

MANEUVER WARFARE

Commander's Intent: The Seed of Haitian Success

by Maj Thomas C. Greenwood

If a command understands the overall intent of an operation, it will almost always know what to do—no matter how the situation unfolds.

If historians mention Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Caribbean's (SPMAGTF Carib's) 20 September 1994 amphibious operation at Cap-Haitien, they will likely focus on the invasion that wasn't, the brief but critical firefight with police, missions to outlying regions, and humanitarian deeds. These events, however, took place within a broader framework that our warfighting doctrine refers to as "commander's intent." The purpose of this article is to illustrate how commander's intent guided MAGTF actions ashore and enhanced unit cohesion in Haiti, thus providing an example that might aid commanders who will write their own intent in future contingencies.



Col Thomas S. Jones

How It Was Written

Serving as operations officer to the commanding officer of SPMAGTF Carib (Col Thomas S. Jones, CO, 2d Marines) for 15 months, I was accustomed to drafting operations orders to include commander's intent with minimal corrections from my boss. Not so on this occasion. Aboard USS *Wasp*, a week before the landing I submitted a rough intent to the commander. He was not impressed and said he'd write it. With slightly wounded pride, I worked on the remainder of the order, leaving a gap for the key words he would pen. The results (see Figure 1) were enlightening. The commander had replaced my descriptions of enemy/friendly strengths and weaknesses, defeat mechanisms, and end state with a straightforward and inspirational call to action. More important, he articulated the mental attitude and physical action he expected every Marine in the MAGTF to display during mission execution. Concise, unambiguous, and emotionally charged, it captured the essential ideas the commander wanted his Marines to carry with them (and remember) as they entered the uncertainty of the Haitian situation.

How It Was Communicated

Although the commander's intent appeared in an operations order that was widely distributed throughout the MAGTF, the commander did not rely on the written word alone; he personally recited his intent in

three different forums beginning 5 days before the landing. First, he expressed it down to the platoon commander level at a MAGTF officers' planning meeting prior to the confirmation briefing (all of this occurred before the Carter Agreement when forcible entry was still the mission). Next, he used excerpts from his intent when he addressed enlisted Marines from each of the MAGTF's major subordinate elements. This involved visiting USS *Nashville*, to ensure he reached all Marines in each major subordinate element prior to H-hour. Finally, he expressed his intent publicly at the 17 September confirmation briefing in the USS *Wasp* wardroom in front of the Navy-Marine team. This last session was crucial because the commander of the amphibious task force (RAdm William H. Wright IV) and his staff were present with Marines in the audience. Their attendance, coupled with the seriousness of the moment, made this a significant occasion.

Why It Was Effective

Careful reading of Col Jones' intent reveals that the commander linked compassionate treatment of Haitians to MAGTF force protection of the population. Ruthless elements of the population notwithstanding, his message was clear—treat Haitians with dignity, fairness, and compassion, and they will have no reason to threaten Marines. From commander's intent evolved the MAGTF's twin tactical pillars of simultaneously

Extract From SPMACTF Caribbean Operation Order

Commander's Intent

Attack and overwhelm the enemy with absolute force and resolution, while treating the populace with dignity, fairness, and compassion. Win and maintain the "Hearts and Minds" of the Haitian people! Immediately capture -- to hold -- the port and airfield, using surprise, shock, and simultaneity of execution. Maintain security of the force always; all maneuver and movement of forces must be accomplished within the framework of absolute security! Rapidly paralyze the . . . (deleted); consequently the . . . (deleted) is the center of gravity and must be controlled quickly. Secure all objectives using nonlethal force to the maximum extent possible. However, once deadly force becomes necessary, it must be used decisively and unhesitatingly. Prepare a reservoir of "audibles" for every planned/expected action. We will comport ourselves always as liberators not dominators. Mental and physical toughness must be our watchwords; be prepared to do what others couldn't, wouldn't or shouldn't. UPHOLD ALWAYS the standards of our Corps and legacy of those who have gone before us.

Figure 1

providing for security and conducting humanitarian relief. At the same time, it provided freedom of action to subordinate by clearly stating deadly force would be used under certain life and death situations—a provision that came into play on 24 September when the firefight broke out with the police. Finally, the intent promulgated high standards. The resounding message was that the MAGTF would liberate, not dominate. It reminded Marines to stay focused on why they were in Cap-Haitien in the first place. It exhorted them to remember the

honorable deeds of their predecessors. In short, the commander's intent was effective because no Marine could read or hear Col Jones' words without being inspired.

What We Should Learn

Although commander's intent must always reflect clear thinking, in some circumstances—particularly in the uncertainty of operations other than war—it is less an act of tactics than leadership. We may not stress this enough at Quantico. Consequently, too many operations officers like my-

self lose sleep over the "parts" that are supposed to be included in intent. We should simply make sure intent inspires Marines to do positive things they might otherwise not do if no intent were given. Other key points are that the commander must:

- Write it himself.
- Use the active voice and be concise.
- Give commanders at all levels something worth discussing.
- Arouse Marines and Sailors to feeling and acting nobly.
- Convey his central concerns and worries without diminishing command confidence.
- Avoid summarizing other parts of the order or simply restating the concept of operations.
- Not be afraid to have his intent reflect his personality.

Closing Thoughts

Leaders must strive to be great communicators. Intent is one tool available to a commander to focus unit energies on the mission at hand. In low-intensity conflict or operations other than war, taskings may appear to be at odds with each other (such as security and humanitarian assistance) until a commander uses intent to highlight their compatibility and coherency. As aptly demonstrated in Haiti, the seeds of success start with the bird's-eye view a commander provides his Marines before they go forward in harm's way.

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Quote to Ponder

On Commander's Intent

"The task describes in quantitative terms the who, what, where, and when of the mission. The intent, on the other hand, describes the why behind the mission and, in qualitative terms, the end result we expect."

—Maj John F. Schmitt, USMCR,
in *Mastering Tactics*