
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
THE BASIC SCHOOL
MARINE CORPS TRAINING COMMAND
CAMP BARRETT, VIRGINIA 22134-5019

INTRODUCTION TO RIFLE PLATOON OPERATIONS

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Introduction to Rifle Platoon Operations

Introduction

The Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy of maneuver warfare is rooted in the principles of war. The principles of war are useful aids to a commander as he considers how to accommodate his mission regardless of whether it is offensive or defensive in nature. The fundamentals and concepts that relate to the operations of the rifle platoon will be introduced in this class beginning with the offense and then transitioning to the defense.

These nine principles apply across the range of military operations including those at the tactical level. They are listed under the age-old acronym, "MOOSEMUSS" (MCDP 1-0 Marine Corps Operations):

Mass: Concentrate the effects of combat power at the decisive place and time to achieve decisive results

Objective: Direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective

Offensive: Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative

Security: Never permit the enemy to acquire an unexpected advantage

Economy of Force: Allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts

Maneuver: Place the enemy in a disadvantageous position through the flexible application of combat power

Unity of Command: For every objective, ensure unity of effort under one responsible commander

Surprise: Strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared

Simplicity: Prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and clear, concise orders to ensure thorough understanding

Importance

This lesson will introduce rifle platoon fundamentals, task-organization, and offensive/defensive concepts that will establish a foundation for tactical thought at the platoon level. This will allow the Marine Officer to make sound tactical decisions at the platoon level and prepare them for follow-on classroom and field instruction at The Basic School.

In This Lesson

This lesson will provide the student officer with a foundation that will allow for success in both tactical planning and execution of operations at the platoon level. This lesson prepares the student officer for later sand table and field exercises here at The Basic School, with the ultimate goal of service as a provisional Rifle Platoon Commander in the operating forces.

This lesson covers the following topics:

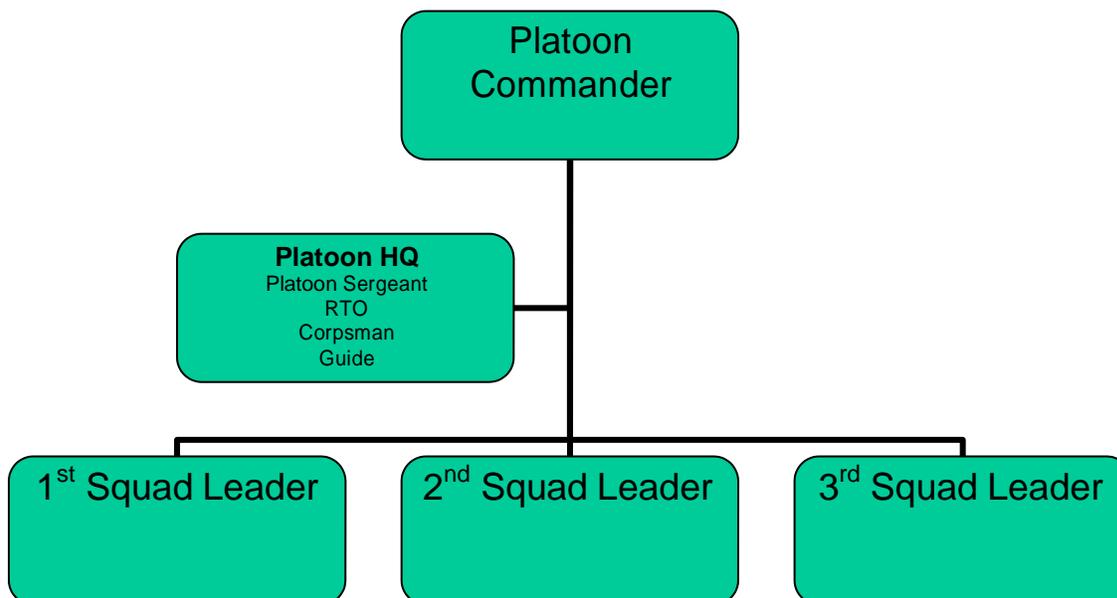
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Learning ObjectivesLearning Objectives

- 1 . Given a unit, an objective, a mission, and a commander's intent, lead a unit in offensive operations to accomplish the mission and meet the commander's intent. (0302-OFF-1201)
- 2 . Without the aid of reference, describe rifle platoon task organization without omission. (0302-OFF-1201a)
- 3 . Without the aid of reference, describe types of defensive operations without omission. (MCCS-DEF-2101a)
- 4 . Without the aid of references, describe types of offensive operations without omission. (MCCS-OFF-2103d)

Task-Organization of a Rifle Platoon

A rifle platoon is led by a platoon commander, typically a 2ndLt, and consists of three rifle squads and a platoon headquarters. Each rifle squad is made up of three fire teams and a squad leader, typically a sergeant. A platoon also has a headquarters element, made up of a platoon sergeant, platoon guide, radio-transmitter operator (RTO) and corpsman.



Rifle Platoon Billet Descriptions

Platoon Commander The Rifle Platoon Commander carries out the orders of the Rifle Company Commander. He is proficient with all T/O weapons within his platoon. He ensures that the platoon is trained in accordance with Marine Corps standards and the company commander's guidance. He is responsible for deployment, tactical employment, discipline, morale, and welfare of his unit. In addition to his specific duties, a Platoon Commander must be:

- A man or woman of exemplary character
- Devoted to leading Marines 24/7
- Able to decide, communicate and act
- A Warfighter
- Mentally and physically tough

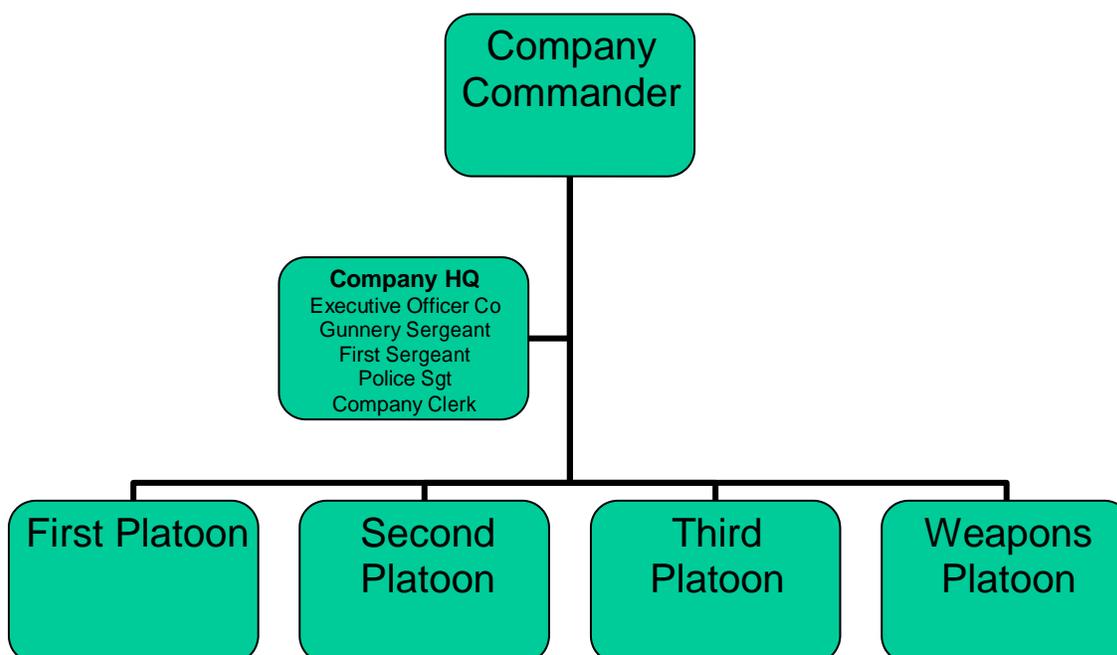
Platoon Guide The Platoon Guide is the senior sergeant in a rifle platoon. He assists the platoon sergeant with administration and logistics of the platoon. In combat, he may be responsible for coordinating CASEVACs and handling EPWs. He is capable of performing all the tasks of a Squad Leader, and can serve as either a Squad Leader or Platoon Sergeant in their absence. Due to personnel limitations in the operating forces, many platoons may not have the ability to employ a guide.

Rifle Platoon Billet Descriptions (Continued)

Platoon Sergeant	The Platoon Sergeant, Infantry Platoon, carries out the orders of the Platoon Commander and Company Commander. He is capable of performing all the tasks required of an infantry unit leader and assumes the position of the Platoon Commander in his absence. He advises the Platoon Commander on the discipline, appearance, control, conduct, and welfare of the platoon. He assists the Platoon Commander in training of the platoon in performance of tasks which support assigned training objectives. He coordinates and supervises the embarkation/debarkation, maintenance, condition, and care of the platoon's weapons and equipment including accountability, communication equipment, and if applicable, maintenance, and upkeep of the platoon's assigned vehicles. He advises the Platoon Commander and works with the Company First Sergeant on all administrative matters pertaining to the Marines in the platoon. His rank is Staff Sergeant.
Squad Leader	The Squad Leader carries out the orders issued to him by the Platoon Commander. In combat, he is responsible for the tactical employment, fire discipline, fire control, and maneuver of his squad. His T/O weapon is the M16 series service rifle. He is also responsible for the discipline, appearance, training, control, conduct, and welfare of his squad at all times, as well as the condition, care, and economical use of its weapons and equipment.
Fire Team Leader	The Fire Team Leader carries out the orders of the Squad Leader. He is responsible for the fire discipline and control of his fire team and for the condition, care, and economical use of its weapons and equipment. In addition to his primary duties as a leader, and as per unit SOP, he may serve as a Grenadier and is responsible for the effective employment of the grenade launcher, his rifle, and for the condition and care of his fire team's weapons and equipment.
Radio Transmitter Operator (RTO)	The RTO is responsible for establishing and maintaining communications between higher, adjacent, and supporting units. He is proficient in all communication devices operated by the platoon and company. While the Platoon Commander is responsible for timely and accurate reporting to higher, particularly the delivery of combat reports, the RTO may be employed to pass pertinent reports (such as POSREPs, SPOTREPs, etc.) as per unit SOP. The RTO may be of the 06xx or 03xx MOS, depending on unit SOP.
Platoon Corpsman	The Platoon Corpsman is responsible for the health, sanitation, first aid training, and casualty care of the platoon. He is a sailor assigned to the unit, and may be either a petty officer or a hospitalman. Depending on unit SOP or operating environment, there may be as many as three corpsman (one per squad) assigned to a platoon.

Task-Organization of a Rifle Company

A rifle company is led by a company commander, typically a captain, and consists of three rifle platoons, a weapons platoon, and a company headquarters. The company headquarters is led by a company executive officer, typically a first lieutenant, and includes a company first sergeant, company gunnery sergeant, company clerk, police sergeant, and company corpsman.



Rifle Company Billet Descriptions

Company Commander The Rifle Company Commander, Infantry Battalion, carries out the orders of the Infantry Battalion Commander. He is responsible for training and employment of his unit. He is responsible for the discipline, morale, and welfare of his unit, in addition to its equipment and material readiness. A Captain holds the Rifle Company Commander billet.

Executive Officer The Executive Officer, Rifle Company carries out the orders of the Rifle Company Commander and serves as Company Commander in his absence. He ensures that the company is trained in accordance with Marine Corps standards and the company commander's guidance. He is proficient with all personal and crew-served weapons in the company. He acts as platoon commander for all company headquarters personnel. He assists the commander to deploy and tactically employ the unit. A First Lieutenant usually holds the Executive Officer billet.

Rifle Company Billet Descriptions (Continued)

Company Gunnery Sergeant	The Company Gunnery Sergeant carries out the orders of the rifle company commander. He is the senior enlisted infantry Marine in a rifle company and advises the company commander on the discipline, appearance, control, conduct, and welfare of the company. He serves as the senior enlisted technical and tactical advisor to the company commander. He coordinates and supervises the embarkation/debarkation for deployment of the company, maintenance, condition, and care of the companies weapons and equipment including accountability, communication equipment, and if applicable, maintenance and upkeep of assigned vehicles. His rank is Gunnery Sergeant.
Company First Sergeant	The Company First Sergeant assists the commander as senior enlisted Marine in the unit, and acts as principal enlisted assistant to the commander; the first sergeant may be of any MOS background. He keeps apprised of all policies of the commander, and disseminates information to the unit's enlisted personnel regarding such policies. He reports to the commander on the status of matters pertaining to the efficient operation of the command. The First Sergeant counsels subordinate enlisted personnel on pertinent professional and personal matters to improve the general effectiveness and efficiency of the command. He assists the commander in the conduct of office hours, request mast, meritorious mast, and other assignments by the CO.

Purposes of the Offense

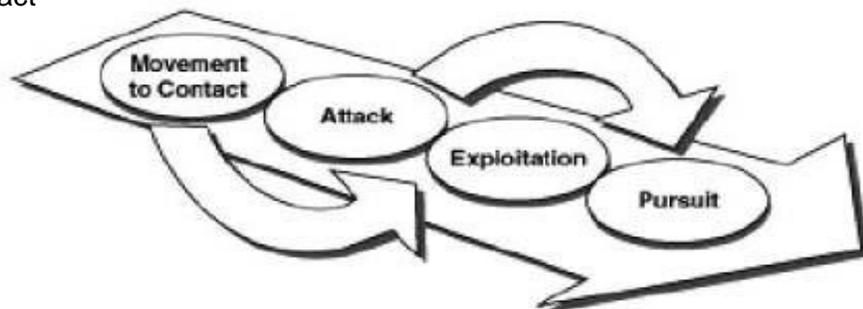
Marine Corps units normally undertake offensive operations to:

- Destroy enemy forces, equipment, and resources
- Disrupt enemy actions or preparations
- Deceive and divert the enemy
- Deprive the enemy of terrain relevant to his objective
- Fix the enemy in place
- Gain information on the enemy

Types of Offensive Operations

The four general types of offensive operations are

- Movement to Contact
- Attack
- Exploitation
- Pursuit



Movement to Contact

Movement to contact is an offensive operation conducted to establish or regain contact with the enemy. A properly executed movement to contact allows the commander to make initial contact with minimum forces and to expedite the employment and concentration of the force. (Here at TBS, this is taught in a separate class—B3N4638 *Movement to Contact*.)

Attack

The purpose of the attack is to defeat, destroy, or neutralize the enemy. An attack emphasizes maximum application of combat power, coupled with:

- Bold maneuver
- Shock effect in the assault
- Prompt exploitation of success

There are eight different types of attacks. (While at TBS, focus of instruction will be on hasty and deliberate attacks.)

- **Hasty Attack**
 - An attack in which preparation time is traded for speed to exploit opportunity
 - **Deliberate Attack**
 - Characterized by preplanned coordinated employment of firepower and maneuver to close with and destroy the enemy
 - Requires thorough reconnaissance of the enemy
 - **Spoiling Attack**
 - Normally mounted from a defensive position to disrupt an expected enemy attack
 - Attempts to strike the enemy while he is most vulnerable:
 - During his preparations for the attack in assembly areas and attack positions
 - While the enemy is on the move prior to crossing the line of departure
 - **Counterattack**
 - Conducted either with a reserve or otherwise uncommitted or lightly engaged forces
 - Conducted after the enemy has begun his attack and a resolute defense or enemy tactical error exposes him to effective counteraction
 - **Feint**
 - A supporting effort designed to divert or distract the enemy's attention away from the main effort
 - Involves physical contact with the enemy
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- **Reconnaissance in Force**
 - Always a deliberate attack by major forces to obtain information and to locate and test enemy reactions, disposition and strength

- **Raid**
 - Usually small scale offensive operation
 - Involves penetrating hostile territory for a specific purpose other than seizing and holding terrain and for which there is always a planned withdrawal

- **Demonstration**
 - Aims to deceive and confuse the enemy
 - Does not make contact with the enemy

Used frequently during amphibious operations to draw enemy forces away from actual landing beaches, or fix them in place.

Types of Offensive Operations (Continued)

Exploitation

Exploitation, an offensive operation usually following an attack, is designed to disorganize the enemy in depth. It prevents the enemy from disengaging, withdrawing and reestablishing an effective defense. Typical objectives for exploitation include command posts, reserves, seizure of key terrain, and the destruction of combat support and service support units deep in the enemy's rear.

Pursuit

Pursuit is an offensive operation designed to catch or cut off and destroy the enemy attempting to escape. They often develop from successful exploitations when enemy defenses begin to disintegrate or the enemy attempts to withdraw after an attack. However, conditions for pursuits can seldom be predicted, and forces are not normally established ahead of time but are rather immediately designated during another offensive action (i.e. an exploitation). Pursuit, like exploitation, must be conducted relentlessly.

Purpose of the Defense

In general, the purpose of defensive operations is to defeat an enemy attack. Specifically, the defense achieves one or more of the following purposes:

- To force the enemy to reach his culminating point without achieving his objectives
- To rapidly gain and maintain the initiative for friendly forces
- To create opportunities to shift to the offense

Types of Defensive Operations

The specific design and sequencing of defensive operations is an operational art largely conditioned by a thorough METT-TC analysis. Doctrine allows great freedom in formulating and conducting the defense. A key characteristic of a sound defense is the ability of the commander to aggressively seek opportunities to take offensive action and wrestle the initiative from the enemy.

Types of Defensive Operations (Continued)

The two general types of defensive operations are

- Position defense
- Mobile defense

Position Defense

Position defense focuses on the retention of terrain by absorbing the enemy in an interlocking series of positions and destroying him largely by fires. The position defense is a type of defense in which the bulk of the defending force is disposed in selected tactical positions where the decisive battle is to be fought. Preparation of a position defense is continuing process that ends only when the defender is ordered to depart the terrain. METT-TC drives the tasks to be done and their priority, making maximum use of obstacle and barrier plans, engagement areas, and fires. The defense uses obstacles and barriers to slow, canalize, and defeat the enemy attack through sector defenses, battle positions, and strongpoints.

In position defense, the commander

- Employs security forces
 - Depends on his static forces to defend their positions
 - Positions the bulk of his combat power in the static defensive positions and small mobile reserves
 - Has sufficient time to prepare positions
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Mobile Defense A mobile defense is the defense of an area in which maneuver is used together with fire and terrain to seize the initiative from the enemy. Mobile defense orients on the destruction of the attacking force by permitting the enemy to advance into a position that exposes him to counterattack by a mobile reserve. Open terrain or a wide sector favors a mobile defense that orients on the enemy. In a mobile defense, the commander

- Commits minimum forces to a pure defense
- Employs a strong, mobile counterattack force to strike the enemy at his most vulnerable time and place

The following circumstances favor the conduct of a mobile defense.

- The frontage exceeds the defender's capability to establish an effective position defense
- Time for preparing defensive positions is limited
- The mission does not require denying the enemy specific terrain

NOTE: A division-sized or larger force normally conducts the mobile defense (MCWP 3-11.1). For the focus of instruction at The Basic School (making a provisional rifle platoon commander), the mobile defense is not a practical option.

Summary

Every Marine Officer should be able to clearly define the task organization of a rifle company and its platoons. Through the examination of the purposes of offensive and defensive operations, and different types of each, the basic officer should gain an understanding of doctrinal concepts. However, this alone cannot and will not ensure mission accomplishment. An understanding of the tactical concepts needed for success will be provided in follow on classes.

References

Reference Number or Author	Reference Title
MCDP 1	Warfighting
MCDP 1-0	Marine Corps Operations
MCDP 1-3	Tactics
MCRP 5-12A	Operational Terms and Graphics
MCWP 3-1	Ground Combat Operations
MCWP 3-11.1	Marine Rifle Company/Platoon
NAVMC DIR 3500.87	Infantry Training and Readiness Manual

The following article illustrates the absolute connection between the offense and the defense and how, during operations at any level, leaders must identify the importance of their connectivity and when to transition from one to the other.

ATTACK OR DEFEND?

By LtCol Michael D. Wyly, published in the Marine Corps Gazette, June 1983.

Whether Marines should charge inland upon hitting the beach or dig into a solid defensive position has been argued in recent issues of the Marine Corps GAZETTE (*1). I hope that the debate has not degenerated into an argument over whether offensive or defensive is better. Warfare has far more dimensions than two, and both the offensive and defensive modes are as indispensable now as they always have been. Too often, we fail to see the crucial connection between the two and the great advantage gained by the force that can make the transition from one to the other with finesse. It is that connectivity, how it can be used, and how important it is, that is the more appropriate subject for serious students of war.

Essential to any discussion about the defensive and offensive and their relationship to one another is the concept of initiative. In fact, whether the landing force retains or cedes the initiative is far more important than whether it assumes the offensive or defensive.

The defensive posture should not connote ceding the initiative to the other side. You choose where to defend. In that way, you choose where to fight. The initiative, therefore, is yours. You give it up if your defense ties you to the terrain or an installation in a way that denies you the option of switching back to the offensive.

Retention of initiative, then, is always essential. If we have the initiative, the enemy is reacting to us. Unless he knows precisely what we are about, he is at a disadvantage. For if he must react to us and he misunderstands what we are doing, he will react incorrectly. There can be little argument, then, that it is desirable to have the initiative, whether we gain it by attacking or defending in some advantageous position.

The great advantage of the amphibious force is that so long as it is at sea, it has all the initiative. The enemy has to try to guess when and where it will land. The unfortunate thing about an amphibious force that lands and settles into a static beachhead is not that it has gone on the defense. The defense can indeed be the stronger form of war. But the force that seizes the beach and stops, at once cedes all the initiative to the enemy. Where before our confused enemy was anxiously trying to guess when and where we would land, now we, ensconced on our beachhead, are anxiously trying to guess when and where the enemy will attack our perimeter. If, however, our defense not only includes but focuses on a violent counterattack, and if we can shift totally to an offensive mode at the time of our choosing, then we have not given up the initiative after all. We may, in fact, trap the enemy into thinking we have given up the initiative—a belief that could lead all the more swiftly to his destruction. But no defense can be permanent. It is no more feasible to remain in a defensive position continuously than it is to remain continuously on the offensive. The important thing is that we be able to make the transition from one to the other. Both defense and offense alike are temporary statuses to be adopted when appropriate. The essence of the art of war emerges as the ability to know when to make the transition from one posture to the other. It is certain that the necessity of switching over will occur. Therefore, the ability to make the transition effectively when the time arises becomes the most important talent that a fighting unit must possess. It was no mere whim that caused Napoleon's 19th maxim to read: "The passage from the defensive to the offensive is one of the most delicate operations of war."

Some common misunderstandings pertaining to both the defense and the attack need clearing up before returning to the subject of the transition between the two.

"To trap and destroy hostile forces" is one out of a list of seven possible purposes of the defenses given in FMFM 6-3, and it receives insufficient attention. It is not mentioned until fifth, after four passive uses for the defense, none of which deserves the attention that is due the one quoted above. The primary purpose for the defense ought to be the defeat of the enemy. Seldom in our exercises in the FMF or in our schools are defenses designed with this purpose in mind. Even the counterattack, according to Marine Corps

doctrine, is said to be for the purpose of regaining lost portions of the "battle area," to destroy the enemy that happens to be "within the penetration" (see FMFM 6-3, page 290, but not, primarily, to be a means of defeating his total force. FMFM 6-3 misses the point. The most useful purpose for setting up a defense, especially for an amphibious force, is to defeat the enemy. The defensive can be one of the best ways of getting at him. In order to use it in this way, we must recognize that the defensive posture, once assumed, is temporary only. **No matter how we fortify ourselves, if we stay in the same position, our adversary is going to work towards dislodging us until he finds a way to do so.** But if we can choose some terrain that is for some reason dear to the enemy, and entice him into coming to us, destroy him in a counterattack, and then go on the offensive, moving somewhere else, we can turn the defensive tactic to great advantage. And, we can hold the initiative.

A well-designed defense endeavors to force the enemy to commit himself irrevocably. Its design should be such that when committed the enemy's forces are in a disadvantageous situation relative to ours. Committed thusly, the enemy loses options. When he attacks irrevocably, he literally casts away the initiative as his options disappear. If we, the defenders, have a counterattack plan and the ability to switch totally to the offensive at the time of our choosing, the initiative is ours.

Attacking to new locations that are void or nearly void of the enemy and moving on again was the way the Prussians fought throughout their victorious war of 1870 in which they totally defeated the French. Though the technique was by no means new in the 19th century, it became standard in the Prussian Army. Its reemergence in 1870 was the result of the Prussians' realization of how best to use the breech-loading rifle. The Prussians were rightfully enamored with the ability the weapon gave the infantryman to reload and fight while lying down. To use it in this way, of course, meant that the rifleman had to be on the defensive. Indeed, in this way, a few men could hold off many. Recognizing that they could not defeat anybody if they remained on the defensive all of the time, or most of the time, the Prussians sought a solution. The synthesis was a combination of the offensive and defensive. Viewed at the operational level, a study of the Franco-Prussian War shows the Prussian armies on a fast-pace, aggressive offensive that gave the French no rest. But, if we select out the tactical battles, the actual clashes between forces, the Prussians, on the contrary, seem always to be defending while the French are attacking them. It is no coincidence that it appears this way for this was Moltke's strategy. The Prussian Army had gained an appreciation of this all important interconnection that is the subject of this article: the transition from defense to offense and back again, and the art of how and when to effect it.

Though the technique flowered in Prussia's defeat of France, the Prussians did not invent it. Ironically, its most decisive application in modern history was provided by the French. Napoleon's decisive victory over the Austrian and Russian armies at Austerlitz was a classic application of the defensive-offensive. Using the utmost in wile, he most purposefully enticed his allied adversaries to attack what he had made appear to be the weak flank of a defensive position. They fell for it and no sooner did they commit themselves to the offensive than Napoleon went on his own offensive. He so totally confused the situation for his enemies that they abandoned the whole war effort. What was left of their defeated armies fled in disorder, leaving thousands of dead and wounded behind.

Enough said about antiquity. Let us turn to the 20th century and our own country. While studying at the National Archives one day, I came across a thick, dusty document by Gen Franz Halder, formerly of the German Army. He had completed it in 1953. Since then, it was little read. He produced the work for the American Army. Halder had, along with his countrymen, suffered the consequences of bad strategy, corrupt politics, and defeat. As a professional who had studied warfare all his life yet seen the finest soldiers he had served with go down in defeat, he endeavored to extract the things that they had done right, to leave a legacy to the Americans. It was Halder, more than anyone, who convinced the defeated German generals to be cooperative with their American captors. In Halder's view, it would be left to Americans to carry the baton as the Soviet Union's main military opponent. The subject of his treatise was the U.S. Army's Field Service Regulations, FM 100-5. He did not tear it apart or lambaste its authors. Many parts of it, he thought were quite good. But he was highly critical of the way it dealt with the defense. In reserving the defense as a less attractive form of war, to be used only to gain time, hold ground, etc., the Americans, in Halder's opinion, had missed the whole point of what that mode of warfare is all about. The defense, like any other form of war, according to the Germans, has to do with destroying the enemy. It is another means in the repertoire of how to get at him. A cover letter on the old document, signed 30 years ago by an American Army colonel, stated that Gen Halder's comments contained much

of relevance, of which all officers should take heed. Yet, Halder could write the same critique of the Marine Corps' view of defensive warfare today, for it is little changed.

Some of the terminology has changed. What was the main line of resistance (MLR) when I went through The Basic School is now the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA). This is disturbing, however, in that battles are not bound by areas. They have no forward edges. And, if we impose such artificial limitations on our tactics and our thinking, we do to ourselves exactly what Halder criticized us for. Our defense ceases to be a means of defeating the enemy. It becomes a structured "holing up" in which we constrain our forces and impose on ourselves the very difficulty of changing back to the offensive which Napoleon warned us of in his 19th maxim, cited above.

The defensive posture is a most versatile one. It need not involve a perimeter, a FEBA, or continuous interlocking bands of steel. It is seldom justified to defend forward slopes because of the inviting target presented to enemy artillery as well as direct fire weapons. The defense can be the integration of several strongpoints, a screen, and a counterattack force. Variations are unlimited. Any force employed to counter an anticipated enemy attack is in the defense, whether its positions are static or mobile. This opens the door to a wealth of ideas, depending on the type of terrain available. Given this viewpoint, our practice of the defense is flawed. It seldom incorporates a design to defeat the enemy. It ignores too many of the options that could be utilized to advantage.

Conventional wisdom regarding the offense is equally flawed and some reflection on it is called for here. Any force that moves to engage an enemy force or to seize terrain is attacking. Here we begin to see a merging of the offensive and defensive modes. The distinction becomes less and less clear. Well it should, for all warfare is ultimately directed at the enemy's defeat. As in the case of defending forces, attacking forces may be employed in myriad ways. Their repertoire extends well beyond facsimiles of Pickett's charge. Too often, though, imaginations only conjure up visions of headlong assaults. Thus, the outcry that we can only attack if we greatly outnumber the enemy. Thus, the ridiculous formulas dictating amazing force ratios said to be required for the attacker over the defender. Would-be tacticians continually are producing the most astonishing figures. The attacker, they say, will, in the next war, have to outnumber the defender 3 to 1, 4 to 1, 12 to 1. All this is meaningless. Most often, the especially high ratios, attacker to defender, result from confusion over what is meant by the attack, as differentiated from the assault (*2).

The assault is one of the many potential actions that fall under the broad heading of attack. The assault is where you physically move upon the enemy, himself. It is the ultimate commitment. The issue was somewhat clearer when I went to The Basic School, before they changed the name of the "assault position" to the "final coordination line." The difference between attack and assault seemed clear, put in terms of the control measures that governed them. The attack position was (and still is) the last covered and concealed position before crossing the line of departure. The assault position (now the final coordination line) was the last position before initiating the assault itself, the position where supporting fires ceased or were shifted and final coordination between assaulting elements was completed. Even the assault, however, is frequently misunderstood in the Marine Corps. The assault, to be an assault, need not mean lining up and walking forward in the face of the enemy. The assault is where you physically move upon the enemy, himself, but in no way does this require the assaulting force to line up and walk. Running forward might be better, but still, there is no requirement to line up and move forward in unison. To do so makes you an easier target. The assault can be an advance by fire and movement. It can be some walking, some running, some crawling; advancing by bounds; infiltrating the enemy's lines at night and turning on him by surprise, as the Royal Marines did in the Falklands. If we only think of the long, slow-moving line of walking infantry whenever we hear "assault"-or, much worse, whenever we hear "attack"-no wonder such amazing ratios for attacker to defender are formulated.

Gen Hermann Balck also recounted that on one occasion, fighting the Russians in Hungary, his division was so badly outnumbered that he had no alternative but to attack. In other words, the attacker need not outnumber the defender. For Balck to have defended in the position that he found himself in would have spelled inevitable doom, for the Soviets had sufficient forces to surround him many times over. When he speaks of attacking, however, he is not describing a broad frontal assault on the enemy's strongpoints. To us, who were in Vietnam, the decision to attack, though outnumbered, should not seem so strange. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese found themselves outnumbered, locally, most of the time, yet they did not abandon the attack or the assault. They adapted their methods of assault to the situation, assaulting

in small groups on narrow fronts, infiltrating at night, doing everything possible to make themselves less of a target. The Israelis typically fight an offensive battle, yet they are normally outnumbered. They cannot withdraw into the hinterlands, as the Russian Army has traditionally done, for a retreat away from the Egyptians is an attack on the Syrians. The smallness of their country forces them to the offensive. Outnumbered, they attack, and they succeed.

I hope that the foregoing discussion, first of the defense, then of the offense, demonstrates that the two forms are very general categories, each offering a broad range of options. Understanding them in this way, can better prepare the combat leader to combine the two and to decide when to shift from one to the other. Some may say that this is a lot of esoteric philosophy that does not apply to training Marines, to students at The Basic School, or to NCOs. True esoteric philosophy, with little usefulness on a real battlefield, however, comes in the form of memorizing principles of war and the other lists that appear throughout the FMFMs. The ability to decide when to attack and when to defend is essential knowledge for every combat leader. Small units are often dispersed, as in Vietnam, and small unit commanders must make independent decisions. The question of whether to set in and fight on a given piece of terrain, or go out after the enemy, or get in behind him, is one that leaders of patrols and smaller units must be prepared to answer. In Vietnam, some were able, some were not. All needed to be. Few had been consciously prepared in their stateside training, and this included officers, to make the decision whether to attack or defend. Training courses and schools gave instruction and exercises designed to prepare the student to set up a defense if told to defend. They had learned to plan and execute an assault, if told to attack. This is necessary training. But no courses and no stateside training seemed to require NCOs or officers to decide, based on a given situation, whether to attack or defend, or when to shift from one mode to the other. Though the former type of training is necessary, so is the latter, and, the latter question requiring more thought, demands the most education. Therefore, learning to decide whether to attack or defend is the aspect which should be dealt with more thoroughly.

We presently put way too much emphasis in our training on how to attack and how to defend. In so doing, we limit the methods which we prepare our Marines to adopt. The defense is almost invariably a forward slope area defense, fixed to a FEBA, focusing on interlocking bands of fire. With the counterattack directed towards restoring the FEBA, we have a defense oriented towards keeping the enemy out of an area rather than trapping him where we can take him apart. Similarly, the attack is almost invariably an assault, whether frontal or flanking, directed against enemy strongpoints.

The student of tactics is not likely to begin to consider the whole spectrum of methods available for attack and defense unless he has been required to consider which form is more appropriate in a given situation. FMF commanders, as well as instructors, should exercise the minds of their subordinates by giving them missions that dictate neither attack nor defense. They should require subordinates to decide which posture to assume initially and when to change from one to the other. Once freed from the structured atmosphere of laying out a FEBA between this point and that, or getting troops on line at a given final coordination line, subordinates will begin to consider variations. They will have ideas that combine the offensive with the defensive and need not be categorized into a form described in a paragraph of the FMFM. Some suggestions for missions that give this kind of latitude:

- For the platoon-Prevent guerrillas from entering Hoa An Village and harassing the populace.
- For the company-Draw the enemy's attention to the north to enable rapid passage of our main forces to the south of him.
- For the battalion-Protect the flank of our main force.
- For the regiment-Force the enemy to abandon his position on the high ground in order to draw him into the swamps where our infantry can harass and destroy him.
- For the division-Prevent the enemy from using his main supply route in order to cut off his supplies and disrupt his communications.

These are only a few examples. The solutions to each problem could entail some form of maneuver nowhere addressed in our manuals. So, what manuals can you study?

The Marine Corps Association has recently reprinted *Infantry in Battle*, replete with reallife combat experiences to draw on. It is excellent. John Langdon-Davies' *Invasion in the Snow* tells how the Finns again and again applied the defensive-offensive against the Russians, 1939-1940. Read how the Boers used the defensive-offensive to defeat the British at Colenso in 1899. Study Austerlitz. Commanders with

Vietnam experience can reconstruct small unit experiences from their own recollection. Food for great ideas of this nature abounds, and officers should seek it out.

Certainly, fundamentals of soldiering must be taught. How to live in the field, stalk the enemy, care for equipment, throw a grenade, shoot, employ mortars, operate a radio, read a map-these are the things that the British could do so much better than the Argentines in the Falklands. They are important. Training in the FMF, at the Amphibious Warfare School, and at the Command and Staff Collge, however, should be conducted at a higher level. We should be able to presuppose that such basics are already mastered. I realize that we find that our young Marines and even some of our officers have not mastered these essentials. But they should master them at The Basic School, and during initial training at recruit depots and infantry training schools. Tactics, practiced in the FMF and at AWS, should be at least on the level of sophistication discussed in this article. If Marines are found wanting in the basics, the solution to this problem should not be lowering the level of education later in an individual's career. It should mean intensifying courses in fundamental soldiering at the earliest stage of that career (*3).

Educating men for war takes work and years of time. It takes study. Of all the things that the profession of arms is, it is not plain commonsense. It never has been. There seems to be in the minds of some Marines a Utopian idea that somehow ours is the one profession in which a lot of academic study is not required, that commonsense is enough. It would be nice, indeed, if that were all there were to it, if all we had to do was go to the field and practice applying commonsense. I am in favor of practice, lots of it. But practice in the field in peacetime, with no real enemy, can lead us to believe that we can do all kinds of things that would be impractical, even ridiculous, on a real battlefield. Without some study of the realities of war, we would be like doctors, espousing a commonsense approach, ignoring medical theory, practicing on artificial dummies, cutting, tying off artificial vessels, succeeding in every way-until they worked on you and encountered the surprise of gangrene.

"Lieutenant, it's all commonsense" is not very good advice. Did Lee use commonsense when he split his forces at Chancellorsville? Did Rommel use commonsense when he sent his tanks across the Somme over the narrow track of a railroad trestle under fire? Did MacArthur use commonsense when he chose Inchon as the point of landing? Was it commonsense that caused John Buford to recognize Cemetery Ridge as terrain worth fighting for and to commit his two small cavalry brigades to the risk of holding the Confederates until the Union Army could be guided into positions there? None of this was commonsense. It was uncommon genius.

Commonsense produced the repeated headlong frontal assaults of World War I. Years went by without anyone questioning seriously whether hurling more men and more firepower directly against the enemy was the best solution. Obviously, what the French, British and Germans were doing to each other in the trenches made sense to most people, universally. The decisions were made by officers who would have told you that they acted on instinct, on good old-fashioned horse sense, and certainly in accordance with "conventional wisdom" of the time.

More recently, the Argentines applied commonsense in the Falklands by defending Port Stanley, applying exclusively the "stronger form of war." Commonsense for the British might have dictated a direct assault on the Argentine positions; however, an indirect approach produced the effect desired. Did Brigadier Julian Thompson simply apply commonsense? It seems apparent that, instead, he applied an intimate knowledge of warfare, and some genius.

It is intimate understanding and constant practice in decision making that enables a commander to decide whether he should be moving towards a new position or digging in. He never gets to rest his mind once he has assumed one posture or the other, because the situation is always subject to change, so long as the enemy is still intact. All is fair. Nothing is sacred. There are no rules. Though it seems one day that to dig in on the reverse slope is clearly the answer, the situation that night may dictate an attack the next morning, perhaps even as assault.

There is no issue worth arguing, then, over whether the landing force should attack or defend. Leaders on the ground must be prepared to make that decision based on the situation. Units must be able to respond rapidly to changes in posture. The important issues are how fluid and responsive the landing force is and how mobile it is relative to the enemy and the conditions imposed by the terrain.

The idea of landing and setting up static defense immediately, right on the littoral, is not usually very attractive; historically it has a poor track record. While we should not categorically exclude that or any other option, defending with one's back to the wall, or to the sea, is not usually sparked by genius. The reason for this was discussed at the beginning of this article. It is initiative that is important. Backed up against the sea, having just violated somebody's sovereignty, with everything your opponent can muster coming at you, you do not leave yourself many options for initiative. The defense offers many ingenious opportunities to defeat the enemy. But an offensive option should always be kept open. Land and back him up to the wall. Get in deep where he never planned on finding you and push him into the sea. A little uncommon sense can go a long way.

*1 See MCG articles/commentaries by Maj J.D. Burke, Sep82, pp.67-71; Maj E.J. Robeson IV, LtCol L.G. Karch, Capt R.S. Moore, LtCol M.D. Wyly, Maj J.D. Burke, Dec82, pp.24-26; Maj K.W. Estes, Jan83, p.11; LtCol M.D. Wyly, Jan83, pp.34-38; Maj E.J. Robeson IV, Apr83, p.24.

*2 Clausewitz wrote about this tendency to confuse the two terms 150 years ago (see Chapter 5, Book Six,) however, it warrants reiteration from time to time.

*3 See Maj S.W. McKenzie's comment on the Royal Marines' 30-week basic training course for enlisted Marines in MCG, Aug82, p.70.

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