

Rethinking Combat Orders

'Bullets quickly write new tactics.'
—Wilhelm Balck¹

by 1stLt Elliot L. Ackerman

I recently attended a course with several Marines from my platoon where combat orders were a small portion of the curriculum. The instruction the lance corporals and corporals received was nothing out of the ordinary. It resembled the same classes I had received at The Basic School. The instructors asked the officers and staff noncommissioned officers in the class to provide additional feedback to the younger Marines as they presented their orders. As I watched the Marines work their way through the intricacies of the operation order—orientation-situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, command and signal (O-SMEAC)—and brief their 8- to 10-page squad orders, I grew frustrated. These Marines would never be asked to present such long, intricate orders, and while the nuances of their orders were picked apart, it was apparent that many of them lost confidence in their abilities to deliver clear instructions.

My frustration was not born of the fact that such junior Marines were being taught to write out their five-paragraph orders in painstaking detail, but that their instruction ended there. As I reflected on my training and experiences in combat I realized that I had never really been taught to give a "combat order." This skill was one I was forced to develop out of necessity in actual combat. Needless to say, combat orders or effective fragmentary orders cannot be performed effectively without a solid foundation in the formal five-paragraph order format, but they must be learned nonetheless. Thinking about combat orders leaves two questions that need answers. First, what is an effective combat order, and second, how can we teach it to Marines? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

The effective combat order is wholly dependent on the situation. It is a balance of information, guidance, and time. The leader must be able to identify the most pertinent pieces of information surrounding a given situation and present them clearly to his subordinates. Following this presentation, he must provide clear guidance as to how the mission will be accomplished. When providing intent, balance must be struck

between telling one's subordinates exactly how to execute the task—which stifles initiative—and providing vague guidance that may produce undesired results. Finally, all of this must be weighed against time. How much time is there to convey information—hours, minutes, or seconds? Everything presented must be prioritized. The leader must know what is important. In a combat situation, something will inevitably be left out due to time. What is essential is that leaders have been trained to differentiate between the essential and nonessential elements of the order.

Finding the balance between information, guidance, and time is not a new concept. In the book of World War I combat vignettes, *Infantry in Battle*, the following is stated:

The leader who would become a competent tactician must first close his mind to the alluring formulae that well-meaning people offer in the name of victory. To master his difficult art he must learn to cut to the heart of a situation, recognize its decisive elements and base his course of action on these.²

We must teach Marines how to cut to the heart of a tactical situation and present effective combat orders that consider information, guidance, and time. In the past, the orders process has been taught as prose. Marines have been encouraged to write long, detailed orders to describe a situation and convey a plan. As we look at teaching combat orders we must transition from prose to poetry. The effective combat order looks more like a poem. The situation and plan are stripped to their barest form and are succinctly and clearly communicated.

A poet must first learn to write prose, and so a Marine must be well grounded in the already existing O-SMEAC format as it is currently

taught. However, his education must extend beyond that. Our courses for squad leaders must emphasize the importance of timely decisions and clear, succinct communications. Field problems should force the Marines to conceive and execute plans with very little time. Marines should spend less time giving orders over terrain models and spend more time giving orders over the radio. The former they will probably do once or twice in a situation, the latter they will do almost continuously. We must create leaders who can conceive and communicate plans in the worst of situations with little to no time.

When training Marines we must take that extra step and develop leaders who not only can give orders, but who also can give combat orders. The grounding in O-SMEAC as it exists is a good foundation, but currently Marines are not taught to make decisions based in terms of information, guidance, and time available. These skills are being learned, but it is on the battlefield. We must afford Marine leaders with every opportunity to succeed in combat. A more advanced approach to combat orders must be taken.

Notes

1. Balck, Wilhelm, *Development of Tactics—World War*, translated by Harry Bell, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1922, p. 14.

2. *Infantry in Battle*, The Infantry Journal, Inc., Washington, DC, 1939, p. 1. (*Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-2*, PCN 140 12020000, 14 October 1988.)



>1stLt Ackerman served as a rifle platoon commander with Company A, 1st Bn, 8th Mar (1/8) in the November 2004 assault of Fallujah. He is currently assigned as the 81mm Mortar Platoon Commander, 1/8.