

# Rethinking MCDP 1

Is it time?

by 2ndLt Paige E. Dillard

**M**CDP 1, *Warfighting*, is sectioned into four chapters that define the Marine Corps' doctrinal form of how we, as a fighting force, fight current and future wars. It is a document that is inherent to our Service and gives us the fundamentals we use daily. We implement the ideas and concepts from this doctrinal text into unit training programs, school-houses, and our day-to-day operations. As such, it was created to be a timeless document that can be utilized in some way, shape, or form for everything the Marine Corps does.

Every student officer at The Basic School (TBS) is issued a copy of *MCDP 1* and is required to read the text as part of the program of instruction. After reading it, not only are students tested with a physical, hand-written exam, but they are also tested via discussion groups that highlight the definitions and concepts inside the text. The doctrine is then put aside for the remainder of the program of instruction and, for some, the remainder of their careers. For many, it is merely a check in the box that says, "Yes, I have read and accept the terms of the Marine Corps' doctrinal fighting basis."

In April 2018, student officers awaiting training in Mike Company at TBS opened up a discussion on *MCDP 1*. For several hours, they sat in Barnum Discussion Room, debating the pros and cons of the text. The group split into two groups: pro-*MCDP 1* and anti-*MCDP 1*, with the additional goal of seeking improvements to the text. On the pro-*Warfighting* side, students argued that *MCDP 1* is like the beginning of building a house: it creates a common knowledge for all, its theories are effective when put in place in the field, and it is adequate training and

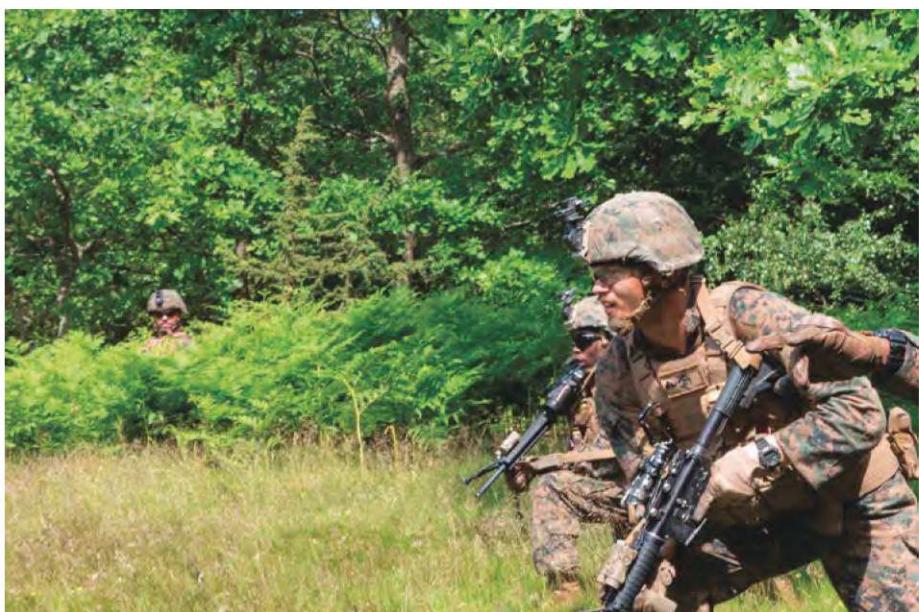
*>2ndLt Dillard's article won the Company D, TBS, writing contest in 2018.*

***On the pro-Warfighting side, students argued that MCDP 1 is like the beginning of building a house ...***

professional military education for all Marines. On the anti-*Warfighting* side, the main arguments were the text is too vague, not engaging enough, and outdated. In the end of the discussion, the two sides came together again to discuss

how *MCDP 1* could be improved upon and whether it should be improved. It has been over twenty years since the last revision to *MCDP 1*, and the way the Marine Corps operates has changed immensely since then. Is it time we as a fighting force look at our doctrinal text again?

In 1989, the Marine Corps created *MCDP 1*'s predecessor, *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1*, and it was not until 1997 that *MCDP 1* became an official document. The doctrine was created so all ranks were able to read and understand the ideas and tenets founded in the book. Gen Charles C. Krulak, USMC(Ret) stated that it was created to "change the way Marines think about warfare," Gen Alfred M. Gray, USMC(Ret), in his preface to *MCDP 1*, writes, "Like war itself, our approach to warfighting must evolve. If we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming outdated,



***It's time for a change in how we utilize MCDP 1 as a teaching tool at TBS. (Photo by LCpl Antonio Garcia.)***

stagnant, and defeated.” Continuing further, he wrote that the doctrine is based on the last decade of warfighting and operations, meaning the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s.

Since 1997, the Marine Corps has dealt with many different types of operations ranging across the spectrum of conflict. The Corps has evolved to face ever-changing threats and situations, and over the years many publications across the Services have been published with doctrine, policies, and ideas on how to handle these threats. In all of this change, the one thing that has not undergone revision is *MCDP 1*. While many of the concepts and ideas throughout *MCDP 1* can be loosely attached to each and every situation, they remain outdated, seemingly halted in 1997. The language used to write warfighting in the late 1990s is not the language many young Marines grew up using. To some, “the fog of war” sounds like a book title, not a concept that is vastly important in every operation. This begs the question: Is *MCDP 1* written for every Marine, as Gen Krulak had intended?

Two of the points students brought up were that *MCDP 1* is too vague and not engaging enough. They found many of the definitions of key concepts led to more confusion or were so lengthy the true definition was lost. In recent years, there have been many studies done on the three different learning styles people possess: kinesthetic, visual, and auditory. While schools such as TBS try to tailor the lessons on *Warfighting* to all three styles, many Marines—who may not be visual learners—are just left to read the text and understand it on their own. The students on the anti-*MCDP 1* side concurred that in its current state, and because of the reasons above, the text is not common knowledge to all Marines, nor is it written or taught to every Marine.

*MCDP 1* should be common knowledge for every Marine. The terms and concepts discussed in the text should resonate on some level with every Marine, but there are some who have never seen or heard of it. How is it possible the text can be the doctrinal foundation for the Marine Corps’ way of think-



***Every Marine needs to read and study MCDP 1 if it is to be the doctrinal foundation for how the Marine Corps thinks about warfighting. (Photo by Cpl Alexander Mitchell.)***

ing about warfighting if it can not be understood by every Marine reading it. *MCDP 1* remains under the Commandant’s Choice on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List, but Marines are told to read a minimum of five books from either the Commandant’s Choice list or from their grade-specific list. To ensure every Marine understands the Corps’ warfighting foundation, *MCDP 1* should be read at every rank by every Marine.

It is time to take another look at *MCDP 1*. It is time to update our doctrine in accordance with Gen Krulak’s guidance and not allow it “to stagnate.” Like everyday operations around the world, our “doctrine must continue to evolve based on growing experience, advancements in theory, and the changing face of war itself.” In so doing, *MCDP 1* should be considered the entry level reading for the Marine Corps, and it should be made to be read by all levels. It is our way of thinking, and if our way of thinking does not advance with us, how can we intend to stay on top?



**CONTACT YOUR  
REGIONAL CAMPUS  
[WWW.USMCU.EDU/CDET](http://WWW.USMCU.EDU/CDET)**

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction  
prohibited without permission.