

Mountain Fighting

Observations and recommendations
from Bridgeport's Infantry Training Company

by Mr. David Kerby

“Company! On line! Take the peak!” The roughly two platoons in the attack slowly complied; the weight of their gear and exhaustion from the last 72 hours of operations was taking its toll. Roughly 1,000 feet above them, tucked in behind fortifications among the trees and rocks, was a reinforced platoon. The defenders were well concealed, but the attackers were about to cross a steep slope covered with sage brush—doing little for concealment and nothing for cover. The company formed on line, and they began walking, or rather trudging, up the slope. Unlike the company's previous attacks in Camp Lejeune and Twentynine Palms, no friendly artillery or machine-gun fire was planned in order to support their approach. The defenders, however, had machine guns oriented on this very route, and an ecstatic observer with pre-planned targets was at the ready. We watched in amazement as these two platoons, like a vision from a battlefield supposedly lost to history, slowly moved across open ground in linear formation against a withering hail of fire and shrapnel—well, notional fire and shrapnel.

The Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center (MCMWTC) exists to teach cold-weather skills and how to conduct operations in a mountainous environment, but we have often seen this training hindered because of a lack of proficiency in infantry fundamentals from the units that train here. I served at the MCMWTC in Bridgeport, CA, for over two years. I spent most of my time as the officer-in-charge of the Mountain Leader Section where I taught the tactics, techniques, and procedures of military mountaineering as part of the Mountain Leader Courses.

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As an infantry officer, I also observed many of the Mountain Training Exercises (MTX) where I was embedded with rifle platoons and companies, both with the exercise force and adversary force (ADFOR). Before my assignment to MCMWTC, I was already a qualified Winter Mountain Leader, had participated in both winter and summer training aboard MCMWTC, and had conducted training in Norway while serving as a rifle platoon commander. All of the officers, staff, and instructors assigned to the Infantry Training Company, which oversees the MTXs, Mountain Leaders Courses, sniper courses, and reconnaissance packages, come from combat arms military occupational specialties and have similar backgrounds with an amazing depth of experience. Many previously served in the units training at MWTC and are deeply invested in the continued success of their former units. All can attest that the mountains and cold weather present unique challenges that multiply the difficulties already encountered in combat. The purpose of this article is to report common observations on the performance of training units, identify common sources of shortfalls in performance, and provide recommendations to leaders and unit training managers to better prepare their units for mountain and cold weather operations.

At the most basic level, we have witnessed Marines unwilling to patrol at night because they do not feel confident in their ability to walk in the dark. We have seen patrols rendered ineffective

because Marines struggle to use a map and compass. We have seen defenses compromised because of a lack of fieldcraft and operational discipline.¹ We have seen squads and platoons paralyzed because radio communications failed, and the plan was only one system deep. We have seen entire platoons “cocoon” when isolated from their company—ceasing to actively orient on the ADFOR and becoming the hunted instead of the hunter. We have seen squad leaders, platoon commanders, and company commanders write incomplete orders and, in some cases, no orders at all. We have commonly observed units without standardized or at least well thought out contingency plans (lost/missing Marine plans, degraded communications plans, link up plans, etc.), which are critical to success on every battlefield and against any foe. We have seen entire companies, that when presented with a thinking enemy, attempt to “box while blindfolded” and simply blunder forward until the ADFOR's main engagement area destroyed their lead platoons. Alternately, we have seen a unit react to contact by standing nearly shoulder to shoulder, in the open, and “charge” forward toward an unseen enemy. We have seen a complete lack of ground reconnaissance and little planning, especially in regard to fire support. The resulting lack of coordination measures or developed enemy situation often resulted in units falling into an unplanned pursuit that resulted in their isolation from other friendly units. Additionally, units struggled with the transition from the offense to the

defense as they reached the culminating point and often found themselves unprepared when the ADFOR counterattacked. Unfortunately, these were not isolated instances but were repeated through the course of multiple exercises by various units.

We can summarize these observations as such: Individually, we consistently observed a lack of proficiency in individual skills and operational discipline from both the leaders and the led. Teams, sections, and squads persistently demonstrated a lack of standardization of techniques and procedures as well as almost no ability to conduct the scouting and patrolling functions of small units under load and over extended periods of time.² At the platoon level, we have seen a reluctance to engage in the kind of intrusive leadership required of combat operations, a reluctance to take disciplined initiative, and a worryingly consistent loss of control of information, weapons, and units when in contact with the enemy. At the company level, we have seen shortfalls in maneuver and fire support planning and an ever-growing belief that fire team-, squad-, and platoon-level ground reconnaissance is obsolete. When the ADFOR was located, we have seen many difficulties in coordinating fires in support of maneuver in complex, compartmentalized terrain. Finally, we have seen difficulties with transitions from offense to defense and vice versa.

These observations puzzled all of us, and I began asking questions soon after my arrival as many of these observations were shared by peers and superiors who had observed previous MTXs and Integrated Training Exercises at Twentynine Palms. I knew some of the executive officers and company commanders, and these observations did not fit with what I knew of them as professionals. After much discussion, a couple causal factors were repeatedly brought up. The first was the slating of units early in their pre-deployment training plan (PTP) to participate in a Service Level Training Exercise at MCMWTC. MTX has evolved over the years, and with its current ties to the MAGTF Warfighting Exercise (MWX), it is no longer simply a month of basic skills training in

the mountains. MTX does begin with training at the individual to company level through teaching survival and mobility skills, but we quickly move on from there to the main portions of the MTX: the Company Offensive Operations Lane (COOL) and Final Exercise (FINEX) tied in with the Marine Air Ground Task Force Warfighting Exercise FINEX. Both require companies and battalions to perform at a high level. Companies must be able to maneuver while incorporating indirect fires and air support in a comm-degraded environment and without the ability to see where each subordinate unit is located. Company and battalion staffs must be well practiced in command and control (C2) in this same environment. Units that train at MCMWTC too early in their PTP often have suffered a large atrophy of experienced small unit leaders, have conducted little to no force-on-force training, and their staffs have never worked together.

As former leaders at the company level and below, we have two main recommendations to help remedy these issues: discipline and basic skills.

The second factor identified is the lack of training and education among the units.³ Many squad, platoon, and company leaders relayed to me that platoons and companies had attempted to plan evolutions to address their shortfalls in basic skills, only to have it denied or cancelled. For whatever reason, units were training at MCMWTC without having previously conducted training at night, in basic navigation, on patrolling, etc. This always led to degraded training value during the Company Offensive Operations Lane and FINEX. It was also intriguing to note, during discussions with unit leaders, the *type* of training conducted at home station prior to arriving at MCMWTC. Many units trained excellently to conduct live fire attacks against stationary objectives over open terrain. They could conduct rote movements and choreographed fire and maneuver but became paralyzed

when faced with a thinking and moving enemy. Absent in their home station training were evolutions that educated unit leaders to think critically and to fight amidst uncertainty: wargames, force-on-force, etc.

As former leaders at the company level and below, we have two main recommendations to help remedy these issues: discipline and basic skills. Operational discipline is certainly important, but here we mean discipline on the part of unit training managers and commanders in how they allocate their training time. We may have no control over the slating of Service Level Training Exercises during a PTP, but we can recommend fierce discipline in the development of the short- and mid-range training plans and allocation of training time leading up to a MTX. During the initial training assessment of a unit, high levels of individual and small unit proficiency should be identified as a required capability for operating in the

compartmentalized, comm-degraded environment of the mountains. When establishing training priorities and plans, we recommend that unit training managers and commanders remember *MCDP 1's* guidance,

Commanders at each echelon must allot subordinates sufficient time and freedom to conduct the training necessary to achieve proficiency at their levels. They must ensure that higher-level demands do not deny subordinates adequate opportunities for autonomous unit training.⁴

The number of skills an infantryman must master at the individual and small unit level are numerous, as our *Training and Readiness* manual will attest to. *MCDP 7* also reminds us, "Developing warfighting skills and competencies requires time, deliberate practice, and repetition."⁵ This is why we recommend unit training managers allot as much

time as possible for companies and below to train and educate their Marines on these skills. Even the best courses of action developed by the best staffs fail here at Bridgeport when squads have not been invested in and developed prior to execution.

Our second recommendation deals with mastery of basic infantry skills. We have listed several of the most commonly deficient skills and recommend these be given priority. We also recommend that squads, platoons, and companies be allotted ample time to rehearse battle drills, maneuvers, and refine standard operating procedures. Some of these commonly failed actions are listed as well. We recommend that squads and platoons roam their “backyards” near the barracks to practice, and we recommend this happen at least once a week in addition to all the individual skills. Notice that nighttime practice is included in this: showing up early, working late, or reverse cycle training may be a regular occurrence to maximize the use of periods of limited visibility. In addition to this skills training, tactical decision games should occur regularly to promote a high level of critical thinking and decision making among small unit leaders, especially in a comm-degraded environment.

While platoons practice, the company staff should be exercising their headquarters Marines through Combat Operations Center procedures and transitions. Little details such as watch schedules, information display, security posture, and distribution during displacement can all be experimented with before contact with a thinking ADFOR. Company leadership should rehearse their sequencing and transitions through finding, fixing, and finishing the enemy—even if just over a map while the platoons are training. For almost the entire company staff, this will likely be their first time in their billet, making rehearsals at home station all the more important.

In addition to tactical decision games for small units, all leaders should be conducting various forms of wargaming together frequently. At my first battalion, before one of our MTXs, the operations officer pitted company staffs

Individual Skills:	Small Unit Actions:
Communication Techniques	Nighttime Marking Procedures
Land Navigation	Loading Ambushes
Individual Movement Techniques	Loading Patrol Bases
Night Vision Device Employment	Scouting/Patrolling
Fieldcraft	React to Contact Drills
Observation	
Reporting Procedures	
Light/Noise Discipline	
Orders Process	

Figure 1. (Figure provided by author.)

against each other through *kriegspiels*. Separated in different rooms, companies fought one another in realtime over maps. Platoon commanders learned to understand how their company commanders thought, and company commanders began to learn how their fellow company commanders operated. Although we only had time for two iterations, those three or four hours paid dividends. Exercises like these will help solve many of the issues we observe regarding a lack of initiative and hesitation when radio communications fail. Overall, units should do their best to provide training *and* education that focuses more on developing initiative instead of simply following a checklist.

For more information on preparing, we recommend the following resources as a place to start. These may be common knowledge to some, but they are listed here because they address almost all the issues we observe, and many Marines questioned were either ignorant of their existence or had never bothered to read them. *MCTP 3-01A, Scouting and Patrolling*, and *TC 3-21.76, Ranger Handbook*, are crucial for Marines at the platoon level and below. As stated

earlier, exercise force units struggle with locating the ADFOR through proficient ground reconnaissance; the lessons in these most basic of publications will help remedy this. Next is *The Tiger's Way* by H.J. Poole. This book is for the individual Marine and is full of skills that make Marines better riflemen and woodsmen. It also has an appendix with excellent drills and exercises for small units to utilize. Also by H.J. Poole is *The Last Hundred Yards*. This book features feedback from noncommissioned officers returning from combat in Vietnam. Previously one of the books on the Commandant's reading list, this is still a must-read for small unit leaders on how to fight effectively in close terrain. It also includes great sections on navigation, ambushes, and night fighting. Finally, for the company staff, *MCRP 3-10A.2, Infantry Company Operations*, is the starting point from which you can develop procedures for fire support planning at the company level, intelligence collections, COC operations, and many other functions. We highly recommend it to new executive officers.

In conclusion, preparing Marines for combat requires massive amounts

of time. The mountains only magnify the constants of chaos and uncertainty found in combat and realistic force-on-force training. Mountain fighting presents unique challenges, and all units training at MCMWTC will fail to a certain extent, but we hope that by properly preparing beforehand, units can improve the quality of their learning while at Bridgeport. Ultimately, Bridgeport is not the final test but merely another way to prepare for combat. As stated by Marcus Acosta, "In the end, fierce close combat between infantry units decided the outcome. ... Well-trained and equipped light infantry is the only force capable of decisive maneuver in rugged mountain terrain."⁶ Let us help you get there.

Notes

1. I use fieldcraft here in reference to the numerous individual techniques required to survive and move while remaining undetected to the

enemy. Fieldcraft includes such skills as camouflaging personnel, gear, and fighting positions; light/noise discipline; implementation of early warning devices; and use of micro terrain. Operational discipline, as opposed to ceremonial discipline, is practical in nature and refers to the habits and behaviors needed for success in combat. It is related to fieldcraft in that all fieldcraft is considered operational discipline, but it also includes such disciplines as weapons maintenance, foot care, accurate combat reports, and sound application of techniques and procedures.

2. TTPs: Procedures are the specifics of what you do (e.g. firing an AT-4). Techniques are the different ways and methods of performing that procedure (e.g. firing from standing, kneeling, or prone, and the rocket battle drill). Tactics are the application of procedures and techniques (e.g. using a rocket battle drill in coordination with suppression to neutralize an enemy bunker in support of maneuver along a key avenue of approach).

3. *MCDP 7* points out that training prepares Marines to deal with the known factors of war.

In contrast, education prepares Marines to deal with the unknown factors. It is vital that individual Marines and small units be trained and educated prior to conducting mountainous operations.

4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

6. Marcus P. Acosta, *High Altitude Warfare: The Kargil Conflict and the Future*, (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2003).

>Author's Note: The Marine Corps' Force Design 2030 calls for units capable of conducting distributed operations across dispersed island chains. The training and education required to fight in a decentralized manner in compartmentalized mountainous terrain directly translates to the distributed way in which we will fight in the western Pacific.



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