

## IDEAS &amp; ISSUES (PROFESSIONAL READING)

# Ender's Game

## A guided discussion

by Maj Jonathan Burgess

I haven't read *Ender's Game* in a very long time. I remember reading it for the first time as a PFC and then again as a new lieutenant. Each time, I thought it was a great book. I was elated when I heard that it was headed for the silver screen. I did a little research and found some press photos, but just as you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, you can't judge a movie by press photos. They can be misleading and the movie could end up a dud. For example, early on in my career, I had also read *Starship Troopers* (Robert Heinlein, Ace Publishing, 1987) and thought that was a great book as well. The movie...well, let's just say it wasn't as good as the book.

If you've seen it, you know that this is not the case with the movie adaptation of *Ender's Game*. The first time I watched *Ender's Game*, I instantly enjoyed it. As much as I liked the book, I enjoyed the movie even more. As I watched it, I realized that there were many scenes that would make excellent teaching and talking points that would resonate with younger Marines. Over my career, I've served as an instructor several times. As any instructor knows, adults learn in different ways. Some can read a book or manual and take away learning points, one of the main reasons we have the Commandant's Reading List. Others learn by doing and others can learn by simply watching. This is a great movie to watch and to pull learning points for discussion.

Ender's initial voiceover provides a quick background for those who haven't yet read the book or seen the movie—with a spoiler alert:

Fifty years ago, an alien race known as the Formics attacked Earth. Tens of millions died. It was only through the sacrifice of our greatest commander that we avoided total annihilation. We've been preparing for them to

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come back ever since. The International Fleet decided that the world's smartest children are the planet's best hope. Raised on war games, their decisions are intuitive, decisive, fearless.<sup>1</sup>

I purchased the movie as soon as it was released. Now, if I was back in an artillery battery, I would have my Marines (and not just the junior ones) first read, or reread, the book. Then, I would designate a 4-hour block of time on the training schedule, probably on a Friday, for a professional military education session. We would watch the movie and then have a guided discussion on several of the scenes, which would serve two purposes:

1. Marines have to read three books from the CMC reading list annually, so for some this would partially satisfy that requirement.
2. You begin a guided discussion with the Marines and draw out some pertinent Marine Corps lessons.

The following are some scenes and lessons that can be drawn out and discussed. Please note that if you have not yet seen the movie, you may want to quit reading now. The rest of this article contains major spoiler alerts.

In the opening scene, Ender is playing a video game against an older boy and wins because he forced his opponent to hit an asteroid. The other boy claims Ender cheated, to which Ender calmly replies, "You have to use what's around you." This sounds a great deal like what is taught throughout the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. One Mind, Any Weapon. This mindset does not apply to just hand-to-hand combat. Recall what

then-1stLt Brian Chontosh did during an ambush in Iraq. He cleared over 200 meters of enemy trenches, killing over 20 enemy soldiers. When he ran out of ammo, he picked up multiple enemy weapons.<sup>2</sup> You have to use what is around you. What about Gen "E-Tool" Smith? I will give you one hint how he earned that moniker in Vietnam, and it wasn't about his ability to dig a fighting position.

A little later, Ender is confronted by the same kid, now looking for a real fight. Ender takes an object and hits the kid with it, knocking him to the ground. Once he was down, Ender tells him to stay down. The bully mouths off, so Ender continues to beat him. When I saw this, I recalled the immortal words of Gen James N. Mattis speaking to the Iraqi Sheiks, "I come in peace. I didn't bring artillery. But I'm pleading with you, with tears in my eyes: If you f— with me, I'll kill you all."<sup>3</sup> After you win the initial fight, you may extend a peaceful hand, while keeping the other ready to fight...which elicits another Gen Mattis quote, "be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everyone you meet."<sup>4</sup>

Later, at Battle School, Ender is playing a computer game which is linked to his mind, and he comes across an obstacle with two apparent choices. First, he attempts to utilize his perceived options. When those run out, he does the unexpected. Another student, who was watching him, asked why he did that. He replies, "follow the rules you lose, choose violence, you win." Not necessarily the exact lesson you want Marines

to take away. While Marines are in the business of violence, there are rules to its application. They need to be taught that *not* following the rules can have strategic implications. For example, civilian casualties are to be avoided and no, we cannot urinate on enemy combatants. Marines must learn how to execute sanctioned violence tempered with discipline. Leadership must help them through the mired landscape of modern warfare.

Ender is moved from his initial Army to the Salamander Army, where, upon his arrival, he is treated very rudely by his new “commander,” Bonzo, who is only interested in his own career. He verbally insults Ender and tells him that he will not train or take part in any wargames with the rest of the Army. This attitude is completely unprofessional and undesirable from a leadership perspective. This is not how Marines take care of one another, especially with new personnel. How can new Marines contribute to the team if they are not trained and allowed to participate? Basic and initial MOS training is just that: basic and initial. Marines need to be trained and challenged, not bullied and belittled. Nobody wants to work for a Bonzo.

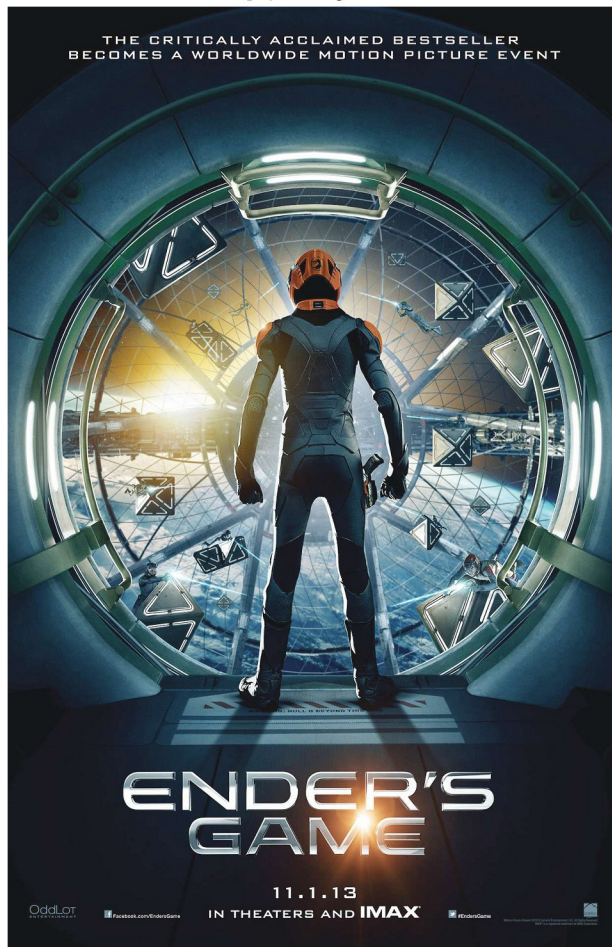
During his first battle with Salamander, Ender disobeys the order not to participate so that he can help a teammate. It is debatable if this is a good thing or a bad thing. Remember that this is a Hollywood movie, and thus the outcome is scripted. In a real battle, not following orders can be disastrous...but on a rare occasion you can be awarded the Medal of Honor like Sgt Dakota Meyer was for his actions in Afghanistan. What lesson can be learned here? We follow orders for a reason. Does that mean if people are dying in combat, that it's okay to disobey an order? Ask your Marines this question and you may be surprised to hear the answer.

Ender is eventually confronted by Bonzo while taking a shower. Ender realizes he will not be able to walk away from this fight, so he increases the water temperature and soaps up his torso. Why is that important? Because Bonzo is physically stronger than Ender and Ender is trying to compensate. The steam makes it harder to see in

the shower and when Bonzo attacks, Ender points the shower head in Bonzo's direction, scalding him. The soap makes Ender slippery, thus making the ensuing melee more difficult for Bonzo. Ender shows once again that one must change tactics to match the fight at hand.

Ender finally makes it to Command School where the final scenes are played

out. There is great dialogue between Ender and Mazer Rackham, the hero who defeated the Formics during the previous war. Mazer tells Ender, “There is no teacher but the enemy. He will tell you where you are weak and where he is strong.” A simple, yet true statement. As we have seen time and time again over the last decade of war, our



enemies will always seek out our weak points, using tactics and weapons that play to their strengths. In this current war, that equates to improvised explosive devices and suicide vests among others. We play to our strengths as well, utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles and superior firepower among other tactics. Future conflicts will be no different.

The final battle scene is very poignant not just for the Marine Corps, but for America as well. Ender has defeated the Formics, destroying their home planet with a genocidal weapon. He realizes the gravity of what has just happened and at his command. He believed it was a computer wargame and not actual combat. He and his handler, Col Graff, argue about the morality of it all. Col Graff takes a hawkish stance, stating, "We won, that's all that matters!" Ender disagrees, saying, "No... the way we win matters." History is replete with why "how we win matters." How many wars have ended only to be restarted a few years or a genera-

tion later? The peace imposed by the Allied Powers after World War I was a direct cause of World War II. The politics and world order that emerged after World War II led to the Cold War and very nearly World War III. It has been argued that because America did not invade Iraq during Operation Desert Storm for regime change, we later had to return for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

*Ender's Game* is a great book that has been turned into a great movie with timeless lessons that have direct applicability not only to today's fight but those in the future as well. There is a reason this book is on the Commandant's Reading List, and the movie brings the book to life. I believe this movie can provide some visual context to many of the lessons that we try to teach to our younger Marines on a variety of subjects. I've pulled only a handful of examples from the movie, and there are definitely more lessons to be gleaned. Take an afternoon, watch the movie, and talk about these lessons with them.

**Notes**

1. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, (Top Science Fiction, 15 July 1994).
2. Wikipedia entry for Brian Chontosh, accessed at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.
3. Gretel C. Kovach, "Gen. James Mattis' Words to Live and Die By," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 19 January 2013, accessed at <http://www.ut-sandiego.com>.
4. Ibid.



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