) mention of tactics was made, and there was certainly no mention of the principles found in the publication by that title. More concerning, at the final after-action report, the two topics that consumed much of the three hours allotted were air-ground integration and kill chain/kill web methodology. Not only do these subjects fall into the “techniques and procedures” category but they are techniques and procedures that we have been talking about as a Service for a very long time. In the case of air-ground integration, we have been talking about it for the past 100 years; in the case of kill chains, we have been talking about it since the invention of the cannon. The effect of

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new technology on these techniques may merit some discussion, but techniques are techniques, and if we talk about them at the largest *tactical* after-action review in the Marine Corps, we should only be talking about them as they relate to the principles found in *MCDP 1-3*.

If we are not going to focus on air-ground integration or kill chains, what *should* we focus on to get meaningful, Service-wide learning out of the premier force-on-force training exercise known as MWX? The answer is so simple it will undoubtedly offend some high-minded individuals: *tactics*. Tactics should be the focus of the debriefs resulting from MWX. By tactics, I mean specifically the seven principles outlined in *MCDP 1-3* in conjunction with those found in *MCDP 1*. Marines will prioritize what the leaders/debriefers talk about. If we want tactical thought to be a priority, it must be an explicit focus. MWX provides the Service the opportunity to train and evaluate the application of warfighting and tactics at echelon over the course of multiple days of continuous operations in an austere environment. If we are not making tactics the explicit focus of the debriefs, we are failing ourselves and the future warfighters of this organization. If the point is to make us better at maneuvering against thinking enemies, then the focus of our debriefs should be to draw out at every echelon—to include our supporting

agencies—how well we identified and exploited the gaps in the enemy system through: achieving a decision, gaining an advantage, being faster, adapting, cooperating, exploiting success and finishing, and making it happen.

Closely related to the structure and focus of the debriefs is the issue of commanders—company-level and higher—being immune to failure. If we want to get better as an organization, the commanders debriefs and final after-action report need to be the kind of events where every echelon of command has the humility to receive candid feedback about where they did well and where they failed at the application of *tactics*. Every time we conduct a final after-action report and a commander at the company, battalion, or regimental level is publicly allowed to get away with the mediocre or abysmal application of the seven principles from *MCDP 1-3*, we are committing the worst kind of crime against the future survival of our organization in combat. To use a metaphor from a children’s story, *the king has no clothes*. Immunity to failure may help us save face in front of our Marines now, but it will not help us save their lives in combat; in fact, it will result in the needless loss of many lives if we do not start calling out good versus bad tactics, and there is in fact such a thing as bad tactics. There *is* a wrong answer. The lowest echelons of our formations will only suffer if we continue telling everyone they did well and/or focusing on the wrong things. In combat, the people who do well are the ones who make *tactically* sound decisions and the ones who do not get killed.

The historical and present-day necessity for us to make tactics the focus of MWX is enormous. Technology changes the *how*, but tactics are still the *what*. Techniques and procedures can only do

so much for us when the enemy has the opportunity to analyze how we fight. History has proven time and again that *tactics*, not technology or techniques, are how we achieve success when the enemy is trying to outsmart us. An ancient but applicable example of this is the defeat of the Spartan Phalanx at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC. After so many victories using their trusted technique, the Spartans grew lazy in their tactical thought, rested on their laurels, and were defeated by someone who did some simple analysis of how to defeat their sacred technique. Our sacred techniques today (indirect fire followed by support-by-fire followed by maneuver; air integration; kill-chain methodology) are the modern Spartan Phalanx.

In February 2018, a mechanized force of Russian contractors and the

Syrian Army made an incursion over the Euphrates River, preceded by coordinated indirect fire, to seize what they thought was a lightly defended oil refinery. The engagement lasted four hours and resulted in a tactical victory for the small U.S. force that defeated them in battle. What is not readily apparent, but something we all should be considering, is that while the aggressors were destroyed in detail, their four-hour engagement with U.S. forces allowed their higher headquarters, as well as all our other peer-level enemies, to gather invaluable data points about how we would fight a mechanized enemy with peer-level assets conducting a coordinated attack (specifically how we integrate air). We are kidding ourselves to think our enemies have not spent the last five years analyzing and reverse-engineering the techniques we

employed in that engagement down to the last 7.62 machinegun round. If we think they have not spent tens of thousands of man-hours devising tactical answers to the techniques we employed there, we are deathly wrong. Those techniques are effective but only until we meet someone whose *tactical* mind outsmarts those techniques, and that someone is out there *now*.

In conclusion, MWX is one of the best training exercises in the DOD. But if we continue patting ourselves on the back at the Service-level debrief, we are wasting an event that could drive major advances in our ability to out-sense and out-maneuver a thinking enemy through the application of tactics. For the sake of our future survival, let's re-focus MWX on *tactics*.

