

# The Tactical Ground Advisory Board

The birth of bottom-up refinement

by Capt Tyler B. Folan

**“N**ineteen of my fifty-five soldiers were either killed or wounded severely enough to warrant evacuation. The loss was mainly my fault. It was not that I was new at the job. This was my fourth command, so I thought I knew what I was doing,”<sup>1</sup> claimed a battery commander in 1969 during the battle of Dong Ap Bia. To prevent such atrocities, tactical-level leaders must be given the opportunity to evaluate experiences and provide recommendations to the Commandant that will improve lethality and success at the tactical level. The current construct of advocacy within the GCE, on average, takes fourteen years to produce a decision point for a general officer to determine if the Marine Corps will field an idea or not. Fourteen years is unacceptable when tactical-level leaders are required to improvise against an evolving enemy with primitive equipment. A shift in Marine Corps research and procurement is required to counter the evolving battlespace of tomorrow. The very leaders who are fighting it, the tactical unit leaders, must be given the opportunity to develop such changes. The Marine Corps must establish a tactical ground advisory board to identify and procure tactical-level constraints that are hampered by the existing advocacy process. A tactical ground advisory board composed of company-grade,

SNCO, and NCO leaders will identify tactical-level concerns and expedite said issues more efficiently than the GCE and ground advocacy process.

The current advocacy process is outdated and slow to respond, and it revolves around a semiannual event known as the ground board. The ground board

Pentagon. Recommendations are then tabled by priority and have expected lifespans of fourteen years before being acted upon. The following are previous topics discussed at the ground board: squad sizes, upgrading riflemen optics, and the ongoing tribulation of the amphibious assault vehicle survival and

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is comprised of all division commanders. Here, division commanders discuss, dismiss, or endorse changes proposed by GCE and MSE (major subordinate element) advocates. Each MSE of the GCE identifies, refines, and makes recommendations to their advocate in the

longevity. “Competition for resources is keen; thus a majority of proposals that enter the defense acquisition process do not survive it.”<sup>2</sup> Recommendations from tactical-level leaders fail in the current GCE advocacy construct and must improve.



***Author's company following firing Range 400, Twentynine Palms. (Photo by LCpl Brennon A. Taylor.)***

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**Tactical-level recommendations are often lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.** (Photo by Cpl Joseph Prado.)

Regimental commanders and Marine gunners are the primary influencers of the GCE ground board. Division commanders discuss, vote, or table recommendations based on urgency placed by regimental commanders or due diligence by division commanders at the semiannual ground board. Consistent turnover in regimental and division commanders puts a void in the current system that requires the GCE

Advocate to determine the priority of recommendations. Tactical-level leaders could expect to finally see and likely vote on their ideas as a battalion commander, when as a lieutenant, their idea was submitted and required action. Although there is merit to the current decision-making system, tactical-level leader recommendations are often overlooked and lost in the bureaucratic process.<sup>3</sup>



**We can set requirements for selecting Marines to serve on a ground advisory board.** (Photo by LCpl Bernadette Wildes.)

Once a decision is voted on by division commanders, the Deputy Commandant of Plans, Policies, and Operations either endorses or rejects the recommendation. Pending the decision, the Commandant determines the verdict of the fourteen-year research project. The GCE is constantly getting out-cycled by itself in the decision-making process as division commanders are re-assigned, and the needs of today are not being addressed for the fight tomorrow. The Marine Corps prides itself as an organization that abides by bottom-up refinement; however, because of excessive levels of bureaucracy, recommendations from the tactical level fail to reach the decision makers. To refine this process, the tactical ground advisory board must be composed of the very leaders who have the least involvement in improving the Marine Corps at large: the small unit leader. The tactical ground advisory board must be established to advise senior leaders concerning issues at the tactical level. "Unless there was some fundamental transformation in the thinking about defense, the process would never change."<sup>4</sup>

"There can be true economy of men's powers in war only when command reckons with man as he is and not as it would like him to be."<sup>5</sup> In order to build a tactical ground advisory board, recruiting the best is dependent upon the regiments and below. Battalion and regimental leadership must ensure that the best candidates are selected, knowing that those who are chosen will brief the Commandant. In order to be selected, a candidate must have completed a minimum of one deployment, display leadership potential, demonstrate an innovative spirit, and think critically. Battalions will slate one company-grade GCE officer, one SNCO, and two NCOs. Regiments will then examine and select the representation for part of the 96 core Marines' board that will be composited for a six-month tour before returning to their parent battalion. Buy-in from tactical-level leadership through regimental commanders will assure that innovative, talented Marines are allotted the opportunity to improve the Marine Corps.

Establishing a policy of one-year rotations as a member of the tactical

ground advisory board will not distress the selected Marines' careers but rather enhance them. Following deployments, battalions and regiments often face re-staffing because of personnel rotations, yet during the deployments, they had experienced small unit leaders with an enhanced knowledge of an area of operations as well as procedures, techniques, and tactics\* that benefited the unit. Although after-action reports and command chronologies capture snapshots of the deployment, improvements that can assist all tactical-level units are overlooked, leaving small unit leaders to reinvent procedures each deployment. Mechanisms are in place to prevent this from occurring, yet the emphasis is placed on the operational and strategic levels.

Those selected to be part of the tactical ground advisory board will have no more than six months after selection to the board to research, produce, and recommend a solution to demands placed at the tactical level. The Commandant, who will have sole voting authority, will evaluate recommendations from the board. He will determine sourcing and fund allocations necessary to provide all tactical-level units the solution he



**We can expedite the acquisition system through the Rapid Capabilities Office.** (Photo by LCpl Bernadette Wildes.)

endorsed via an accelerated planning, programing, and budgeting system.<sup>6</sup> The exceeding cost for projects can be expected to range from Acquisition Category II to Acquisition Category III.<sup>7</sup>

The entirety of this process, from identifying a shortfall to funding and

sourcing it, should take no more than nine months, eighteen times less than the current process. The U.S. Army announced the creation of the Rapid Capabilities Office in August 2016,<sup>8</sup> which is intended to significantly reduce its aged research, development, and acquisition process. Although the new office will expedite identified priorities, it seeks to receive recommendations from combatant commanders. The Army's plan lacks tactical-level recommendations; the model for accelerated acquisition must be replicated in the Marine Corps. Combatant commanders are significantly removed from the battlefield and offer no further improvement from the heavily bureaucratic process already in place within the Marine Corps GCE advocacy process. The Marine Corps has an existing arsenal of mechanisms providing feedback, but none of the current mechanisms have the ability to influence or produce change.

The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL) provides Marines of all ranks and MOSs the capacity to access a litany of solutions to problems faced from training to theater operations. Access to the MCCLL applies to those aware of the database who have vested interest in seeking self-improvement. MCCLL provides frequent updates to its subscribers; how-

\*Leaders consistently speak counter to how we operate with regard to procedures, techniques, and tactics. TTP is used as a ubiquitous acronym that lacks the appropriate level of critical thinking and analysis in briefs or after-action reports. Modern vernacular claims tactics, techniques, and procedures whereas our Doctrine and application enforces the reverse order. "The science of tactics lies in the technical application of combat power. It includes mastering the techniques and procedures that contribute to the development of warfighting skills such as marksmanship, navigation, gunnery, and close air support. The execution of these techniques and procedures must become second nature for us; this requires intensive and continuous training. Without mastery of basic warfighting skills, artistry and creativity in their application are impossible" (MCDP 1-3). For successful tactics, techniques must build upon procedures and be evaluated and rehearsed. For successful techniques, procedures must be instructed, validated, evaluated, and rehearsed. Procedures are systematic steps that equate to the action of the individual or larger element when on the battlefield. Our method of education instructs procedures to techniques, to tactics; if applicable, we must speak to how we practice. For example, the rocket battle drill via the M72A7, LAAW or M136, AT-4 has a myriad of procedures: how to inspect the rocket, how to manipulate the sights, carrying, manipulation, weapon to target match, capabilities, ammunition types, night site considerations, misfiring procedures, and additional science based knowledge (MCDP 1-3). Techniques of the rocket battle drill are the application of the aforementioned procedures but incorporate additional methods necessary for proper employment: methods of employment, methods of fire, supported/supporting relationship, cycle of the rifleman, and the incorporation of suppression, allowing the Marine with the rocket the ability to employ the weapons system while in combat. Rocket battle tactics reside with small unit leaders, so long as the Marine has a firm understanding of the art and science—as well as the procedures and techniques—associated with the weapon system. Marines may understand the acronym TTP and what it stands for, but if properly educated, they, too, will understand that sequentially, PTT is proper form.

ever, it fails to provide a suitable venue for tactical-level innovators to present and improve the real trade seeking to secure the last 800 meters of diplomacy. MCCLL, although a suitable means to broadcast common maladies that are often observed at the battalion, operational, and higher levels, falls short of providing tactical-level leaders the venue to improve issues at the tactical level.

## ***The ground board process continues to allow division commanders the forum to leverage changes at operational and strategic levels but does little to improve the tactical-level setbacks.***

The *Marine Corps Gazette* is a suitable venue that boasts that those who submit projects for publishing will gain the attention and interest of senior leaders. However, frequent shifts in themes, required lengths of submission, and timeliness of publication fail to provide tactical-level leaders the venue needed to improve the very issues they write about. An additional constraint to the *Gazette* is that the published article must entice the reading leader who may have ironclad beliefs relating to the subject and may not welcome the proposed change. The *Gazette* is the Professional Journal of the Marine Corps; it is not the arm of decision or action that is necessary to shape the significant changes our tactical leaders desire. The *Gazette* will remain a source for the critical thinker and those seeking to pontificate wordy thoughts and wait for someone or some group to drive the action.

Collectively, the GCE has existing methods and procedures in place that provide some changes within the community, however, at a speed and level of focus that is unacceptable. The Marine Corps' recent development of the Rapid Capabilities Office has assisted with the nexus of identification and assessment of emerging threats, all the while changing "the old way of thinking,"<sup>9</sup> however lacks tactical-

level leader involvement and refinement. Professional military journals attract innovation from tactical leaders but hold little merit for change. The ground board process continues to allow division commanders the forum to leverage changes at operational and strategic levels but does little to improve the tactical-level setbacks. Establishing the tactical ground advisory board will alleviate the constricted and outdated

acquisition process for tactical-level shortfalls within the GCE. Instead of waiting fourteen years for action on one item, a significantly reduced timeline for procurement of innovated ideas or equipment will be established. Added buy-in from tactical-level leaders will increase and harass innovation from the community as well as provide small unit leaders a venue to make a lasting impact within the GCE community.

Marines have identified war as "both timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously."<sup>10</sup> Leaders at all ranks within the Marine Corps are quick to identify and agree with our doctrine, yet we remain ever slow with regard to the necessary changes to improve our warfighters. Identifying, empowering, and listening to our small unit leaders not only harnesses an untapped resource for ingenuity but will provide the needed buy-in from tactical-level leaders, demonstrating that their feedback merits attention. Although ambitious, the tactical ground advisory board is a much-needed change required to reinvigorate an old GCE process. "Planning is a dynamic learning process—one that improves the understanding of a situation even as the institution constantly evolves."<sup>11</sup> For the Marine Corps to remain relevant and lethal at the tac-

tical level, a tactical ground advisory board will provide future generations the arena needed to establish change today, in order to defeat the challenges of tomorrow.

### Notes

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4. Grant T. Hammond, *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001).
5. BG S.L.A. Marshall, *The Soldier's Load and The Mobility of a Nation*, (Quantico, VA: The Marine Corps Association, 1980).
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7. Ibid.
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11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-0, Marine Corps Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2011).

