Chapter 8

Making It Happen

"Nine-tenths of tactics are certain, and taught in books: but the irrational tenth is like the kingfisher flashing across the pool and that is the test of generals. It can only be ensured by instinct, sharpened by thought practicing the stroke so often that at the crisis it is as natural as a reflex."[1]

—T. E. Lawrence

"It cannot be too often repeated that in modern war, and especially in modern naval war, the chief factor in achieving triumph is what has been done in the way of thorough preparation and training before the beginning of war."[2]

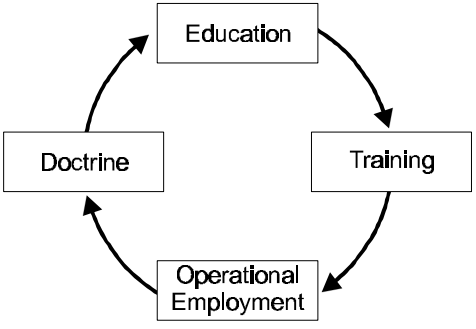
—Theodore Roosevelt

Reading and understanding the ideas in this publication are the initial steps on the road to tactical excellence. The primary way a Marine leader becomes an able tactician is through training and education, both of which are firmly rooted in doctrine. Doctrine establishes the philosophy and practical framework for how we fight. Education develops the understanding, creativity, military judgment, and the background essential for effective battlefield leadership. Training follows doctrine and develops the tactical and technical proficiency that underlies all successful military action. Individual and group exercises serve to integrate training and education, producing a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The lessons learned from training and operational experience then modify doctrine.

DOCTRINE

Doctrine establishes the fundamental beliefs of the Marine Corps on the subject of war and how we practice our profession.[3] Doctrine establishes a particular way of thinking about war and our way of fighting, a philosophy for leading Marines in combat, a mandate for professionalism, and a common language. Doctrinal development benefits from our collective experience and distills its lessons to further education and training.

Our doctrine within the Marine Corps begins with the philosophy contained in MCDP 1, *Warfighting.* This philosophy underlies publications in the Marine Corps Warfighting Publications series that contain tactics, techniques, and procedures for specific functions. This body of thought helps form Marine tacticians through its implementation in education and training. (See figure.)



The doctrinal development cycle.

EDUCATION

While combat provides the most instructive lessons on decisionmaking, tactical leaders cannot wait for war to begin their

education. We must be competent in our profession before our skills are called upon. The lives of our Marines depend on it.

Our education in tactics must develop three qualities within all tactical leaders. The first quality is *creative ability*. Tactical leaders must be encouraged to devise and pursue unique approaches to military problems. No rules govern ingenuity. The line separating boldness from foolhardiness is drawn by the hand of practical experience. That said, an education in tactics must possess an element of rigor. Too often, tactical discussions lack an in-depth analysis of cause and effect. The tactically proficient leader must learn how to analyze solutions to tactical problems. Lacking such a rigorous analysis, the tactician will not learn from experience nor exercise creative ability.

The second quality is *military judgment*, which includes the skills for gaining situational awareness and acting decisively. The tactician must readily recognize the critical factors in any situation—enemy capabilities, weather, terrain characteristics, and the condition of our own forces, to mention just a few. Marine leaders must be able to cut to the heart of a situation by identifying its important elements, developing a sound plan, and making clear decisions. Our educational approach should emphasize the ability to understand the mission, issue a clear intent, and determine the main effort.

The third quality is *moral courage*. Moral courage is the ability to make and carry out the decision regardless of personal cost. It is different from—and rarer than—physical courage. The cost of physical courage may be injury or death, whereas the cost of moral courage may be the loss of friends, popularity, prestige, or career opportunities. The burden of conflicting responsibilities in combat—responsibility for the lives of subordinates, support for peers, loyalty to superiors, duty to the Nation—can be heavy. Our educational efforts should lead potential leaders to work through the proper resolution of such conflicts in peacetime. Leaders often need to make morally correct decisions in combat, but there will rarely be time for deep moral or ethical contemplation on the battlefield.

An effective leader willingly takes on the risks which come with military responsibilities. In that light, the greatest failing of a leader is a failure to lead. Two steadfast rules apply. First, in situations clearly requiring independent decisions, a leader has the solemn duty to make them. Whether the subsequent action succeeds or fails, the leader has made an honorable effort. The broad exercise of initiative by all Marines will likely carry the battle in spite of individual errors. Second, inaction and omission based on a failure of moral courage are much worse than any judgment error reflecting a sincere effort to act. Errors resulting from such moral failings lead not only to tactical setbacks but to the breakdown of faith in the chain of command. Proper training, education, and concerned leadership are

the keys to instilling the qualities of creative ability, military judgment, and moral courage in the minds of all Marines.

TRAINING

Good tactics depend upon sound technical skills. These are the techniques and procedures which enable us to move, shoot, and communicate. We achieve technical competence through training. We build skills through repetition. Training also instills confidence in weapons and equipment. It develops the specialized skills essential to functioning in combat.

One of the ultimate aims of training is speed. Essential to speed is the requirement for accuracy. Speed without accuracy may be counterproductive and causes more damage than inaction. Whether Marines compute firing data, practice rifle marksmanship or weapons gunnery, rearm and refuel aircraft, repair vehicles, stock or transport supplies, or communicate information, the speed and accuracy of their actions determine the tempo of the overall force. Training develops the proficiency which enables this effective combination of speed and accuracy.

Small-unit training should focus on proficiency in such techniques and procedures as immediate-action drills, battle drills, and unit standing operating procedures. Practicing to reach

technical proficiency applies to all types of units, whether a section of aircraft executing air combat maneuvers, a maintenance contact team repairing a vehicle under fire, an artillery gun team conducting displacement drills, or a rifle squad conducting an in-stride breach of an obstacle. We develop and refine these measures so that units gain and maintain the speed and accuracy essential for success in battle.

Staffs, like units and individual leaders, must train to increase speed and accuracy. Staffs increase speed by accomplishing three things: first, by obtaining and organizing information to help the commander and themselves understand the situation; second, by understanding the commander's decision and coordinating efforts to focus combat power to achieve the commander's goal; and third, by monitoring events, maintaining situational awareness, and anticipating and adapting to changes. As staffs train, they increase accuracy by becoming more proficient both in their respective areas and in functioning as a team.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel knew the value of speed and accuracy for his staff when he wrote:

> A commander must accustom his staff to a high tempo from the outset, and continuously keep them up to it. If he once allows himself to be satisfied with norms, or anything less than an all-out effort, he gives up the race from the starting post, and will sooner or later be taught a bitter lesson.[4]

The speed and efficiency of a unit depend not only on the technical proficiency of its individual members but also in large part upon its cohesiveness. Such cohesion requires both personnel stability and solid leadership.

Training should also prepare Marines for the uniquely physical nature of combat. Living and caring for themselves in a spartan environment, confronting the natural elements, and experiencing the discomfort of being hungry, thirsty, and tired are as essential in preparing for combat duty as any skills training. The point is not to train individuals on how to be miserable, but rather on how to be effective when miserable or exhausted.

Likewise, training should enable us to take appropriate action in any environment and at any time. This readiness includes operating during inclement weather and periods of limited visibility. We must make terrain, weather, and darkness our allies if we are to gain advantage and deliver decisive force at a time and place of our choosing. We can neither anticipate nor appreciate the inherent friction that these natural factors produce unless we experience them.[5]

TRAINING AND EDUCATIONAL METHODS

There is no single "best" approach to developing tactical proficiency. However, any approach should be adaptable to all echelons and to all grades. The environment should be one that

is challenging and conducive to creative thinking. Like all preparation for war, training should reflect the rigors of that environment. The following examples may provide some tools for developing tactical proficiency in Marines.

Professional Reading and Historical Study

Because of the relative infrequency of actual combat experiences in most military leaders' careers, Marines must seek to expand their understanding through other, less direct means. The study of military history is critical to developing judgment and insight. It enables us to see how successful commanders have thought through—and fought through—the situations they faced. Not many people can do it instinctively—few possess the rare native ability to think militarily. Even those few can enhance their abilities through study and practice.

Historical studies provide the most readily available source of indirect experience in our profession. These studies describe the leadership considerations, the horrors of war, the sacrifices endured, the commitment involved, the resources required, and much more. These studies include biographies and autobiographies of military figures, books on specific battles, wars, and military institutions, unit histories, after-action reports, films, and documentaries. Group discussions help to expand the insights into leadership and battle that we have gained through individual study.

Professional readings and study are not solely the responsibility of military schools. Individuals cannot afford to wait for attendance at a military school to begin a course of self-directed study. Military professionalism demands that individuals and units find time to increase their professional knowledge through professional reading, professional military education classes, and individual study.

Tactical Exercises

Tactical success evolves from the synthesis of training and education—*the creative application of technical skills based on sound judgment*. Exercises enable leaders to practice decisionmaking and individuals, staffs, and units to practice and perfect collective skills. Exercises also serve to test and improve tactics, techniques, and procedures, immediate actions, battle drills, and combat standing operating procedures.

An exercise should serve as a unit's internal assessment of the quality of its training and education, not as grading criteria for higher commands. The conclusions should aim to note shortfalls so as to address them through future instruction and not to penalize poor performance. A unit will never be fully trained. There will always be room for improvement.

Exercises also test the ability of units to sustain tempo for an extended period of time. Since victory is rarely the product of single actions, the ability to operate and sustain combat effectiveness over time is important. Knowing when hostilities

will cease is a convenience denied the combat Marine. Equipment must be maintained, and people must be sustained with adequate rest, nourishment, and hygiene until they accomplish their mission.

Tactical exercises can range from field exercises to command post exercises to tactical exercises without troops. Field exercises, conducted by units of any size, involve all unit personnel working together to learn, test, and refine their collective battlefield tasks. Such exercises can be general in nature, or they can be detailed rehearsals for specific upcoming missions.

Command post exercises are largely limited to commanders and their staffs. Their purpose is to familiarize staffs with their commanders' personal preferences and operating styles as well as to exercise staff techniques and procedures and to review particular contingency plans.

Tactical exercises without troops provide tactical leaders opportunities to exercise judgment while permitting other unit elements to conduct training and education of their own. There are two approaches to conducting them.

The first method provides a leader an opportunity to evaluate a subordinate's ability to perform in a given scenario. This method places students in an area of operations and provides a situation upon which to plan and execute a task—for example, "Establish a reverse slope defense." The aim here is to exercise

tactical proficiency in the siting of weapons and the use of terrain.

The second method also places students in an area of operations and provides a situation but gives them a mission order—for example, "Prevent enemy movement north of Route 348." The aim here is to exercise judgment. After walking the ground, the students must first decide whether to defend or attack, supporting their conclusions with reasoning. The reasoning is then discussed and criticized. This approach encourages students to demonstrate ingenuity and initiative. They have free rein to employ their resources as they see fit to achieve the desired results.[6]

Wargaming

Wargames can be a valuable tool for understanding the many factors that influence a leader's decisions. Morale, enemy and friendly situations, the higher commander's intentions, firepower, mobility, and terrain are only a few of the decision factors included in the play of wargames. In all these simulations, from the sand table to a commercial board game to a computerized simulation, routine should be avoided. The less familiar the environment, the more creativity the student must display.

Sand table exercises, tactical decision games, and map exercises present students with a general situation, mission orders, and a minimum of information on enemy and friendly forces. Sand table exercises are especially suited to novice tacticians. They present the terrain in three-dimensional array, whereas a

map requires interpretation. Both map and sand table exercises enable students to conceptualize the battle, deliver their decisions, and issue orders to subordinates. Afterwards, students discuss their decisions and are critiqued. The discussion should focus on making a decision in the absence of perfect information or complete intelligence.

Terrain Walks

Terrain walks introduce the realities of terrain, vegetation, and weather. Terrain walks can be conducted in at least two ways.

The first method provides students with an area of operations, a general situation (usually depicted on a map), and a mission. As in sand table and map exercises, students describe their view of the battle. Choosing one plan, the group then begins to walk the terrain according to the plan. The group will then encounter unanticipated terrain and obstacles, while the instructors introduce enemy actions into the play of the problem. In this way, students must contend with the disparity between actual terrain and vegetation and maps as well as the chaos and uncertainty generated by enemy actions that invariably occur in real-world operations.

The second method involves the firsthand study of historic battlefields. We gain a special vantage on battle by walking the ground and seeing the battlefield from the perspective of both commanders. We gain a new appreciation for an historical commander's blunders. Often such blunders seem incomprehensible—until we see the ground. Only then can we

realistically consider alternative courses of action that the commander might have pursued.[7]

Competition

Exercises should provide realism. The means to achieve tactical realism are competitive free-play or force-on-force exercises. Whenever possible, unit training should be conducted in a free-play scenario. This approach can be used by all leaders to develop their subordinates. It affords both leaders and unit members the opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge against an active threat.

Free-play exercises are adaptable to all tactical scenarios and beneficial to all echelons. Whether it is fire teams scouting against fire teams, sections of aircraft dueling in the sky, or companies, battalions, squadrons, and Marine air-ground task forces operating against one another, both leaders and individual Marines benefit. Leaders form and execute their decisions against an opposing force as individual Marines employ their skills against an active enemy. Through free-play exercises, Marines learn to fight as an organization and to deal with a realistically challenging foe.[8]

Critiques

A key attribute of decisionmakers is their ability to reach decisions with *clear reasoning*. Critiques elicit this reasoning process. Any tactical decision game or tactical exercise should culminate with a critique.

The standard approach for conducting critiques should promote initiative. Since every tactical situation is unique and since no training situation can encompass more than a small fraction of the peculiarities of a real tactical situation, there can be no ideal or school solution. Critiques should focus on the students' rationale for doing what they did. What factors did a student consider, or not consider, in making an estimate of the situation? Were the decisions the student made consistent with this estimate? Were the actions ordered tactically sound? Did they have a reasonable chance of achieving success? How well were the orders communicated to subordinates? These questions should form the basis for critiques. The purpose is to broaden a leader's analytical powers, experience level, and base of knowledge, thereby increasing the student's creative ability to devise sound, innovative solutions to difficult problems.

Critiques should be open-minded and understanding, rather than rigid and harsh. Mistakes are essential to the learning process and should always be cast in a positive light. The focus should not be on whether a leader did well or poorly, but rather on the progress achieved in overall development. We must aim to provide the best climate to grow leaders. Dam- aging a leader's self-esteem, especially in public, therefore should be strictly avoided. A leader's self-confidence is the wellspring from which flows the willingness to assume responsibility and exercise initiative.[9]

CONCLUSION

In this publication, we have explored themes that help us to understand the fundamentals and to master the art and science of tactics. From the study of our warfighting philosophy, we have gained an appreciation for the requirement to be decisive in battle. To accomplish this, we must clearly visualize the battlespace through gained situational awareness, recognize patterns, and make decisions intuitively. We have also discussed ways we can gain advantage over the enemy and force him to bend to our will. We also explored how to be faster in relation to the enemy, to adapt to changing conditions, to cooperate for success, to exploit success, and to finish the enemy. Finally, we discussed how we can begin to act on these ideas during our training for combat. The ideas presented in this publication have implications far beyond battlefield tactics and the doctrinal way we think about warfare. They also influence the way we organize—using task organization and flexible command and control relationships—and the way we equip ourselves for combat.

Waging war in maneuver warfare style demands a professional body of officers and Marines schooled in its science and art. When asked why the Marines were so successful in Operation Desert Storm, General Boomer replied:

> The thing that made the big difference on the battlefield is that we had thousands and thousands of individual Marines constantly taking the initiative. The young lance corporal

> would take a look, see something 75 or 100 meters out in front that needed to be done, and go out and do it without being told. As I read through [the] award citations from Desert Shield and Desert Storm, this theme reappears, time and time again. That aggressive spirit comes from being well-trained, and confident in your professional knowledge.[10]

Everything we do in peacetime should prepare us for combat. Our preparation for combat depends upon training and education that develop the action and thought essential to battle.