

Opposition Force 2025

Force-on-force training for the new normal and beyond

by Maj Paul L. Croom II

To say that the *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1)*, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), or the *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)* (Washington, DC: HQMC, September 2016) “calls for a focus on force-on-force training” is to generously and deceptively overstate these documents’ treatment of force-on-force training as a concept. *MCDP 1* states that because “opposing wills [are] the essence of war,” then “dictated or ‘canned’ scenarios eliminate the element of independent, opposing wills that is the essence of war.” Accordingly, “only in opposed, free-play exercises can we practice the art of war.” While unambiguous with respect to the value of force-on-force training, these two statements are buried several paragraphs into the “Training” subsection of the chapter on “Preparing for War.” Additional references to force-on-force training do not appear anywhere else in the text. Inside the MOC, even the allusion to force-on-force training is tangential in statements like, “Training and education must be focused on developing Marines for complexity,” if that complexity is interpreted as complicated, multi-dimensional problem sets in which living, thinking, breathing human terrain (friendly, neutral, and opposition) are the actors.

Though the value given force-on-force training in two of the Corps’ pre-eminent organizational documents is lackluster, force-on-force remains inarguably the most effective training and exercise construct conceivable—if created, missioned, maintained, resourced, distributed, and employed correctly. Despite no direct prompting, the Ma-

rine Corps—like successful military organizations worldwide throughout history—continues to employ force-on-force training at all levels. Though anecdotal, its persistent recurrence as a critical aid in honing competence in military strategy and tactics regardless of time or place in history is an extremely compelling affirmation that force-on-force training works.

Force-on-Force Training and Its Efficacy

If asked to visualize or describe force-on-force training today, most Marines would likely identify as their exemplars the venerated combined arms exercise, Exercise ENHANCED MOJAVE VIPER of the mid-late 2000s, or the current Integrated Training Exercise at the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, CA. Closer to home, unit field training at the platoon and company levels, in which a blue force of Marines in woodland Marine pattern utilities faces off against an opposition (MARPAT) force of fellow Marines in desert MARPAT utilities or scenario-appropriate civilian attire, is relatively commonplace. Whether at the tactical or strategic level, at its core, force-on-force training pits humans against one another. It is the human element across physical, cognitive, and emotional domains—the “dynamic of competitive human interaction” as stated in *MCDP 1*—that makes combat

more than the aggregate of its parts. Force-on-force training attempts to replicate those conditions as closely as possible to allow for sets and reps of the “weights” of tactical decision making.

Within the institution, the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program provides an example of effective close-quarters/hand-to-hand force-on-force training at the individual or fire team level. Though skill and technique acquisition and evaluation occur either in a *kata* style (no physical target) or against a static, non-reactive opponent, true mastery is achieved through sparring with an opponent whose objective is victory.

Perhaps a more convincing and relatable case is that of the many National Collegiate Athletics Association Division I women’s basketball programs, particularly the notable and storied University of Tennessee-Knoxville Lady Vols or the University of Connecticut Lady Huskies. In both preseason camps and training sessions, these teams employ all-male practice squads as their force-on-force opponents. As such, the women are able to train against a level of speed, strength, and athleticism above that which they will encounter in their game opponents. The male practice-squad players analyze films of the teams’ next opponent, identify individual and group centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, and then adopt the team strategies and player personas of that opposing team, effectively allowing the

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female players pregame practice against their opponents. The male players are also instructed to identify the female players' weaknesses or areas of improvement and play and react to work those deficiencies.

By training against a dedicated, real-life opposing lineup, these women's college basketball teams achieve the competitive human interaction that is the core of force-on-force training's effectiveness. During practices, the practice squads' decisions on where to be on the court; when and how to pass, shoot, move, and communicate; and how and when to attack and defend clearly pressure and stretch the fires and maneuver components of the women's teams' games. The example goes further than this, as film analysis and subsequent incorporation of opposing teams' tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) into the practice squads' individual and collective non-scripted decisions on the court get to the heart of the intelligence warfighting function. Acknowledging that each adversary will behave differently in any given situation is a necessary step in ensuring the rote "drills" of which *MDCP 1* speaks (small unit training that stresses proficiency through progressive repetition of tasks) are effective for the confluence of variables that create the tactical situation at hand. As often seen, the "textbook" answer presented in formal school instruction is wholly inappropriate or ineffectual under tactical conditions. Accordingly, drills must sometimes adjust to alter the skills being practiced to place friendly strengths and surfaces against adversary weaknesses and gaps (while avoiding the inverse).

Marine Corps Force-on-Force Training: The Current Paradigm

Who are the opposition forces? Broadly, opposition forces in today's Marine Corps might be bifurcated as either dedicated or *ad hoc*. Dedicated opposition forces are generally permanently assigned as role players and often double as controllers, mentors, or evaluators regularly or as required. They may be service members from any Service and component, though most are active duty Marines. The majority of

individuals detailed to dedicated opposition force assignments received permanent change of station orders for those assignments and bring with them the experience and expertise of at least one completed tour of duty, often to include relevant deployments. The majority of the Corps' dedicated general purpose opposition forces is concentrated at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, CA and comprises a cross-section of MOSs from within the GCE, ACE, LCE, and command element of the MAGTF. In the past, civilians were contracted to provide niche role player/opposition force support to major recurring certification exercises like *MOJAVE VIPER*, administered by the MAGTF Training Center's Tactical Training and Exercise Control Group. Similarly, Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron 1 employs the Reserve and retired pilots and aircraft of Marine Fighter Training Squadron 401 and other contracted surface-to-air, air-to-surface, and air-to-air threat systems operators as dedicated opposition forces during its bi-annual Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, AZ. As these personnel are dedicated and permanently assigned, concerns over opposition force availability are rare or exist at an institutional manpower level.

Conversely, *ad hoc* opposition forces are pick-up teams, typically temporary assignments of short duration for a defined and finite role-player requirements. Units training at the Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, CA, or the Jungle Warfare Training Center in Okinawa, Japan, must provide their own opposition forces, though both venues are singular and unique within the Marine Corps in terms of physical environment, training objectives, and mental/psychological stressors. Even at the force level, the Expeditionary Operations Training Groups must rely on the MEF G-3 (Operations) sections to solicit opposition force role-player support from across the MEF for virtually all training and exercises they oversee; the opposition forces for notable high-profile evolutions like the MEUs' realistic urban training, amphibious ready group-MEU exercise,

and composite training unit exercise harry and harass the training units in a temporary additional duty status away from their regular day jobs. These forces are often pulled from within a unit or across the local force unless funds are available to contract civilian role players. Often, these role-player requirements are general in nature and do not require specific MOS skills proficiency. Because tasked units must provide requested role-player personnel for opposition force duty while maintaining their own internal battle rhythms and operational tempos, unit appetite to give up their top performers to this duty is low. A corollary to these realities is that there is a probability that an *ad hoc* role player may possess marginal or less-than-desirable general tactical proficiency.

What Do the Opposition Forces Do?: Theory and Practice

An idealized doctrinal mission statement for opposition forces might read:

Against a living, breathing, free-thinking adversary, enable the training audience to integrate observation. Orientation, decision, and action cycles across the warfighting functions in scenarios implicating the operational environment's physical, informational, and cognitive components and spanning the range of military operations in order to achieve training objectives founded on mission-essential tasks.

Unfortunately, too often in practice, that mission statement manifests itself closer to:

As stalwart but nonetheless doomed-from-the-start tactical aid (read: prop), follow a script (even if loosely) against which the numerically and tactically superior training audience can successfully apply maneuver doctrine in the offense or practice responses to force-protection threats in the defense, often in a non-contested signature and network environment.

While effective across three warfighting functions, the basketball analogy is incomplete because force protection, logistics, and command and control (C2) considerations play a minimum



Many of our adversaries are outmatched in terms of manpower and materiel. (Photo by LCpl Jacob Wilson.)

role in game preparation. Evolutions involving dedicated opposition forces are empirically and anecdotally more comprehensive than *ad hoc* opposition force constructs in implicating the six warfighting functions. However, both are still largely maneuver, fires, and force protection centric, and the meaningful involvement of C2 is occasional at best. Intelligence play is largely uni-directional; the training audience collects on the opposition force, but the opposition force provides little if any counterintelligence threat or executes intelligence operations in support of its own mission.

Although many of the Marine Corps' adversaries in the current and future operating environments are non-conventional or hybrid entities grossly overmatched in terms of manpower and materiel, several standing operations plans in which the Marine Corps is a significant stakeholder focus on global actors with military might roughly commensurate with American military capacity. Despite this, opposition forces rarely present the training audience with a near-peer threat problem. They are often loosely or poorly organized, and their intelligence, C2, and logistics capabilities are regularly lacking or altogether absent. Deliberate attention to incorporate likely adversary doctrine and TTP into opposition

force organization and employment is infrequent, appearing with any consequence either at the level of dedicated opposition forces or by forward thinking and enterprising battalion or squadron intelligence sections. These intelligence sections are frequently tasked with scenario development but are chronically under-manned and under-equipped to conceive realistic, cohesive, and comprehensive situations and injects; the result is often a "script" that drags the training audience to victory, checking the boxes for predetermined training objectives despite the training audience's best efforts of lackluster performance. Compounding the problem, intelligence sections are habitually under-manned and under-equipped to man an opposition force intelligence apparatus while simultaneously executing their primary functions as the intelligence node for the training audience. Significant responsibilities in the exercise control cell levy an additional competing tax on the section. When forced to separate the section to accomplish these functions, the efficacy of all three suffer.

Foot-mobile maneuver is inexpensive, as it requires only sufficient food and water and, to a lesser extent, rest. Equally, it is standard and readily available to every potential role player who is adequately healthy and ambulatory.

Most current and future threats employ some sort of motorized, mechanized or otherwise, mounted forms of movement or maneuver. Still, the majority of opposition forces are dismounted, and adversary logistics becomes an afterthought at best. Food and water realities are "not in play" during most exercises and training evolutions, and any petroleum, oil, and lubricants—factors that necessarily demand the attention of every real-world adversary the training audience may face—are conveniently absent for the opposition force. Realism yields to compelling fiscal, safety, and personnel availability considerations.

Similarly, opposition force C2 is seemingly only of superficial concern. If appropriately resourced, a training audience might bring assets to bear against the opposition force in order to collect on and/or disrupt its operation in and exploitation of the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum. On the other hand, the opposition force rarely possesses the capability to influence the training audience's C2 within the EM spectrum. Fundamentally, the opposition forces are rarely regarded as a collective target for which the ability to effectively C2—rather than the force itself—should be a critical target for destruction, neutralization, or degradation. Accordingly, the purposeful organization of the opposition force's C2 structure and concept of employment seldom occurs.

Fixing Force-on-Force

The preceding discussion highlighted how the Marine Corps currently approaches force-on-force training, the inefficiencies of its present state, and areas of concern. Characteristics of the conceptual ideal opposition force construct for the Corps includes the following attributes:

- Scalable: Able to meet opposition force table of organization and table of equipment requirements for the fire team through regimental strength problem sets.
- Tailorable: Possess appropriate MOSs and table of equipment to effectively simulate conventional, asymmetric, and hybrid threats across the range of military operations.

- **Replicable:** Able to be reproduced through codified skills/experience requirements and standardized training packages.
- **Holistic:** Functionally organized in order to exercise the training audience across the six warfighting functions both individually and as an integrated collective.
- **Informed:** Driven by a nuanced understanding of and appreciation for political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical terrain, and time, areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people, events; and doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, education, personnel, facilities, and policy considerations that define the TTP of current, anticipated, and notional threats. The language and culture are of particular criticality.
- **Realistic:** Endeavor to employ or produce effects as near to real life as practical. Within the physical realm, utilize kinetic effects whenever and wherever possible (e.g., Simunitions vs. the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System).

These desired characteristics are not revelatory. In fact, it is clear that the Marine Corps understands implicitly the importance of opposition forces for training and the development of the force and that the current standard is grossly inadequate. In summer 2016, under the auspices of the Corps' experimental campaign plan SEA DRAGON 2025, the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory Futures Directorate (MCWL/FD)—in conjunction with 3d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment—conducted MAGTF Integrated Exercise 16 (MIX-16) in Southern California. According to MCWL's after-action report, MIX-16

was a force-on-force free play experiment that pitted an expeditionary landing team from a sea-based MAGTF against a hybrid near-peer competitor employing adversary capabilities in a future environment as described in the MCWL/FD Marine Corps Security Environment Forecast.

A principle enabling objective of MIX-16 was to build from the ground up

and employ a “capable, resourced, and adequately led opposition force” against which the ELT would be exercised in all domains and across the range of military operations.

To achieve this, MCWL/FD sought to create a core opposition force of platoon size with a decidedly non-American, non-U.S. Marine organizational identity, not particular to any existing threat model but incorporating elements of current and future adversaries in both general and specific terms. At inception, the MCWL team assigned the opposition force cadre classified and open-source readings and research tasks to build a baseline on structural, social, behavioral, cultural and tactical aspects, with considerations of current and future hybrid threats. Each individual in the opposition force then created a detailed persona for himself, in line with the common operational picture provided by the foundational research the team had conducted. The

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opposition force then performed center of gravity/critical vulnerability analysis on the training unit (in the context of an American military unit) and organized itself to exploit the training unit's identified gaps while avoiding its surfaces and protecting its own weaknesses. Specifically, MCWL/FD employed evolved perspectives on the warfighting functions by creating specific cells devoted to both traditional functions such as intelligence and offensive fires and nuanced functions such as public perception, civil control, reconnaissance of technology, and co-opting of local criminal elements. Additionally, MIX-16 leaned on a 225-person strong role player cadre to recreate a functioning environment of human terrain that was integral to the realism and efficacy of representing current and future hybrid threats. The opposition force employed commercial off-the-shelf unmanned

vehicles, communications, EM disruption, and less-than-lethal offensive technologies. C2 from both physical and organizational perspectives was a deliberate symbiosis of centralized and decentralized approaches.

Ostensibly, the exercise was conducted over a limited duration using blank ammunition and dummy weapons, while controllers/referees were critical to evaluating performance. Evaluative results of employing a tailored opposition force in MIX-16 identified several valuable lessons regarding some of the Corps' organizational culture-induced vulnerabilities. Still, MCWL/FD's after-action report for the exercise is self-admittedly unable to answer what might be ideal and what might be practical and achievable regarding how and where such an opposition force capability should reside in the Corps' organizational structure.

Operationalizing the Construct

Though no permanent solution is yet in sight, MCWL/FD's series of force-on-force experimentation exercises clearly acknowledges that the status quo for conception, preparation, equipping, and employment of opposition forces for training and exercise is grossly inadequate.

Essentially, three lines of effort (LOE) exist when considering both talent pools for manning the opposition force and level within or outside the institution at which the opposition force—once conceived—should reside. A “Marine Corps Organic” LOE will remain internal to the Corps, drawing on Marines, Sailors, and civilians to populate the opposition force at the maneuver unit (battalion/squadron), brigade (regiment/group), corps (MEF) or Service (Training and Education Command) echelons. Under a “Military Pure” LOE, the Marine Corps is joined by sister Services and foreign ally militaries in contributing to the manning, training, equipping, and employment of the opposition force. Lastly, a “civilian” LOE will leverage private and/or corporate organizations while also implicating local/state/national non-DOD entities and academia. While categorizing the general sourcing loci for a doctrinalized and permanent



Force-on-force training provides for a more realistic experience. (Photo by LCpl Larisa Chavez.)

Marine Corps opposition force proves helpful to focusing and simplifying the discussion, the best solution is likely a hybrid of these LOEs.

Challenges to Achieving Opposition Force 2025

Undoubtedly, the obstacles to realizing an opposition force that meets the requirements of a Marine Corps faced with a wickedly interconnected, hyper-fluid operating environment that nurtures constantly transforming and metastasizing threats are numerous and substantial. Fiscal realities underwrite a military force that is already thin on personnel vis-à-vis global requirements. Likewise, the depth and breadth of worldwide technological growth and the attendant costs to maintain pace strain materiel-to-manpower ratios. Combined, these two complexities create logistical concerns regarding both the maintenance and upkeep of materiel, as well as the transportation of people and things within the continental United States and across oceans measured in orders of magnitude.

From a policy standpoint, existing agreements and treaties governing international partnerships and sharing may present narrow left and right lateral limits regarding how the Marine Corps might interface with allies, both within and outside the strict confines of militar-

ies and military departments. Beyond that, serious consideration is required in identifying the appropriate constraints and restraints for implicating non-DOD players, particularly non-governmental civilian individuals or entities, as the risks that accompany such reduced controls are significant. In order to be effective, more than a modicum of deliberate intelligence sharing with international military partners/allies as well as U.S. and foreign non-military individuals/organizations (e.g., law enforcement, private/corporate entities, academia) would be required. Equally, the reality of inadvertent, passive sharing of intelligence through its inculcation into opposition force TTP will be unavoidable.

Finally, simple physics remains king. As stated previously, during the execution of force-on-force combat training, kinetic effects—effects that are physically “felt”—are ideal. More than a hypothesis, the veracity of this statement is borne out repeatedly at the small unit level, where 1stLt Doitright and GySgt Leadfromthefront themselves (to say nothing of the PFC) are challenged to take appropriate, effective cover seriously when the penalty is, at best, annoying beeps on a sensor vest that functions correctly half the time or, worse, a blatantly disinterested exercise controller/referee designating them “hit.” To manifest a physical feeling requires

an object in motion to make contact with another; force equals mass times acceleration ($F=ma$). Constraining this requirement is for the purposes of force-on-force free play, the force imparted must always be significantly less than lethal. Simunitions meet the mark in the 10 to 30 meter range but are ineffectual beyond that. Unfortunately, Newton’s Second Law has, thus far, rendered impossible or at least wholly cost prohibitive the development of a marking projectile able to travel several kilometers or even several hundred meters in seconds or fractions of seconds to then impact a target with a force insufficient to cause more than superficial injuries to exposed or lightly covered flesh.

Conclusion

Though obstacles abound, developing a standing opposition force to enable force-on-force training within the Marine Corps is a laudable goal worthy of continued pursuit. As MCWL/FD continues to test and evaluate the boundaries of opposition force development, consideration of some of the preceding points may provide additive context or angles from which to approach the problem. Whether the practical solution ends up a regimental strength, multi-service, multi-national unit tied into academia and the private sector for applied research and resourcing, or simply a dedicated platoon of Marines whose charter is to learn and replicate the adversary the Corps may face is, at its core, irrelevant. What matters are the sets and reps executed against a thinking, feeling training adversary under the most realistic conditions possible. Force-on-force free play provides the most valuable opportunities to fail. The immortal words of the storied Lady Vols coach, the late Pat Summit, ring equally true for players battling on any court:

The greatest strength any human being can have is to recognize his or her own weaknesses. When you identify your weaknesses, you can begin to remedy them—or at least figure out how to work around them.

