

Educating the Enlisted Marine

How much longer will we fall short?

by GySgt Neil D. McCoy

Let's Start with Some Questions. We invite you to try something today. Whether you are in the field or at the office, ask one of your subordinates, peers, or superiors this question, How well do we train our junior Marines? We determine that most answers will come back as "pretty well." Now ask this: How well do we educate them? Before one attempts to answer this question, let us review the meaning of education. Military education is an integral part of tactics and the operational art. Education removes the need for simple checklists and "canned" solutions. It enables commanders to place constantly changing situations on and off the battlefield into the larger context of military history, theory, and behavior in combat. The ability to contextualize and think logically under the rigors of combat will lead to creative and innovative solutions to the problem. Knowing this, the answer to this question by many would most likely be "not that well." We are convinced that, in this respect, we repeatedly fall short. How much longer are we willing to accept this?

With the current educational construct, enlisted Marines are only required to attend approximately 40 weeks of technical or "educational" schooling throughout a career of 20 years. If the Marine completes only one enlistment of four years, that number is reduced to twelve weeks if the Marine is promoted to sergeant and attends Sergeants Course. All-in-all, the maximum amount of schooling an enlisted Marine will receive from the Marine Corps in a period of twenty years equates to ten months. This does

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not even equal one tour at the Expeditionary Warfare School that officers attend. How then can we expect our enlisted Marines to be conversant in Marine Corps doctrine and maneuver warfare? How can we expect them to speak a common language (doctrinal language) throughout the Marine Corps if we do not spend the required or necessary time to debate and discuss it? Most PME schools give only an introduction to *MCDP 1, Warfighting*¹ by reading and discussing chapter one of the first book. There are nine total doctrinal publications, and most Marines are not even aware of publications such as *Plan-*

ning, Logistics, Command and Control, and Intelligence.² Again, I ask how can we expect Marines across all the MOS to speak on common ground during combat operations without having first discussed these documents? This article addresses how our current enlisted educational system both in the Operating Forces and the institutional system is in need of desperate improvement.

Before we attempt to answer these questions in new ways, let us first reflect on it from a historical perspective. We must revisit a time of significant transition in terms of warfighting doctrine, a time where these questions were dissected and discussed by some of the brightest minds the military has ever seen. At the end of the Vietnam War, a small group of mostly company grade officers identified the need to readdress how Marines think, fight, and win wars. Together with the help of a



Educating our Marines is more than just a discussion about MCDP 1. (Photo by SSgt Dengrier Baez.)

number of civilians, these officers created our warfighting philosophy and doctrine: maneuver warfare. During this time, some of the greatest work on the subject of maneuver warfare was being written, published, discussed, and debated. Examples of this include, *The Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, *Patterns of Conflict*, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, *the OODA Cycle*, and *FMFM 1, Warfighting*.³ Maneuver warfare requires Marines at all levels to use their minds in pursuit of achieving their respective missions. The Marine Corps, unfortunately, has placed great importance on only educating officers. For instance, all officers spend *six months* at TBS. This is not their boot camp, (OCS is) this is six months of training and education. When done, they continue to their follow-on MOS school. Furthermore, it is time we change this, and it is not a matter of wanting to change: we must. For evidence we need only look at today's highly complex challenges and ever-adapting enemies. Both *Expeditionary Force 21*⁴ and the Squad Leaders Development Program agree with us on this point. Although the Squad Leaders Development Program is in its early stages, the Marine Corps has identified the need to spread this same construct to all MOSs. Imagine a platoon where not only the lieutenant, but all the unit leaders spoke the same language in regard to our warfighting philosophy, doctrine, techniques, and tactics. But how do we get there, and is it even possible?

We absolutely determine this is possible. We start by immersing our junior Marines in our warfighting philosophy. "Free maneuver has to become a way of life, a state of mind," Gen Alfred M. Gray, our 29th Commandant, once said. A way of life or state of mind does not simply start after attending a month-long course. It must be present at the beginning of a Marine's career and reinforced throughout. So we must begin at recruit training.

Start at the Start: A New Kind of Recruit Training

At boot camp, junior Marines should become highly familiar with the ideas presented in our doctrinal publications,

particularly *Warfighting, Tactics*, and *Marine Corps Operations*.⁵ Recruits do not necessarily need to read the *MCDP*'s. They can instead go through the excellent *MCI Warfighting Skills Program*,⁶ which the Marine Corps used in the 1990s but has since (and inexplicably) abandoned. This introduction to our beliefs and theory of war will initiate the development of critical thought. The young recruit may not fully grasp the concept of the entire texts, but that is fine to begin with. Thoughts will begin to form. Conversations will

judgmental. Of course, the focus of SOI should remain on the technical skills and the science of war, but discussions of doctrine and maneuver should be actively pursued when the time allows.

The implementation of this education throughout the entire enlisted ranks in the Marine Corps, in any MOS, must be a priority. There are many reasons why infantry and non-infantry Marines should be well-versed in our doctrinal publications and maneuver warfare. Infantry alone cannot be successful in war without the

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take place. Debates will emerge. Senior drill instructors and series commanders can present simple decision-making exercises that draw out the core ideas of maneuver warfare and ethical values of the Marine Corps. This will allow the recruit the opportunity to speak his thoughts and facilitate a better understanding of the subjects. It will be the starting point to get the ideas into Marines, that these publications can guide us through our quest to become a more effective and efficient warfighting institution.

As the recruit graduates and earns the title, "Marine," the School of Infantry (SOI)—whether it be the Infantry Training Battalion or Marine Combat Training—could set aside time for follow-on maneuver warfare-themed guided discussions and exercises. At this point, the Marine will now have a rudimentary understanding of the science and art of war, but an understanding nonetheless. The Marine will be able to take this understanding and put it to work immediately in their unit. To get here, we must allow recruits and SOI students to openly speak their minds. Instructors, in turn, must actively listen with appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses, giving proper feedback and acceptance, all while remaining non-

assistance of supporting agencies such as fire support, aviation, and logistics. Focus of effort (*schwerpunkt*), that is the understanding and implementation of, is essential in maneuver warfare. A commander must understand this to establish the unit that will *achieve the decision* in that phase of the battle and must apply all support necessary to do this. If all Marines understood this at generally the same level, ground commanders would be able to work more efficiently together to focus all combat power in accordance with commander's intent. This understanding will further increase the longevity of the support and supported relationship.

At this point, some readers may think that, while this sounds all well and good, we need Marines who practice instant and willing obedience to orders. We teach our junior enlisted Marines that such obedience is key to mission accomplishment. But, at what point does this idea become irrelevant or even dangerous? We argue that on today's battlefield that such unthinking obedience can cause its own chaos, uncertainty, and friction. A Marine who has neither the ability nor the will to analyze a problem or understand the purpose of an order through implicit communications can be just as dangerous as the enemy.



Enlisted education has to extend far beyond recruit training. (Photo by PFC Aaron Bolser.)

Furthermore, immediate obedience to orders inherently stifles boldness. Let us be clear, we *do not want* Marines to question every order. Rather, if we want our Marines to practice boldness and take the initiative, we must first develop their thought process, which will allow the understanding of the situation as a whole. This will then naturally temper boldness with sound judgment. In doing this, we encourage understanding of the “why” behind orders, which leads to immediate obedience to orders through implicit communication.

Education in the Marine Corps as dictated by *MCDP 1* should be three tiered: the education establishment, the commander, and the individual.⁷ First, the professional schools of the Marine Corps should focus not only on the technical skills required in that specific field, but also the application of the art of warfare that is appropriate to that specific rank of Marine. Schools must not be completely filled with the memorization of facts and knowledge regurgitation. A portion of the curriculum may call for classes of this type, but they must also encourage discussion, sound judgment, and decision-making exercises. Second, commanders must consider it essential to their job as leaders to expand upon the baseline of education received at the professional establishments. Junior leaders must be

seen as a direct reflection of their commanders. This expansion can be done through free play field exercises, terrain walks, supervised reading programs, map exercises, wargames, decision-forcing cases, or any other creative way that will facilitate learning. Lastly it is the responsibility of the individual Marine to self-educate and dedicate the time to studying military history and theory. *MCDP 1* states:

Self-directed study in the art and science of war is at least equal in importance to maintaining physical condition and should receive at least equal time.

Conclusion

Yesterday’s Marines already identified the importance of this education for our officers years ago. We are now at another point where this education has become just as important for the enlisted Marine. Aligning ourselves with *Expeditionary Force 21*, and preparing our Marines for disaggregated operations throughout the world, we simply must extend this education of maneuver warfare and study of Marine Corps doctrine to our enlisted Marines. As William Lind said in *The Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, “We must return to personnel management as explained by *MCDP 1*,”⁸ and carefully select those commanders and operations officers

who will advocate this type of education and training in the Fleet Marine Force and the school system. With the right men and women in the right positions, those who truly believe and understand maneuver warfare, can strive for a more effective decentralized command, which will allow our team leaders, squad leaders, section leaders, and platoon sergeants the freedom necessary to analyze the situation and implement smart decisions on and off the battlefield. This thought process and ability to make decisions is vital to success in the asymmetric wars we fight today.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 5, Planning*, (Washington, DC: 1997); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 4, Logistics*, (Washington, DC: 1997); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: 1996); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 2, Intelligence*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
3. William S. Lind, *The Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, (Abington, UK: Routledge 1985); John R. Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict*, brief, Congress, (Washington, DC: 1986); Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, (Fort Leavenworth KS, 1981); John R. Boyd, *The Decision Cycle*, (1976); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1989).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: 2014)
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-0, Marine Corps Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2017).
6. Headquarters Marine Corps, Marine Corps Institute, *Warfighting Skills Program*, (Washington, DC: 1990).
7. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*.
8. *The Maneuver Warfare Handbook*.

