

The Sacred Scrolls

Timeless wisdom for an operational planner

by Maj Paul L. Stokes, USMC(Ret)

Throughout a Marine's career there will be opportunities to plan, shape, and lead operations in support of our national interests with the inherent challenge of determining "how does one prepare for that fateful day?" History demonstrates that there is no easy answer to that question; but if a leader makes the firm commitment to self-study, he will discover that he has—at his fingertips—literally countless volumes, essays, and treatises that will provide insight into "where we were, why we are here today, and how we can

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>>Author's Note: A list of all of the book titles referenced in this article are provided for the readers.

"Plans must be simple and flexible ... They should be made by the people who are going to execute them."
— GEN George S. Patton and MCDP 5, Planning

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Where we were

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How we can shape the future

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The Sacred Scrolls. (Figures by author.)

shape the future.” Here is an overview of some of these “sacred scrolls” that will help leaders at all levels prepare for the inevitable clash of wills on the field of honor.

Where We Were

In the 1890s, the era of industrial warfare that began with the American Civil War matured to the point where all of the Great Powers—Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan—had created modern armies and navies. This era was ably recreated in *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*, which discusses how the United States recognized the threat, made the commitment to build a modern Navy, and boldly sailed it around the globe. This event proved that our time had come to enter the world's stage and we were now capable of aggressively executing power projection as championed by Alfred Thayer Mahan in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*.

Concurrently with this “naval renaissance,” in 1891 the Marine Corps established The School of Application at Marine Barracks, Washington, DC, to formally train officers who were tactically and technically proficient in the nuances of modern warfare. This focus on professionalism culminated in the creation of “Huntington's Battalion,” the first combined arms unit in the Corps, which distinguished itself at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. Two Marine Corps publications, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the U.S. Marine Corps 1900-1970* and *Marines In The Spanish-American War, 1895-1899*, coupled with the *Marine Corps Gazette* article, “The Mobile Defense of Advanced Bases by the Marine Corps,” outline how Marine leaders were able to develop our Corps into a fighting organization capable of missions such as advanced base seizure and expeditionary operations ashore as

well as providing security at sea or on bases, posts, camps, and stations.

In the years leading up to America's entry into World War I between 1900 to 1917, Marine planners found themselves once again pulling “double duty” as they fought campaigns in China, the Philippines, Panama, Haiti, and Santo Domingo while preparing for the great slaughter that was to come. *A Marine Tells It to You* is a firsthand, insightful, and pragmatic account of this tumultuous period, written by an officer who rose to command the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in France between 1917-1918 and also the Marine brigade in Haiti.

The First World War was our Corps' baptism of fire and proved that the twenty-plus year effort that began in 1891 to “professionalize the force” was not in vain, which is why a planner must understand all levels of this conflict. Several treatises come to mind: *Infantry in Battle* provides a strategic and operational perspective; *The Bravest Deeds of*

Men: A Field Guide for The Battle of Belleau Wood, and *Reducing the Saint-Mihiel Salient - September 1918*, sheds new light on these battles from an operational and tactical perspective; and *Battle Leadership and Fix Bayonets! and Other Stories* are two military classics. Together, these books vividly describe how the Marine Corps “came of age” on the fields of France and why a planner can never forget the human factor in military operations.

As the Marine Corps entered the interwar period, it found itself fighting for its survival once again. The answer to our calls for help came in the form of MajGen Commandant John A. Lejeune. In *Lejeune: A Marine's Life, 1867-1942*, one will gain an appreciation of just how fortunate our Corps was to have Lejeune at the helm, especially when the powers that be were content to revert the Marines to the role of colonial infantry as we fought campaigns in Haiti and Nicaragua. Furthermore, it was under Lejeune's tutelage that the mercurial Lt-Col Earl Hancock “Pete” Ellis wrote his groundbreaking *Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* in 1921, which served as the blueprint for the great amphibious operations to come—as masterfully told in *Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet, 1880-1923*.

The interwar era between 1920 and 1939 fostered a tremendous amount of critical thinking—including such outlandish ideas like amphibious operations, close air support, aircraft carriers, radar, radio communications, mechanized warfare—in preparation for the conflagration that the Great Powers knew was coming. These efforts included strategic planning as described in *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945*; initiative and willingness to challenge status quo in *A Naval Expedition Involving the Landing of a Marine Expeditionary Force, Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, and *Preparing for Victory: Thomas Holcomb and the Making of the Modern Marine Corps, 1936-1943*. Each work is well-researched treatise that exemplifies how

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How we can shape the future (Cont)

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it is possible to shape the future in a resourced constrained environment as long as leaders are willing to take risks and develop detailed, realistic, and executable plans.

World War II was the defining event in the 20th Century, but it was more than just facts and figures; it was a conflict that pitted men against men in mortal combat on a global scale. This is why a planner should begin with *Edson's Raiders*, which is the story of how a lieutenant colonel—after receiving a direct order from the Commandant—successfully created a unit capable of striking the enemy quickly and deeply: the 1st Marine Raider Battalion.¹ This should be followed by *A Bias for Action: The 7th Panzer Division in France and Russia 1940-1941*, which explains that the success of the German army in the early stages of World War II was in how their commanders and staff officers used a common doctrine that stressed initiative, critical thinking, and the willingness to make decisions at the lowest practical level.² Furthermore, the German staffs were lean and focused solely on mission accomplishment. One can learn much from these two books because they explain how leaders interacted and successfully executed a wide range of combat operations with limited command and control and logistic support capabilities.

No study of the Second World War is complete without including amphibious operations, especially from a planning and execution perspective. Guadalcanal (1942-1943) and Tarawa (1943) presented the greatest risks and challenges faced by the Navy-Marine Corps Team throughout this conflict. Guadalcanal was the last time the Unit-

ed States fought a determined enemy, the Empire of Japan, in an expeditionary environment without the luxury of air, sea, or ground superiority. This forced our Marines, Sailors, soldiers, and airman to think “out of the box,” lead from the front, and employ tactics, techniques, and procedures that led to victory. For these reasons, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Landmark Account* should be the first book

a leader reads once he is assigned as a planner because it addresses all aspects of this decisive campaign.³ Tarawa was the first time an amphibious landing was successfully executed in the face of devastating enemy fire. The Marine Corps' success can be directly attributed to the abilities of the 2d Marine Division leadership to plan, improvise, adapt, and overcome regardless of the cost—as magnificently told in *Utmost Savagery*.

Why We Are Here Today

While it may not be noticeable, to a great extent we are still recovering from the effects of World War II. In the post-war euphoria of 1946-1949, our Nation faced the multi-faceted challenge of demobilizing twelve-million men in uniform, transitioning from a wartime to a peacetime economy, and preventing humanitarian crisis in Europe and Asia—all while still maintaining a global military capability. But the key difference between 1946 and 1919 was the fact that the United States was now the world's dominant nation with the possession of the atomic bomb—which spurred a great debate over the future of America's Armed Forces in general and the Marine Corps in particular. Once again, a core group of Marine leaders met; analyzed the challenges of executing amphibious operations in the wake of the 1946 atomic bomb tests (*Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll*); determined how to make a persuasive argument as to why the Nation needed a Marine Corps (*Once A Marine: The Memoirs of General A. A. Vandegrift* and *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*);

and aggressively executed their plan on multiple fronts (*Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962*). The end result was the retention of the Marine Corps as a separate Service under the Department of the Navy.

The efforts of these unsung heroes were put to the ultimate test when, on 25 June 1950, North Korea crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea, forcing our Nation into war once again. Our Corps was ready to answer the call, and Marine planners supported a conflagration that began as a war of movement that transitioned to trench warfare with all fighting restricted to the Korean Peninsula—which subsequently ended with a tenuous ceasefire right where it started on the same border between the two Koreas on 27 July 1953. The Marine Corps experiences in the Korean War are eloquently conveyed in

- *U.S. Marines in the Korean War*
- *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon Seoul Campaign*
- *CG 1st Marine Division MajGen Smith's Report to CMC General Cates dtd 17 Dec 1950*
- *Chosin Reservoir Case Study*
- *On Desperate Ground: The Marines of the Reservoir*
- *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness*
- *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea 1950-1953.*

When our forces returned from Korea in 1953-1955, our Nation was embroiled in the Cold War with a World War II-era military establishment that was rapidly becoming obsolete and faced with the unenviable prospect of fighting an atomic war against the Soviet Union. In response, on 4 June 1956, the Marine Corps established a study board, chaired by MajGen Robert E. Hogaboom,⁴ and given the mission

to conduct a thorough and comprehensive study of the Fleet Marine Force and make recommendations to CMCs for the optimum organization, composition and equipping of the Fleet Marine Force in order to best perform its mission.⁵

The results of what came to be known as “The Hogaboom Board” had far reaching impacts on the Corps and the Navy’s amphibious fleet that, in many

respects, are still relevant after 60-plus years as told in *Progress and Purpose, Assault from the Sea*, and *Sea Soldiers in the Cold War: Amphibious Warfare 1945-1991*.

Concurrently, from 1954 to 2011, the Corps fought three wars and supported a multitude of combat operations, contingencies, exercises, and deployments around the globe with the underlying tenet that the Marine Corps’ leaders and planners must never forget to see things for what they are, as opposed what they want them to be. Following any other path can have disastrous results, as vividly detailed in *Street Without Joy: Indochina At War 1946-1954*, *Hell in a Very Small Place, A Savage War of Peace*, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, and *Losing Mogadishu*.

This period of “violent peace” also provides a treasure trove of lessons learned through official anthologies to include:

- *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973*
- *U.S. Marines in the Persian Gulf, 1990-1991*
- *Marine Communications in Desert Shield and Desert Storm 1990-1991*
- *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan 2001–2002 ... From the Sea*
- *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2003*
- *U.S. Marines in Iraq 2003 Basrah, Baghdad and Beyond*
- *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan 2001–2009.*

The list continues with battle studies and campaign histories, such as:

- *Leaders and Battles: The Art of Military Leadership*
- *The Soldier's Load and The Mobility of a Nation*
- *The Marines in Lebanon 1958*
- *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*
- *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*
- *The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors Vietnam, 197*
- *U.S. Marines in Lebanon 1982-198*
- *U.S. Marines in Grenada 1983*
- *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942-1991*
- *Firepower in Limited War*
- *The Battle for the Falklands*
- *Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama 1988-199*

- *Operation Stabilise - Australian East Timor Ops: Sep-Dec 1999*
- *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One.*

On 1 January 2012, as our Nation pulled out of Iraq, remained in Afghanistan, and refocused on economic challenges at home, Marine planners were faced with a paradigm reminiscent of the 1930s wherein we still supported global MAGTF operations but in a “resourced constrained environment.” These austere conditions gave birth to a resurgence of critical thinking in the form of the *Expeditionary Force 21 MEB CONOPS* (2014), the *Force Development Strategic Plan* (2015); and the *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)* (2016), setting the stage for the *Future Force 2025 Initiative* (2015-2025), which will restructure and reposition our Corps for success in what is a new era of “Great Power competition” as Russia and China reentered the world’s stage.⁶

How We Can Shape the Future

In his 2019 message, “*Continue the Attack*,” our former Commandant directed, “We must continue to develop leaders with the analytical and critical thinking skills required to adapt and win,”⁷ which translates into Marines who are honest, aggressive, clear-headed, and pragmatic leaders and planners who abide by the tenets of *MCDP 1, Warfighting*; *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*; *MCDP 5, Planning*; *MCDP 6, Command & Control*; and the *MOC* while being masters of the Marine Corps planning, total force structure, budget, logistics, and equipment fielding processes. While this may appear to be an impossible task, the fact is this knowledge is readily available in the form of *MCWP 5-10, Marine Corps Planning Process*; *MCO 5311.D, Total Force Structure Process*; *Marine Corp Gazette* articles like “The Electronic Fire Support Coordinator: Thinking outside of the box” (April 2011), “Finding Joseph: Turning one’s premonitions into reality” (January 2015), “Resource Allocation: A Primer” (February 2000), and “A Practical Example” (January 2001); *MCCP Reference Guides* (July-December 2018); “Marine Corps Logistics Command 101” (January 2019);

and books like *Marines Under Armor*, *The Harrier Story*, and *Scales on War*. All that is required is the desire to study, learn, and embrace the fact that

our potential adversaries see us as their pacing competitor, and they must never surpass our effort to be ready to deploy and fight tonight ... So from more resilient C4I, to additive manufacturing, to the fielding of new equipment and capabilities, we must work hard every day to be ready for whatever mission comes our way.⁸

The Marines in our care deserve nothing less.

Notes

1. Maj Paul L. Stokes, "The Electronic Fire Support Coordinator," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Marine Corps History and Museum Division, *Progress and Purpose: A Developmental History of the U.S. Marine Corps 1900-1970*, (Washington, DC: 1973).
5. Ibid.
6. The Defense Intelligence Agency has published two reports describing this threat: *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations (2017)* and *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win (2019)*. Both are available online at www.dia.mil.
7. Gen Robert B. Neller, *Message to the Force 2019: "Continue the Attack,"* (Washington, DC: January 2019).
8. Ibid.

