

Fieldcraft Revision and Tactical Culture

Return to the basics

by MGySgt Charles A. Walker, USMC(Ret)

In the tragedy now known as the Civil War, a young soldier marched onto the field of battle in formation. He had been drilled hard in the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) of the day: armed men, covered and aligned, meeting one another in close combat with musket and bayonet. They marched smartly and presented themselves as targets to one another. The young soldier was taught this is how a disciplined military unit conducted itself. Though he was not formally trained and educated in tactics or strategy, his gut told him they were doing it wrong. He recalled stories from his grandfather, how they had employed TTP learned from Native Americans, such as firing from concealed positions when engaging the British. He wondered why the army had forgotten those lessons and reverted to the status quo. He was unable to effect change though, so with discipline and courage he faced combat in the way his leaders directed. The young soldier died while the employment of forgotten TTPs could have prevented loss that day. Today, our Marines are similarly at risk unless we revisit and revise certain aspects of fieldcraft that have seemingly disappeared.

For over almost two decades, we have conducted combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. We strived to be hard to kill. Often that resulted in literally hardening ourselves, with increasing body armor and upgrading armored vehicles. We worked out of forward operating bases that were semi-permanent. We developed what is becoming referred to as “mountains of iron” and “lakes of fuel.” We were much better supplied and equipped than our enemy, yet many times that was not

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enough to win. We also increased the creature comforts for our Marines to an unprecedented level. Though we are an expeditionary organization it is common to have a cot, a hot meal, a shower, and Wi-Fi when we deploy. More often than not, camouflage netting is used for shade rather than for concealment. We were able to wage combat in this manner for many years because of the environment and the enemy. As we look

to the future operating environment, we must change. We now must be prepared for a peer or near-peer threat. We can reasonably expect a hybrid conflict and still employ lessons learned from Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM; however, we cannot allow ourselves to fight the last war in the coming conflict. We must develop “hybrid TTP” for ourselves. To do this, we need to relearn some of the fieldcraft that was common decades ago while considering how to adapt them to the emerging threats.

Recently while visiting a unit conducting a mission rehearsal in the field, a couple of observations were made. The Marines conducted all of their tasks with full protective posture equipment (PPE), including body armor with front, back, and side small arms, protective



The nature of war is everchanging. We must do away with creature comforts and focus on warfighting skills—a return to the basics. (Photo by Cpl Sean Evans.)

insert plates, helmet, and gas mask. Conversely, the billeting tents were all covered and aligned (for years the mark of a disciplined unit). The only camouflage netting utilized covered equipment in the middle of a bare field. These actions are as much cultural as they are tactical. In order to change to meet the current threat, we must take an honest look at how we do business void of emotion. We must ask ourselves simple questions. Why do we do this? Is this the best way to do it? How can we do it better? In the case described above, was the threat such that full PPE was required? If so, for how long? Is the expectation that Marines will remain in full PPE at all time during combat operations (or in this case continuously for a 30-day field exercise)?

To be detected is to be targeted, and to be targeted is to be engaged. There was a time when the enemy would strike us while we maneuvered—when we came to him. In response, we increased levels and layers of hardening, from body armor to vehicles. We can now expect to be engaged more frequently while we are static. In other words, the enemy is coming to us. The lethality and precision by which we will be engaged negates hardening as the primary means of defense. We must employ concealment, masking, and deception. In field environments, we must push into the tree line. When unable to do so, we then hug the tree line in such a manner that our use of camouflage netting creates a seamless extension of the vegetation.

We must also consider that the majority of camouflage netting in our inventory does little more than conceal visually. Our enemy is able to detect our location and activities by looking across the electromagnetic spectrum. How do we conceal emissions? It may be that dispersion and displacement are keys to force protection. Remember the veteran from wars past who scolded “spread out, don’t bunch up!”? If we are to displace quickly and frequently, then we must examine our footprint. In order to emplace and displace quickly, is the time required to erect and pack up camouflage netting worth it? Other than Marines in the rifle company,

when was the last time billeting consisted of an Isomat and poncho liner on the ground? In many respects with the level of technology available, we have created an unhealthy digital appetite. It is time to institute a self-imposed digital diet. Increased capabilities do not necessarily make us more capable. Our “requirements” have grown to such that we need more computers and servers, more power generation, and then more environmental control units to maintain them. This in turn requires more personnel to operate and more lift to provide transport. We add to this growing footprint a requirement to encircle certain secure areas in triple strand concertina wire. Not only does this take time to emplace, lift to move, and space to establish, what is worse is we outline some of our most valuable assets. In other words, we create a target reference point for the enemy!

The TTP of fieldcraft can be applied in urban environments, and in fact, our digital signature may require us to operate primarily from urban areas. If we are the only entity emitting in field conditions, it is the equivalent of shooting a floodlight in the sky to let the enemy know where we are. If we can mask our presence in an urban area where the population is “connected” and “online,” then we essentially employ a form of digital camouflage. These TTP need to be explored and developed by subject matter experts while also reviewed by our staff judge advocates for the legality of employing such concepts. When discussing hybrid TTP, we must be able to seamlessly transition from field settings to urban settings while turning on and turning off certain aspect of fieldcraft for the given condition. These things must be rehearsed during all exercises and mission rehearsals. In many cases, we must re-learn lessons forgotten, lessons that were paid for in blood. We must practice them until they become habits of action and second nature.

Casualty aversion is understandable and was a significant factor in the way we’ve hardened ourselves, but we may be able to increase our survivability by choosing to be lighter, faster, and more mobile. If they find us, they cannot hit us. If we keep moving, we decrease our

odds of being found. We often make the problem more complicated than it is. Yes, it is complex, but by applying common sense, we can layer by layer reduce the complexity. If we institute old techniques of fieldcraft and apply them to the current (and future) operating environment, we can get better. Our two greatest challenges will be to reduce our footprint and to establish “asymmetrical camps.” Senior SNCOs may be the hardest to change. As leaders, we grew to know that things like sounding reveille in the field, covering down tents, and having clean lines reflect unit discipline and a mark of professionalism. However, if we continue to mass our personnel in one area to execute rest plans, we create an area target. Imagine fireteams and squads distributed over a large area in concealed positions when the time to sleep comes. Instead of taps and reveille, Marines sleep when they need to and in different shifts to maintain 24-hour operations. Things like this are a subtle cultural shift. We do not change for the sake of change but because we want to face tomorrow’s fight with common sense and the long game in mind. These things won’t change who we are but simply our method of engagement in accomplishing the mission. Just as the army of yesteryear had to change from marching rank and file into musket volleys, we must change from a forward operating base mentality and from a regimented garrison approach to field (or expeditionary) settings.

There was a time in our Corps when fieldcraft was not only a tactical staple but also a matter of discipline and pride. The coming fight will require not only that we return to this practice, but that we modify it for the nature of the future operating environment. By doing so, we make ourselves a hard target, and we engage the enemy at a time of our choosing. This decision must be deliberate and driven by a tactical command climate. It is not so much a cultural change as it is a cultural return.

