



MARINE CORPS Gazette

Professional Journal of U.S. Marines

MARCH 2022 Vol. 106 No. 3

www.mca-marines.org/gazette



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A publication of the Marine Corps Association

What Are Your Orders, Sir?

How we train versus how we fight

by Mr. Brendan B. McBreen

Every day around the world, Marine leaders issue clear orders. Marine units execute these orders. As professionals, we emphasize correct tactical language and precise communications.

The corporal says: “We will **search** every vehicle in order to stop any VBIED from getting inside the compound.” The staff sergeant says: “We need to **block** this intersection in order to protect the airfield from insurgent vehicles.” The lieutenant says: “1st Platoon will **clear** the west side of the village in order to prevent snipers from firing on the convoys.” The captain says: “Alpha Company will **seize** the apartment building, objective two-zero, in order to control the downtown avenues of approach.”

These sentences—as well as the deliberate sentences that follow them—are orders. You have heard them, and you have issued your own, in combat, contingencies, deployments, and training. What are *your* most effective orders techniques? Where are they taught? How should Marine leaders best issue orders under pressure, in combat? These are important skills for any military organization, but our actual practices—what we do out there in the dirt—conflict with our doctrine and our training.

Why Is What We Teach So Far Removed from What We Do?

Afghanistan, 2021.

Last month, I talked to a Marine officer, a unit commander, who had issued orders on the tarmac at Kabul airfield during the evacuation. He described his orders process, built on the real-world techniques he had learned and practiced over the years. In a chaotic,

>Mr. McBreen is a former Infantry Officer who retired in 2012 after 25 years of service.

rapidly changing situation, with only verbal guidance from his own commander and almost no time for analysis or preparation, he issued verbal orders from outline notes to a mixed unit of Marines and British soldiers—just like he had trained himself to do.¹ He did so by using practical methods he had shared and discussed with leaders across the Marine Corps.² However, this was not like our schools had trained him to do.

Iraq, 2003.

Two decades ago, our commanders in Iraq said the same thing. After 6 months preparing for the first 24 hours, most leaders were unprepared

for the dynamic orders process required during the march up to Baghdad: multiple orders per day, received and issued principally on the radio, and using only hand-written notes. Our schools and our doctrine had *not* prepared them for this. One battalion’s Operation IRAQI FREEDOM after-action report observed:

“Peacetime ... training ... should move away from a detailed plan that relies on perfect situational awareness and focus on ... a chaotic, information-starved environment.”

“During training, the issuance of orders, conduct of rehearsal, and receipt of brief-backs should be conducted over the radio. Tactical decision game training for scenarios at the company level ... should require (orders) to be briefed ... over the radio.”³

From the beginning to the end of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, with thousands of orders issued, our combat-



Often in training, we place unrealistic importance on preparing and issuing long and elaborate operations orders. (Photo by SSgt Jared Becker.)

experienced leaders have pointed out the same fact: we need more realistic training and doctrine on orders.

What We Teach

Marine Corps training handouts generally recommend throwing everything into an order, as if the order was a soup pot overflowing with a hundred random ingredients. Students are given lists and lists of every possible item that might go into an order and then warned that their orders need to be “complete.” Nowhere do we discuss what to leave out. The same is true for our training standards.

The Basic School (TBS) provides baseline orders training for officers of every MOS. These lessons follow Marines throughout their careers, particularly since orders are not emphasized in later schools. However, the current 31-page TBS orders handout is a confusing mishmash of instructions, ill-defined terms, mnemonic acronyms, and lists of mandated items to put into the order.⁴ Lieutenants are not provided with any example orders or practical real-world processes.

The orders handouts for the *Staff Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) Academy* and *College of Enlisted Military Education* are largely the same, with entire sections copied from the poorly written TBS handouts.

At each *School of Infantry*, the Infantry Small Unit Leaders Course teaches orders to infantry NCOs. Their 32-page student handout for orders is overwhelming—essentially a long checklist of recommended items to pack into a squad-level order. There are no examples and no instructions on what information is needed for what types of missions. The performance checklist is *140 lines*, including 21 lines for the situation paragraph alone.⁵

Earlier this year, a sergeant sent me his final Infantry Small Unit Leaders Course order where he directed a squad to occupy a patrol base. It was ten pages of computer-printed text, an absurd product that could never be produced in the field—and all this for a straightforward task that any experienced NCO would accomplish with a few sentences and a hand gesture.



Marine Corps doctrine regarding combat orders is inconsistent and often conflicting. (Photo by SSgt Jared Becker.)

The instructors who put together these student handouts, and the commanders who sign them, are not to blame. They have no useful references. Our curriculum is generated from doctrine, and our doctrine on orders is terrible.

What We Publish

Our orders doctrine is awful. None of our infantry manuals—all updated within the last three years—explain how to issue an actual order:

- NONE includes an *example* of an order.
- NONE includes a single *sentence* of an example.
- NONE specifies *who* does *what* and *when* to produce an order.
- NONE explains parallel planning and the *orders process* between echelons.
- NONE discusses orders for different types of *operations* or different environments.
- NONE includes a realistic, annotated orders *template*.

MCRP 3-10A.2, Infantry Company Operations, is the worst of the three. The company commander is a key leader on the battlefield—directing complex tactical evolutions with attached units, indirect fires, and air—yet this manual provides almost nothing

on the critical skill of how to produce a company order.⁶

Instead, the manual is infected with operational-level terms and irrelevant Marine Corps Planning Process (MCP) concepts. The manual directs that company-level OPTs conduct an unexplained “abbreviated version” of MCP, generating useless LOE, MOP, MOE, COG, COA, and DST. But MCP does not apply at the company level.⁷ OPTs are not a company-level concept.⁸ Companies are told to produce battalion-level IPB products.⁹ Eight pages discuss *operational design*.

Multiple sentences imply that a published order, with appendices, is expected from the company. This is unrealistic. The manual includes NO guidance on how to conduct a rehearsal, NO appendix with a company orders format, and NO example of a completed company order.

MCIP 3-10A.3i, Marine Infantry Platoon, states helpfully that platoon orders are “normally issued verbally” (page 57) but contains NO example orders and NO explanation of the orders process.¹⁰

MCRP 3-10A.4, Marine Rifle Squad, also provides very little guidance on orders. This omission is especially bad in a manual intended for both infantry

small unit leaders and units serving as provisional infantry. Our junior leaders, with the *least* experience and training, should be getting the *most* guidance and the clearest examples of how to issue orders in combat. In the Figure C-4 template, fully half the entries should *never* be included in a squad, platoon, or company order: references, annexes, distribution lists, official signatures, and time zones.¹¹

What Is to Be Done

- The most important step is to rewrite our manuals. Rewrite the orders chapters for the squad, platoon, and company infantry manuals. We need to see example orders: sentences for different types of missions in different types of environments. Recommend techniques for how to copy an order in the field, make an estimate, draw a sketch, and issue an order—using hand-written notes. These pen and paper processes are combat skills that should be explained. Recommend techniques for the orders process, how orders are passed from one echelon to the next, especially when time is short. Our doctrine should focus on the nuts and bolts of the orders process, the actual steps in the field that reflect real-world practices. *The Marine Corps needs better doctrine on orders.*

- Rewrite the T&R standards for orders.¹² An effective order is not the longest order, nor the order that matches an exhaustive checklist of a hundred items. Our standards need to reflect combat scenarios, with time and information limitations: “Given a platoon defensive order, write a squad

students can later develop their own shorthand techniques—but we should train like we fight. *The Marine Corps needs better training on orders.*

- Conduct a study on actual orders issued at the company level. Collect examples of company, platoon, and squad orders issued to real Marine

Our doctrine should focus on the nuts and bolts of the orders process, the actual steps in the field that reflect real-world practices.

order, including a CONOPS sketch, using pen and paper, in 30 minutes.” *The Marine Corps needs better standards on orders.*

- Rewrite student handouts for orders. Rewrite the exercises and the evaluation criteria to reflect the real world. Forbid computer preparation of orders. Train to the Kabul Airport example—a combat standard, with limited time, limited information, written notes, and verbal orders. Eliminate the concept of a “complete order”—there is no such thing. Assign orders for non-infantry units. Some instructors advocate that we should teach the long, elaborate orders format so that our

units. Observe and record unit leaders in contingencies and combat. What kind of orders are issued? What skills are displayed? What tactics, techniques, and procedures are used? *The Marine Corps needs to capture actual orders practices, so we can train like we fight.*

The Marine Corps is not a draftee organization desperate for overly detailed directions. As long-service professionals, serving in well-trained, cohesive units, our orders process should reflect our shared doctrine, experience, and understanding of our commander’s intent. Why do our orders not reflect our tactical abilities?

Marines need to be taught to issue concise and effective orders. We need to assume competence, trust our subordinates, focus on the essential, and not waste time on the trivial. Our orders in combat—unlike artificial classroom exercises—must be precise, mission-specific, doctrinally-correct, and well-understood. *Precision language is more important than precision weapons.*



Marines should be taught to issue concise orders based on trust tactics and the initiative of subordinates. (Photo by LCpl Joseph Scanlan.)

Notes

1. Email to author on 1 October 2021.

2. Brendan McBreen and C. Skaggs, *Orders: A User’s Guide*, (The Warfighting Society, 2021). In August, 20021, Chad Skaggs and I published a guidebook of best practices on orders that we collected from three dozen experienced Marine officers and SNCOs.

3. 3/7 Mar, *3/7 Iraqi Freedom Operations and Training After-Action Report*, (Twentynine Palms, CA: 2003).

4. Staff, *Student Handout B2B0287XQ-DM, Combat Orders Foundations*, (Quantico, VA: The Basic School, n.d.). Tactical planning is defined to new lieutenants as “METT-TC → EMLCOA → CG/CV/EXP → SOM → FSP → Tasks.” The TBS *Combat Orders STEX Assistant Instructor Guide*, B2B0307D (n.d.), includes no recommendations or standards for how instructors should evaluate the orders briefed by their students.

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *School of Infantry—East, West, and Det Hawaii, Student Outline: Combat Orders*, (Washington, DC: 2018). Commanders Intent is defined (non-doctrinally) as “CG, CV, EX, and FRD”—center of gravity, critical vulnerability, exploitation plan, and final result desired.

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 3-10A.2, Infantry Company Operations*, (Washington, DC: April 2018). LOE is line of effort, MOP is measure of performance, MOE is measure of effectiveness, COG is center of gravity, COA is

course of action, and DST is decision support template. *DOD Dictionary*, Aug 2021.

7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 5-10, Marine Corps Planning Process*, (Washington, DC: August 2020). Chapter 1 clearly describes MCPP as a staff process for battalions and above. Page 1 states, “For Marine *units with staffs*, the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP) ... is a proven ... approach to planning.” The troop leading steps apply to units below the battalion.

8. There are no OPTs at the company level. By definition, OPTs are formed by staffs with a future operations section:

operational planning team (OPT): A group built around *the future operations section* that integrates the staff representatives and resources. The operational planning team may have representatives or augmentation from each of the standard staff sections, the seven warfighting functions, staff liaisons, and/or subject matter experts.

See Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 1-10.2, Marine Corps Supplement to the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (Washington, DC: May 2018).

9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 2-10B.1, Intelligence Preparation of the of the Battlespace*, (Washington, DC: May 2016). Chapter 1 clearly describes IPB as a staff process for battalions and above conducting the Marine Corps Planning Process. Page 1-1 states, “The G-2/S-2 leads this staff effort.”

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCIP 3-10A.3i, Marine Infantry Platoon*, (Washington, DC: June 2019).

11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 3-10A.4, Marine Rifle Squad*, (Washington, DC: August 2020).

12. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 3500.44D, Infantry Training and Readiness Manual*, (Washington, DC: May 2020). Tasks 0302-C2-1002 for officers and 0369-C2-2002 for SNCOs are different for some reason, but both equally lack substance. There is no attempt to define a standard for an effective order



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