A Study of Military Theory

Making *MCDP 1* accessible to junior Marines using Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*

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At some point in their careers, every Marine comes across *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1), Warfighting,* the U.S. Marine Corps' doctrinal philosophy for how we think about war. Indeed, by the time a Marine has reached the rank of sergeant, he has probably been required to read *Warfighting* so many times that he is forced to suppress the inevitable groan as the next instructor or platoon commander places it on the required reading list. Yet it is important that every Marine, regardless of rank, reads and understands *MCDP 1* and the doctrine of maneuver warfare because it serves as the foundation for how we do business. Among other things, it provides a practical guide for leading Marines, a common language for tactical employment, and a particular way to think about combat, all of which makes the Marine Corps unique among Military Services.

Yet the brilliance of maneuver warfare and its relevance to the individual warfighter is lost if we cannot find a way to make the publication enjoyable (or even simply accessible) for younger Marines. The answer to this problem might lie in a popular science fiction book written in 1985 by a man who had never served day of his life in the military. Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (A Tor Book, NY, 1977, 1985, 1991) vividly and accurately illustrates tactical principles and leadership traits that are described in *MCDP 1.* Easily readable and very engaging, *Ender's Game* brings the theory of maneuver warfare to life, especially for young Marines who

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> "Experience has shown that the warfighting philosophy described on these pages applies far beyond the officer corps. I expect all Marines—enlisted and commissioned—to read this book, understand it, and act upon it."
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> —Gen Charles C. Krulak, referring to **MCDP 1**

You can use fiction to teach **MCDP 1** principles. (Photo by Cpl Ed Galo.)

can relate better to Ender Wiggin, the young military genius and protagonist of the book, than to a German theorist like Carl von Clausewitz. In fact, Maj John F. Schmitt, the author of *MCDP 1*, considered *Ender's Game* such a good study of leadership and tactics that he taught the book during lectures at the Marine Corps University in Quantico. With this in mind, we will use *MCDP 1* to analyze the tactical and leadership lessons found in *Ender's Game* to show the value in reading the two works side by side.

Set in a near future, *Ender's Game* begins with a united human race on Earth engaged in a decades-long war against an insect-like race called the Buggers. After repelling the Second Bugger Invasion 70 years ago, the military has been searching for a brilliant commander to lead the human's spacefleet against the Buggers, who nearly wiped out the human race in their last invasion. For years the military has been selecting child geniuses and training them at the Battle School through elaborate and technologically advanced wargames in order to turn them into military commanders. At the beginning of the book, Ender Wiggin is selected to attend the Battle School at the age of 6 and is immediately separated out by the instructors as potentially the most brilliant military mind ever seen, which quickly earns Ender the enmity of the other students. Tormented by the other students and challenged ruthlessly by the teachers, Ender is forced to rely on himself and a small core of loyal friends to survive and become a commander.

For the next few years Ender develops into a soldier at the Battle School by participating as part of mock armies in the battle room, a zero-gravity chamber designed to replicate different elements of combat. Through his creativity, intellect, and initiative, Ender develops novel techniques and tactical ideas that propel him to become the best soldier and leader in the school. Given command of Dragon Army, Ender develops his own soldiers by training them to be military thinkers rather than automatons simply executing rote formations and maneuvers. Based on decentralized command, Ender's combat leadership style relies

on mission intent and initiative-based tactics, which allows him to easily defeat other armies. Eventually, the teachers at the school begin to stack the deck against Ender in every way they can, pushing him to his breaking point. Yet, against increasingly skewed odds, Ender always manages to win using his style of maneuver warfare.

After graduating from the Battle School, Ender goes to Command School to learn to be a starfleet commander, where he becomes the student of the legendary commander Mazer Rackham. Having defeated the Buggers in the previous invasion, Mazer Rackham prepares Ender to face the alien race using a simulator that replicates starfleet combat. Ender eventually takes command of a fleet of squadrons led by his former friends and subordinates from the Battle School. While Ender believes he is simply learning on a simulator, he is actually fighting the real Buggers by controlling the human starfleet using

a new technology called the Ansible, a communications device that allows him to instantly control the starships across the galaxy. In what Ender believes to be his final exam at Command School, he destroys the Bugger home world and the entire Bugger fleet, eliminating the threat to the human race.

Perhaps the greatest value in reading *Ender's Game* side by side with *MCDP 1* is the insight it provides into the theory of maneuver warfare. According to *MCDP 1*, there are two distinct styles of warfare—attrition and maneuver. In attrition, we attempt to defeat the enemy through the complete destruction of his forces. Simply put, we pit our strength against the enemy's strength in an attempt to destroy him through superior firepower. In contrast, maneuver warfare seeks to destroy the enemy "system" by attacking enemy vulnerabilities in order to destroy the enemy's will to resist. We seek to pit our strengths against enemy weaknesses
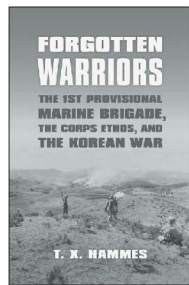
in order to maximize advantage and exploit success. While both styles exist on a continuum and rarely ever in pure form, the styles reflect an approach to war—a way of thinking about combat and how to thrive in it.

In *Ender's Game*, we find vivid examples of both styles put into practice by various armies in the battle room. In Bonzo Madrid's Salamander Army, attrition warfare finds perfect expression in the rehearsed battle plans and mass formations that Bonzo uses to destroy his opponents. Through rigorous drilling and instant obedience to orders, the soldiers of Salamander learned to execute these complex formations and patterns in order to bring massive firepower to bear on the enemy. Even as a young soldier, Ender quickly realizes the weakness of this style, as he notes:

> The well-rehearsed formations were a mistake. It allowed the soldiers to obey shouted orders instantly, but it also meant they were predictable. The individual soldiers were given little initiative. Once a pattern was set, they were to follow it through. There was no room for adjustment to what the enemy did against the formation.

Similarly, Ender is able to analyze the strengths of maneuver warfare in Pol Slattery's Leopard Army. In its battle against Salamander, Slattery's army uses quick and chaotic attacks in order to demoralize its enemy, who quickly forfeit the initiative and huddle together in the center of the battle room. Though both sides lost roughly the same number of soldiers in the battle, the Salamander Army "felt defeated," ultimately allowing Leopard to achieve victory. However, while Pol Slattery has interesting ideas on maneuver tactics, Ender notices that they are still immature. His army's movements were too uncontrolled and chaotic, resulting in unnecessary casualties and nearly losing him the battle.

Eventually, Ender receives command of his own army and implements tactical ideas and leadership principles that could have been lifted straight from the pages of *Warfighting*. Relying on decentralized control and initiative-based tactics, Ender develops Dragon Army into a nearly unbeatable unit, despite having the youngest and most inexperi-

enced soldiers in the school. In the battle room, Ender leads his army by providing intent and mission-type orders, then relying on subordinate leaders to make quick decisions as necessary in order to accomplish his desired end state. By giving subordinates the freedom to exercise initiative, Ender's army is able to take advantage of the chaotic and unpredictable nature of war. Specifically, his soldiers are able to rapidly identify opportunities and exploit advantages as the battle unfolds, in turn creating a tempo and fluidity that overwhelm the enemy's system. Based on these qualities, maneuver warfare finds near perfect expression in Dragon Army.

Ender's Game also provides young Marines with a clear example of two of the more difficult concepts in *MCDP 1*—centers of gravity (COGs)/critical vulnerabilities (CVs) and orienting on the enemy. To defeat an enemy system, maneuver warfare relies on the related concepts of COGs and CVs. A COG is an important source of strength that allows the enemy to impose his will on us. It may be an intangible factor, such as morale, or a specific capability, such as an armor column or fortified machinegun position. A CV is a weakness in the enemy system that, if exploited, will do the most significant damage to the enemy's ability to resist our will. *Ender's Game* does a very good job of showing how these concepts can be used to fight an enemy. In his final battle against the Buggers, Ender defeats the enemy only after he successfully identifies the Bugger's CV—their unprotected planet where their queens live. By avoiding the enemy's COG—the massive Bugger space fleet—Ender annihilates the Bugger race by attacking the queens on the unprotected planet, eliminating their command and control system.

Similarly, as a young soldier in the battle room, Ender learns the principle that all combat is determined and decided in relation to the enemy. According to *MCDP 1*, "orienting on the enemy" is fundamental to maneuver warfare by focusing our attention outward rather than on our own internal procedures. By understanding the unique characteristics that make an enemy system

function, we can penetrate that system in order to disrupt its operation and destroy its component parts. When Ender first enters the battle room, he quickly figures out that there is no standard orientation in the chamber because of the zero-gravity effects. So he orients himself on the enemy and determines that "the enemy's gate is down." By doing so, Ender gains an advantage over everyone else for two reasons: (1) he is able to orient himself to his environment more quickly by focusing on the gate, and (2) the downward orientation places his feet toward the enemy, which creates a smaller target profile.

MCPD 1 further explains that we must try to "get inside" the enemy's thought processes and see the enemy as he sees himself. Ultimately Ender is chosen as a military commander for his unique empathy, which allows him to understand his enemies better than anyone else. In his last battle with the Buggers, he uses this understanding of his enemy to attack the Bugger planet, a course of action he knew the Buggers had never considered possible. Yet, overwhelmed initially by the enemy's COG, it is not until one of his subordinates reminds Ender that the enemy's gate is down that he reorients himself on the enemy and finds their CV.

The approach we have taken in this article is that *Ender's Game* serves as a valuable tool for making *MCDP 1* and the theory of maneuver warfare more accessible to junior Marines. But the reality is that the leadership principles and tactical lessons contained in the novel have something valuable for Marines of all grades. We strongly recommend that leaders use *Ender's Game* to teach their Marines about *MCDP 1* and maneuver warfare. Often, to fully grasp a concept, we need to see it in practice, and *Ender's Game* provides us with a dramatic example of maneuver warfare in action.