

# Off-The-Shelf PME

Commercial wargames as low-cost, high-value training and education aids

by Capt Nicholas D. Patitsas

## The Problem: Marines Want More Opportunities to Compete, but Institutional Resources Are Limited

The Marine Corps is in a period of institutional change. With emergent technology, new doctrinal concepts, and Force Design, it is an exciting time to be a Marine. What has not changed is the premium on sound military judgment and decision-making ability. Warfare is still an inherently *human* endeavor. While physical training, critical-skills development, and unit-level exercises are built into our pre-deployment training plans, there are few opportunities for Marines to actually compete against a thinking opponent. What's more, the predominance of the force is now untested by combat, leaving Marines to question if they have what it takes to win. The CMC has stated, "in the context of training, wargaming needs to be used more broadly to fill what is arguably our greatest deficiency in the training and education of leaders."<sup>1</sup> How did wargaming top the CMC's list of solutions?

The use of wargames in training and education is nothing new. Yet, as a Service, we have largely outsourced wargaming to research and analysis firms or compartmentalized them within curricula of formal military education. Wargames indeed have great value in those settings, but they also can provide compelling opportunities to compete and learn at the unit level. Wargames illicit strong analytical and creative effort in pursuit of a goal. Moreover, wargames engage all modes of comprehension: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. While playing a wargame, Marines practice the same types of decision-making skills used in the planning and execution of operations. They also receive real-time feedback on the impact their decisions

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have on friendly forces, the environment, and the enemy. This type of learning differs from the traditional teacher-to-student model. Rather, it employs something called "Learner-Centered Teaching."<sup>2</sup> According to the research,

Learner-Centered Teaching produces "meaningful and long-term understanding, increased motivation to learn, and better assessment outcomes."<sup>2</sup> While the benefits of wargaming are numerous, the Marine Corps does not currently pos-



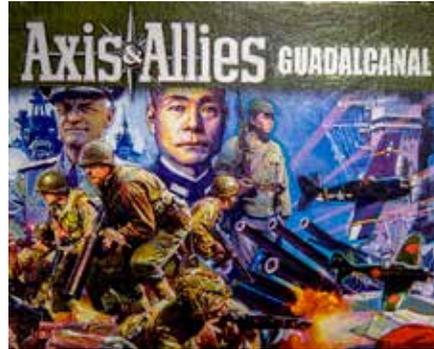
**UCLA MECEPS and Midshipmen face off in the Chinese Battle of Red Cliffs using modified rules from Neil Thomas' "One-Hour Wargaming."** (Photo provided by author.)

sess a library of games or a ready-made curriculum that could lower the barrier to entry for commanders and small unit leaders seeking to employ them. What follows is a simple yet effective alternative that can be applied across the total force.

### **Value Proposition: Leverage Off-The-Shelf Commercial Wargames in Unit PME**

As with our physical combat systems, we must consider low-cost, high-value means to build experience at scale in the cognitive domain. From local hobby stores to Amazon, commercial wargames are widely available and far cheaper than any resident professional military education (PME) course. Commercial wargames vary from simple to highly complex, with nearly any topic or scale imaginable. Once relegated to small circles of enthusiasts, hobby games have exploded in popularity during the global pandemic, with U.S. and Canada sales growing 21 percent in 2020 to more than two billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> Quality wargames have a strong following that provides a myriad of free resources and community insights available to Marine facilitators. One challenge is choosing which wargame to utilize in a unit PME program. Maj Ian Brown, et al in “Making it Stick” advises that there is no single wargame that meets everyone’s learning objectives. Instead, Marines should be playing many different wargames, with

22d MEU reflects fondly on his time at Marine Corps University where his professor utilized commercial off-the-shelf wargames to teach ends, ways, and means. “At the Marine Corps War College, I had a professor who effectively



**Axis and Allies Cover: Axis & Allies: Guadalcanal Box Set. (Photo provided by author.)**

used commercial wargames to teach strategy. I thought we could do the same in the fleet to develop decision making, planning, critical thinking as well as concepts like multi-domain operations.” At the Army Command and General Staff College, Professor James Sterrett teaches a course titled “Military History through Wargaming,” which is exactly what it sounds like. Junior-level schools are catching on as well. In 2021, the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps “Evolution of Warfare” curriculum was revamped to include either a tactical decision game or a commercial wargame for every lesson. Undergraduate student

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perspectives across the spectrum of conflict and levels of warfare. We want Marines to establish a broad mental catalog of experience and then go deeper with advanced wargames.

Professionals across Training and Education Command have been using commercial wargames in training and education for years. An officer from the

feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with students relishing the opportunity to “command” in battles like Marathon, Waterloo, and D-Day. Just as our PME schools are leveraging commercial wargames in creative ways, the FMF can adopt a similar model to sustain the training and education of leaders.

### **How the 22d MEU Is Using Commercial Wargames in Unit PME**

The 22d MEU CO prioritized the development of decision-making skills amongst the unit’s officers. Accordingly, the MEU’s Officer PME program was designed to develop officers as students of their profession, critical thinkers, and dynamic decision-makers. The curriculum also focused on the ability to plan and execute across all domains.

One segment of the curriculum centered on Guadalcanal. Assigned readings from Richard Frank’s “Guadalcanal” provided the historical underpinning. The MEU CO facilitated a series of guided discussions, followed by a wargame to meet the following learning objectives:

1. Increase understanding of Multi-Domain Operations. It is hard to think of another campaign in World War II that was fought in the three standard domains of the times (air, land, and sea) but also the electromagnetic and information domain. The interplay of these domains was key, and the advantage went to the side that best figured out how to fight across multiple domains.
2. Understand the idea of the *Single Naval Battle* (i.e. Naval Integration). Marine Corps University published a case study of Operation WATCHTOWER in 2018 titled “How to Fight and Win the Single Naval Battle.” They defined the single naval battle as “the integration of all elements of sea control and naval power projection into a cohesive whole that shares a common, unifying purpose and that runs from top to bottom through all formations.” For obvious reasons, this is a good goal for the MEU to strive toward. It is also not a bad way to learn about the Navy’s Composite Warfare construct.
3. Learn about *Emerging Naval Concepts*: Guadalcanal and Tulagi were essentially Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations that the Marines used to support sea control and sea denial. We need to re-learn lessons from the Pacific and apply them to modern operations.
4. Improved decision making: With the foundational understanding of the above concepts, place the officers in a situation where they have to apply those concepts and make multiple

decisions, facing an adversary that is dealing with the same challenge.

With clear learning objectives established, the task turned to identifying the right wargame. The game would have to involve the sea and air domains and not just the island of Guadalcanal. This might seem counterintuitive for a group of Marines, but the MEU CO was less interested in banzai charges and machineguns and more interested in how officers would wrestle with the decisions faced by American and Japanese generals and admirals. The wargame would provide insight into theater-level decision making and multi-domain operations, a first for many of his junior officers.

Given the CO's intent, PME facilitators selected "Axis and Allies: Guadalcanal." A wargaming classic, this title was familiar to many on the staff. It exercises multi-domain operations and the single naval battle concept through land, sea, and air including important factors like submarines and logistics. Its mechanics for initiative and counter-offensive make for a dynamic game where no player has a distinct advantage and the tables can always turn—quite representative of the historic campaign. In terms of victory conditions, the Marines play a balanced role with the other forces: there is value to seizing and holding islands of the lower Solomons, but you do not win unless you sink enemy capital ships and build airfields in order to extend the operational reach of land-based airpower. Lastly, the rules are not overly complicated, and the game time is only a few hours—making it ideal for the first unit-hosted wargame during a busy MEU workup.

Once obtaining several used copies of the game, a small cadre play tested the game. This step was integral to developing resident experts who would later facilitate as the "White Cell." Players were tasked with developing an estimate of the situation (METT-T) based on knowledge from the readings, and then with constructing a plan to achieve victory given the constraints of the game based on their METT-T analysis. Two-player wargames occurred over multiple days in the wardroom of the USS *Kearsarge*. One of the wargame facilitators noted that "the players that usually came out



**Capt Tomblin stages a stubborn defense of Guadalcanal.** (Photo provided by author.)

on top came prepared with a thorough METT-T analysis. They also understood the need to develop a game-plan that integrated actions across air, land, and sea domains, and that was logistically supportable." These factors forced players from diverse MOS backgrounds to think outside of their comfort levels. In one game, the 22d MEU Supply Officer, Capt Csarankhi Tomblin led the Japanese forces in a heroic yet inevitable defeat. The results of the game taught him that "one must be aggressive when in the offensive but must position forces to have an active defense. I had to understand the capabilities of the assets in

Allies allowed me to gain a deeper appreciation of just how interrelated the sea, air, and land domains are. The smallest mistake in the allocation of assets in one domain can have grave consequences on the other two and vice versa."

#### **Recommendations for running effective Wargaming PME**

Wargaming at the unit level is best kept simple. Simplicity reduces barriers to actually starting the game and then in-game allows players to commit maximum attention to decision making. When selecting a game, start by reviewing the rules, which typically are avail-

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my possession as the battle progressed in order to think two to three moves ahead of my opponent." Resource allocation, to include supply, ground forces, shore defenses, fighters, bombers, and various ship classes, presented players with a series of constraints and restraints. For 1stLt Alex Freburg, "playing Axis and

able for free online at boardgamegeek.com or via the boardgame simulator "Vassal." Reviewing forums or YouTube "battle reports" can also give you a sense of the game duration and experience. Look for ways that the game simulates the kinds of problems you want to explore in your PME. Wargames inten-

tionally white-card certain aspects of conflict to accentuate others. You will want to make sure the game design lends itself to your learning objectives. Next, acquire the wargame and begin play testing with a small cadre. Once your White Cell thoroughly understands the rules, you are ready to roll out the PME to the rest of the participants with something akin to the following process:

**Tutorial:** Distribute the wargame rules and any tutorial videos. Each player should review the rules in advance, and then conduct a one or two-turn sequence with the White Cell to become familiar with the game before execution.

**Planning:** Players should develop a written estimate of the situation (METT-T) of the wargame scenario. PME facilitators can review products with participants individually or in a group setting and apply Socratic questioning to illicit deeper analysis. Next, players should develop their plan, which can be as simple as a mission statement and concept of operations.

**Execution:** Players put their plan into motion and then assess and adapt their plan as the situation evolves.



**LtCol Myette, the 22d MEU Executive Officer, facilitates as White-Cell for young lieutenants playing their first wargame. (Photo provided by author.)**

tive decision making at the unit level. Most leaders already have the facilitation skills necessary to develop low-tech, high-impact wargaming PME. Like PT, exercising the cognitive abilities and tactical acumen of our Marines should be

operating forces. Ideally, this trend will be accelerated by the completion of the Marine Corps Wargaming & Analysis Center planned for 2024. But we do not need to wait until then. By leveraging the talent in the room, we can develop tailored wargaming solutions that provide high educational value, foster strong buy-in, and maximize opportunities for our Marines to compete.

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## **New wargames are being produced by active duty and civilian advocates and are making their way into the hands of Marines in the operating forces.**

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**Debrief; Debrief, Debrief:** The debrief is the most important part of the PME because it is where the learning is distilled. It is best done in a group setting immediately after execution where lessons are top of mind and can be shared widely. Most of the talking should be done by the players, but facilitators can guide the discussion towards the learning objectives. Keep the group small enough so that everyone gets a chance to debrief.

### **Conclusion: Every Marine a Wargamer?**

Given the opportunity for a fight, there is no one more enthusiastic than a Marine. Commercial wargames provide an accessible means to practice competi-

a regular part of our training calendar. After all, our warfighting culture compels “every Marine to be a student of the art and science of war.”<sup>4</sup>

Institutional solutions to what the Commandant identified as our greatest deficiency are underway. The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management called upon the Joint Force to “resource and develop a library of case studies, colloquia, games, and exercises for use across the PME enterprise and incentivize collaboration and synergy between schools.” New wargames are being produced by active duty and civilian advocates and are making their way into the hands of Marines in the

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### **Notes**

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).
3. “Hobby Game Sales Over \$2 Billion in 2020,” *ICv2*, July 16, 2021 <https://icv2.com/articles/markets/view/48827/hobby-game-sales-over-2-billion-2020>.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDPI, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

