

How We Make Marines

Time, lethality, and close order drill

by Capt Nathan Berg

MCDP 1 states, “War is timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously.”¹ Gen Berger, in his 2019 *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, stated, “We must change the Training and Education Continuum from an industrial age model, to an information age model.”² In this period between combat commitments, we must look internally to find ways to become even better than have been before. We must continually strive for ever-increasing levels of lethality that will ensure not only that we remain capable of winning our next fight but that we do so while bringing home as many of our warriors physically and psychologically whole as we can. Our maneuver warfare doctrine

>Capt Berg is currently serving as the Weapons Company Commander of 1/1 Mar. In his prior duty, he served as a Series Commander and Company Commander aboard MCRD Parris Island, SC.

makes it explicitly clear that we must constantly remain flexible and adaptable in our methods of thinking, training, and fighting. We must not forget the hard-learned lessons of the past, but neither can we treat our history as something so sacrosanct that our traditions may never be improved upon in order to meet emerging threats. It is not a bad thing to have sacred cows, so long as we are still willing to eat steak.

At any given time, approximately 75 percent of the Marine Corps is composed of first-term Marines, meaning that the vast majority of our force is less than three years removed from the entry-level training pipeline. What we do on recruit training depots echo across our Corps. How does the current training pipeline support the endstate of increasing lethality in our basically trained Marines? To examine this, the concepts of transferability and specificity in training programs will first be introduced. Then using the lens of transferability and specificity, the benefits and limitations of Close Order Drill (COD) in the Marine Corps’ entry-level training pipeline will be examined. Ultimately, COD does retain some limited introductory training value, but the current amount of time dedicated to its practice vastly outweighs its benefits. Time is the ultimate limiting factor, and the entry-level training pipeline could achieve significantly higher skill acquisition levels in tasks essential to the creation of a basically trained rifleman if there were less time dedicated to COD while still building the intangible qualities required of a basically trained Marine. COD’s final evaluation and training should be no later than Training Day 31 in order to culminate before beginning marksmanship and field training.

To begin, the concepts of transferability and specificity are taken from physical training programs used in terms of preparation for particular physical events, but they are illuminating for training of any type. Transferability is the conduct of such exercises as may be beneficial for increased performance in the target event but do not involve the conduct of any portions of that target



What are the benefits and limitations of close order drill in Marine entry-level training? (Photo by PFC Vanessa Austin.)

event itself. Specificity is training that consists repetitions of the target work, subsets of that target work, or some variation thereof. Consider a professional football team preparing for a season of play. In the off-season, training is focused largely on improving performance in transferable skills such as heavy and explosive compound lifts and anaerobic conditioning such as sprints. It builds a baseline for improved performance without actually playing football. As the season nears, the training will still include transferable exercises but will start to include more specific skills as blocking, tackling, and catching. As the season becomes imminent, transferable skills are no longer the priority and players focus on running plays and building proficiency in specific skills. There is a progression from largely transferable skills in the early training to largely specific skills later in training.

How does this apply to COD in Recruit Training? Is COD a transferable or specific skill to combat? COD is a training method from the close order line and column tactics that required unquestioning discipline in tight lines and columns of poorly educated conscripts to maximize firepower from the smoothbore muskets. It bears no resemblance to the smart, lethal, dispersed, and complex battlefield of today. COD is not a specific skill to combat today as it has not been tactically relevant as a skill set since the advent of the rifled bore in 1850, but hundreds of thousands of combatants have died learning that lesson. Despite this, it does provide a basis for instilling intangible qualities that can make it a valuable transferable training skill.

What are those transferable benefits? *Marine Corps Order P5060.20 w/Ch1, The Marine Corps Drill and Ceremonies Manual*, states, "Beginning with OCS and recruit training we continue to use close order drill as the foundation for developing discipline and esprit de corps." It later identifies the five purposes of drill are to: (1) move units from one place to another in a standard, orderly manner; (2) provide simple formations from which combat formations may be readily assumed; (3) teach discipline by instilling habits of precision and auto-



COD has not been tactically relevant since the widespread fielding of rifled weapons beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. (Photo by Sgt Jennifer Schubert.)

matic response to orders; (4) increase the confidence of junior officers and noncommissioned officers through the exercise of command, by the giving of proper commands, and by the control of drilling troops; and (5) give troops an opportunity to handle individual weapons. Beyond these five reasons given in *MCO P5060.20 w/Ch1*, it also is the most efficient manner to bring together strangers from all walks of life to work together as a team in an event which carries little risk of injury, making it an ideal activity for fresh recruits to reap the above-stated benefits.

Each of those five purposes of COD also contain significant limitations. First, COD as an orderly means of moving units from one place to another should be encouraged whenever a purely garrison and administrative environment is in place. However, once recruits have been instructed in small unit movement techniques such as combat formations and patrolling, every movement made that does not involve combat formations and patrolling is a wasted training opportunity. These skills are no different than any other skill; they require countless repetitions to gain proficiency. Non-combat MOS designated Marines are in recruit training for 70 days and MCT for 28 days. Why not utilize more time in recruit training to gain

a higher skill acquisition level in these tasks that may actually save their lives in combat? Currently, the facilities aboard recruit depots are not purpose built to facilitate this kind of training. What if instead of continuing to reinforce COD at every movement, we reinforced small unit and individual actions by having them patrol from place to place? What if our facilities were purpose-built to make this feasible and civilian traffic was not a consideration for the making of Marines? What if every recruit training battalion, in addition to the parade deck, had a field purpose built for the exercising of patrolling and individual field skills during white space? If we knew today that these young men and women were going to combat soon upon graduation, would we make these changes? If the answer is yes, then why are we not doing it today?

Next, COD purportedly provides simple formations from which combat formations may assume. This became a false statement in 1850. COD may be a useful metaphor to teach some combat skills such as reacting to flank contact from a column (by the left/right flank) and footwork in room clearing (column movements). But how much training time should be dedicated to training events which are used as a metaphors for actual combat skills? Should we

dedicate more training time to the metaphor (COD) or the target performance event (combat formations)? An efficient training program would begin with an introduction to the basic concepts gained in drill until understood, and then dedicate half or more of the remaining training days to the targeted skills. Again, to maximize the number of repetitions of skills needed to save lives and win in combat, maximum repetitions of combat specific skills are needed at every training opportunity. Skill acquisition level is entirely dependent upon the number of proper repetitions performed of the specific target task, so it is entirely incorrect to think that COD in any way builds proficiency in combat formations. COD also does not teach any of the individual actions required in a combat formation which could be practiced in every combat formation movement.

The most discussed benefit of COD is its ability to teach discipline by instilling habits of precision and automatic response to orders. This is undoubtedly true. Discipline is the bedrock of combat success, but there are different types of discipline. COD is a fantastic means of instilling extrinsic discipline and automatic response to orders. Discipline in COD relies primarily upon extrinsic motivation to obey in the form of an ever-watchful Drill Instructor (DI) who is eager to impose physical punishment (Incentive Training) for the slightest mistake. There are several limitations to this type of extrinsic motivation in inducing discipline. First is that as soon as the authority figure leaves the scenario, the motivation to maintain discipline and obedience is gone. Ask any DI about his experience in leaving a platoon unattended for more than a moment. In fact, it is considered unacceptable to do this at any time in recruit training. It is ironic in this sense that the organization implicitly cedes the fact that the discipline they claim to have instilled through COD tends to leave as soon as the watchful eye passes on; however, the vast majority of individuals still claim that this type of discipline transfers to combat (which occurs largely at the small unit level without direct SNCO or officer supervision).

The limitations of extrinsic discipline are fully expounded in a 1978 study entitled “Military Self-Discipline: A Motivational Analysis” conducted by the Policy Sciences Division of CACI, in which it was determined that individuals who were primarily motivated to obey by extrinsic means performed worse in dangerous and stressful situations than did those who were motivated by other means. Additionally, this study discusses that the effectiveness of extrinsic motivation decreases with time and is only marginally successful in modifying behavior in the long run. Milgram, in his classic study of obedience, also confirmed that the obedience gained by extrinsic motivation is only observed so long as the authority figure is in the immediate vicinity of the subject. Additionally, William S. Lind, in his weekly column “On War,” noted that second generation (attritionist) military organizations place the highest value obedience, while third generation (maneuverist) military or-

to maintain obedience as self-discipline will never be universal in any organization. But is COD the only effective vehicle of instilling extrinsic motivation? Once a baseline level of proficiency has been established in COD and its lessons are taught, it can be used as a teaching metaphor for the same level of discipline in other tasks that are specifically applicable to combat. Why is the unflinching discipline that is demanded on the parade deck not demanded in field skills? Is a DI today more likely to passionately correct a recruit for smiling in formation than he or she is for violating geometries of fire or exposing their body behind cover? This is not a result of DI negligence; it is a direct result of cultural priorities that manifest themselves in training priorities and the allocation of the finite supply of mental and physical resources inherent to human and organizational capacity. Discipline and *esprit de corps*, the *Drill Manual’s* stated primary reasons for the continuation of COD, can be instilled

Is a DI today more likely to passionately correct a recruit for smiling in formation than he or she is for violating geometries of fire or exposing their body behind cover?

ganizations place the highest value on coordinated initiative. In this paradigm, we are continuing to move further away from our maneuver warfare doctrine in the making of our newest Marines by relying solely upon extrinsic discipline (“instant willing obedience to orders”).

This is not to say that extrinsic discipline and supervision does not have its place in preparing for a combat environment—in fact, just the opposite. Extrinsic motivation serves as the baseline for the development of intrinsic motivation and self-discipline. An individual must be taught what is right and what is wrong before holding oneself to the standard without external pressures applied. Extrinsic discipline cannot and should not be eradicated from military training because it is necessary

in small unit combat drills that lend themselves more towards developing more self-discipline, initiative, and are actually skill sets specifically applicable to combat. The institution can simultaneously imbue the intangible qualities of a basically trained Marine while also building skill acquisition levels in combat specific tasks. These things are not mutually exclusive but rather self-reinforcing.

The next stated benefit of COD is to increase the confidence of junior officers and noncommissioned officers through the exercise of command, by the giving of proper commands, and by the control of drilling troops. This is true on the parade deck. But take that same unit leader and put them in charge of a squad in a field problem or in combat and



More training time should be dedicated to drilling skills that are directly transferrable to combat tasks. (Photo by Cpl Alexander Mitchell.)

their confidence will rapidly dissipate, or worse still, false confidence can lead to an ill-informed tactical decision that gets Marines killed. COD commands reliant upon explicit communication are useless in dispersed small unit combat. The confidence unit leaders gain on the parade deck is useless if it is not matched with equal or greater training time in equipping that leader with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed against a thinking enemy.

The final stated benefit of COD is it gives an opportunity for troops to handle individual weapons. For someone who has never held a rifle before, this is true. But for an individual learning the skills needed to succeed in combat with that rifle, its level of transferability is actually quite low. The type of weapons handling needed for successful combat performance is entirely different than the type of weapons handling needed to succeed in drill. Once the recruit has carried the rifle around for a few weeks and has learned that it will only do exactly what he or she commands it to do (as all inanimate objects do), then the emphasis of training should turn to specific combat skills. A sharp execution of “Inspection Arms” looks impressive. Proper and rapid immediate or remedial actions in clearing a stoppage can actually save lives. The ability to execute a

crisp “Left Shoulder Arms” does not help the rifleman speed reload any faster in the face of the enemy. Yet, the current allocation of training time heavily favors the former. What if there were drill instructors who taught drills that are applicable to combat today instead of drills designed on the Napoleonic battlefield?

These examined limitations of COD should make it clear that it has an important benefit in introducing civilians to military discipline. It is a necessary transferable exercise, but it is only a means to an end. The COD time investment to benefit ratio does not currently support the assertion that every Marine is a rifleman. Being a rifleman requires a high degree of proficiency in skills specifically applicable to combat. Placing Final Drill on Training Day 56 is similar to asking a starting quarterback to hit a personal record for a one repetition maximum on a back squat the day before the first game. If we were a football team, then we would be strong and fast, but we would miss most tackles and drop most passes because we do not spend enough time on gaining proficiency in target-event specific skills. Good training programs do not incentivize transferable skills at the end of a training program; they do so at the beginning. Good training programs de-

mand the highest level of excellence in skills specific to the target event at the end of the training program. This requires the time and resource allocation as well as the proper mindset to reach maximum performance. Our target event is the chaos of modern combat, for we exist to win wars. While discipline is the bedrock of that victory, it is in self-discipline in tasks specific to combat that matters most. COD does not teach self-discipline in tasks specific to combat but rather the opposite; it teaches extrinsic discipline in tasks only slightly transferable to combat. For that reason, the institutional incentivization of Final Drill should be placed before commencing any combat skills training. It is recommended that Final Drill be moved back to Training Day 30 and that 1000-level 0300 skills be given more time and resources in the recruit training schedule to support the goal of increasing the lethality of our newest Marines, as they are all riflemen and should be trained as such. The *Drill Manual* itself states that drill is only the foundation; it cannot be an end unto itself. The institution can simultaneously imbue the intangible qualities of a basically trained Marine while building higher skill acquisition levels in these combat specific tasks.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: June 2019).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order P5060.20 w/Ch1, The Marine Corps Drill and Ceremonies Manual*, (Washington, DC: May 2003).

