On the Art and Science of War at the Tactical Level

Achieving battlefield success and decisive victory by 1stLt Ryan Hoffman

ar: the biggest little word. It is a word filled with so much chaos and ambiguity that it has been studied tirelessly for thousands of years. What scholars and great military minds have discovered about this three-letter word is that is incredibly dynamic. So much so the Marine Corps has broken war down into three levels loaded with dynamic intricacies. Per MCDP 1, the three levels are strategic, operational, and tactical. At the highest level, the strategic level deals with nation-to-nation matters and concerns the politics of war regarding national policy and strategy. The operational level links the tactical and strategic via campaigns with the purpose of "get[ing] strategically meaningful results from tactical efforts."1 Finally, the tactical level is where the rubber meets the road—where Marines turn training into action and make contact with the enemy to achieve a decisive victory. With war being nothing but a "political instrument [and] a continuation of political intercourse," as some militarists such as Carl Von Clausewitz would argue, the strategic level is the most important level of the war itself.² However, strategic victory cannot be achieved without tactical success on the battlefield. Therefore, how does one achieve consistent tactical success on the battlefield that will allow for decisive victories on the strategic level? This is accomplished by merging the art and science of tactics to route the enemy and achieve victory. How the Marine Corps effectively employs this infusion is through its enlisted and officer corps, respectively. The Marine Corps achieves decisive victory on the

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tactical level by employing its enlisted personnel to execute the science of winning engagements while the officer personnel are tasked to execute the art of winning engagements.

The art and science of tactics are distinctive yet rely upon one another to achieve a decisive victory. The art of tactics "lies in how we creatively form and apply military force in a given situation."³ The art of tactics is the ability to take a blank canvas and create a plan that will best employ the tools at the

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artist's disposal. It is all based on intelligence, experience, and knowledge of the individual creating the plan. How well do they know their tools? The general situation? Has a similar plan been painted in previous conflicts? The "artist" uses these questions that will help them create a plan that leads their unit to victory. The science of tactics is different. It deals with the "technical application of combat power"⁴ on the battlefield. The science of tactics is tangible, trainable, and can be mastered. In fact, MCDP 1-3, Tactics, tells us that the technical skill we were tasked with learning "must be second nature and requires consistent training."5 During a conflict, it is important for the person employing the science to be well-versed in the critical capabilities of their job. They do not need to create new ways on the battlefield; rather, they need to be able to successfully employ their skill when tasked to do so or when the situation demands them to do so-hence the importance of knowing their skill as second nature.

The science of tactics relies on repeated practice and rehearsals until the time arises to employ the skill. If the science is wrong, the art has the potential to fail. Take a football play for example: the coach draws up a passing play and orders his quarterback to execute the play. The quarterback's task is to throw the ball to the open receiver to score. He has practiced passing for years and is expected to accomplish the task without fail for the coach's plan to work. If he cannot throw the ball, the play is useless. Just as in football, if a battle plan is drawn up, but the people who are tasked with applying their craft fail, so can the entire plan. The artist also has the potential to fail if they create a battle plan that improperly employs the science. In the football example, if the coach creates a plan that is catered toward the quarterback running the football but the quarterback is ranked as the slowest in the league, the plan has more potential to fail.

Furthermore, the science of tactics rarely changes. "I sensed a continuity

with other infantrymen stretching back to Thermopylae," said infantry officer Nathanial Fick. "Weapons and tactics may have changed, but ... the men stayed the same."6 It is a constant cycle of a student becoming a master and then teaching the next student. To show that the science of tactics and the people who employ them have remained the same, The Scientific American published the article "The True Science of War in 1915." Therein, the editor argues that "[t]he military expert ... required further to know how thoroughly trained, flexible-minded men there are [in a unit] currently engaged in [carrying out] methods of mass destruction." The author states the importance for countries (and their leaders) in the Great War to adopt the practice of effectively employing men knowledgeable of their military craft. He continues, stating that approach was the reason for German victories in 1915, specifically that they were among the first countries in the Great War to understand and integrate the model of using a plan built around the science of battle.

Though the art and science of tactics are different, they are not mutually exclusive. They need to be employed concurrently and fluidly, lest failure at the tactical level. In war, "Art and science can never be completely separated from each other," argued Prussian militarist Carl Von Clausewitz, for "there is no science without the mixture of art."8 The way the Marine Corps executes the simultaneous employment of art and science is executed by dividing the artistic and scientific levels of tactics down to the officer and the enlisted personnel. The officer is tasked with the art of tactics and the enlisted the science and the two are trained accordingly.

It is paramount that the training of the art and science of winning battles be separated so both can be employed to their maximum capabilities simultaneously. The art of tactics, interpreted as "complex [military] operations, demand military officers who possess a comprehensive understanding of the battle environment and the capacity to integrate capabilities to achieve mission success."⁹ The United States supplies this demand by training each officer in

the art of infantry tactics during their time at The Basic School. Student officers are primarily trained on the artistic side of infantry tactics. They are constantly challenged with tactical decision games, sand table exercises, and practical applications. This training comes with a general situation and the officer is challenged with composing a successful plan. The challenge for the student officer is determining how to effectively place the tools given to them to accomplish the mission and achieve a decisive victory over the enemy. Effectively drawing up a plan that emplaces those tools is one of the most important pieces officers need to understand. This is what connects art to science, in turn

the science when the time is right can be the deciding factor of a battle, thus placing substantial responsibility on the enlisted Marine. This responsibility is showcased in C.S. Forester's classic novel Rifleman Dodd. Dodd, an enlisted soldier in the King's Army during the Napoleonic Wars, was exposed to "months and months of drill [that] had been devoted to making him mechanically perfect in loading, so that he would not in a moment of excitement put the bullet in before the powder ... or make any other of the fifty mistakes to which recruits were prone."12 For centuries, it has been stressed upon enlisted men to become experts at their craft for the overall plan to be a success.

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allowing fluidity on the battlefield. Nathanial Fick talks about this when he recounts his time at the Basic School, saying that "Instruction at TBS goes far beyond rote memorization, growing into some amalgamation of chess, history, and game theory."10 Fick demonstrates that becoming a Marine officer is not simply making a specific subject second nature, but more of a chess game where officers are challenged in every way to think differently, and how to effectively move pieces across a board to achieve decisive victory. The effective training The Basic School offers to its junior officers allows for "an increased focus on cultivating [officers to become] the most talented strategists relatively early in their careers."11

The science of winning engagements relies on the successful employment of skills the Marine Corps has entrusted with its enlisted members. After basic infantry training, each enlisted Marine will be tasked with specific jobs that lead them to become subject-matter experts in that skill. They train hard and effectively and run through repeated rehearsals to drill their specific job down to a science. Knowing how to employ

The science of tactics has been utilized for centuries cycling through master and student. This is no different in the Marine Corps, where most of the tough training of the science is enlistedto-enlisted, where non-commissioned officers train their junior enlisted counterparts. Col David Hackworth recounts numerous anecdotes of the importance of non-commissioned officers' training of its enlisted personnel to ensure "the makings of one hell of a fighting team."¹³ He also explained how a lack of training the science can affect a unit: "What [the big unit movers] didn't recognize was that their big units were made up of individual soldiers whose training needs had to be met, not for the soldiers own survival but for the ultimate success of big unit maneuvers."14 Without the science being effectively implemented, his unit became useless in accomplishing tasks. Though an anecdote from an Army unit, the same bodes for the Marine Corps and the employment of the science of tactics among the enlisted ranks. If the cycle of teaching the science is broken, the unit cannot function and therefore cannot execute the

officer's plan in battle, leading to a loss on all levels of war.

The importance of the art and science of war on the tactical level can be felt up to the highest echelon. It is what helps us get inside of the enemy's head. Art allows us to turn the map around to think like our enemies, and science allows us to exploit the enemy's weakness on the battlefield. Both art and science are distinctly employed on the battlefield, but neither supersedes the other's importance overall. This relationship between art and science also applies to officers and enlisted—one is inherently no more important than the other in battle, for the two could not succeed when isolated. What remains most important between the art and science and the officer and enlisted is their simultaneous employment, permitting plans to be executed and battles to be won. The Marine Corps successfully executes this

simultaneous employment by tasking out their officer and enlisted Marines with two vastly different responsibilities that, when employed together, win battles and win wars.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, MCDP 1-2 Campaigning, (Washington, DC: 1997).

2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3 Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Nathaniel Fick, *One Bullet Away* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

7. Charles Allen Munn, *Scientific America: The True Science of War* (New York, NY: Munn & Co.,1915).

8. On War.

9. Don M. Snider et al, *Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps*, (Center for a New American Security, 2010).

10. One Bullet Away.

11. Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps.

12. C. S. Forester, *Rifleman Dodd*, (Quantico: Marine Corps Assoc., 1996).

13. David M. Hackworth, *About Face* (New York, NY: Avid Reader Press, 2020).

14. Ibid.

