MCDP 1

Not just for warfighting

by Capt Brandon Bocian

>Capt Bocian is the Company Commander, Co G, 2d Bn, 8th Marines. He previously served as the Weapons Platoon Commander and Company Executive Officer, Co G, 2d Bn, 8th Marines; Assistant Operations Officer, 2d Bn, 8th Marines; and Patrolling Instructor, Staff Platoon Commander, and Testing and Evaluations Officer, TBS. He wrote this article while he was a student at Expeditionary Warfare School.

Maneuver warfare should not be confused with attrition warfare. (Photo by Cpl Santino Martinez.)

Over my last eight and a half years in the Marine Corps, I have read *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, no less than five times. I have also been a part of four different units. So, every time I have checked into a new unit, I have been asked to re-read *MCDP 1, Warfighting*. The beautiful thing about this 96-page work is that you have a new revelation each time you read it. At first, when you are trying to simply find out exactly what maneuver warfare is, you walk away knowing a flanking attack is always the answer, and whoever tries to tell you otherwise is an attritionist! Another time, the difference between supporting arms and combined arms comes to light, and you wonder why we don't call the combined arms exercise the supporting arms exercise. There's nothing wrong with these takeaways. They're explanations of warfare. In fact, the first two chapters (49 pages) simply condense thousands of years of warfare into explanations specifically geared toward those who have either never been to war or think they've figured it all out. The third chapter (and the shortest, at fifteen pages) discusses preparation for war. The final chapter is where our doctrine discusses how the Marine Corps wishes to conduct warfare—through the use of mission tactics, commander's intent, and main effort. I have learned through the study of *Warfighting* that you can apply its principles to your leadership style and ultimately lead a unit that can understand and win through maneuver warfare. *MCDP 1* was not written as a leadership book, but if a leader cannot embrace its principles, he cannot execute maneuver warfare.

Let's begin by looking at maneuver warfare, arguably the driving force behind publishing *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, in 1989. Though the word "maneuver" doesn't appear until page 30 (aside from the foreword and table of contents), and "warfare by maneuver" doesn't appear until page 37, the concept is ingrained within the doctrine. Maneuver warfare is on the opposite end of the spectrum from attrition warfare, neither of which exists in pure form. "Warfare by attrition pursues victory through the cumulative destruction of the enemy's material assets by superior firepower."[1] This is relative, however, as what may look like a brilliant maneuver to one person may look very much like a dreaded frontal attack to another. Armies, generals, and individual soldiers have been conducting maneuver warfare long before the term was coined. Though I believe the concept is best summed up where it first appears on page 37: "warfare by maneuver which stems from a desire to circumvent a problem and attack it from a position of advantage rather than meet it straight on."[2] Another way to view maneuver warfare is as a form of critical thinking and problem solving. To be effective in maneuver warfare, we must take the limited resources we have and apply them to the problem. This idea, though not obviously stated, shows itself multiple times in *Warfighting*, through initiative and response, speed and fo-

cus, surprise and boldness, creating and exploiting gaps, decision making, commander's intent, and surfaces and gaps. Marines who are not proactive will spend the battle being reactive. Leaders must allow their Marines to be proactive and must be understanding of the outcome. If we are unable to think two, three, or four steps ahead, we cannot focus on the solution to a problem and apply that solution with speed.

Now that we can see how the need for critical thinking is woven throughout *Warfighting*, you can see why Marines at a decisive point may need to think outside the box, or unconventionally. This does not come at a specified point (age, rank, experience, MOS), which is why leaders must be open to their Marines thinking critically at all levels and in all situations. But before scoffing at the notion that we, the Marine Corps, don't encourage Marines to think, ask yourself if you've ever heard a Marine say, "I'm not allowed to think," or "I'm not allowed to question orders," or "I don't know," etc. The idea behind an immediate obedience to orders is drilled into Marines during entry-level training, and the expectation is maintained throughout one's time in service. Our culture has bred us not to think unless we're specifically asked. I was once told by a major, "The only one in a battalion who's allowed to have an opinion is the deuce [intelligence officer]; everyone else just needs to do what they're told." Really? I would argue that every Marine should have an opinion and know when to ask questions. As officers, we are taught to ensure that every mission statement or task has a purpose associated with it. The *why* is the most important part of the mission. A critic may argue that Marines can't be taught to question orders because not following those orders could lead to immediate failure of a mission or, worse, death for those involved. This may be true, but it is why Marine leaders at all levels must build inherent trust with their Marines before first contact with the enemy is made. I shouldn't need to explain my actions when in contact if I first built trust with my Marines. My Marines won't question my orders but will intuitively trust that I am making the best decision. Leaders at all levels should strive to build an understanding with their Marines at every opportunity. Not only will leaders learn what their Marines understand and are capable of, but the subordinate Marines will have an intuitive understanding of how their leader thinks. If Marines feel their welfare is being addressed and that they are being listened to in garrison, they will be more comfortable when they're asked to put their lives on the line in combat. Building this trust is essential to effective leading.

As officers, we are taught to ensure that every mission statement or task has a purpose associated with it. The why is the most important part of the mission.

Despite "trust" only being mentioned ten times in *Warfighting* (five times in one paragraph), it is inherent in building a cohesive unit. When you replace *war* with *everyday life in the Marine Corps*, you realize the nature of war (friction, uncertainty, fluidity, disorder, complexity, the human dimension, violence, danger, and physical, moral, and mental forces, etc.) also applies to an armory draw, vehicle maintenance, or range week. Very little of what the Marine Corps does is kinetic operations. If we view our daily operations through a maneuver warfare lens, these skills will easily transfer to the kinetic operations. Is there any reason why every month, week, and day in garrison shouldn't begin with the commander (or any leader) issuing his intent to his subordinates? If a Marine is confused, lost, or not understanding his role in the mission, what is an extra 30 seconds to explain to him the why? Additionally, by showing our Marines we care enough to give them the time to focus on their input, we also encourage feedback and new ideas from our Marines. Regardless of how many schools you've been to, books you've read, or deployments you've been on, the 40-plus Marines in your platoon or 150 Marines in your company will bring an entirely new perspective to the problem set.

This must all come together for maneuver warfare to be successful. A Marine will not take the initiative and exploit a gap if he is not allowed that

Marines need to think outside the box. *(Photo by LCpl Jonah Baase.)*

opportunity in garrison or training because there is a lack of trust between the leaders and the led. "Trust is an essential trait among leaders—trust by seniors in the abilities of their subordinates and by juniors in the competence and support of their seniors."[3] Without taking time to build these relationships—to develop that trust—Marines will be unable to effectively conduct warfare by maneuver. Leaders must be able to trust that their Marines will accomplish the mission when given an intent without being told how; subordinates must be able to trust their leaders will give them an intent and the latitude to accomplish the mission. As this relationship is being built, mistakes will be made. Leaders have a responsibility to understand their Marines will make mistakes, and subordinates have a responsibility to learn from their mistakes. As Gen Charles C. Krulak said,

> There are lessons to be learned from mistakes. Good leaders create an environment where subordinates are allowed to make mistakes, yet are not put into situations for which they are unprepared or for which the scope of the mistake could be dangerous.

Now, all too often, we as leaders fear our Marines making mistakes. We must foster an environment where Marines at the lowest levels can not only make decisions but also make mistakes. If you build the right environment, Marines will learn from their mistakes when training. They will learn what their left and right lateral limits are with respect to their commander. We must encourage thinking outside the box and accept when it fails or when Marines make mistakes. Only then can we, and our Marines, truly learn how we'll react in adverse situations.

Throughout EWS, several speakers posed the questions, "Is *MCDP 1* still applicable?," "Does the concept of maneuver warfare still apply?," "What will future technologies mean for *MCDP 1*?" While I personally do not know what the cyber domain or artificial intelligence means for warfare, I believe it is safe to say that there will always be people involved. When nuclear weapons were developed in the 1940s and 1950s, it was common belief that nuclear weapons would take the place of ground combat. Wars would be fought by aircraft, which delivered strategic nuclear strikes, and wars would be over in days. Despite this new technology, the Marine Corps continued to find itself deployed across the globe, with smaller and smaller unit actions having operational- and strategic-level implications. As Marines, we must continue to invest in the lessons of *MCDP 1* and look to apply its leadership principles.

In conclusion, *MCDP 1, Warfighting,* lays the framework for how Marines are expected to understand, prepare for, and conduct warfare. As leaders, it is our responsibility to train our Marines to accomplish a mission in any clime or place. To do this within the framework of maneuver warfare, we must encourage our Marines to think critically and develop an implicit understanding between leader and led. As the Marine Corps engages future challenges, we must realize more Marines will have greater tactical-, operational-, and strategic-level impacts. The only way to effectively fight will be to employ the concepts of maneuver warfare. This requires a greater influence from leadership to develop young Marines before they are sent into harm's way.

Marine leaders must build trust with their Marines. *(Photo by LCpl Charles Plouffe.)*

If you build the right environment, Marines will learn from their mistakes when training. They will learn what their left and right lateral limits are with respect to their commander.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting,* (Washington, DC: 20 June, 1997).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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