
One Year to Train

by Major Brendan B. McBreen

In 1920, General Hans von Seeckt, chief of staff of the German Army, issued training guidance that mandated three months of company-level training for all units.¹ Eighty years later, the Marine Corps does not even do this. In 1920, the rifle company was almost all rifles – a far easier unit to train than today’s company. Modern Marine Corps infantry units have hundreds of sophisticated tools – weapons, night vision, lasers, PLGRs, and radios – and dozens of challenging training missions, yet insufficient training time is blocked out for commanders to effectively train their units. As a company commander, and then as a battalion operations officer, I realized that few leaders appreciated the amount of time and effort it takes to train good infantry units. In my opinion, combat effectiveness is 10% equipment and 90% training. We in the Marine Corps have our priorities reversed.

The infantry battalion needs *one year to train for combat*. More accurately, the battalion needs *ninety* prime training days to prepare for combat. Prime training days are days devoted to mission training, with all Marines available for training, and with the unit leadership conducting the training.² With formal and ancillary training requirements, maintenance, medical, administration and other obligations, there are usually only twenty to twenty-four prime training days in an average twelve-week quarter. It therefore takes one *year*, with holidays and a leave period, to generate ninety prime training days.

The infantry battalion needs a *two-year training cycle*. If a year is required to train for combat, then the cycle of training, deployment, and post-deployment phases needs to be at least two years long.

The infantry battalion needs the same Marines *throughout the training cycle*.

One Year to Train. We have the best equipment, the best facilities, great Marines, and dedicated leaders – all ineffectually preparing for combat. Why are we not training effectively? We need training *priorities*, and we need training *time*.

Our primary training manual, *MCRP 3-0A Unit Training Management Guide*, states that “training is the number one priority.”³ We all know that this is not true. The fundamentals of training management, defined by FMRP 3-0A and other training publications, are all but ignored in practice. Despite their best efforts, most infantry battalions do not practice progressive training, they practice haphazard training. Battalions are assigned missions, exercises, and a host of other activities by higher headquarters with little regard for training priorities or small unit competence. Higher headquarters display an unhealthy interest in large training exercises. A battalion’s training plan is an internal document, of scant interest to higher headquarters.

Progressive training builds units from the bottom up. Squad training is a pre-requisite for platoon and company-level training. Battalion

exercises and higher-level exercises cannot be successful without these pre-requisites. Yet often, the higher exercise *prevents* the very training that would make the exercise successful.

Marine leaders *train well*. As an organization however, we *plan poorly*. It is difficult to execute good training management within the battalion because generally the Marine Corps does not demonstrate nor practice good training management at the higher headquarters level. Battalions conduct unit training during those days that are left over after higher headquarters schedule their events. This prioritization needs to be reversed.

The Two-Year Training Cycle. Requirements for deployable units define our training schedules. The prioritization of the remaining time however, belongs to divisions and regiments. There are infantry battalions that go from duty battalion to MEU(SOC) training with only a single month allocated for unit training. There are battalions that have only twelve months between deployments, and only half of this time can be scheduled for training. There are battalions that participate in a CAX within weeks of their new privates arriving, when their time would be better spent on squad and weapons team training. We have firm requirements for duty battalion, firm requirements for deployments, firm requirements for literally hundreds of mandatory training events, but no requirements at all for mission training, our supposed “first priority.” Anything less than a

two-year training cycle robs our units of essential training time.

We need the same Marines. The cohesion plan stabilizes all the privates in the battalion. The leaders, however, arrive throughout the training cycle. This disruption of the small-unit chain of command makes team training irrelevant, degrades the intent of the cohesion plan, significantly undermines training evaluation and planning, and decreases combat readiness. The cohesion plan is a headless horseman. New company commanders arrive mid-cycle, new lieutenants, new SNCOs, FAPs, CAPs, security Marines – all come and go after the privates have already been training for months. New squad leaders usually have not attended the Infantry Squad Leader Course, have poor training skills, and are not prepared for their new billet.⁴ Our personnel policies are executed with little regard for their debilitating effects on unit readiness.

How Training Management Should be Done. The goal of infantry training is to prepare for combat. The goal of training management is to allocate *time* and *resources* to selected training *tasks*. A commander starts with a METL (Mission Essential Task List) and matches it against the time available in a training cycle. The training cycle becomes the lifecycle of the battalion. Under the new cohesion plan, the cycle starts on Training Day 1 (TD-1), the day the new privates arrive, runs through a Unit Training Phase, a Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase, and concludes with a Duty & Cadre Phase. Each phase should be a multiple of three months to parallel the quarterly training model. Significantly, The 3-0A has *no* explanation of training cycles.

The RED Duty & Cadre Phase. This phase starts upon return from

deployment and runs until the privates arrive. During the RED Phase, some Marines leave the battalion, and some Marine leaders join the Battalion. The battalion is put in a duty status to meet exercise support and other requirements. Battalions use this time for cadre training, SOP development, PME, and unit schools. It is an ideal time for squad leader training. All squad leaders should attend Infantry Squad Leader Course, as well as company and battalion leader training during the RED Phase.⁵

The YELLOW Unit Training Phase. TD-1 is the day the privates arrive. The leadership is in place and prepared, the unit is now complete. A four quarter Unit Training Phase provides twelve training weeks at each level, squad, platoon, company, and battalion. The individual and collective training at each level leads into the following level. No higher headquarters events are imposed on the battalion during this phase. During the fourth quarter, the battalion requests to participate in large exercises that reinforce battalion's training goals.

The GREEN Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase. During this phase, the unit is considered fully trained and participates in sustainment training. The battalion is assigned to exercises, contingencies, and deployment overseas.

MEU(SOC) workups are not a replacement for the YELLOW Unit Training Phase. MCO 3502.3 MEU(SOC) *Predeployment Training Plan* makes it clear that a well-trained unit is a prerequisite to MEU(SOC) training.⁶ The MEU(SOC) focus on company-sized raids is a two-quarter training plan for a single METL task. The Initial Collective Training Phase (ICTP) of 14 weeks, Intermediate Training Phase of 5 weeks, and a

Final Training Phase of 7 weeks, replaces the second half of the YELLOW Unit Training Phase. The cost, however, needs to be recognized. The battalion deploys with well-trained company raid forces.

The Unit Training Phase is the core of the training cycle. TD-1, the arrival of the privates, defines the cycle. The YELLOW Phase fences out the prime training time needed to plan and execute quality unit training. The battalion's annual training plan lays out a progressive schedule to meet the unit's METL. Company quarterly training plans then systematically link individual and collective training at each echelon – squad, platoon and company – into the battalion's plan. In the final fourth quarter, the battalion evaluates its companies and trains to battalion-level tasks.

We do NOT need more big exercises. “The bigger the exercise, the poorer the training at the small-unit level.”⁷ We need to change our view that bigger is better. MCRP 3-0A states “Long term training plans focus on big exercises.”⁸ Nothing could be more wrong. Long term training plans set progressive goals. Big exercises can either support or detract from these goals. The best small unit training is done internally. Large unit training should be done by TEWTs and map exercises. The Japanese prepared for WWII with NO exercises above the battalion level. The German army prepared for larger operations with wargames and CPXs.⁹ If only fully trained units participated in big exercises, these exercises would be safer, more cost-effective, more realistic, and would result in less controller oversight and more valuable feedback.

We do NOT need burdensome training requirements. Formal and ancillary training requirements

need to parallel unit training cycles. Training requirements based on the fiscal or calendar year, though suitable for base and non-deployable units, are sometimes senseless with respect to the training cycle of deployable organizations. Infantry units should complete most training requirements, including the rifle range, *once* during a two-year training cycle. MCO 1553.3 states “Nonmission-related programs...must not be allowed to adversely affect mission-oriented training.” The sheer amount and inflexibility of these programs currently cannot help but interfere with mission training.

We do NOT need more schools. School is not the answer to all training issues. MCRP 3-0A states “Not everything required of Marines...can be taught in a formal school.”¹⁰ I would suggest for infantry that “Not *much* required of Marines...can be taught in a formal school.” Infantry is a team sport. Each individual needs to be trained on individual skill pre-requisites, but the real training only occurs when the team trains together. No matter how well SOI prepares Marines, it cannot prepare tightly woven, well-trained infantry companies. *Units* need a chance to train uninterrupted together, to take well-trained individuals and build combat-ready teams. MCRP 3-0A stresses collective training: “Make commanders responsible for training.” Collective training allows leaders to fight their units and develop confidence and teamwork.¹¹

We do NOT need ‘alternate’ training opportunities. Fire fighting training, capability exercises, static displays, and other ‘opportunities’ do not support METL training. If we were honest, we would call these what they are – either missions or distracters. Fully trained units are sent on missions.

Missions that do not provide METL training are distracters.

We need to build teams. The training cycle concept is effective if all the players start and end the cycle together. In order to assess, plan, and execute training, we need continuity. The privates are there for the cycle. NCOs and SNCOS, the primary trainers and small unit leaders, must be there at the beginning and see the training cycle through to the end. Officers, especially the company commander, are the planners and evaluators. They must be there at the beginning and see the training cycle through to the end. Marine leaders reporting in from Security Battalion, FAST, B-billets, and schools should join months *before* the privates arrive. Marines on FAP and CAP need to be recalled months *before* the privates arrive. Marine leaders need to serve a complete training cycle. All hands are joined by TD-1, and no one leaves.

We need to maximize Prime Training Time. If a unit can generate less than ten prime training days a quarter, little can be accomplished, and the unit is significantly undertrained. If the Marine Corps examined how requirements and policies, from regiment through division to Headquarters Marine Corps, cut into Prime Training Time, we could eliminate inefficiencies and generate more training time for all of our infantry units. This in turn would reduce the current overhead where one year generates on average only ninety Prime Training Days.

How do Training Cycles affect Marine Corps Readiness? At any instant, the Marine Corps has a number of GREEN battalions deployed or ready to deploy. A second tier of YELLOW battalions is undergoing unit training. A third RED tier has just returned from

overseas, has lost its people and is untrained. Using a two-year cycle, with each unit serving three months RED, twelve months YELLOW, and nine months GREEN, our twenty-four infantry battalions would always have three battalions in a Duty Phase, twelve battalions in a Unit Training Phase, and nine battalions available in their Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase.

If the Marine Corps adopted a three-year cycle, our twenty-four battalions would have four units in a Duty Phase, eight units in the Unit Training Phase, and twelve units in the Exercise, Workup & Deployment Phase.

An alternative three-year cycle would deploy a battalion twice within the cycle. This pattern would produce two battalions in a Duty Phase, eight battalions in a Unit Training Phase, and fourteen battalions in a Workup, Exercise and Deployment Phase, maximizing our warfighting readiness. Three-year cycles, however, would require a 36-month lock-on for all personnel, which is probably beyond the reach of current personnel capability.

What is to be Done?

Division / Regiment

- Define Training Day 1 (TD-1) for each battalion as the day following the SOI fill.
- Insert a 12-month YELLOW line on the TEEP. Title it “Unit Training Phase.”
- Schedule no events during this 12-month phase.
- Insert a GREEN line on the TEEP. Title it “Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase.” Insert a RED line on the TEEP. Title it “Duty & Cadre Phase.”

- Tie support to training cycles. Surge training areas, air requests, and other support to parallel each battalion's GREEN "Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase."
- Tie schools to training cycles. Surge school seats to parallel each battalion's RED "Duty & Cadre Phase."
- Require each Battalion Commander to brief his quarterly training plan to the Regimental Commander. Require each regiment to brief the division.
- Use units in the GREEN phase for exercises, contingencies and deployments.

MMEA / MMOA

- Use TD-1 as the point of reference for all infantry battalions.
- Stabilize personnel during the RED Duty & Cadre Phase. Move Marine leaders in and out of the battalion during the months *preceding* TD-1.
- Leave the battalion alone. With few exceptions, no Marines should leave the battalion, and none should join it during the YELLOW and GREEN phases.

MCCDC / Doctrine / T&E

- Rewrite MCRP 3-0A *Unit Training Management Guide*. Explain training cycles.
- Train leaders in Marine Corps schools how to plan training.
- Rewrite training requirements so that infantry units can meet these requirements once during a two-year training cycle.

Conclusion

The infantry battalion needs one year to train for combat. Training needs to be our first and only priority. The Marine Corps suffers from what George Marshall called the "Minuteman Myth" – the idea that training good infantry is relatively easy. Few people are aware how difficult and challenging it is to produce good infantry units.

I know there are a thousand reasons why the ideas presented in this article cannot be implemented. I know my demands for training time sound unreasonable and optimistic. I know I should balance my recommendations with an understanding of "the big picture."

I also know that we routinely deploy undertrained units. I know that someday, some Marines will pay the ultimate price for our failure to train well. I know that our sacred duty as leaders of Marines is to insure that the men we lead are

as well-prepared for the crucible of combat as we can make them. We cannot rest until this is so.

For these reasons and for this goal, no idea is unreasonable.

Notes:

1. Corum, James. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and the German Military Tradition*.
2. Collins, LtGen Arthur S., *Common Sense Training*. Novato, CA. Presidio Press, 1978.
3. MCRP 3-0A *Unit Training Management Guide*, HQMC, Washington, D.C. 25 Nov 1996.
4. *A Blueprint for Efficiently Training Infantry Squad Leaders for Combat*. 2nd Bn, 4th Marines, 10 June 1998.
5. Ibid.
6. MCO 3502.3 w/Ch 1. *MEU(SOC) Predeployment Training Program*. HQMC, Washington, D.C., 7 July 1995.
7. Collins.
8. MCRP 3-0A.
9. Collins.
10. MCRP 3-0A.
11. MCRP 3-0A.

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