

Contact Is Imminent

A training change is required

by SgtMaj Ernest R. Twigg

On 15 September 1950, the United States Marine Corps entered the Korean Conflict. After three years of intense fighting, North and South Korea signed an armistice ending the brutal, kinetic warfare. The Korean War was only 36 months long, yet it produced thousands of American casualties. Dr. Allan Millett, a military historian at the University of New Orleans, reported that “36,000 Americans were killed in action during the Korean War.”¹ Despite the high attrition rate, historians titled the Korean Conflict as “The Forgotten War.” Sixty-eight years later, tensions remain high between North Korea and the United States. With the Marine Corps entering into the nineteenth year of fighting in the Middle East and increasing tensions with North Korea, China, and Russia, senior Marine leaders find the Marine Corps in a dilemma. On the one hand, Marines continue to augment task forces in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; on the other hand, the need to train and prepare for near-peer adversaries is imminent. Lessons learned from the past underscore the need to focus on a variety of threats. For example, the Marine Corps is vulnerable because it is not preparing for war with North Korea as well as it could. In order to eliminate this critical vulnerability, Marines must shift their educational focuses, training objectives, and mindsets to combine counterinsurgency (COIN) and conventional warfare. If the Marine Corps fails to prepare for war with North Korea, the future death toll will surpass the horrific tally of the past.

The Marine Corps’ educational focus must shift to incorporate conventional doctrine into lesson plans or else warfighters’ knowledge of the capabilities and composition of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) will be in short supply.

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The problem is that almost all the educational focus has been on desert operations. The byproducts of the last nineteen years of fighting in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan are COIN-oriented learning outcomes. “Tunnel vision” is a term used to refer to the single focus on one objective.² Unfortunately, Marines have tunnel vision for COIN themes, which is a critical vulnerability in the ability to fight and win a war with North Korea. Over the years, the KPA has made several technological advances, increasing their lethality. Lessons of the capabilities of North Korean equipment would give a decisive advantage to warfighters on the battlefield should they encounter the KPA’s technology. Furthermore, cultural lessons can facili-

tate the transition from full-out war to policing actions, correcting the mistakes made in preparation for operations in the Middle East. These examples illustrate the need to assimilate COIN with conventional warfare into unit-level learning objectives. Leaders who study holistic warfighting concepts are armed with the knowledge to exploit enemy critical vulnerabilities and centers of gravity. However, preparation for North Korea will take more than shifting education; it will take shifting training as well.

Training objectives must evolve to combine tactics, techniques, and procedures of COIN and conventional warfare in a manner that is expansive and up to date. Leaders continue to rely on



We have spent nineteen years fighting in the desert; our focus needs to change. (Photo by LCpl Jacqueline Parsons.)



We need to be prepared to fight a conventional war in mountainous terrain in all kinds of weather conditions. (Photo by LCpl Jacqueline Parsons.)

training and lessons learned in Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. There is a benefit in conducting this type of training, especially if the unit is preparing to deploy to that specific desert theater. Nevertheless, Marines execute a broader spectrum of missions than just current operations. Field exercises should integrate scenarios that a small unit leader would face in future conflicts. One possible exercise built on this idea would require Marines to conduct live fire on simulated KPA targets, transition to nonlethal crowd control, and move on to passing out bottled water to displaced civilians. Integrated training objectives such as these incorporate warfighting principles that develop leaders more fully for the diverse operations that Marines execute. Furthermore, units that are not slated to deploy to the Middle East should conduct cold-weather training in Bridgeport, CA, instead of desert training in Twentynine Palms. This would balance the need to prepare for North Korea and establish a versatile training cycle. After shifting the educational focus and training objectives to combine a COIN-based perspective and a conventional doctrine, the unit will be well-rounded, possess a better ability to adapt to uncertainty, and not be fixed into conducting only cliché training objectives. Mak-

ing a shift in education and training is not easy; it requires a complete shift in mindset.

Warfighters must shift from linear mindsets to inclusive cognitive patterns. Many leaders possess a dichotomous “one or the other” way of thinking that is limiting combat readiness across the Marine Corps. The problem is that Marines do not have a holistic view of warfighting themes. COIN and conventional warfare represent two different themes and are not in competition with each other. In theory, the two should work synergistically to support one another. Therefore, the notion that education or training must compartmentalize COIN and conventional warfare is a flaw. Current training scenarios highlight this error. Examples of common training exercises are conducting patrols to establish presence and searching for improvised explosive devices. These types of tactics, techniques, and procedures are beneficial for operations in Iraq but do not ready warfighters for the KPA’s precision fires. Consequently, conventional warfare is an equally integral warfighting theme because it prepares Marines for a fight with North Korea’s conventional army. Preparing to defeat an adversary becomes important and is taken seriously when Marines think enemy contact is imminent. One

objective of inclusive thinking is to prioritize warfighting themes based on the probability of future contact. Themes include COIN, conventional warfare, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, noncombat evacuation operations, and all other types of military actions. Prioritizing these themes into an inclusive mindset will finally harden force protection, increase training value, raise operational readiness, and prevent near-peer adversaries such as the KPA from gaining a tactical advantage.

In today’s Marine Corps, there are leaders unable to provide what is best for subordinates because these leaders rely on an exclusive method to educate and train Marines. The problem is systemic in leaders’ mindsets. History illustrates that tunnel vision degrades the ability to anticipate problems and decreases operational effectiveness. Leaders who think like this are often unaware of the dilemma and unable to break free from the blind spot. Marines do not like change, but to rid a mindset such as this, all a leader has to do is look to the past. Marines fought bloody battles in the frozen mountains of Korea, a terrain that is a stark contrast with the hot, flat deserts of Iraq. With the political tensions between the near-peer adversaries and the United States on the rise, the need to train for different environments is imminent. This does not lessen the requirement to train for Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Marines must continue to train for desert warfare as long as the Nation is engaged in operations in the Middle East, but Marines must train for operations in North Korea, China, and Russia as well. Ultimately, once the Marines shift their education, training, and mindset to a framework that combines COIN, conventional warfare, and other warfighting themes, survivability will increase, not only for a war with a near-peer but in whatever fight is next.

Notes

1. Allan Millett, “Korean War.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (September 2017).
2. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Tunnel Vision.”

