

Why Doesn't First Fire Team Rush?

by Capt Michael F. McNamara and Paul J. Kennedy

The Marine Corps gets from its NCOs what it puts into them. If NCOs are to fulfill their tactical role, it must educate and train them in tactics and insist that they display initiative.

"If we are to win, we must be able to operate in a disorderly environment. In fact, we must not only be able to fight effectively in the face of DISORDER, we should seek to generate disorder for our opponent and use it as a weapon against him."

—FMFM 1, Warfighting
1989

"I want Marine NCOs and officers who know how to think about, and in, war . . ."

—Gen A. M. Gray
29th Commandant of the Marine Corps

"In the opinion of Yigal Allon, ranked the outstanding field commander in the 1948-49 War, the great battles of that particular war, the Sinai Campaign, and the Six Day War were won in the NCO courses of the Haganah and the Palmach. . . . He clearly considered the section leader's position to be the linchpin of operational effectiveness. The most brilliant plan devised by the most capable general depends for its tactical execution on the section leaders. . . . It follows then that the section leader is to be trained as a tactical commander and as an educator of his men."

—John A. English

We believe the above statements accurately assess the nature of war and the historical role that the noncommissioned officer (NCO) plays in war. However, we question whether the Marine Corps as an institution is adequately training and educating NCOs for this role. This article will examine the following four questions:

1. What must Marine corporals and sergeants be capable of in order to operate within the "chaotic" environment of war?

2. As a result of his training and education, does the Marine NCO see himself as the type of leader that functions easily on this "chaotic" battlefield?

3. What are the consequences for units if NCOs are not prepared to be that type of leader?

4. If NCOs are not prepared to operate in this environment, can we say with confidence that NCOs are the "backbone" of our Corps?

Marine NCOs pride themselves on a tradition of military excellence. Positive control over a situation, precision in execution, attention to detail, and the ability to create order out of disorder are some of the most admirable qualities an NCO can possess. However, attempts to institute positive control on battlefields, which by their nature are disorderly and chaotic, usually fail. "Friction" and

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"fog" dominate even our training battlefields. Tragically, much of the formal instruction for NCOs centers around a didactic (i.e., "what to do") approach to learning and applying doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures. As a consequence many NCOs believe that they should be capable of exercising positive control over their subordinates on the battlefield. This is neither the Marine Corps' institutional understanding of what is necessary on the battlefield nor is it what works.

To illustrate this point, let's look at an example: All infantry Marines are taught to move fire teams, squads, and platoons in contact with the enemy

through the use of hand and arm signal, as well as voice commands. Teams and individuals are signaled by their leader to move, or not to move, at the appropriate time throughout an attack. This is positive control, taught in all our infantry schools, yet it doesn't work on the battlefield.

The immediate effect of this education and training, at the company level and below, is attacks that fall apart. These attacks fall apart because Marine NCOs are essentially being taught "what to do," instead of "how to think." This system of command and control that infantry NCOs learn and perpetuate was designed for open fields; in these open fields visibility is unobstructed, hearing is unimpaired, and positive control is achievable. None of this corresponds to the battlefields on which Marines have historically fought. This system of control is quickly rendered ineffective by small variations in terrain or vegetation and the noise of "blank" ammunition. When live ammunition, physical exhaustion, environmental extremes, and the threat of death are included, positive control is no longer attainable. And, at the very moment when the attack must be driven home, it flounders. These attacks flounder because by consistently teaching NCOs "what to do" instead of "how to think," they are never conditioned to rely on their primary weapon, their knowledge and initiative.

This is but one example of how our formal schools fail to teach things that correspond to the Marine Corps' stated understanding of what works on the battlefield. In other words, institutionally, we put out material that doesn't translate well onto the battlefield. And, since little emphasis is placed upon "how to think" (i.e., "translate"), should anyone be surprised at the gross misinterpretations that occur on the battlefield? Some Marines defend this as a basic technique used to introduce the essential elements of teamwork to a unit, as something that will sharpen performance. If that is the case, our operational units are failing to "translate." All one has to do is watch an infantry companies attack a 400-series range at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) at Twentynine Palms. Attacks on these dummy positions inevitably fall apart. The primary reason for these failures is not that



Marine NCOs cannot yell loud enough or that their arms are too short. This failure is an institutional failure, attributable to the type of professional education and training we give our NCOs, which in this case causes them to force a technique into a situation where it cannot succeed. The question that begs to be answered is: Have NCOs been taught what they should be doing? We believe that they definitely have not.

During their limited educational opportunities, NCOs must do more than drill and memorize acronyms that allow them to list characteristics or principles, such as BAMCIS, SMEAC, METT/SL and MOOSE MUSS. The Marine Corps' failure to emphasize the NCO's role as the critical leader in the fight must be seen as devastating to their professional development and to the combat power of the Marine Corps. Along with junior officers, NCOs make the critical decisions that must be made to achieve battlefield victories. "What to do" education does not plant the seeds that bring to fruition the flexible mindset that regularly uses the full "bag of tricks." Instead, "the way we do it" mentality is embedded, and thus we see mediocrity in execution on MCAGCC ranges. If we are to correct this problem, we must develop NCOs with an understanding of the concepts behind the techniques. It is this knowledge that serves as the basis for the battlefield adjustments that they must make in order to create battlefield victories, and those adjustments are the primary contribution of NCOs to the fight.

The concept of the NCO as this type of leader is not new, *FMFM 6-5, The Marine Rifle Squad*, describes him in the attack as follows:

The squad leader locates himself where he can best control and influence the action. . . . When taken under fire, the squad leader takes into account . . . that the battlefield is a very noisy and confusing place. If enemy fire is light he may be able to control his fire team leaders by voice, whistle, or hand and arm signal. As the volume of fire increases, this type of control becomes impossible. . . . The squad leader must rely on the skill and initiative of his fire team leaders . . . the squad leader positions himself near the fire team leader of the designated base fire team. By regulating the actions of the base fire team leader, the squad leader retains control of the squad . . . the other fire team leaders base their actions on those of the base fire team.

. . . The base fire team is used by the squad leader to control the direction, position, and rate of movement of the squad. It is not intended that the other fire teams maintain rigid positions. . . . the base fire team is used as a general guide. If another fire team can move forward more rapidly . . . it should do so. . . . if the base fire team is receiving enemy fire, but the terrain in front of another fire team provides cover from enemy fire, the latter team should move rapidly forward to positions where they can deliver fire on the enemy. Covering the base fire team's movement by fire takes pressure off them and permits them to move forward.

Upon reading this excerpt from *FMFM 6-5*, one is struck by how much

"technical" sense it makes. It reflects the chaotic battlefield of *FMFM 1*. At its center is an NCO who is thinking and using his initiative as a matter of course. It talks about a system of influence through decisive action. The Marine Corps is in error as an institution by ignoring this theme of "active" control in the education and training of its NCOs. The problem is made worse by the fact that not only do most NCOs not get introduced to this style of fighting, but often they view it as abnormal. "That's not the way we do it . . ." is the quote most often heard when discussing this style of fighting with Marine NCOs. This response is an institutional tragedy, because these NCOs are saying that they believe "coordinated-initiative" and "dependent decisions and actions"* are not their primary contribution to the fight. NCOs utter this response because they have been educated and trained to believe exactly that.

As should be expected, the long-term effect of a system that perpetuates "1st Fire Team, prepare to rush! rush!" as "the way" to close with the enemy is to stifle the thinking ability and initiative of the NCO. Throughout their first term of enlistment, young Marines see leaders at the squad and fire team level who are waiting to be directed on the battlefield. As these same Marines are educated and trained to become NCOs, they are consistently taught "what to do" instead of "how to think." Will this create the NCO demanded by *FMFM 1*? Does this exemplify the "fighter-leader" of *FMFM 5-5*? By educating and training the new NCO in this manner, has he been prepared for the real battlefield? Is this the educational path upon which NCOs should tread? The answer to all these questions is "No, absolutely not."

**Coordinated-Initiative*: "He who changes the mission or does not execute the one given must report his actions at once and assumes all responsibility for the consequences. He must always keep in mind the whole situation." [The German Troop Leading (*TRUPPENFUHRUNG*) Manual, 1933]. Actions are reported immediately so that the unit can get the most out of the "opportunity" that the subordinate leader has seized; or, so that the higher unit can cease that effort because it knows that its pursuit is "irrelevant." In either case, the leader must exercise initiative in the context of the whole situation (i.e., for the squad leader, in the context of the platoon and company), and that initiative must be coordinated in order to maximize the destructive force of the effort.

Dependent Decisions and Actions: This term refers to decisions or actions that support or exploit the actions of another individual or unit.

In *A Bias for Action*, the first volume in the Marine Corps University's "Perspective on Warfighting" series, Col Russell H. S. Stolfi, USMCR(Ret), describes the ability of leaders to maintain the initiative in battle as a "bias for action." Leaders who consistently make decisions and execute without direct orders exhibit many of the leader qualities discussed in this paper. This "bias" is a benefit enjoyed by an institution that provides its leaders with the following:

- Education about "... how to think about, and in, combat."
- Training that emphasizes decisive action through timely decisionmaking, flexible combat orders, and rock solid execution.
- A leadership climate that accepts the fact that mistakes are a function of uncertainty, and that mistakes can be overcome by further action, not by more controlled action or more deliberate planning.

This is the NCO that the battlefield demands and Marine institutions must breed. Those warriors who historically performed these duties on the battlefield were so important that they were separated into their own class and given the title of "noncommissioned" officer. Their job has always been to hammer home the attacks, to forge them as a blacksmith forges iron, and this takes thought, decisiveness, and will.

When the fighter-leader of *FMFM* 6-5 leads the attack in our example we would see something very different: fire team leaders would lead by physically influencing their Marines, not by laying behind them screaming and throwing rocks in vain attempts to direct movement. The fire team leaders then support the squad's effort by "reading" the actions of the base unit, reading the fight that surrounds him, and acting appropriately. In this attack NCOs are seizing opportunities. Voice commands and hand and arm signals serve to augment the action of the NCO. Most significantly these NCOs understand that their unit demands them to *think, decide, and act*.

If all infantry Marines were trained to close with the enemy using the active skills discussed above, attacks would unfold much like a fast break in basketball or a rush in hockey or soccer. In these attacks, teams move toward a goal, focusing on the opponent and remaining aware of each other's

actions. Action generates further action as teammates "fill lanes" and seize advantages created by their opponent's attempts to react to the attack in time. This process continues until it is too late to stop the attack, and the enemy is defeated. This type of opportunistic, aggressive, initiative-filled fighting is what the battlefield requires, what the Corps must create in its NCOs, and what the NCOs of our Corps must provide.

The properly trained squad leader establishes the tempo, direction, and action of the squad through the control of the base fire team leader. He

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does not even attempt to fight the fight for his other team leaders. Rather, he allows those NCOs to make their "dependent decisions" based upon his initial guidance and the situation. He remains confident in their ability to support the base unit and their willingness to capitalize on the fleeting opportunities that present themselves during the fight. In this manner, a team of NCOs rapidly impose their will on the enemy, thus forging a victory. The key to the success is NCOs who have been taught not "what to do" but "how to think."

As Marine NCOs understand more of these concepts, we as a Corps come closer to achieving the fluid fighting style deemed so necessary by *FMFM 1* and illustrated in *FMFM 6-5*. This style of fighting relies on NCOs who consider the application of their knowledge through battlefield initiative as the normal state of affairs on the battlefield. It demands NCOs who have been raised with a bias for action,

where coordinated-initiative and dependent decisions and actions are also considered the norm. It demands NCOs who can both think and execute, for being able to do one or the other simply does not measure up to the responsibility that accompanies the title of "noncommissioned officer."

Make no mistake about the problem either, it is an institutional problem, and it exists in every infantry unit in our Corps. The Marine Corps constantly tells its NCOs that they are its backbone; yet it gave away the rank of corporal in a contract, it dissolved their clubs, it billeted them in rooms with Marines who are not NCOs, it does not allow them to take their units to the field alone, and recently the "NCO Schools" of the Marine Corps were redesignated as the Sergeant's Basic Course. Where does that leave the 6,100 infantry corporals that compose 62 percent of our infantry NCOs? If an individual took that type of care of his own backbone, would anyone be surprised if someone wound up being paralyzed?

Anyone who has served in a joint environment will tell you how fortunate he or she feels to be a Marine. Our Corps attracts a special individual, one who is more than capable of achieving the level of performance that we need in order to win in combat. However, the Marine Corps as an institution must now put up or shut up.

The time has come for the Corps as an institution to properly educate and train its NCOs; to teach them the doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures that reflect a realistic understanding of the nature of war and the role that we expect them to play in that war. If we do that, we won't have to wonder why 1st Fire Team won't rush.

Finally, to answer the four questions we began this article with:

1. NCOs must be able to *think, decide, and act*.
2. Currently, no.
3. Expensive victories or unnecessary defeats.
4. No.

We are Marines; we must do better.

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