People First

Inspiring an intellectual renaissance to reinvigorate strategic thinking in the Marine Corps

by Mie Augier & Maj Sean F.X. Barrett

"[P]eople are more important than systems."[1]
—LtGen Bernard E. Trainor,
Marine Corps Gazette,
September 1983[2]

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We now have a younger Corps that has not seen war. *(Photo by LCpl Jacob Wilson.)*

Following seventeen years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Marine Corps is in the process of turning its focus to the "re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition" with "revisionist powers," as directed by former Secretary James N. Mattis' National Defense Strategy.[2] The Marine Corps will be forced to confront this new security paradigm with a force that has increasingly little combat experience, especially among its company grade officer and NCO ranks. Given the enormity of these challenges, including the "increasingly complex global security environment,"[3] the Marine Corps will benefit from looking at its own history in order to inform how it will confront this future operating environment. While today's siren song of technology, weapons systems, and artificial intelligence promises quick and clean solutions,[4] this article notes that seemingly radical change is oftentimes messy, surprisingly gradual, and attempts to nudge the pendulum back toward the idea that people matter most. This emphasis is consistent with important aspects and people in Marine Corps history, especially regarding maneuver thinking. In particular we draw on the post-Vietnam intellectual renaissance in the Marine Corps, which emphasized the development of critical thinking skills and professional military education under the leadership of Gen Alfred Gray, as a way to inspire a reinvigoration of strategic thinking and education to meet the challenges and uncertainty of the future.

Critical Thinking, PME, and Maneuver Warfare

After the decades-long Vietnam war effort, the United States faced great challenges, including a great power competition with the Soviet Union, a burgeoning terrorist threat, an inflation-ravaged economy, and the transition to the All-Volunteer Force.[5] Military thinkers were again beginning to question the future of the Marine Corps and the need for an amphibious capability in the Nuclear Age.[6] The quality of the Marine officer was also challenged. In 1978, William Lind, who would become an influential member of the maneuver warfare movement, wrote a critique of Marine officers—observing the lack of new tactical or operational concepts introduced in the *Gazette*, which he attributed to an inadequate knowledge of theory and

history and a promotion system that did not emphasize theoretical ability.[7] He was also critical of how unwilling some senior officers were to adapt to the changing security environment. In the face of such challenges, the Marine Corps began the long march toward the development of the maneuver warfare thought process.

The maneuver warfare movement partially traces its roots to Vietnam in the 1960s. Body count strategies, centralized decision making unable to cope with fluid battles, and inadequate doctrine led to the early adoption of maneuver warfare tenets on the battlefield and created a burning desire for change among junior members of the officer corps following the war.[8] Gen Gray proved instrumental in the development of multiple hardware programs, such as the LCAC, V-22 Osprey, HMMWV, and the light armored vehicle, which increased the Marine Corps' mobility on the battlefield and facilitated its adoption of maneuver thinking/theory.[9] However, Gen Gray never lost sight of the primacy of the individual Marine and his bias for action as the basis of maneuver warfare.

Based on this mindset, Gen Gray took a bottom-up approach to implementing maneuver warfare, notably as CG, 4th MAB, the Marine Corps Development & Education Command, and 2d MarDiv. In addition to tinkering with task organizations and increasing the mobility and firepower of Marine GCEs, Gen Gray began to combat the anti-intellectual current in the Marine Corps at the time by making reading and serious self-study an expectation. For example, as CG, 2d MarDiv, he consolidated a packet of literature on maneuver warfare for his Marines to read,[10] activated a "professional study group,"[11] and established a Maneuver Warfare Board to act as a clearinghouse for spreading ideas on maneuver warfare.[12] Additionally, during his time at Quantico, after working-hours debates—wherein the merits of a given idea and not the rank of the holder mattered—were commonplace.[13] This enthusiasm for ideas enabled Gen Gray to recruit Marines to come work for him at the Doctrine Center in Quantico, which helped create momentum for maneuver ideas.[14] At Lejeune, he consistently fielded requests to join the 2d MarDiv. The Marines knew they were creating something which inspired them to relish the challenge.[15]

As part of this, Gen Gray was determined to make his leaders and junior Marines *think*. During after-action reviews, for example, he was more concerned about *why* a Marine did what he did (and what he was thinking about it) than *what* he did.[16] In continually challenging his Marines in command post and field exercises, which emphasized "free play" instead of scripted scenarios, he let his Marines discover the merits of the maneuver philosophy first-hand.[17]

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The creation of an open and collaborative environment that broke down traditional notions of hierarchy was essential to nurturing critical and creative thinking. A tireless operational critic, Gen Gray insisted on these after-action reviews following wargame and field or command post exercises, during which discussions took place without rank insignia being visible, thus encouraging open dialogue and emphasizing the merit of ideas over rank.[18] Additionally, even though outside of Gray's immediate purview, maneuver warfare discussion groups at Camp Pendleton—inspired by those at Lejeune—insisted on participants, regardless of rank, referring to one another as "Sir," thus placing a similar emphasis on the merit of ideas.[19] The conceptual debates in the *Gazette,* also central to the eventual organizational embrace of maneuver thinking, were not inhibited by a deference to rank either.[20]

The emphasis Gen Gray placed on ideas and understanding the need for fresh inputs involved non-Marines as well, leading to an eclectic mix of reform minded politicians, military theorists, staffers, and Army officers who joined forces with the Marine maneuverists.[21] For example, a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel, fighter pilot, and influential military theorist, John Boyd, inspired a generation of Pentagon reformers with his broad perspective on warfare encapsulated in his famed "Patterns of Conflict" lecture.[22] Gen Gray and other influential Marine maneuverists, such as Col Mike Wyly, invited Boyd to speak to their Marines, beginning in the early 1980s.[23] William Lind, a legislative aide to Senators Robert Taft, Jr. and Gary Hart, proved to be another key contributor to the debate and the conceptual development of maneuver warfare. He was a frequent contributor to the *Gazette* and initially met Gen Gray at a seminar at Carlisle Barracks in the mid-1970s. Though Lind was known to be an iconoclast at times, Gray was willing to speak with anyone who had ideas and wanted to help.[24] Additionally, inviting outsiders to contribute helped avoid the deleterious impact of becoming a closed system while fostering innovative thought. It also embodied one of the most important roles of education; to help broaden minds—helping students learn *how* to think about complex issues (not *what* to think) and reinforcing the importance of learning as a lifetime activity.

The intellectual underpinnings and arguments in maneuver thinking (represented, for instance, in the *Gazette* debates and Boyd's briefings) fit well with Gray's maneuver exercises and broader operational philosophy and experience. This created a synergy that enabled him to nudge the entire organization toward a maneuver warfare philosophy that incorporated people (e.g., study groups), organizational processes (e.g., exercises), and thinking (e.g., core organizational documents, especially *FMFM 1*).

When he became Commandant, Gen Gray institutionalized the intellectual renaissance undergirding maneuver warfare by revitalizing the Command and Staff College curriculum and faculty, publishing a reading list for all Marines (enlisted and officers), revising the Marine Corps Institute professional education curriculum, introducing a

Professional NCO and SNCO Education Training System, and securing funding for the construction of a credible library and research center. Gray's vision was to consolidate "all of the educational type institutions in the Marine Corps under the broad umbrella of such a Marine Corps University"—an institution which soon celebrates its 30th anniversary.[25]

Success on the battlefield in Operation DESERT STORM was in many respects due to maneuver warfare.[26] Gen Gray proved to be a transformational leader not because of any technology or hardware he championed, but rather because of the intellectual renaissance he led, which empowered the institution's most precious asset: the individual Marine. As Rep Ike Skelton, (D-MO) noted, having observed the Marine Corps' transformation under Gray's leadership: "The Marine Corps, thanks to General Al Gray, did a complete 180-degree turnaround, which today makes us very, very proud of the Marine Corps, not just in its graduate staff level, but now with its War College."[27]

"He will be known for many achievements, but most prominent will be his title as 'the Professional Education Commandant.'"[28]

General Gray's Educational Vision and the Future

Ike Skelton was a keen observer of the military and was in charge of the Military Education ("Skelton") Panel in the late 1980s. He believed the education of officers was a lifelong process and studying military history was central to it: a vision he shared with Gen Gray.[29] Gen Gray's maneuver warfare transformation had important educational underpinnings and elements too.

Maneuver warfare is a warfighting philosophy predicated on competent leadership, decentralized command, and empowering young leaders to adapt to changing circumstances and generate a faster operational tempo by making and implementing decisions consistently faster than the enemy.[30] Gen Gray, who found greater kinship with Sun Tzu than Clausewitz, remarked, "But I believe in the indirect approach. I believe in the absolute essentiality of using the subtleties of war and thinking as part of the major game plan."[31]

As such, Gen Gray's intent for the Marine Corps PME system was to teach military judgement, not material to be memorized.[32] History, Gray noted, should be used to teach such judgment, "not to make academic historians or simply teach facts."[33] He insisted that lesson plans enabling learning objectives, and terminal learning objectives are "inappropriate for education," and that it is inherently impossible to "objectively" or "quantitatively" measure an art.[34]

Imbuing this sense of judgment will become increasingly important to a Marine Corps with increasingly less combat experience. The first President of Marine Corps University, then-BGen Paul K. Van Riper, observed:

> I often noted in my two years at Quantico that the primary "weapon" that officers possess remains their minds ... [and] that books provide the "ammunition" for this weapon ... I wanted to impart a simple lesson: a properly schooled officer never arrives on a battlefield for the first time, even if he has never actually trod the ground, if that officer has read wisely to acquire the wisdom of those who have experienced war in times past.[35]

Such vicarious experiences impart wisdom and military judgment and enable "practitioners of war to see familiar patterns of activity and to develop more quickly potential solutions to tactical and operational problems"—one of the first principles of maneuver warfare.[36] He eagerly embraced the case study method as most conducive to instilling such judgment and critical thinking skills in our Marines.

The importance of critical thinking is not only crucial to fostering initiative on the battlefield, but also in managing change (e.g., through articulating our hardware needs to Congress). Congressman Mike Gallagher, who served as an intelligence officer in the Marine Corps for seven years and now sits on the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, observed that traditional arguments for seapower and the defense budget have fallen flat, necessitating a new, more compelling story identifying what the future fleet will do and how it will differ from today's.[37]

Hope for the Past, Lessons from the Future

Throughout Gray's strategic leadership of the Marine Corps, thinking and education remained central; his awareness of people, ideas, and organizations made him unusually skilled in leading the change toward an organization embracing maneuver warfare. This did not happen overnight, but over time, changes were gradually built into "how the organization was thinking" and fighting. Though a seemingly radical transformation, it was quite incremental and evolutionary in nature. A detailed examination of his leadership and the organizational transformation will give useful insights into how to create organizational changes in the future, but here we just point to a few implications in light of current debates regarding PME.

Last April, Under Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Modly, convened an Education for Seapower (E4S) Study to "develop a series of observations and recommendations for knowledge-based continuing learning throughout the naval services."[38] In full recognition that there are no simple solutions, a few observations from the Marine Corps' post-Vietnam revival that may inspire future changes are:

- *The centrality of leadership; inspire and understand; do not dictate or prescribe.* This can be done by enabling forums that foster creative and innovative discussions and thought. In contrast to this way, requirements are oftentimes a symptom of the abdication of leadership. When Gen Gray appeared before the Skelton Panel,

Education in the school house or unit PME is important. *(Photo by Cpl Austin Weck.)*

he noted that the joint PME requirements in the Goldwater-Nichols Act not only told the Service Chiefs what to do, but also how to do it, which took away their flexibility and was inimical to the ideals of mission-type orders.[39]

- *Quality over quantity*. More requirements can easily lead to a box-checking mentality and a creeping careerism, which Gen Gray disliked.[40]
- *A greater appreciation for opportunity costs*. Gen Gray made thinking a priority. Today, however, constantly increasing requirements and administrative matters can make us victims of a "tyranny of the inbox" syndrome. Retired U.S. Army MG Robert Scales often remarked that the DOD is "too busy to think." It is easy to become too focused on what is seemingly urgent rather than what is important.
- *Fresh input*. In the spirit of the E4S Study and Gen Gray's emphasis on thinking, judgment, and education, the Marine Corps (as well as other Services) might find inspiration in how other professions and their educational institutions have transformed and improved in the past.[41]

Finally, the importance of the evolutionary nature of seemingly dramatic changes. When asked about whether the establishment of permanent MAGTF headquarters, the maritime prepositions squadrons, and the LAV battalions were "radical changes" that heralded in a "new Corps," LtGen Trainor responded,

> I'm not sure I'd categorize the changes as 'radical,' nor is a 'new' Corps emerging. ... What you are witnessing is the fruit of a great deal of past thought and effort. It's evolutionary progress rather than revolutionary change.[42]

Enduring organizational changes takes a significant amount of time and effort. It promises to get messy; the road to progress is rarely easy or straight.

Notes

1. John C. Scharfen, "Views From PP&O: An Interview with LtGen Bernard E. Trainor," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: September 1983).

2. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

3. Ibid.

4. LtGen Paul K. Van Riper observes,

> My experience has been that those who focus on the technology, the science, tend towards sloganeering. There's very little intellectual content to what they say, and they use slogans in place of this intellectual content. It does a great disservice to the American military, the American defense establishment . . . What I see are slogans masquerading as ideas.

"The Immutable Nature of War," *PBS*, (Online: May 2004).

5. The transition to the All-Volunteer Force negatively impacted the Marine Corps, in particular. By 1975, the Marine Corps had the worst rates of imprisonment, unauthorized absence, and courts-martial in the U.S. military and was second only to the Navy in drug and alcohol abuse rates, all of which adversely impacted proficiency and readiness. Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps*, rev. ed., (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1991). LtGen Trainor attributes this to three primary errors the Marine Corps made as it transitioned to the post-Vietnam All-Volunteer Force: prioritizing mental testing of the IQ variety over education; assuming the draft would not adversely impact the Corps' recruiting effort since it was already largely a volunteer organization; and assuming drill instructors could make a Marine out of anyone. Bernard E. Trainor, "The Personnel Campaign Issue Is No Longer In Doubt," in *The Legacy of Belleau Wood: 100 Years of Making Marines and Winning Battles*, eds. Paul Westermeyer and Breanne Robertson, (Quantico, VA: History Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 2018).

6. Martin Binkin and Jeffrey Record, *Where Does the Marine Corps Go from Here?,* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 1976).

7. William S. Lind, "Marines Don't Write about Warfare," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 1978).

8. Michael D. Wyly, "Doctrinal Change: The Move to Maneuver Theory," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: October 1993); and personal conversations between authors and Gen Al Gray, USMC(Ret), in September 2018.

9. Whether maneuver warfare movement is best expressed as a "theory" or way of thinking or thought process is an argument for another day and place. Here, we simply note that to the extent one wants to emphasize maneuver warfare as an adaptive and interdisciplinary mindset, perhaps "thinking" (or "maneuver warfare framework") is more useful than "theory," as that sounds a bit too deterministic and monodisciplinary. For similar reasons, Herbert Simon preferred to refer to bounded rationality as a framework encompassing and spanning different disciplines, not a theory.

10. See the Alfred M. Gray Collection, Box List Part 2, Box 39, Folder 13, BGen Edwin H. Simmons Center for Marine Corps History Quantico, VA for the packet of readings.