

# “All Stations, this is Kodiak Actual...”

## Thoughts on Verbal Orders in the Infantry Battalion

by

Major Brendan B. McBreen

*“Engineers attach to Echo, machineguns DS to Echo, as of eleven-fifty. I think the enemy has withdrawn - the vehicles at the stadium are abandoned and the snipers to the south are just a delay. Our forces to the north can’t be relieved until we’ve secured the main road. **Mission: At thirteen hundred, we attack east and seize the railroad bridge in order to prevent enemy interference with the MSR.** One company attacks north of the boulevard inclusive, one south. Echo, main effort. Seize the railroad bridge in order isolate the town from enemy east of the river. Golf. Clear the south sector of town in order to prevent enemy interference with the main effort. Fox, reserve. Co-locate with mortars at checkpoint romeo-three-one. Confirm, over.”*

**The Marine Corps preoccupation with the planning process and written orders serves to decrease our ability to issue effective verbal orders.**

Think of your own experiences with verbal orders. At a wargame at Quantico, “*We couldn’t really do an order in only an hour, so these bullets represent some of our **thoughts.***” At a warplan simulation at Camp Pendleton, “*If this were real, we’d have the imagery to permit us to make our **plans.***” On a TDG at a battalion PME session, “*We’ve outlined two **options** to think about.*” During an exercise, a voice crackles over the radio, “*Move to phase line gold and **stand by** for further orders.*” Thoughts? Plans? Options? Stand By? Gentlemen, we need a clear *order* implementing your decision *now!* The above examples represent three negative trends you may

have observed (1) an expectation of more time, (2) an expectation of more information, and (3) a lack of decisiveness and sense of urgency. Given ample time, each of the officers involved could have developed his thoughts into a coherent order in the recommended fashion. Without practice at rapidly producing succinct verbal orders, however, he is adrift.

Why are we not as good at verbal orders as we should be? The first reason our verbal orders technique suffers is because in school and in the fleet, “the orders process” is synonymous with “the planning process” which concludes with lengthy written orders development. The training rationale is that this develops an understanding of the components of an order. Once the concept is understood, unit SOPs can reduce the details of the order. The reality, of course, is that most well-trained leaders mimic exactly what they are taught in school, generating six-page orders to direct a two-hour attack. Even squad leaders are taught to write pages of orders. This has planted unrealistic expectations of “adequate planning time” and “proper orders format” in the heads of both leaders and Marines. When you are not granted adequate time in combat, is your order sufficient? Do you or your people now have doubts? A common opinion is that you cannot do a ‘proper’ or ‘real’ order unless you have a few hours available. Even the term ‘frag order,’ mistakenly applied to any verbal order, implies your directive is not a *real* order, but a fragment or offshoot of a properly written plan. A side effect of this model is that the comfort level we have discussing courses of action delays decisiveness and generates uneasiness with rapid decisions that have not been widely discussed or examined.

The second reason our verbal orders technique suffers rests on our inability to stabilize units, stabilize commanders, and train progressively. Cohesive and well-trained units can operate on concise verbal orders because they have shared experiences and expectations, they know each other’s capabilities, and can operate well on minimum guidance. Excessively detailed orders are

required when a commander lacks familiarity with his unit's background, leadership and capabilities.

The third and most compelling reason we are poor at verbal orders is that most of our exercises and training events lack a capable, thinking opponent. We are not teaching our leaders that combat is a dynamic clash of wills. When our training 'enemy' does not react or willfully attempt to counter our efforts, we learn the dangerous tendency to precisely script our every move. Evidence of this trend can easily be found in orders that include seven or eight sequential tasks for each subordinate, and in matrices that precisely envision six phases for an attack. In the dynamic chaos of actual combat, we will never be able to predict the sequence or the results on the battlefield with such accuracy.

The Marine Corps publishes almost no guidance on verbal orders. We teach few good techniques, we do not demand competence, and we rarely practice. Most of us do not do well when verbal orders are required. On exercises, particularly over the radio, we issue haphazard verbal orders off the top of our heads.

Combat narratives, from World War II through Vietnam, show that the Marine Corps has historically operated well on verbal orders. According to MajGen O.K. Steele, the battle for Hue City was fought exclusively on verbal orders. Many biographies of wartime leaders, including Patton, Montgomery, Slim, Rommel, and von Mellenthin, show that these men were adamant in their insistence on verbal orders. These leaders knew combat as a rapidly changing competitive environment where decentralization and small unit initiative were energized by concise verbal orders.

The details of war plans, amphibious landings, movement plans, and large deliberate operations cannot be communicated by verbal orders. For the rapidly changing environment of

combat, however, the Marine Corps needs to be good at verbal orders. This key skill accelerates our tempo and maintains our momentum. A tactical decision is meaningless without the ability to communicate it clearly and rapidly. Your ability to issue a brief, clear, unambiguous order is a difficult but essential combat skill. This requires guidance, training, and practice.

### **Recommended Verbal Order Technique**

The standard for verbal orders should be: **Five sentences, in fifty seconds, while under fire.**

**Task Organization.** Organize your force before issuing the order. State the time of any attachments.

**Orientation.** One sentence on orientation, if needed, should precede the order to identify any new control measures or reference points.

**Situation.** Give a one-sentence assessment of what you *think* the enemy is trying to do. Start with **“I think...”**: *“I think those vehicles are the counterattack!”* Your orders make sense if your Marines know what you are thinking. Do not restate the obvious: *“We’re under fire!”* Do not restate facts, *interpret* them. What does it mean? Draw conclusions! Then put your analysis in context. How do these enemy actions affect your higher headquarter’s intent?

**Mission.** State the single collective unit mission before assigning any tasks. Start with **“We...”** Use the in-order-to (IOT) format to link mission and intent: *“At 1215, we will seize the pass IOT prevent enemy retreat.”* This is the single most important sentence of your order. Choose each word carefully.

**Execution.** A concept of operations lets everyone know the context of your plan and any support planned. If you jump straight to tasks, *“You buy meat! You buy cheese! You buy vegetables!”*, your people may not know if they are building a salad, a pizza, or a sandwich.

**Tasks.** Phrase each task exactly like a mission statement. Use the IOT format to link mission and intent. Always designate one unit as the main effort. The main effort task needs to parallel the unit mission. Always designate, and avoid tasking, a reserve. A single “Be Prepared To” statement for the reserve can guide that unit commander in his preparations.

**Coordinating Instructions.** The final sentence ties up the order with any instructions for all hands, usually timing, signals, or locations such as the casualty collection point. Most **Admin & Logistics** and **Command & Signal** information should be SOP, and rarely needed in a verbal order.

The notes for a verbal order, if made at all, should fit on an index card:

**T/O:** E + CEB + MG(DS), F, G, 81s, COC

**O:**

**S:** EN withdrawn, snipers are delay. **HHQ** needs MSR.

**M:** 1300 ATK E seize RR bridge **IOT** prev EN interference with MSR

**E:** **SoM:** Echo N of boulevard incl, Golf on S.

Fires:

- Echo. **ME.** Seize RR bridge **IOT** isolate town.
- Golf. Clear southern sector **IOT** protect ME.
- Fox. **RES** @ CP R31 with 81s.

Coord:

### Good Orders

The above technique meets all the requirements of a good order. A good order includes:

- An analysis of the situation
- A unit mission and intent
- A tie to the higher intent
- A series of tasks with intents

- A designated main effort
- A designated reserve

Conversely, a good order avoids:

- Excessive “On Order” or “If Then.” Too many conditional statements indicate a fragile plan, dependent on many linkages and good communications. In combat, these are the last things you’ll have. Do not reserve all decisions to yourself.
- T/O Confusion. Too many independent units also indicates a fragile plan. Complex organizations require detailed orders and good communications to coordinate multiple moving parts. Generally, one organization should be responsible for each separate part of your plan. Be very clear on command relationships.
- Micromanagement (MM)
- More-of-the-obvious (MOTO)

In any order there are three types of sentences. (1) Mission Specific: *“H-Hour is 0900,”* (2) MM: *“Have your third squad carry extra batteries for your beacons,”* and (3) MOTO: *“Use all means to minimize casualties.”* MM statements might be good training advice, but they do NOT belong in your order. Do not step on the command prerogatives of your subordinates. MOTO phrases are self-evident statements that offend your subordinates’ sense of competence. Do not restate SOPs. **Every sentence in your order should be mission specific.**

### Verbal Order Philosophies

**Less is more.** Be painstakingly brief and clear. Construct an unambiguous order with the fewest number of carefully chosen words. Kill all adjectives and adverbs. Avoid excessive “Be Prepared To” sentences for future potentialities. Strive to meet the current situation. When

another task needs to be accomplished later, issue another order. Avoid “phases” for the same reason. In the disorder of combat, simplicity is strength.

**Cohesion and Training are the Pre-requisites.** Cohesive and well-trained units have practiced battle drills and standing operating procedures that speed communications and are well understood. The leaders of cohesive units understand the tactical thoughts and expectations of their commander, they know and trust each other’s judgement, and they have confidence in the capabilities of their Marines and their small unit leaders who make the crucial decisions on the battlefield. Train your unit and your leaders with these goals in mind.

**Trust your people.** Know your leaders and assume competence. The level of detail in an order depends on the proficiency of your subordinates. When you rely on your subordinate’s self-reliance and judgement on the spot, you create enthusiasm for the task which increases the likelihood of success and the conditions for exploitation of opportunity. An order should contain everything a subordinate must know to carry out the order, and only that. Use the briefback technique to avoid surprises.

**Missions and Tasks.** Assign a single mission to your unit. Assign a single task to each subordinate. Select only the essential tasks and focus on those. A mission which includes several parts diverts attention from the primary goal.

**Intent.** Intent equals purpose. The IOT format is the most concise technique to link the mission and the intent. The commander’s intent paragraph has no place in a verbal order. Avoid splitting your unit’s focus with two intents: “*Seize Hill 160 IOT control the riverline AND permit our unhindered resupply.*” The best intent focuses on the enemy, not friendly forces or terrain. Intent is not a tactical task, “*Attack IOT destroy.*” The intent is far larger than the tactical task. A good intent will always provide your subordinate with multiple options. Your

subordinates then have leeway to take action when the situation changes. Meaningful intent gives your order durability and longevity.

**Nesting Intents.** The intent of each task must be “nested.” Supporting efforts support the main effort. The main effort supports the higher headquarters. From the highest headquarters to the leading squad, the intents of all units should cascade so that the actions of each unit contributes to the whole. This is the only way to make a large organization operate in a chaotic environment. Disciplined initiative at each level will contribute to the greater good only if the intent of each order supports the order above it.

**Puppet orders.** Avoid moving and placing your subordinate commanders: “*Continue moving north and then east to CP51.*” You are not moving puppets. You are tasking commanders. Avoid using “orient.” The intent of your order should clarify why a certain position or direction is important.

**Schedules,** target lists, manifests and other data sheets are the results of an order. They are not the order. Issue a verbal order, then develop and submit any lists or manifests needed.

**Language.** Use inclusive language, “*You are moving with me,*” and avoid exclusive language, “*You are not staying here.*” Avoid qualified statements, “*Try to hold,*” or “*As far as possible.*” These lessen responsibility. Avoid conditional statements, “*If you can get over the bridge.*” Know and use precise tactical terms, the language of your profession. Mission and task statements, especially, need to be clear and correct. Tasks that focus on the enemy, *fix, suppress,* tasks that focus on terrain, *secure, occupy,* and tasks that focus on friendly forces, *overwatch,* have very precise meanings and need to be understood by your Marines. Likewise, when organizing for combat, use the terms *attach, direct support,* and *take command.* Imprecise statements, “*The XO will supervise,*” or “*Machineguns move with 3rd Platoon Sergeant,*” can lead to dangerous confusion in combat.

**Command.** As far as possible, move to your subordinates and issue verbal orders face to face at a critical observation point on the battlefield. Beyond the words, a leader communicates far more by looking into the eyes of his Marines. When issued over the radio, a verbal order is far less likely to be misunderstood if it is well constructed, succinct and unambiguous. Remember also that issuing the order is only ten percent of the commander's responsibility. Supervision, pushing the plan vigorously to success, is the true role of the commander.

### **Conclusion**

Success on the battlefield goes to the leader who can quickly assess the situation, decide and communicate his decision, and fight his unit effectively. How many verbal orders have you issued in your career? How many have you received? Capture good techniques for verbal orders. Train your leaders. Marine leaders at all levels need as much practice as possible in communicating their decisions. During exercises, wargames, planning conferences, and tactical decision games, critically discuss the order as well as the tactics. The essential skill of issuing clear, concise, unambiguous orders is difficult. It is not a skill you are born with nor is it acquired automatically with rank. Only those who practice in peacetime will be successful leaders in the chaos of combat.

*Major McBreen is the Operations Officer for the 5th Marine Regiment.*