

The Imperative for Decentralization

To win the next fight, the Marine Corps must better empower subordinate leaders and practice more decentralized command and control

by 1stLt Haofeng Liu

A young Marine forward observer crouched stealthily behind a tree, one hand holding a pair of binoculars and the other holding a radio handset. He kept the binoculars expertly trained on a convoy of military vehicles loitering in a clearing three thousand meters ahead. His ear was glued to the handset: on the other end of the line was the artillery battery supporting his company.

The unmistakable roar of tactical vehicle engines suddenly pierced the air and jolted him to his senses. He raised his hand to alert the others. His fire support team had spent the better part of the morning tracking the convoy and had arrived at their current position mere minutes ago. The fire support team's mission was to prevent the vehicles from leaving their assembly area.

"Target number AL1650, ready, over," squawked the handset.

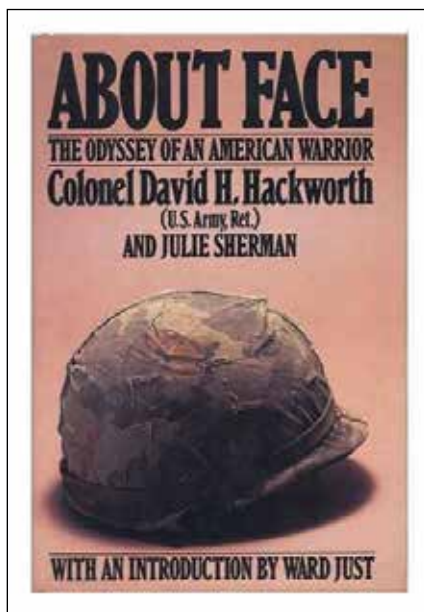
The Marine turned to his fire support officer. "Sir, the battery is ready to fire."

The lieutenant nodded. "Roger. We are still waiting on approval from regimental FSCC [fire support coordination center]. Tell the battery to hold tight."

The Marine opened his mouth to say something but then closed it. He knew it was no use—and that he was on the same page as his lieutenant.

The radio operator next to the Marine suddenly looked up from the small tablet he had been hunched over. "Sir, the regimental commander just sent you a message. He saw the photo we sent of our observation post, and he says we are not concealed enough. He wants us to displace three hundred meters west and then

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About Face: Odyssey of an American Warrior; by David H. Hackworth and, Julie Sherman. First Edition January 1, 1989, Simon & Schuster, ISBN-13978-0671526924.

report back with an updated POSREP [position report] and picture."

As if on cue, the vehicles started to rumble out of the clearing. Less than a minute later, they were gone, swallowed up by the thick tree line. Soon, the only sounds that hung in the air were the trees rustling lightly in the breeze.

Our current Corps

In *About Face*, Col David Hackworth bemoaned the tendency of commanders in Vietnam to micro-manage the battlefield by being airborne in command-and-control helicopters.¹ During a firefight, it was not uncommon for the regimental, division, and corps commanders to all be hovering overhead, monitoring the tactical radio nets and telling the commander on the ground exactly what to do.

Although the Marine Corps has made huge efforts to prepare for a near-peer conflict through *Force Design 2030*, not nearly enough work has been done to rid the Marine Corps of its modus operandi that assumes a Global War on Terrorism-era mindset of uncontested, ergo unlimited, communications. The newest technologies—which can link the MEF commander in the same chat room as a lance corporal radio operator or can give the President a live video feed of an operation happening half a world away—only give commanders more opportunities to oversee the particulars of an operation. With the ability to micro-manage at new levels, the self-discipline required to exercise decentralized command is severely lacking across the force. A near-peer conflict, where communications will likely be one of the many degraded assets, will not be kind to the Marine Corps'

current approach to decision making and command and control.

In the current Marine Corps, centralization has manifested in a few forms. Perhaps the most prevalent form has been through group messaging applications, which allow leaders at all levels to instantly pass the word to their subordinates. Although the accessibility of messaging applications may ensure that Marines are notified faster in the case of emergencies, the benefits are far outweighed by the expense of denying small-unit leaders the ability to exercise leadership. The reactive, rather than proactive, nature of these applications stymies opportunities for critical thinking and initiative that were once widespread. When Marines have around-the-clock access to a device that can communicate with anyone in the world, there is a tendency

less time for preparation for combat, rehearsals, and orders briefing. This severely misplaces the priorities of those in leadership positions from what they should be: informing their Marines and preparing them for the mission. The Marine Corps champions a *train as you fight* mentality; the current system is no way to train and certainly no way to fight. As the Nation's expeditionary force in readiness, efficiency is the name of the game for Marines. Re-formatting PowerPoint slides when leaders could be preparing their Marines for combat degrades efficiency and stifles tempo.

The Marine Corps must review its practices and work toward more decentralization in its ranks. However, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, warns readers that implementing a more decentralized command-and-control model is more demanding and

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to forget about the principles of communication that every Marine learned at entry-level school: Be concise. Talk on the appropriate channels. If you do not have anything important to say, stay off the net.

Another process that suffocates decentralization and initiative in our current Marine Corps is the confirmation brief, a PowerPoint presentation with slides often numbering into the hundreds that spell out the minutiae of an event or operation. In many Marine Corps units, the confirmation brief has been adopted as the de facto operations order while the five-paragraph order is still espoused in publications and schoolhouses as the doctrinal way of briefing an operation.

With PowerPoint-heavy requirements, officers must spend the bulk of their time ensuring their slides are formatted correctly and abide by their unit's detailed templates, leaving them

requires more from leaders at all levels.² For the Marine Corps to pivot toward decentralization, it must lean into the "rigorous training and education" that is required to overcome the all too human response of gatekeeping authority to try and control a situation.³

Train as You Fight

To better face the challenges of fighting a near-peer threat, the Marine Corps must place a bigger emphasis on force-on-force training. The current pre-deployment training programs for both the MEUs and the Unit Deployment Program primarily focus on evaluating higher headquarters' ability to integrate the MAGTF and plan large-scale operations; little attention is paid to simulating a living, breathing enemy representative of a peer adversary.

One event that does an exemplary job of simulating the dynamic, sentient nature of an adversary force is

the MAGTF Warfighting Exercise, the final event at Service-level Training Exercises in Twentynine Palms, which pits two regiments against each other in the Mojave Desert. There is no script, the only objective being to come out on top against a thinking enemy of like size and capabilities. Additionally, over 760,000 acres of training area largely nullify concerns about violating range regulations, a common issue that units run into while training on other bases. In this setting, units and their commanders are forced to confront the most pressing issues they would face against a threat like Russia or China: conducting disaggregated operations covering a large area, practicing emissions control across the electromagnetic spectrum, issuing concise orders in a time-compressed environment—just to name a few.

Across the MAGTF, Marines are participating in exercises that are heavily event and checklist-driven, often accompanied by master event timelines and lists of tasks that must be completed for the exercise to be considered a success. Although checklists are a useful training aid to ensure certain objectives are met, they should not be the main priority, and their completion alone should not signify the end of an exercise. By placing a greater emphasis on unscripted, force-on-force training, it rids Marines of the *check-in-the-box* mindset of training toward a largely predetermined end goal. Having a thinking, moving enemy in field exercises will force Marines to practice intent-driven orders, concise communications, and emissions control to survive.

Changing How We Communicate

Another change to training that would have an outsized impact on preparing Marines for the next conflict is to establish the combat order as the de facto framework with which the MAGTF communicates. This would include using the orders framework for all correspondence, to include everything from a regimental-level field exercise to a company Christmas party.

Additionally, the orders should be issued verbally whenever possible. One of Germany's most decorated military

officers, Gen Hermann Balck, emphasized the importance of issuing orders verbally even for “the largest and most important operations orders.”⁴ LtCol Ernest Cheatham, the commanding officer of 2/5 Mar, only issued verbal orders during the battle for Hue City in 1968.⁵ Verbal orders have the added benefit of forcing leaders to scrutinize their verbiage and re-evaluate what they view as important.

Issuing more verbal orders would provide leaders at all levels with the daily repetition of communicating in the way that they must in the next conflict. It would also give Marines the experience of receiving and executing based on the combat order structure. If leaders in combat will not be receiving orders over the Signal messaging application or schemes of maneuver on a PowerPoint slide, they should not be using those tools in training.

Educate from Within

With good training and the trust that naturally results, Marine Corps leadership should feel more comfortable with distributing decision-making authority. However, it now becomes even more incumbent upon the junior Marines to know what to do and to wield their newfound authority with prudence. Technology can be a tool for good in the next fight—its use, however, must be regulated with both self-discipline and awareness. Fortunately, both can be learned and reinforced through education.

Gen Charles Krulak coined the term *strategic corporal* to describe the type of junior Marine that is needed to fight on the 21st-century battlefield.⁶ He recognized that Marines must be more mature, competent, and situationally aware than ever before to survive in dynamic environments. For this to happen, junior Marines must be better educated on geopolitical context, global operating environments, and strategic implications of their tactical decisions. Fortunately, most officers receive plenty of education in this regard by attending college and The Basic School.

Whether through tactical decision games, current events discussions, or moral dilemma exercises, the onus

must fall on junior officers to bring their Marines into the fold. The notion that important issues and decision making should be solely reserved for the college-educated is severely outdated and must be abolished. These Marines, now armed with a more nuanced understanding of their surroundings and their role in them, will have no problem operating “far from the flagpole without the direct supervision of senior leadership.”⁷

A Call to Action

Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in February of 2022, the Russian military is reported to have lost over 3,000 main battle tanks to the Ukrainians.⁸ A big contributor to this statistic is the decentralized decision-making approach that the Ukrainians have adopted—a tactic that admittedly was largely driven by necessity. This approach has enabled Ukrainian fighters

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to use ambush-style tactics in a disaggregated manner, relied on by higher commanders to make tactical-level decisions without the imperative to constantly communicate with a centralized command and control node miles away.⁹

By contrast, the Marine Corps’ top-down command-and-control structure, exacerbated by an emphasis on new and emerging communication technologies, is creating a destructive culture of micromanagement. This culture dilutes the fidelity of the leadership hierarchy while also diminishing the decision-making abilities of small-unit leaders and robbing them of valuable experiences. The Marine Corps must adopt a command-and-control structure more like the Ukrainians than the Russians to win its next fight.

There is no need to start from scratch or reinvent the wheel. Many of these

enduring issues are discussed ad nauseam in Marine Corps publications and doctrine. The Marine Corps has long espoused the values of decentralization and empowering subordinate unit leaders; now is the time to start practicing what it preaches. The Marine Corps’ charge in the coming years is to keep warfighting as its top priority while not getting so distracted by emerging technologies that it forgets the Marines whom its achievements stand on the shoulders of. We must empower our Marines with the latitude and authority they need to keep making the mature, selfless decisions that make Marines known around the world as *no better friend, no worse enemy*.

Notes

1. David H. Hackworth and Julie Sherman, *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
3. Ibid.
4. Brendan McBreen and Chad Skaggs, *Orders: A User’s Guide* (Quantico: The Warfighting Society, 2021).
5. Ibid.
6. Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three-Block War,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 83, No. 1 (1999).
7. Ibid.
8. Ellie Cook, “Russia Has Lost More Tanks in Ukraine than Were Operational Pre-War: IISS,” *Newsweek*, February 13, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-tank-losses-ukraine-iiis-military-balance-armored-vehicles-1869450>.
9. Kris Osborn, “Ukraine’s Decentralized Command Puts Russia on the Defensive,” *The National Interest*, September 11, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/ukraines-decentralized-command-puts-russia-defensive-204714>.

