

900 Orders

By Brendan McBreen

A **lieutenant** asked me last week where I had learned to issue orders. “It wasn’t a place,” I said, “It was a process.” I thought back to my time at the Infantry Officer Course (IOC) when I was a lieutenant:

Let me get this straight. In less than a month, I’ll be making tactical decisions and issuing orders to Marines in combat. They won’t know who I am. They won’t know if I’m competent. But they will know that I have zero experience. I can’t fake it. I’ve got to make myself as capable as possible: on tactics, decision making, and combat orders. The Marine Corps expects that. My Marines deserve that.

Four years later, I was in Somalia on my third deployment. Mogadishu was on fire, collapsing in a chaotic turmoil of tribal conflict and warlord-on-warlord violence. We—38 Marines and four HMMWVs—were assembled on the beach, at night, south of Mogadishu. On the radio, the MEU passed an anxious report about six blacked-out militia vehicles heading in our direction. The battalion XO was furious because the LCACs were not coming back for us in the dark: “Hold the beach.”

I secured the handset and showed the platoon sergeant my defensive order. It was three short paragraphs, six sentences, and a fire plan sketch, anchored on four interlocking machinegun positions and good narrow dirt—flank defilade. “What do you think, staff sergeant?”

He smiled. “I think that’s *your* job, lieutenant.”



Somalia, 1994.

Damn right. He was a tough professional and our confidence in each other was well-established. We *knew* what we were doing.

Over next two decades, I wrote or edited over 900 orders. Every Marine develops their own orders process. This was mine.

The Basic School (TBS). One weekend at TBS, I wrote an order for homework. It took a long time, and I thought about the instruction we had received: “This cannot be how we do it in combat.” I had read an article by Michael Wyly who said that the orders he issued in Vietnam looked nothing like his orders at TBS, especially with their overwhelming focus on control measures. I discussed this with our TBS tactics instructor, who seemed resigned, “that’s what’s in the manual.” [2 orders]

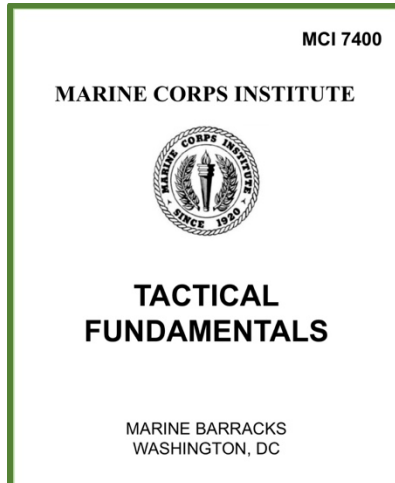
Deployed. During my first three deployments, I issued dozens of orders to my Marines in combat, contingencies, and training. With 48 months as a lieutenant in the infantry battalion, I gained extensive operational experience and my orders reflected my growing tactical confidence and competence. Most importantly, in a well-trained unit, I learned what *not* to say in an order. My real-world orders did not look at all like the orders I had written at TBS. [24 orders]

Tactical Fundamentals. On float, I completed Marine Corps Institute (MCI) course 7400 *Tactical Fundamentals*, the five-volume series which was required for all lieutenants. This excellent MCI, written by Tim Jackson, required each student to make a series of tactical decisions, write their orders, and then discuss these orders with their company commander, who graded them. [12 orders]

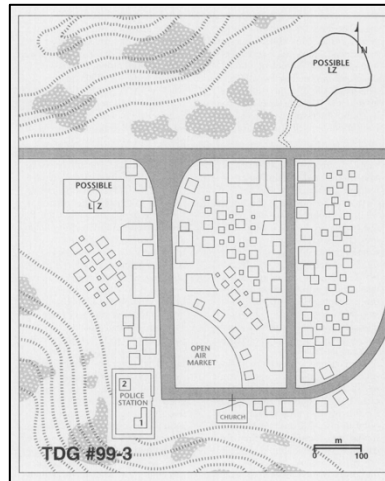
Tactical Decision Games (TDGs). One of my professional military education (PME) goals as a lieutenant, and then as a captain, was to submit a TDG order every month to the *Marine Corps Gazette*. I successfully submitted—minus deployments and other training obligations—about half the problems over the course of ten years. TDGs really helped me to develop good habits: for making estimates, making decisions, and then communicating orders quickly and clearly. [50 orders]

Quantico. The Wargaming Division, for a Korean scenario, tasked me to write the notional orders for the 3d Marine Division and three Regimental Landing Teams. This was an overwhelming task for a Captain. But I read the war plan, wrote the four orders and then watched 100 Majors execute my orders. I learned that big orders were the same as small orders, and that nesting—where the mission at each echelon parallels the higher headquarters intent—is critical in large unit operations. [4 orders]

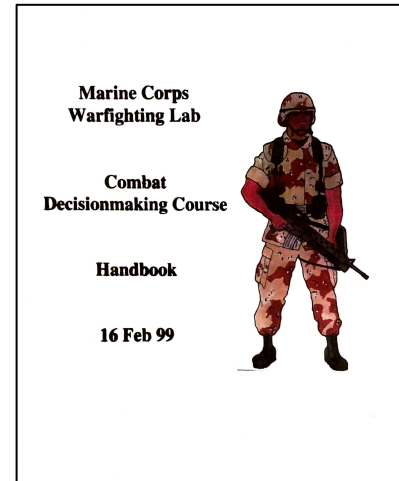
Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL). As a Captain, I designed the *Combat Decisionmaking Course* to teach NCOs the tactical decision making and orders skills normally taught to officers. I had visited a British Army NCO course where *every student wrote an order every day*—on a single card in the field, in the rain. With a team of contractors—all Vietnam veterans—we facilitated hundreds of student orders for multiple courses during the initial *Sea Dragon* experiments, and taught practical techniques for constructing orders that would be well-understood by Marines. [300 orders]



MCI 7400 *Tactical Fundamentals*



Marine Corps Gazette TDG



Combat Decisionmaking Course

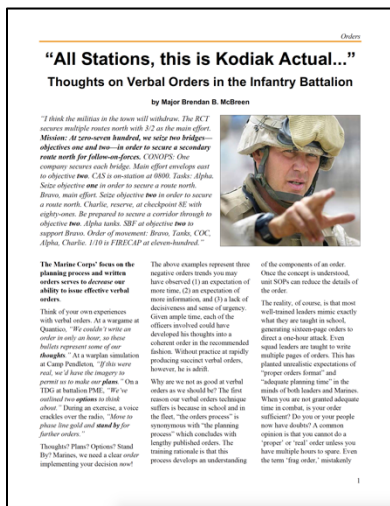
Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS). Five of my peers fought on Tuesday nights—Branstetter, Schuehle, Byron, Evans, and Collins. I reserved a room at the Research Center and bought a laptop wargame and a large map. We wrote our orders on pre-printed templates and fought as brigade and division commanders—far above our rank. I continued this practice, fighting with other Marines in other places—Okinawa, 29 Palms, and Quantico—for years. Fighting your peers triggers tremendous professional discussions—on the enemy, tactics, orders, and doctrine. [90 orders]

Kodiak Actual. At Camp Pendleton, I wrote “Kodiak Actual: Thoughts on Verbal Orders in the Infantry Battalion” to share the orders techniques that we had trained on as company-grade officers

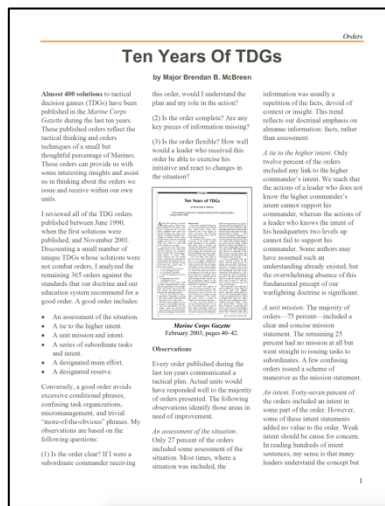
and that I had used as a company commander, battalion operations officer, and regimental operations officer with 5th Marines. A sergeant in the S-3 showed me how to post this article to the new website I had started: www.2ndbn5thmar.com. [18 orders]

Ten Years of TDGs. As a major at Quantico, I reviewed the first 400 TDG orders that had been published by the *Marine Corps Gazette*. My article, “Ten Years of TDGs” summarized the trends these orders displayed, identified strengths and weaknesses, and recommended best practices for improving our written orders. [400 orders]

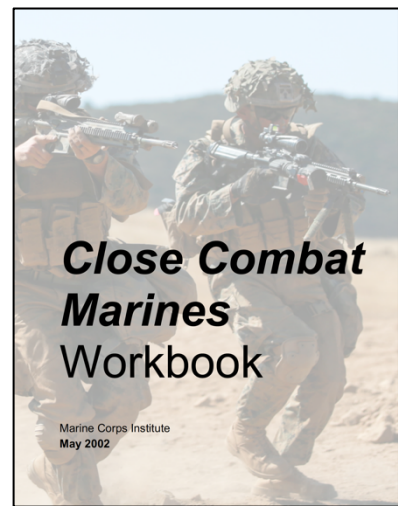
Close Combat Marines. For the Marine Corps Institute, I wrote the *Close Combat Marines Workbook*—including scenarios and higher headquarters orders—to enable Marines to make tactical decisions, develop their own orders, and fight the simulation. The *Close Combat Marines* computer wargame had recently been developed and distributed by the Marine Corps. [12 orders]



“Kodiak Actual”



“Ten Years of TDGs”



Close Combat Marines Workbook

CENTCOM. After SAW, I spent a year as a lead war planner at CENTCOM. I wrote and edited over 100 annexes and appendices—orders—for a high-priority war plan in the Middle East. [100 orders]

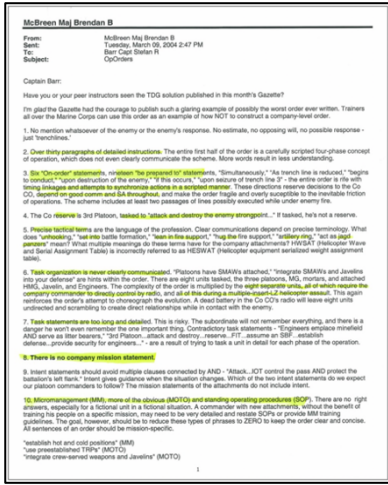
Unit PME. As a battalion commander, company commander, and warfighting instructor, I led unit PME events that focused on fighting. Our map exercises, TDGs, and battles studies all required *decisions* before discussions—analysis of the terrain, estimates of the enemy, and an actual order. Combat scenario training is particularly valuable for internalizing the value of reconnaissance and learning to act with limited information. [48 orders]

My Marines practiced critiquing each other’s orders, learning from each other in order to improve their techniques. Twice, I submitted orders critiques to our instructor staff at IOC and TTECG to contribute to the discussion on how best to teach orders. See Enclosures (1) and (2).

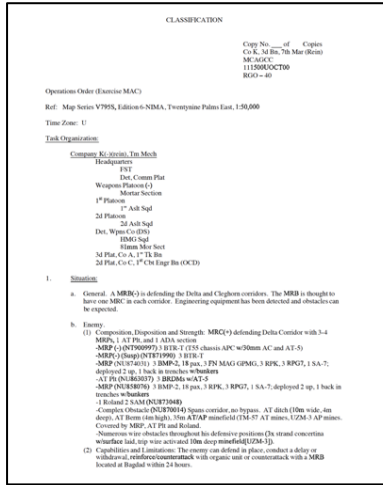
Orders: A User’s Guide. This year, Chad Skaggs and I wrote [Orders: A User’s Guide](#) to help Marines develop their own orders procedures. We collected best practices from leaders across the Marine Corps and published recommended techniques for concise and effective orders.

The primary skill for Marine leaders is communications—directing their units in combat. Developing this skill requires focused practice with peers and mentors. Practice, critique, and repetition—

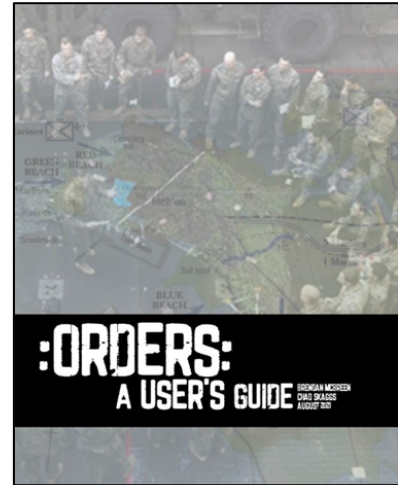
especially repetition—improve your orders. Leaders of all ranks need to internalize strong orders techniques so that they are second nature in the chaos of combat.



Letter to IOC



Letter to TTECG



Orders: A User's Guide

Fight. We all need to fight. Every month. The Marine Corps is a combat organization, ready to fight tonight. All of our other activities—everything we do on a daily basis—are supporting efforts. Combat scenarios—map exercises, TDGs, and wargames—train us to make rapid decisions and issue orders with incomplete information, insufficient resources, and changing situations. Writing makes a Marine precise.

The Marine Corps cannot provide you with enough opportunities to make decisions and issue orders. You have to drive your own PME efforts and develop your own scenario training. Because our units are so busy, some of our best professional development occurs in B-billets. Put yourself in combat situations. Make decisions. Write orders. Fight your boss. Fight your peers. Fight online. Practice, practice, and practice!

McBreen Maj Brendan B

From: McBreen Maj Brendan B
Sent: Tuesday, March 09, 2004 2:47 PM
To: Barr Capt Stefan R
Subject: OpOrders

Captain Barr:

Have you or your peer instructors seen the TDG solution published in this month's Gazette?

I'm *glad* the Gazette had the courage to publish such a glaring example of possibly the worst order ever written. Trainers all over the Marine Corps can use this order as an example of how NOT to construct a company-level order.

1. No mention whatsoever of the enemy or the enemy's response. No estimate, no opposing will, no possible response - just 'trenchlines.'
2. **Over thirty paragraphs of detailed instructions.** The entire first half of the order is a carefully scripted four-phase concept of operation, which does not even clearly communicate the scheme. More words result in less understanding.
3. **Six "On-order" statements, nineteen "be prepared to" statements, "Simultaneously," "As trench line is reduced," "begins to conduct," "upon destruction of the enemy," "if this occurs," "upon seizure of trench line 3" - the entire order is rife with timing linkages and attempts to synchronize actions in a scripted manner.** These directions reserve decisions to the Co CO, depend on good comm and SA throughout, and make the order fragile and overly susceptible to the inevitable friction of operations. The scheme includes at least two passages of lines possibly executed while under enemy fire.
4. The Co reserve is 3rd Platoon, tasked to "attack and destroy the enemy strongpoint..." If tasked, he's not a reserve.
5. **Precise tactical terms** are the language of the profession. Clear communications depend on precise terminology. What does "unhooking," "set into battle formation," "lean in fire support," "hug the fire support," "artillery ring," "act as jagd panzers" mean? What multiple meanings do these terms have for the company attachments? HWSAT (Helicopter Wave and Serial Assignment Table) is incorrectly referred to as HESWAT (Helicopter equipment serialized weight assignment table).
6. **Task organization is never clearly communicated.** "Platoons have SMAWs attached," "integrate SMAWs and Javelins into your defense" are hints within the order. There are eight units tasked, the three platoons, MG, mortars, and attached HMG, Javelin, and Engineers. The complexity of the order is multiplied by the **eight separate units, all of which require the company commander to directly control by radio, and all of this during a multiple-insert-LZ helicopter assault.** This again reinforces the order's attempt to choreograph the evolution. A dead battery in the Co CO's radio will leave eight units undirected and scrambling to create direct relationships while in contact with the enemy.
7. **Task statements are too long and detailed.** This is risky. The subordinate will not remember everything, and there is a danger he won't even remember the one important thing. Contradictory task statements - "Engineers emplace minefield AND serve as litter bearers," "3rd Platoon...attack and destroy...reserve...FIT...assume an SBF...establish defense...provide security for engineers..." - are a result of trying to task a unit in detail for each phase of the operation.
8. **There is no company mission statement.**
9. Intent statements should avoid multiple clauses connected by AND - "Attack...IOT control the pass AND protect the battalion's left flank." Intent gives guidance when the situation changes. Which of the two intent statements do we expect our platoon commanders to follow? The mission statements of the attachments do not include intent.
10. **Micromanagement (MM), more of the obvious (MOTO) and standing operating procedures (SOP).** There are no right answers, especially for a fictional unit in a fictional situation. A commander with new attachments, without the benefit of training his people on a specific mission, may need to be very detailed and restate SOPs or provide MM training guidelines. The goal, however, should be to reduce these types of phrases to ZERO to keep the order clear and concise. All sentences of an order should be mission-specific.

"establish hot and cold positions" (MM)
 "use preestablished TRPs" (MOTO)
 "integrate crew-served weapons and Javelins" (MOTO)

"at 100 rounds per minute" (MM)
 "six rounds per minute, alternating tubes" (MM)
 "conserve ammunition" (MOTO)
 "keep accountability of all personnel" (MOTO)
 "bring resupplies into designated LZ" (SOP)
 "ensure ammunition is resupplied" (SOP)
 "collect all casualties" (MOTO)
 "quickly set into...position" "quickly displace" (MOTO)
 "with connector files" (SOP)
 "handle prisoners of war" (SOP)

11. Conditional statements should be avoided. One, they reduce confidence. Two, they inject "if-then" options into the order, increasing its complexity. Three, they give subordinate leaders a fall-back when difficulties are encountered. "Optimum criteria," "if fires are effective," "if artillery is unable," and "If this occurs" are phrases to be avoided.

I've got a lot of philosophies on techniques for creating concise oporders:
<http://www.2ndbn5thmar.com/orders/>

Semper Fi
 BBM

TDGs

Solutions to TDG #04-1

Tactical Decision Game #04-1, "Attack and Seize the Pass," was presented in *MCG, Jan04* and is reprinted here.

You are the company commander of a rifle company that has been reinforced with the following assets: engineers, 50 caliber machineguns, and Javelins that are all foot mobile. Your total strength is 174 Marines and sailors. Platoons consist of 28 Marines to include corporals. Weapons platoon is robust with complete sections: 18 Marines with 6 M240G machineguns, 13 Marines with 6 Mk153 shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapons, and 13 Marines with 3 60mm mortars. Attachments, as stated, are the following: 8 engineers, 10 Marines with two 50 caliber machineguns, and 10 Marines with 3 Javelins.

Your mission is to attack and seize a platoon (reinforced) strongpoint. It is reinforced with three BMPs (Soviet mechanized infantry vehicle) and possible SA-7 man-portable air defense systems. The enemy has typical Soviet-style small arms with medium machineguns and rocket propelled grenade assets. It is critical that this strongpoint is destroyed and the ground to the northwest of the objective be held to protect the battalion's movement on the left flank of the pass.

The area is a narrow pass in a mountainous and desert terrain. The average temperature is 90 degrees during the day and 60 degrees at night. The enemy is a platoon (reinforced) and has been in the vicinity of the pass for 2 weeks. This has allowed the enemy to prepare minefields, trenches, and harden vehicles in the vicinity of the trenches. All minefields are covered with wire, interlocking fire, and 10 meters in depth. Two of the BMPs are in a hardened position while the remaining BMP acts as a mobile reserve. All intelligence of the site is recent to within 6 hours due to recent unmanned aerial

vehicle flights in the area in preparation for the battalion's movement. The S-2 (intelligence) reports that the enemy position appears isolated, and its purpose is possibly to serve as a "tripwire" for units moving into the vicinity of the pass. In addition, the enemy's parent mechanized battalion is 20 kilometers away.

As stated, your battalion will be moving to your left along a separate corridor to the southwest. The battalion is mechanized with a company of tanks in the lead. They will be moving through the valley in 4 hours. Your mission is to seize the pass. In addition, your company must be prepared to defend the area and protect the battalion's flank until they seize their objective. (Not shown on the map.)

As a helicopter force your company must move swiftly to destroy the enemy in the pass while reserving combat power for immediate follow-on operations. To aid in your attack, the company will have a section of AH-1. In and one section of fixed-wing for 1 hour prior to and during your initial arrival into the landing zone (LZ). With two LZs identified (LZs Hawk and Sparrow), the company will have a lift capability of three CH-53s and six CH-46s. To aid in communications, one Huey will serve as "command and control" and aid with initial fire support coordination then pass the "baton" once forces are aground and a "battle handover" is conducted. Fire support will be robust initially with one artillery battery in direct support for the attack.

Solution A

Company Commander's Frog Order

To all: "This operation occurs in four phases: Phase I—initial fire support via forward air controller (airborne) (FAC(A)) and landing of helicopter company; Phase II—fire support pass from FAC(A) to fire support team (FST) and

land force moves to the attack; Phase III—company attack with supporting fire; Phase IV—consolidation, hasty defense, and receive resupply.

"During Phase I the following actions will be accomplished:

- Designate target reference points (TRPs) for each trench system. Designate target reference numbers (TRNs) for strongpoints and key terrain in the area.
- Designate LZs, initial points, and establish fires via FAC(A) and battery giving a destruction criteria before moving the helicopter force inbound. Optimum destruction criteria is the removal of three of four BMPs, removal of listening posts/observation posts, and effective suppression of SA-7 threat and man-portable air defense systems.
- In accordance with the HDSWAT (helicopter equipment serialized weight assignment table), land first waves into LZ Hawk and LZ Sparrow respectively and quickly establish FST to prepare for battle handover. Also have the company quickly set into battle formation and ready to lean in fire support.
- Simultaneously as the FST is established, elements of 50 caliber machinegun (MG) and 60mm mortar section need to establish fires enabling the company to have constant support for the attack once the company is ready.
- Concentrate on targets left to right and suppressing key areas vital to the company's attack using preestablished TRPs and TRNs. TRPs are 1 through 5, and targets are AB 1400 and AB 1401.

"During Phase II:

- FAC(A) continues fires and notifies of bomb damage assessment

For more detailed information on the structure of Marine Corps units, Marine Corps equipment, and symbols used in TDG sketches, see the MCG and site at www.2ndbn5thmar.com/orders/.

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Marine Corps Gazette, March 2004, page 66–68.

Enclosure 1. McBreen Letter to IOC.

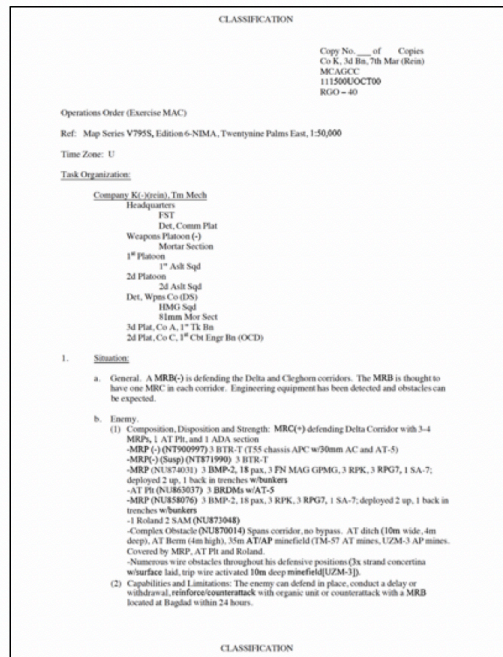
To: TTECG:
 Fm: Maj Brendan B. McBreen

Subj: IMPROVING COMPANY ORDERS FOR LIVE-FIRE RANGE EVENTS

1. **TTECG is more important than our schools.** Marines remember the combat lessons that they are taught on the live-fire ranges at Twentynine Palms. TTECG standards and evaluations are how our units learn to fight. The below example orders show how our leaders are being trained for combat: by carefully scripting an exact sequence of events in painstakingly precise detail. Our orders should emphasize reconnaissance, flexibility, and initiative. TTECG should teach us better orders processes, that reflect the requirements of combat.

Notes on Example Company Range Order

2. **This order, at six pages, could never be executed in combat.** It was written to be graded, which means the TTECG grading criteria make this order worse. When we train without an enemy, we become over-confident. We start to believe that we can control every event. Our scripted orders reflect our scripted training. But combat does not follow a script. We need to train for a chaotic, dynamic clash with a thinking enemy. This order:



Example Company Range Order, six pages.

- Assumes perfect intelligence on static enemy positions, which de-emphasizes the importance of reconnaissance.
- Describes an overly-complex concept of operations, with no clearly-defined main effort.
- Lists 36 tasks, each cluttered with grids and detachment instructions. One platoon has 11 tasks. Which one is key?
- Includes nine on-order statements, reflecting the commander’s belief that he can control the exact flow of events.
- Contains 21 coordinating instructions, 16 grids, six changes in order of movement, and eight withdrawal criteria.
- Restates ordinary admin and logistics details that should be SOP: “Contact CoGySgt for resupply.”
- Defines eight different pyrotechnic signals. What is the potential for mis-communication?

Notes on Example Company Matrix Order

3. **This order could never have been executed in combat.** This is not how we fight.
4. The matrix format encourages bad orders. The company commander listed every attachment and then tasked all 12 units across six phases for a total of 72 tasks! This is a gross misunderstanding of task organization and how to task subordinates. What is the main effort's most important task? It is lost in the matrix.
5. The matrix format reflects peace-time training by trying to control tactical events with a precise script. But combat is not a complex ballet of precise phases.
6. The matrix format encourages phasing, even for small-unit tactics. MAGTF-level phases change over time as the mission changes. "Occupy the SBF" is not a phase. If there is a follow-on objective, the CO should issue another order.
7. TTECG needs to train us like we fight:
 - Require realistic orders for all range events. Evaluate orders.
 - Teach task organization: fewer units with one leader for each major task.
 - Teach tasking: task only direct subordinates. Attachments are tasked by unit leaders.
 - Emphasize the main effort and the primary task of the main effort. Prohibit phases.
 - Emphasize unit SOPs. Teach Marines what NOT to put into an order.

EVENT	ISOLATE BREACH SITE	BREACH	SECURE COMPANY OBJ 1	SECURE COMPANY OBJ 2	SECURE COMPANY OBJ 3	CONSOLIDATION
ME 2ND PLATOON	IN ASSAULT POSITION	FOLLOW 3RD PLATOON	MOVEMENT THROUGH WASH EST SBF 1 & SUPPRESS OBJ 2 PREPARED TO ATTACK OBJ 3	ATTACK OBJ 2	ATTACK OBJ 3	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
SE1 3RD PLATOON	IN ASSAULT POSITION	FOLLOW 1ST PLATOON THROUGH BREACH ASSIST WITH CASUALTIES	MOVE WEST OF SBF 2 & ATTACK OBJ 1A. ONCE SECURE EST SBF 3 PREPARED TO SHIFT FIRES WHEN 1ST BEGINS ATTACK. SHIFT TO OBJ 1	SBF 3 ACTIVE (SUPPRESS OBJ 2, SHIFT TO OBJ 1)	OO CEASE FIRES ON OBJ 3	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
SE2 1ST PLATOON	IN ASSAULT POSITION	FOLLOW CO THROUGH BREACH ONCE MG EST SBF 1 & HAVE SUPPRESSION MOVE INTO WASH & BEGIN W/T TOWARD OBJ 1. PROVIDE P/N SECURITY FOR JAV.	BREACH EST SBF 1 VIC OF OBJECTIVE & SUPPRESS OBJ 1. PREPARED TO CEASE ONCE 1ST PLT SECURES OBJ 1A PREPARED TO ATTACK OBJ 1B	SBF 3 ACTIVE, SUPPRESS OBJ 2, SHIFT TO OBJ 3	010 CEASE FIRES ON OBJ 1, PREPARED TO ASSUME ATTACK IF 2ND PLT NEEDS ASSISTANCE	M W/T TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
MG Section	IN ASSAULT POSITION	FIRST THROUGH BREACH EST SBF 1 ON MG HILL. FIRES ON OBJ 1A, 1B. RAPID FIRE FOR 30 SECONDS, SUSTAINED RATE	PREPARED TO SHIFT FROM 1A TO 1B, FROM 1B TO OBJ 2	CEASE FIRES	SAME	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
Items	MORTAR POSITION 1	WHEN REAL BREACH IS BLOWN FIRE ON TARGETS AD 2402 (1 of every 2 min), AD 2401 (1 of every 2 min), AD 2403 (1 of every 2 min)	010 CEASE AD 2401, CONTINUE FIRES ON AD 2402 (1 of every 2 min), AD 2403 (1 of every 2 min)	OO CEASE AD 2402, SPT FIRE AD 2403	LAY MORTARS ON ENEMY REINFORCEMENT AVENUE OF APPROACH	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
Items	MORTAR POSITION 2	WHEN DECEPTION BREACH IS BLOWN AT M4 SUPPRESS OF AD 2401 (1 min) WHEN REAL BREACH IS BLOWN FIRE ON OBJ 1 AD 2401 (1 of every 30 seconds)	010 CEASE AD 2401, CONTINUE FIRES ON AD 2402 (1 of every 30 seconds)	010 CEASE AD 2402	CEASE FIRES	M W/T TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
ENIS	10 BREACH SITE(S), PREP CHARGES FOR DECEPTION & REAL BREACH	AT M4 BLOW DECEPTION BREACH. AT M4 BLOW REAL BREACH. MARK & PROOF LANE. PREFER GROUND ENEMY. PROVIDE SECURITY AT EXIT. FOLLOW & SPT 1st PLT	FOLLOW IN TRACE OF 1st PLATOON	ON OBJ 1 WITH 1ST PLATOON PREPARED TO SUPPORT	SAME	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
JAVELIN	IN HIDE POSITION	FOLLOW MG THROUGH BREACH EST FIRING FROM EAST SIDE OF HILL. FIRE ON OBJ 1	PREPARED TO FIRE AT TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY	SAME	SAME	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
HMS	IN HIDE POSITION	WHEN DECEPTION BREACH IS BLOWN SUPPRESS OF OBJ 1 MINUTE. WHEN REAL BREACH IS BLOWN SHIFT FIRES TO OBJ 2. SUSTAINED RATE	SHIFT FIRES FROM OBJ 2 TO OBJ 1	FIRES ON OBJ 3, 010 CEASE	NO FIRES	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
Items	IN FIRING POSITION	ONCE REAL BREACH IS BLOWN FIRE ON TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY. PRIORITY IS OF THEN OBJ 1	FIRE ON TARGETS ON OBJ 2	FIRES ON OBJ 3	CEASE FIRES	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP
CO	IN ASSAULT POSITION	FOLLOW JAVS THROUGH BREACH. OPENING HILL. CORP/SMN EST/COPT/BN/COY/SGT OF MG HILL	ON MG HILL	SAME	SAME	MVT TO AFTER ACTION, VIC OP

Example Company Matrix Order