

# Unspoken Training and Education Questions

Public myths vs insiders' truths

by LtCol John E. Campbell

In November 2020, I submitted an article to the *Marine Corps Gazette* that was later published in the online version in June 2021. I attempted to articulate the urgent need to divest from our current Industrial-Aged education model—which I characterized by the attendance of the same schooling regardless of occupational specialty or future billets—and replace it with in-person, occupationally focused, and billet-specific schooling. The three biggest challenges I argue this would address are the rapidly changing pace and character of war, the time spent away from the FMF, and the leader's biggest responsibility: to be best prepared to train the Marines and potentially lead them against the pacing threat. I conclude that the industrial, one-size-fits-all approach with the same schooling is but a byproduct of a much larger cultural problem Marines face and must change. To be the most lethal force our Nation needs to deter and then win in combat, we must do something we all know is true but seldom admit in public: the Marine Corps must disabuse the academic culture it seems to have fully embraced. It always has been and will continue to be detrimental to battlefield efficacy.

To revisit training and education, the Marine Corps' learning philosophy states that while different, they are equally important and complementary as training prepares Marines for the known while education prepares them for the unknowns.<sup>1</sup> The CMC stated in his planning guidance that “the complexity of the modern battlefield and increasing rate of change requires a highly educated force.”<sup>2</sup> However,

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**“PhDs who have never smelled gun smoke in battle pontificate about war. These self-proclaimed strategists imagine high tech conventional wars between great powers like the United States and China involving smart drones, stealth ships, killer robots, rail guns and artificial intelligence. It's D-day run by machines, and this absurd thinking is going to get us killed. Tomorrow's wars will have more in common with Cormac McCarthy than Tom Clancy”**

**—Sean Mcfate**

critical analysis of a problem does not in itself actually solve the problem. The June 2022 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette* dedicated to the Corps' culture of learning highlighted such a dilemma. A photograph of a retired Marine general officer guest lecturing Marines with boxed lunches wearing Christmas sweaters during a Women, Peace, and Security Scholars Program is symbolic of the problem the Marine Corps faces from an academic embrace. The same is true for Marine leaders at the Marine Corps War College's Advanced Studies Program whose curriculum includes “Warfighting and Economics” and “Diplomacy and Statecraft”<sup>3</sup>

Is the Marine Corps' transition to the State Department the unknowns it should be preparing Marine students for? “When diplomatic, economic, and informational power proves inadequate, the ability to apply military power is essential to the protection of national interests.”<sup>4</sup> An easy example: the Marine Corps had no role in the failed economic sanctions and aggressive diplomatic efforts to deter and then retract the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Was the II MEF commanding general included in these discussions? Was he involved in the changing positions regarding Iran? Are I and III MEF commanding generals consulted with the

“strategic ambiguity” that is associated with America’s stance on Taiwan? Even if they were—are their subordinate staff officers?

I first began to see troubling trends and started to question the Marine Corps’ approach to training and education while serving as an observer controller at the Tactical Training Education Control Group in Twentynine Palms. Marine leaders—all educated and some even board-selected at higher levels—tasked with executing “blocking and tackling” during their Service-level training exercises often forgot the most basic skills and knowledge. Gaffes where leaders misunderstood command and supporting relationships while task organizing their units, blundered navigation, inability to communicate, delayed and sometimes nonexistent integration of fire support, fouled battle space geometries, and even map plotting were just some of the examples that—in my opinion—were far too common during the rudimentary and outdated

manders’ bungling the basics was nearly the inverse of the parody *Idiocracy*: a 2005 movie about an average man who becomes the smartest man on the planet due to being accidentally frozen for a half a century. Put simply, the Marine

it on gender-neutral identifiers?<sup>6</sup> Would that money—or the money spent on hiring a mini task force of professors with new buildings that have made Quantico nearly indistinguishable from college campuses—have been better spent on

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***This growing trend is dangerous because it is the execution ... that is paramount to winning in combat.***

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Corps seemed then—and even more so now—to place a higher value on being taught how to think (emphasis on the thinkers, theory, concepts, analysis, etc) than the execution/practice (less so on the doers). Examples include the establishment of PhD programs, credentialing Marine Corps resident PMEs, Marines advocating for Marines to participate in think tanks, and the focus on strategy at junior ranks.<sup>5</sup> This growing trend is dangerous because it is the execution—the result of compe-

something like outfitting infantry Marines that are forward deployed with PVS-31s instead of antiquated PVS-14s?<sup>7</sup>

As a cogent example, from the public biography of a commanding officer in the supporting establishment, I gathered that following a successful tour as an adjutant (which is her primary MOS) and family readiness officer, she was selected for and completed Expeditionary Warfare School, Quantico, VA. During her nearly year of studying warfighting, the profession of arms, and planning, she was likely in a conference group with my future company commander who went on to own battlespace and led more than 400 Marines, sailors, and Afghan forces in Helmand Province in 2010. This head scratching illustration of our training and education model is only surpassed by her two masters degrees she earned as a student from her resident attendance at the Naval Command and Staff College in Newport, RI, where she earned a Master of Arts in National Security and Strategic Studies as well as the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, PA, where she earned a Masters in Strategic Studies. Needless to say, none of her follow-on billets (and likely future billets) have anything to do with national security or military strategy. Again, is there a better way to use taxpayer money spent on multiple PCS moves as well as her nearly three years as a student, learning things that were irrelevant or at best marginally beneficial to her positions? This is not a personal attack on the lieutenant colonel—I could easily find combat-arms officers that also have tenure as a student (and certainly in the supporting establishment) that

***How many graduates are going to a MEB, MEF, or Joint Staff ... Even if they were, wouldn't an MOS specific school be of more benefit to them and the staff they're joining?***

exercise. I often wondered what leaders were learning in resident schools such as Expeditionary Warfare School and Command and Staff. Today, I realize the much bigger and more troubling question: why was this apparent to a young captain but not to senior leaders in charge? Was it because they only showed up to the choreographed execution (that often *still* failed) following the spoon-fed Tactical Training Exercise Control Group instruction, range walks, simulations, and multiple rehearsals? More will be discussed later with actual decision making that accompanies force-on-force training, but the 2012 Enhanced Mojave Viper consisted solely of execution with little leeway for commanders to do anything differently on a live-fire range due to safety restrictions. Credentialed com-

tence which *MCDP 3* rightfully defines as the ability to get things done—that is paramount to winning in combat. Abstract theoretical and philosophical ramblings on irrelevant websites and blogs do nothing. For those reading this, consider self-reflecting with how many articles they have read in *Foreign Affairs*, *War on the Rocks*, or something from their LinkedIn account instead of a Marine Corps publication. Is anyone surprised when (if they get one) they receive an encyclopedic-like, multi-page order and annexes while at the same time our doctrine preaches simplicity and new threats seek to disrupt command and control that would enable such complex plans? How about the level of surprise the Marine Corps paid \$2 million for academics from the University of Pittsburgh to advise

matches or even exceeds their time in the FMF—but it does raise the larger issue with our military’s obsession with academic culture. When and why did the military and specifically the Marine Corps begin to embrace such academia credentials? “Our [Marine Corps University] civilian faculty have PhDs from Harvard, Georgetown, the University of Chicago and other premier universities” is what LtCol Erin Berard, the Operations Officer for Academic Affairs, Marine Corps University stated.<sup>8</sup> Does LtCol Berard really believe that higher education is synonymous with achievement, merit, and even intellect? Ivy League MBAs and advanced degrees in finance did not stop sophisticated investors from losing millions or bankers from running Lehman Brothers into the ground back in 2008.<sup>9</sup> What is the return on investment sending our top performing lieutenant colonels—where they seldom even wear a uniform—to top-level schools far detached from the changing technical and tactical realities? Does attending an FBI fellowship make a better judge advocate? What do Marines learn at the Institute of Peace or doing a corporate fellowship that is not remotely applicable to their future jobs? Does the International Securities Studies Program at Yale or a JFK School of Government at Harvard make a better regimental commander? We know the answers to these questions—it is as dumb and non-sensical as it is dangerous. The Marine Corps’ losses in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated our current education model as inadequate. How has—or why hasn’t—it changed to best prepare the force for the future fight against the pacing threat?

In the summer 2020, a coward allegedly set fire to USS *Bonhomme Richard*. It took days to extinguish and ultimately led the Navy to scrap the billion-dollar ship. Just as disturbing as the alleged arson was the botched response to the fire which highlighted abject failures on multiple levels. This ship was not in the Mediterranean or South China Sea but at port in San Diego. One can make similar conclusions after reading the investigations from the 2017 crashes of the USS *John S. McCain* and USS *Fitzgerald* to the crash of

the nuclear submarine USS *Connecticut* or the near collision that just recently happened in December of 2022 in the San Diego Bay. Albeit easier to cover up than the crashing of expensive ships and submarines, the Marine Corps has had similar failures that have resulted in injuries and deaths of Marines—most notably highlighted in 2020. The sinking of an amphibious assault vehicle during a training exercise off the Camp Pendleton coast resulted in the death of eight Marines and one sailor. Such ineptitudes and subsequent reliefs of commanders need not be discovered after the fact in an investigation.

The recently published *Two Year Review of the MAGTF Warfighting Exercise* blatantly highlights the necessity for reform in the Marine Corps’ training and education structure. Excerpts taken directly from the report: “Failure to understand and integrate counter reconnaissance ... lack of experiences with tactical actions beyond the small unit ... lack of education in the nature of control measures ... fratricide incidents are common at MWX resulting in hundreds of casualties and the loss of dozens of aircraft ... no formal small UAS (sUAS) employment doctrine, Marines instead rely on informal best practices and on-the-job training, which

leaves sUAS employment as subjective and nonstandard ... the logistics community does not possess the communication equipment to integrate with other FMF units ... every one of the last five MWXs witnessed exercising units running out, or nearly running out, of fuel and water.”<sup>10</sup>

I challenge all leaders to read the review and question where their attention and priorities lay and then read the Navy’s *Intent of Education for Seapower Strategy 2020*. Absent an assumption was that Marines and sailors (at all levels) know their occupations well enough and only then shift their time and efforts toward achieving academic credentials. As an example, sports team only puts in its backup players to gain experience once victory is certain in the later parts of games. Winning is always paramount. It is of that same thought that one can question the reason certain critical players in the supporting establishment and students at our resident schools (from captain to general) do not have temporary additional duties to cover down and learn from our Service-level training exercises—especially our force-on-force evolutions. Why is it that instead students, instructors, and other Marines throughout the supporting establishment that will

|                  | PC A<br>Joint Feasible Entry Operations (JFEO)  | PC B<br>Operational-level Offensive Operations  | PC C<br>Multinational Interagency Response Operations   | PC X<br>Capstone Joint Multinational All-Domain Operations   |
|------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Dates            | 14-22 Nov (7 Days)  | 5-15 Dec (10 Days)  | 28-31 Mar (4 Days)  | 1-24 May (18 Days)   |
| Size of Exercise | 1 X CO  | 2 X COs (Pair)  | 2 X COs (Pair)  | 1 X Blue Force<br>1 X Red Force  |
| Size of Unit     | Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB)  | Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF)  | Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)  | Combined Joint Force Task Force (CJTF)/Joint Area Command-West (JAC-W) And Subordinate Components  |
| Method           | Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP)  | MCPP  | Joint Planning Process (JPP)  | JPP  |
| Objective(s)     | -Conventional Combined Arms, enabling operational level conditions<br>-Intro to Coalition Multinational Ops<br>-Intro to All Domain Ops | -Conventional Combined Arms/Offensive Ops<br>-Continuous Coalition Multinational Ops<br>-Continuous All Domain Ops<br>-Coherent Transition Briefs | -Integrate whole of government and NGOs<br>-Continuous Coalition Multinational Ops<br>-Continuous All Domain Ops<br>-Coherent Plan Briefs | -2 days of prep<br>-8 days of planning<br>-1 day Op Phase-Planning AAR<br>-5 days of Force on Force Application through Command PE wargame<br>-1 day AAR<br>-Integrate outside Org/Enables<br>-Conduct SC200<br>-Continuous/Multinational Ops<br>-All Domain Ops |

**A slide taken from MCU’s C&S College from MarineNet (after one of the instructors spoke about doing the same exercise more than a decade ago as a student). How many graduates are going to a MEB, MEF, or joint staff (versus the supporting establishment or division and below) after their graduation? Even if they were, would an MOS specific school not be of more benefit to them and the staff they are joining? We have planner producing schools already. (Slide provided by author.)**

eventually return to the FMF—the Marine Corps has outsourced the evaluations (at likely a steep cost) to retired and out-of-touch civilian consultants? Again, are the Marine Corps’ attention and priorities misplaced? The obvious questions are: where are the general officers and other leaders tasked with preparing the Marine Corps for the pacing threat? What are they doing that would be more important to prevent their attendance? Would they not be

itself in. Ukraine—lesser in every metric from population to defense spending—is still sovereign not because critical, deep-thinking wonks but their tactical competence and adaptability from the frontlines.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article highlighted the devastating effects of a Ukrainian drone team comprising a lawyer, project manager, banker, and other Kyiv professionals. In comparison to his service in in the Donbas Region

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getting a valuable (and free) repetition instead of hopefully discussing this at the Operations Advisory Group—if it even is discussed at all? A deeper but nevertheless more important question is: would they be value added and be able to contribute to the exercise and take the firsthand lessons learned from it and implement them? Have they seen firsthand the inadequacies of a Puma while we read about Ukrainian civilians updating their off-the-shelf octocopters with thermal imaging cameras and 3-D printed parts allowing them to drop RKG-3 anti-tank grenades on Russian armored forces?

“From Louis XVI and the French Revolution to the last days of the Soviet empire, history is rife with examples of leaders who realize things can’t go on like they have, but are unwilling or unable to bring about sufficient change ... If will or ability is lacking, what you get instead is a sort of leisurely cruise into the iceberg.”<sup>11</sup> Spare us the glib discussion about change being difficult.<sup>12</sup> Although some call lessons learned like the Ukrainians sinking Russian ships anecdotal, the conflict is validating the urgency for change in training and education.<sup>13</sup> Stop listening to alleged experts saying you cannot draw parallels between Ukraine and other conflicts the Marine Corps may find

in 2015 to now, one of the volunteer soldiers—without attending the School of Advanced Warfighting or letters behind his name that denote postgraduate studies—precisely summarized what many of our leaders write and talk about but have failed to act on, “It’s a different kind of war now. As people here say, if it comes down to exchanging gunfire, you’ve already made a mistake. When I was in my first campaign, I thought, what on earth are those drones? I have to be the real man, carry a gun on my shoulder, go seek out the enemy. I’m older and wiser now.”<sup>14</sup> What is most troubling is the Marine Corps’ next fight will likely not be against an unorganized and ill-equipped foe such as in Iraq and Afghanistan or a poorly trained and single-minded Russian Army but against the Chinese Communist Party. Even the Russians have adapted as one Ukrainian recently stated from Bakhmut, “Before, we could suppress a whole group of armored vehicles with one drone. Here, two or three people are running and it’s hard to catch them.”

Richard S. Faulkner eloquently summed it up, “Battlefield leadership rests on a foundation of mutual trust and confidence between the soldier and his superiors. The cornerstone of that confidence is the subordinates’ faith

that their leaders have mastered the technical and tactical aspects of their jobs”<sup>15</sup> Leaders returning to the FMF after their yearlong sabbatical should be met by a healthy skepticism from their subordinates. As my father succinctly told me: “just because you’re going to college doesn’t make you a member of the intelligentsia—It’ll just make you a college graduate.” It is past time for Marine leaders to stop pretending to be erudite, theorists, philosophic, strategic, think-tank contributors or any other credentialed title or adjective typically associated with academia. Stop wasting time and effort and focus on the tangible skills at echelon to ensure we remain the indispensable force our Nation wants. Should we not, the iceberg we seem to be slowly cruising towards is defeat in battle or victory and an unnecessarily steep cost.

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**Notes**

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning*, (Washington, DC: 2020).
2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
3. Maj Ian Brown, “High Impact PME,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, No. 6 (2022).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 3, Expeditionary Operations*, (Washington, DC: 1998).
5. In June of 2021, author Gordon Emmanuel wrote, “We Have to Focus on Strategic Education” advocating for more and junior officers to study strategy. In the same issue, LtCol Nathan Fleischaker wrote, “Educating to Compete Development opportunities for Marines and the Corps” where he recommended Marines participate in National Security Policy Institutes and Think Tanks.
6. PittWire, “Pitt Researchers to Study Gender-Integrated Recruit Training in Military Settings,” *PittWire*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.pitt.edu/pittwire/accolades-honors/pitt-researchers-to-study-gender-integrated-recruit-training-military-settings>.
7. In 2016, I was a Company Commander deployed to Iraq in support of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. The ACMC of the Marine Corps visited us during Christmas. Seven years later, I still distinctively remember talking to him about PVS 31s that NSW had on our compound

and him telling me that “Big changes are coming to the Marine Corps Infantry, Captain.” I asked him if senior leaders were influenced by the then recently released book *Scales on War*. He smiled and said the book was being widely circulated at HQMC.

8. LtCol Erin Berard, “The Future of PME,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, No 6 (2022).

9. Lauren E. Willis, “Should College Students Be Required to Take a Course in Personal Finance?” *Wall St. Journal*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/should-college-students-be-required-to-take-a-course-in-personal-finance-1489975500>.

10. Commanding General, MAGTF-TC, *Two Year Review of MAGTF Warfighting Exercise*, (Twenty-nine Palms: 2022).

11. Malcom Kyeyune, “The Realignment that Failed,” *Compact Magazine*, August 10, 2022, [www.compactmag.com/article/the-realignment-that-failed](http://www.compactmag.com/article/the-realignment-that-failed).

12. LtGen David J. Furness, “Change is Hard, and No Less So in the Marine Corps,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 106, No. 6 (2022).

13. Nathan Jennings, “An Army at Sea: Why the New FM 3-0’s Emphasis on Maritime Operations is so Important,” *Modern War Institute*,

December 16, 2022, <https://mwi.usma.edu/an-army-at-sea-why-the-new-fm-3-0s-emphasis-on-maritime-operations-is-so-important>.

14. Yaroslav Trofimov, “Ukraine’s Drone Spotters on the Front Lines Wage New Kind of War,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-drone-spotters-on-front-lines-wage-new-kind-of-war-11659870805>.

15. Richard S. Faulkner, *The School of Hard Knocks: Combat Leadership in the American Expeditionary Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012).

