

Close Combat and Learning Infantry Tactics

by Major Brendan B. McBreen USMC

I have practiced more small-unit infantry tactics fighting the Close Combat simulation than I have in fourteen years of Marine Corps infantry experience.

Close Combat is a computer combat simulation published by Atomic Games. The focus of the simulation is on infantry combat at the small-unit level.

The series currently consists of five titles: *Close Combat I: Omaha Beach*, *II: A Bridge Too Far*, *III: The Russian Front*, *IV: Battle of the Bulge*, and *V: Invasion Normandy*.

The Marine Corps version, *Close Combat Marine*, will soon be released by the Training and Education Command.



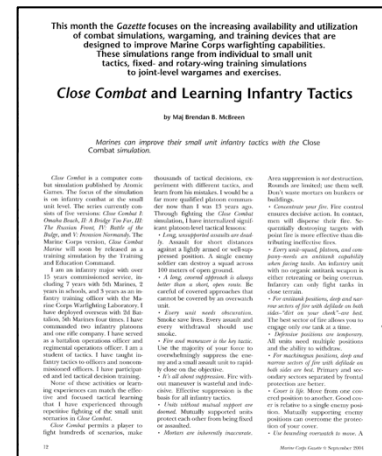
I am an infantry major with thirteen years commissioned service, seven years with 5th

Marines, two years in schools, and three years as an infantry training officer with the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab. I have deployed overseas with 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines four times. I have commanded two infantry platoons and one rifle company. I have served as a battalion operations officer and regimental operations officer. I am a student of tactics. I have taught officers and NCOs infantry tactics. I have participated and led tactical decision training.

None of these activities or learning experiences can match the effective and focused tactical learning that I have experienced through repetitive fighting of the small unit scenarios in *Close Combat*.

Close Combat permits a player to fight hundreds of combat scenarios, make thousands of tactical decisions, experiment with different tactics, and learn from his mistakes. I would be a far more qualified platoon commander now than I was thirteen years ago. Through fighting the *Close Combat* simulation, I have internalized significant platoon-level tactical lessons:

- *Long unsupported assaults are deadly.* Assault for short distances, against a lightly armed or well-suppressed position. A single enemy soldier can destroy a squad crossing 100 meters of open ground.



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- *A long covered approach is always better than a short open route.* Be careful of covered approaches that cannot be covered by an overwatching unit.
- *Every unit needs obscuration.* Smoke save lives. Every assault and every withdrawal should use smoke.

- *Fire and maneuver is the key tactic.* Use the majority of your force to overwhelmingly suppress the enemy, and a small assault unit to rapidly close on the objective.
- *It's all about suppression.* Fire without maneuver is wasteful and indecisive. Effective suppression is the basis for all infantry tactics.
- *Units without mutual support are doomed.* Mutually supported units protect each other from being fixed or assaulted.
- *Mortars are inherently inaccurate.* Area suppression is NOT destruction. Rounds are limited, use them well. Don't waste mortars on bunkers or buildings.
- *Concentrate your fire.* Fire control insures decisive action. In contact, men will disperse their fire. Sequentially destroying targets with point fire is more effective than distributing ineffective fires.
- *Every unit—squad, platoon, and company—needs antitank capability when facing tanks.* An infantry unit with no organic antitank weapon is either retreating or being overrun. Infantry can only fight tanks in close terrain.
- *For anti-tank positions, deep and narrow sectors of fire with defilade on both sides – “dirt on your cheek” – are best.* The best sector of fire allows you to engage only one tank at a time.
- *Defensive positions are temporary.* All units need

multiple positions and the ability to withdraw.

- *For machinegun positions, deep and narrow sectors of fire, with defilade on both sides, are best.* Primary and secondary sectors separated by frontal protection are better.
- *Cover is life.* Move from one covered position to another. Good cover is relative to a single enemy position. Mutually supporting enemy positions can overcome the protection of your cover.
- *Use bounding overwatch to move.* A squad in contact needs immediate suppression from another unit. The measure of success is the number of units that can immediately bring suppression to bear upon enemy contact.

Good Marine leaders know all of these lessons. They have been taught, they have read, they have trained to do them. But I, and those Marines who have fought *Close Combat*, know these lessons in our bones. We know the penalty for mistakes, for misreading the situation, for making decisions too late.

Hundreds of simulated men have died in botched assaults, poorly laid positions, and as a result of unexpected enemy actions in order to teach these lessons. We have examined the ground, checked the line-of-sight, positioned the units, and supervised the units in contact so many times that the key tactical principles have become ingrained as second nature.

I have defended three hundred road intersections. Not just the

first step of putting a defensive scheme on paper, but all the way through to initiation of combat, falling back to supplementary positions under pressure, and sometimes being overrun by the enemy because I failed to protect my machine gun positions.

I cannot now walk across a street without seeing in my mind the intersection occupied: “An anti-tank weapon tucked into that low position with an oblique field of fire and good defilade, machineguns here and here, one squad forward with an alternate position near the guns, one squad on the corner in case they put infantry down that alley.”

The historical methods for teaching tactics, walking the ground, working through the examples in the manuals, tactical decision games, and actual field exercises, are important and must be done by all leaders. Schools and units must focus on real leaders, real units, and real ground.

To augment this practical training however, leaders need to experience the chaotic challenges of combat hundreds of times. As an inexpensive and easy-to-use tool to teach a Marine leader the dynamics of tactics, the *Close Combat* simulation is matchless.

- *Repetition.* In order to understand and identify patterns, Marines need hundreds of simulated examples. In order to internalize lessons, Marines need to fight an active enemy and suffer from their own tactical mistakes. Through repetition, the basic lessons

become so well known that advanced tactics and experimentation can be attempted. Only with the experience of fighting through a hundred enemy positions can a leader look for weaknesses in a given position and initiate creative ways to exploit that weakness. Reading the subtle aspects of a tactical situation is a learned skill that requires far more practice than is currently available outside of a simulation.

- *Efficient use of time.* Schools and units schedule training time. Far more time is typically available to individuals in the gaps.

Weekends, nights, travel time, and dead time can all be used for individual simulation training. This time is usually far more plentiful than that allocated to formal learning environments. In the operating forces, opportunities for individualized learning should be maximized.

- *Peer competition.* Marines can fight each other on a simulated battlefield. These tactical learning experiences, heightened by professional rivalry, can serve as a catalyst for doctrinal discussions, an opportunity to build leader cohesion, and a chance to compare tactics and

techniques among professionals. The *Close Combat* simulation is a great tool while deployed either on ship, on exercise, or overseas.

Close Combat is a valuable training tool. I recommend it to all Marine leaders interested in improving their small-unit tactical skills. Fight the scenarios. Fight your peers. *Fight to learn to win.*

Major McBreen is currently a student at the School of Advanced Warfighting.

