

What is the

# MAIN EFFORT?

Fundamentals of Tactics Series

March 1998

**The Main Effort.** As a commander, you achieve success in combat by focusing your efforts. You determine what action will be decisive, then assign a unit to achieve that action. This unit is your *Main Effort*.

The *Main Effort* is a central concept of maneuver warfare. It makes maneuver warfare decisive. Without a *Main Effort*, combat would break down into a series of unrelated actions by separate units. By defining a *Main Effort*, the commander provides a focal point to give unity to his force. He ties the actions of multiple units together and hurls them at the enemy.

All forces and assets converge to support the *Main Effort*. The commander gives the *Main Effort* priority for support of any kind. In assembling his *Main Effort*, he will take substantial risks elsewhere in order to give his *Main Effort* the greatest possible punch. These **Economy of Force** decisions are difficult, but a commander who distributes his forces in an attempt to cover all the bases is weak everywhere and successful nowhere.

**Your Unit as the Main Effort.** Each commander, at every level, designates a Main Effort for all missions. If you are the leader of the *Main Effort*, you know that it is your responsibility to achieve a decision. You have the resources, you have the mission, and you have the responsibility for your commander's success. You will take risks, seek opportunities, and exploit enemy weaknesses, knowing that you are fully supported by your peers and your higher headquarters.

**Your Unit as a Supporting Effort.** If you are not the *Main Effort*, you are a *Supporting Effort*. All *Supporting Efforts* support the *Main Effort*. In every decision, these commanders ask themselves, "How can my actions help the Main Effort achieve success?"

**Shifting the Main Effort.** The commander may change the *Main Effort* during the battle. If an enemy force delays the *Main Effort*, while

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Surprise

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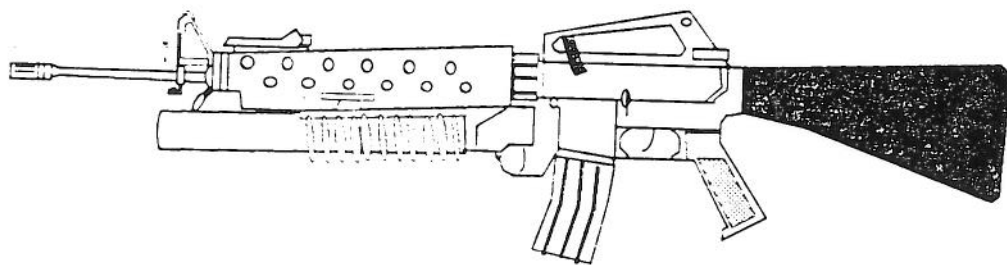
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an aggressive supporting unit finds unexpected success, the flexible commander designates a new *Main Effort*. The combat power which was supporting the initial *Main Effort*, including attachments, now shifts to support the new *Main Effort*.

**Mission of the Main Effort.** When a commander assigns his *Main Effort*, he is saying: "This is how I will achieve a decision. Everything else is secondary." The success of the Main Effort must ensure the success of your unit. The mission of the *Main Effort*, your primary bid for victory, must be well selected to have the most significant effect on the enemy, and lead to decisive combat success.

**Summary.** This tactical fundamental, the *Main Effort*, is a vital tool which allows Marines to fight outnumbered and win. *The Main Effort* allows you to concentrate the greatest combat power at the decisive point, massing your strength and delivering a knockout blow. The selection of a *Main Effort*, and the ruthless concentration of combat power to support it, is the key test of a commander's ability.



### The Main Effort and the Commander

As a commander, you are responsible for *results*. The most important result is decisive victory. Develop a talent for tactics. Learn how to translate your thoughts into a plan. Select a main effort, communicate a commander's intent, and assign missions. Learn how to clearly describe the results you want to your subordinates, but leave the details to them. The concept of the *Main Effort* simplifies your combat orders, and encourages initiative in the chaos of combat, since each of your subordinates automatically knows to act in support of the *Main Effort*.

# SURPRISE

## is a Weapon

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**Surprise is a Weapon!** *Surprise* is the state of confusion caused by an unexpected event that degrades an enemy's ability to resist. The element of *Surprise* can many times lead to decisive victory.

An enemy's level of disorientation depends upon the degree of *Surprise* and the his ability to recover. Enough *Surprise* can put the enemy into shock, which is a total inability to react.

**Why is Surprise a Weapon?** *"Of all of the principles of military tactics, Surprise is clearly the most important, yet least appreciated. Always strive for surprise. Until you can surprise the enemy, all other tactical principles remain secondary."*

— Soviet Army axiom

Sun Tzu stated that if the enemy does not know where or when we will strike, he must prepare many positions. You can then choose to attack where the enemy has poorly defended.

**How do You Surprise the Enemy?** There are three ways to achieve *Surprise*. The first is through *deception*. You convince the enemy that you are going to do something that you are *not* going to do. You give him a clear picture of the situation, but the wrong picture. Effective *deception* can cause major harm to the enemy's efforts, but it is the hardest to achieve.

The second way to gain *Surprise* is through *ambiguity*. You act in such a way that the enemy does not know what to expect. The blitzkrieg style of warfare used *ambiguity* by attacking on many axes. The enemy did not know which thrust was the **Main Effort**.

The third way to achieve *Surprise* is through *stealth*. You deny the enemy any knowledge of your intentions. This applies equally to

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individual movement techniques, night operations, radio silence, and operational security.

**Surprise in the Defense.** Even in stationary positions, you must remain unpredictable. Avoid establishing patterns in order to retain the capability to *Surprise* the enemy. You must constantly shift your positions, change schedules, and patrol aggressively.

**How do I use Surprise?** While *Surprise* can be a decisive factor in battle, the element of Surprise is easily lost., and its effects are temporary. Any opportunities created by *Surprise* must be exploited immediately and aggressively.



What are

# Surfaces and Gaps?

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**Surfaces and Gaps.** *Surfaces* are enemy strengths. *Gaps* are enemy weaknesses. In combat, we seek to avoid *Surfaces* and exploit *Gaps*. This is also known as *Soft-Spot Tactics*.

On the ground, *Surfaces* are where the enemy is well defended, and *Gaps* are where he is not as well defended. But *Surfaces and Gaps* also refer to the enemy's capabilities and limitations. The enemy may possess strong anti-air capabilities, but his ground forces are unable to call for supporting arms. Another enemy weakness may be his inability to react quickly or a space in time when he is vulnerable.

What is considered a *Gap* to one arm may be a *Surface* to another. An antiaircraft battery is a *Surface* to aircraft, but is very vulnerable to infantry attack.

**Why Soft-Spot Tactics?** Striking at *Gaps* increases tempo and results in less casualties. *Gaps* will often be temporary. To exploit them you need to be fast and flexible. The goal is to quickly penetrate the enemy's rear area and disrupt his cohesion. When we locate a *Gap* with a probing attack, we must quickly exploit it by rapidly sending our forces through it. We may have to shift our **Main Effort** in order to exploit a *Gap*.

If *Gaps* do not exist, we must create them. One way to do this is through deception, or feints. We can also crack open a small breach, a penetration, on a narrow front.

**Summary.** The solutions to each tactical problem depend upon the situation. Thus, *Soft-Spot Tactics* require using **Mission Orders** to remain flexible. Extensive training is also necessary to develop a good sense of judgment.

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# What are **MISSION ORDERS?**

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**Mission Orders.** *Mission Tactics*, or *Mission Orders* is simply the method of assigning what must be done without saying how it will be done. *Mission Orders* give the subordinate leader the freedom to use his judgment and imagination to execute a mission.

A *Mission Order* gives broad guidance to the subordinate leader. It leaves the details of the mission up to the person executing the task. *Mission Orders* contain the minimum amount of *restrictive control measures* necessary for coordination.

*“Conduct a point ambush along the enemy’s MSR north of gridline 70 and south of gridline 73, in order to prevent the enemy from resupplying his forward troops.”*

This mission statement leaves the conduct, time and exact location of the ambush up to the patrol leader. It becomes the patrol leader’s responsibility to work out the details for the mission.

**A Contract.** *Mission Orders* act as contract between the small unit leader and the commander. As a commander, you provide the necessary guidance and support to your subordinate leaders. As a subordinate, you take on the duty of executing the orders successfully. This contract is based on trust and understanding.

As a subordinate leader, you also have the responsibility of acting within the *Commander’s Intent* given to you. This trust is based on your self-discipline. Your actions must benefit the whole, not just yourself. When making decisions in a changing situation, you must think of the total tactical picture.

**Tempo and Cooperation.** *Mission Orders* sacrifice certainty and precision for speed and agility. *Mission Orders* allow flexibility to exploit windows of opportunity. As long as you act within your *Commander’s Intent*, you can take advantage of a changing situation without waiting for permission.

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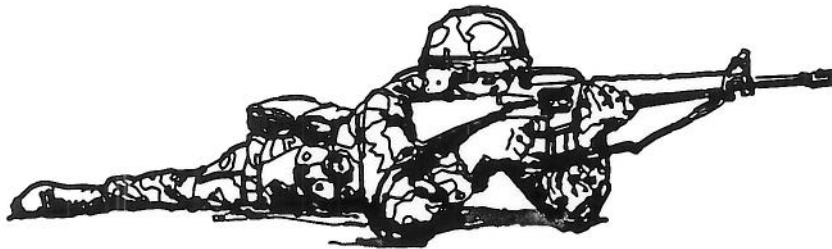
Using your own initiative demands that do what must be done without waiting for orders. Using lateral communication — talking with adjacent leaders — takes less time than coordinating efforts through higher headquarters.

**Issuing Mission Orders.** As a commander, you must trust your subordinates. Allow them the freedom to make their own decisions. It is your responsibility to train your people. Make them tactically proficient and develop their initiative. With training your unit will act correctly and spontaneously. In peacetime, allow your subordinates to make mistakes, ensuring that they learn from them. You will then have more time to dedicate towards supporting the needs of your people.

**Summary.** *Mission Orders* provide the means for decentralized control and decisionmaking essential for maneuver warfare. *Mission Tactics* rely upon initiative and boldness. They give you the ability to execute missions the way you see best. They give you the freedom to change your plan as the situation changes.

### Tips for Issuing Orders

Practice issuing brief orders. Cut out obvious material. Do not micromanage. Give broad guidance to your subordinates. Look your at your people to see if they understand. Use backbriefs to ensure that your people understand what is being asked.



# What is COMMANDER'S INTENT?

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**Commander's Intent.** You are in command of a unit in combat. The tactical situation has changed, but you cannot communicate with headquarters. Your mission is obsolete, but the situation demands action. What do you do?

While your assigned mission statement gives you "what" must be done, sometimes giving "where" and "when", the *Commander's Intent* gives you the "why". This purpose behind the mission is the most important element of the order. It should illustrate the larger picture of what is to be achieved on the battlefield and how your mission contributes to the plan.

Essentially, a clear *Commander's Intent* statement allows you to ignore an irrelevant mission as long as your new actions support the *Commander's Intent*.

**In Order To.** Often, the *Commander's Intent* can be stated by a simple "in order to" following the mission statement. A good *Commander's Intent Statement* will allow you to change the task in multiple ways while still supporting the intent.

*"Seize the bridge in order to prevent an enemy crossing of the river."*

If you cannot seize the bridge, or the enemy attempts to cross somewhere else, you can blow the bridge, mine the fords, or patrol the river line instead. As long as enemy troops do not set foot on your side of the river, your actions have supported the *Commander's Intent*.

Without a clear intent, you may remain on the bridge confused by the unexpected enemy actions and unsure of what action is necessary.

Once you know the reason for executing a mission, you are armed with the ability to operate independently and aggressively in the absence of further orders. This is *vital* important if your task cannot be carried out or no longer makes sense. If the situation changes in a fundamental

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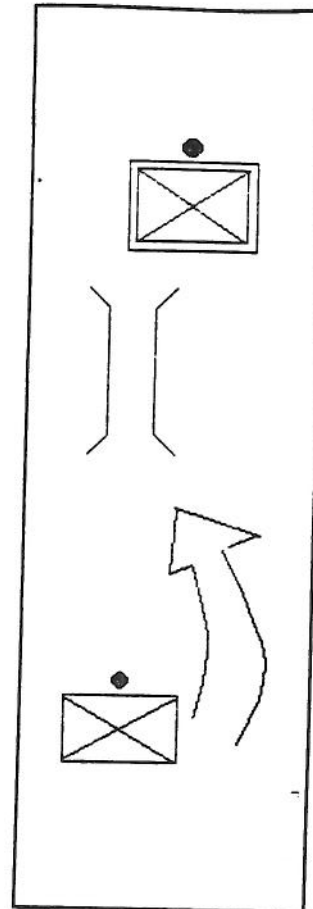


way, the subordinate has the ability to take action without asking for new orders as long as his action will meet the *Commander's Intent*.

**Understanding your Commander's Intent.** When you receive an order, pay close attention to *why* you are being tasked. Seek to understand the total tactical picture. Know your commander's intent so you can make decisions in accordance with his plan. This understanding will allow you to exploit new opportunities and achieve success. If your commander does not give you his intent, ask for it!

**Issuing your Intent.** When issuing orders to your subordinates, be sure they understand why you are assigning them a task. Explain what the tactical picture is one level above your own. Issue **Mission Orders**, providing a clear *Commander's Intent* to give your subordinates decisionmaking room while maintaining your unit's goal.

**Summary.** The *Commander's Intent* is a fundamental part of maneuver warfare. A clear intent statement allows small unit commanders to make independent decisions while still accomplishing the commander's desires. This allows leaders to take advantages of opportunities presented in an ever changing environment, and to drive on when faced with new circumstances. Since leaders across the battlefield do not have to constantly wait for orders to act or make decisions, we are able to maintain unrelenting pressure upon the enemy.



What are the

# LEVELS OF WAR?

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**Levels of War.** There are three Levels of War. The *Strategic Level*, the *Operational Level* and the *Tactical Level*. Concerns at a higher level always override those at a lower level.

**The Strategic Level of War.** National Military Strategy focuses on achieving the goals of national policy. At this level, national priorities are set, and forces are assigned to specific theaters of war.

The Marine Corps is a strategically mobile force. Along with the Navy, the Marine Corps can respond anywhere in the world on short notice. This rapid presence enables the U.S. to affect world events in support of U.S. policy.

**The Operational Level of War.** At the *Operational Level of War*, strategic objectives are met through tactical means. The *Operational Level* deals with where, when and under what conditions to engage the enemy. The *Operational Level* focuses on winning campaigns.

**The Tactical Level of War.** A *Campaign* is a series of battles. A battle is a series of engagements. The techniques used to win Battles and Engagements are called *Tactics*. At the *Tactical Level*, units engage and defeat the enemy at a particular time and place.

Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima and the other island battles of World War II were tactical victories. Together, they represent an island hopping *Campaign*, an *Operational Level* plan which contributed to the *Strategic* goal of defeating Japan.

**Tactics.** *Tactics* refers to the techniques used to apply combat power. *Tactics* cover the use of maneuver, firepower and the integration of different arms to exploit success and defeat the enemy at the *Tactical Level of War*.

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Normally, decisions at the *Strategic Level* drive *Operations*. Decisions at the *Operational Level* then drive the *Tactical Level*. However, decisions at the *Tactical Level* can have a great effect upon *Strategy* and *Operations*. The outcomes of battles can effect *Operations*. Due to modern global communications, some *Tactical Level* decisions can affect *Strategic* policy.

**“The Strategic Corporal.”** You are patrolling an African city when you take sniper fire. Your whole squad returns fire and 12 innocent civilians are killed. The modern media broadcasts the event across the world. At the *Operational Level*, all patrolling stops. The U.S. is widely criticized in the world press. America is forced to pull out its forces and abandon its *Strategic* goals. Whose decision drove national policy? Your decision did.



# What is COMBINED ARMS?

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**Combined Arms.** *Combined Arms* is more than simply using multiple weapons systems upon the enemy. *Combined Arms* traps the enemy and leaves him no way to escape. *Combined Arms* is about employing your organic weapons, supporting arms and maneuver so the enemy is faced with a dilemma. To avoid one threat, he will expose himself to another.

In a fighting hole, an enemy is protected from your rifle fire. If you drop a grenade in his hole, he is faced with a no-win situation. If he jumps out of his hole, he faces your fire. If he remains, the grenade will kill him. He has no escape.

*Combined Arms* demands tactical proficiency. You must know the effects and methods for employing many types of weapons. Your fires must have effects upon the enemy physically, and upon his will to fight.

**Integrating your Fires.** *Combined Arms* seeks to fully integrate weapons systems and maneuver into one cohesive effort. In order to avoid artillery fire, the enemy must seek cover. This allows you to maneuver against him and gain a positional advantage. At the fireteam level, the fireteam leader can suppress a target with the M203 while other members maneuver to use their direct fire weapons.

Using mortars, artillery and naval gunfire on one target is *not* *Combined Arms*. The enemy's response to each of these is the same.

Weapons systems are not the only assets that you must use. *Combined Arms* means the use of deception, surprise and unorthodox tactics in combinations to keep the enemy guessing.

**Summary.** The use of *Combined Arms* applies even at the squad and fireteam levels. *Combined Arms* demands that you use your assets in combinations which leave the enemy no options.

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# Combined Arms

1. Combined Arms is NOT just a listing of all types of weapons [MAGTF inventory]
2. Combined Arms is using your organic fires, supporting fires, and maneuver so that the action which the enemy takes to avoid one threat makes him more vulnerable to another.
  - a. Mortars, Artillery and MLRS are NOT combined arms
  - b. Minefield and AT Weapons example
  - c. Machine gun and grenade launcher example
  - d. Envelopment supported by BOF example
3. Fire. Fire has three functions: suppression, the making the enemy less effective by forcing him to avoid your fire, disruption, causing upheavals to his C2, logistics and other functions, and attrition, causing casualties.
4. Cooperation
5. Indirect Fire
6. Combined Arms and the Squad Leader. You are a combined arms warrior. You create combined arms combinations. You coordinate fires. These are not skills that only FACs, FOs or Battalion FSCs can handle.
  - a. Know the principles
  - b. Know the effects, capabilities and limitations of your organic weapons:  
M249, M203, M16A2
  - c. Know the effects, capabilities and limitations of your company-level weapons:  
M240G, Mk154, M224  
Know the Co SOPs for weapons employment
  - d. Know the effects, capabilities and limitations of your battalion-level weapons:  
M2, Mk19, M47, M220 TOW, M252 81mm  
Know the Bn SOPs for weapons employment
  - e. Know how to call and adjust mortar fire  
Know how to call and adjust artillery fire  
Know how to call and adjust Close Air Support (CAS)  
Know how to call and adjust Naval Surface Fire Support (NSFS)  
It is not enough to know the concepts and ideas. The goal is to DO combined arms tactics and techniques, not simply understand them. There is a big difference between a conversation and steel on target.

Page 4 contains an opinion on enemy vehicle identification, my forte.

Please send me your opinions and suggestions. Thanks. BBM

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## A Combined Arms Discussion

**Combined Arms?** The Marine Corps is a very large, integrated **Combined Arms** organization. A MAGTF is a **Combined Arms** team. A CAX is a **Combined Arms** Exercise. The U.S. Army's 9th Division (Light) is composed of CABs, **Combined Arms** Battalions. **Combined Arms?** What is **Combined Arms**?

Most of the People who use the above terms would define **Combined Arms** as either the inventory of weapons, from rifle to airplane, available to a single commander, or as the combination of combat, support and service support units combined in a single organization. Listing a collection of weapons or units is simple, using these weapons to maximum advantage is not.

- An enemy tank column receives fire from an anti-tank missile. The response: spread out and take evasive action. They run into a minefield. The response: form a column behind a mine plow and sweep a corridor through the field. That then creates a perfect target for the anti-tank

**Combined Arms is two or more weapons which when used together put the enemy in a dilemma. His response to one weapon, his actions to avoid it, make him more susceptible to the effects of the other weapon, and vice-versa.**

missiles! The tank commander is stuck on the horns of a dilemma. His response to one weapon makes him more susceptible to another. A minefield covered by fire is an example of **Combined Arms**.

- The classic **Combined Arms** problem is an infantry assault on a position that is being suppressed by artillery fire. Poor coordination sometimes results in a time lapse. The artillery stops firing before the infantry attacks. The enemy, instead of being forced to respond to two threats simultaneously, responds to each threat indi-

vidually. This is a failed attempt at **Combined Arms!**

- A well-dug-in enemy position is brought under fire by mortars, artillery and an air strike. The enemy's response, to hunker down deep in his hole, is sufficient to protect him from all three weapons systems. This is an inefficient use of resources. This is **NOT Combined Arms!**

Ideally, the enemy commander, faced with a deadly dilemma, will decide that his position is untenable, and will give up the fight. An enemy that surrenders causes far less friendly casualties and does not slow down the tempo of operations like an enemy that fights on.

In this century, the tendency has been for smaller and smaller units to be able to practice **Combined Arms**. Today's Fire Team, with its indirect-fire weapon, the M203 grenade launcher, automatic weapon, the M249 SAW, and rifle, the M16, is actually a **Combined Arms-capable** unit.