

One Year to Train

by

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Marine Corps infantry battalions need *one year to train for combat*.

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 mandates nothing! In 1920, the rifle company was all rifles, a far easier unit to train than today's company. Modern Marine Corps infantry units have hundreds of sophisticated tools and dozens of challenging training missions, yet insufficient training time is available for commanders to effectively train their units. Few leaders appreciate the amount of time and effort it takes to train good infantry.

Our infantry battalions needs *one year to train*. Twelve weeks for squads, twelve weeks for platoons, twelve weeks for companies, and twelve weeks for the battalion.² More accurately, the battalion needs *eighty* prime training days. Prime training days are days devoted to *mission training*, with *all Marines available* for training, and with the *unit leadership* conducting the training.³ With formal and ancillary training requirements, maintenance, medical, administration, and higher headquarters obligations, there are usually less than twenty training days in an average twelve-week quarter. It therefore takes one *year*, with holidays and a leave period, to generate eighty prime training days. The sad fact is that few battalions get a year to train.

The infantry battalion needs a *two-year training cycle*. If a year is required for training, then the cycle of training, deployment, and post-deployment 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, "training is the number one priority."⁴ We all know that this is not true. The fundamentals of training management, defined by MCRPP 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, training schedules, or small unit competence. Higher headquarters display an unhealthy interest in large training exercises. The dichotomy between MEU training and mission training in support of warplans muddles our training priorities. 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, and a host of other 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.⁵ 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. The cycle starts on Training Day 1 (TD-1), the day after the new privates arrive, runs through a Unit Training Phase, a Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase, and concludes with a 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 Cadre Phase. This phase starts upon return from deployment and runs until the privates arrive. During this time, some Marines leave the battalion, and some Marine leaders join the Battalion. The battalion supports exercises 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 this period.⁶ Warplans should not task these non-combat-ready battalions.

The Unit Training Phase. TD-1 is the day the privates arrive. The leadership is in place and the unit is now complete. A four-quarter Unit Training Phase provides twelve training weeks each for the 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 the first three quarters. During the fourth quarter, the battalion requests to participate in large exercises and training packages, such as CAX or Bridgeport, that reinforce the battalion's training goals.

The 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 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.⁷ The MEU(SOC) focus on company-sized raids is a two-quarter training plan for a single METL task. This cost needs to be recognized. The battalion deploys with well-trained company raid forces at the expense of other METL skills.

The Unit Training Phase is the core of the training cycle. This 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 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.⁸ We need to change our view that bigger is better. MCRP 3-0A states, "Long-range planning focuses on major exercises."⁹ Nothing could be more wrong. Long-term training plans set progressive goals. Major 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.¹⁰ 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 senseless with respect to the training cycle of infantry battalions. 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.”¹¹ 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.¹² The Vietnam-era “school-straight-to-combat” model reflects a draftee army, individual replacement mentality.

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. Events 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. Well-trained small units, essential building blocks for our entire warfighting organization are the exception rather than the rule given our current personnel and training management practices.

We need to maximize Prime Training Time. If a unit generates 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 Prime training time, we could start to eliminate inefficiencies and generate more training time for all of our infantry units. Eighty Prime Training Days a year represents a ratio of 4.6 days per training day. If we could reduce this ratio to 2:1, we would need only five months to train a battalion to current levels. Ten or twelve months would then *double* the current capabilities of our units.¹³

How do Training Cycles affect Marine Corps Readiness?

At any instant, the Marine Corps has a number of trained battalions deployed or ready to deploy. A second tier of battalions is undergoing unit training. A third tier has just returned from overseas, has lost its people and is untrained. Using a two-year cycle, with each unit serving three months untrained, twelve months training, and nine months combat ready, our twenty-four infantry battalions would always have three battalions untrained, twelve battalions in a Unit Training Phase, and nine battalions available in their Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase.

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 9-month green line on the TEEP. Title it “Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase.” Insert a red line on the TEEP. Title it “Cadre Phase.”
- Tie support to training cycles. Surge training areas, air requests, and other support to parallel each battalion’s “Workup, Exercise & Deployment Phase.”
- Tie schools to training cycles. Surge school seats to parallel each battalion’s Cadre Phase.
- Require each Battalion Commander to brief his quarterly training plan to the Regimental Commander. Require each regiment to brief the division.
- Use trained units for exercises, contingencies and deployments.

MMEA / MMOA

- Use TD-1 as the point of reference for all infantry battalions.
- Stabilize personnel during the 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 after the privates arrive.

MCCDC / Doctrine / T&E

- Rewrite MCRP 3-0A *Unit Training Management Guide*. Explain training cycles.
- Train leaders attending Marine Corps schools how to plan training.
- Rewrite the formal and ancillary training requirements so that infantry units can meet these requirements once during a two-year training cycle.
- Mandate training levels for all infantry units in the new *Infantry T&R Manual*.

Conclusion

What passes for a well-trained infantry unit in the Marine Corps today will NOT pass for a well-trained unit on the battlefield of tomorrow. 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 hopelessly optimistic. I know I should balance my recommendations with reality, 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.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Corum, James. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and the German Military Tradition*.
- ² During the course of World War II, General Lesley McNair, head of Army Ground Forces, realized that units could not be trained for combat in one year. By the end of the war, the average training cycle ranged from 22 to 29 months, depending on the type of division. Palmer, R.R., Wiley, B.I., and Keast, W.R. *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*. United States Army in World War II: The Army Ground Forces. Washington, DC: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1948, pp 489-493, as cited in Paul F. Gorman, *The Secret of Future Victories*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, February 1992, II-23, II-35, II-36, and II-39.
- ³ Collins, Arthur S., *Common Sense Training*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978, 40-42. See also MCRP 3-0A *Unit Training Management Guide*. Washington, DC: HQMC, 25 Nov 1996, 6-6.
- ⁴ MCRP 3-0A *Unit Training Management Guide*. Washington, DC: HQMC, 25 Nov 1996, 1-2.
- ⁵ *A Blueprint for Efficiently Training Infantry Squad Leaders for Combat*. Camp Pendleton, CA: 2nd Bn, 4th Marines, 10 June 1998.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ MCO 3502.3 w/Ch 1. *MEU(SOC) Predeployment Training Program*. Washington, DC: HQMC, 7 July 1995.
- ⁸ Collins, pp 146-149. For General Lesley McNair’s 1941 recognition that large-scale maneuvers contributed little to the proficiency of small infantry units, see Gorman, Paul F. *The Secret of Future Victories*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, February 1992, II-24 and II-61.
- ⁹ MCRP 3-0A, 3-3.
- ¹⁰ Collins, p 147.
- ¹¹ MCRP 3-0A, 4-1.
- ¹² MCRP 3-0A, 1-2.
- ¹³ Today, U.S. Army Rangers train at the battalion level and below forty-eight weeks of the year. Seventy-five percent of that time is spent at the *platoon level* and below. Keen, P.K. and James Larsen. “Ranger Company Night Live-Fire Raid.” *Infantry*, Sept-Oct 1996, 21-27.

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