

MANEUVER WARFARE

The Decline of the Mission/ The Rise of Intent

by Capt Eric S. Downes, USMCR

One of the vital keys to maneuver warfare is the concept of commander's intent. Unless commander's intent is clearly stated, understood, and respected, maneuver warfare cannot succeed. This article discusses the concept and outlines specific steps that should enable us to use it more effectively.

In the past few years, maneuver warfare doctrine has caused us to reconsider everything we do. We study it, talk about it, write about it, test it, succeed at it, and sometimes fail at it. Change, chance, and uncertainty surround its implementation. For some Marine officers, the doctrine becomes quite difficult for them when they try to move from the realm of philosophy to the realm of practicality. The challenge of making it work is like the challenge of eliminating the zero-defects mentality: We know both require the release of decisionmaking power to subordinates, but we also know who shoulders the responsibility of those decisions.

The central issue in this philosophical conflict is control. What you command you will want to control, and that which you cannot control you would rather not be responsible to command. Unfortunately for our comfort level, it does not always work that way. Consider, for instance, the realities of the battlefield—call it the “fog of war,” Murphy’s Law, or whatever you like—once any battle begins, control over a unit is more of a fading dream than a concrete reality. If you study most conflicts in which Marines have fought over the years, chaos and loss of control are the norm, not the exception. In fact, we have won more often by the preparations made before battle than by any efforts to exert control once the fighting has begun. Challenging training, continuous education of our leaders, and proficiency in planning have ensured our combat successes in the past. The initiative and innovation of individual Marines play a role in winning a fight, to be sure, but even these are unrelated to control.

Maneuver warfare is not the first philosophy to purport that proper

preparations reduce the consequences of losing control. The Marine Corps has been the master at preparations since our first involvement in amphibious operations, long before our adoption of maneuver warfare. What makes our latest doctrine unique, however, is that it openly acknowledges that loss of control is inevitable. To do battle effectively by the theory requires decentralized control, which means giving subordinates the authority to plan and execute their own actions, since centralized control is predictably ineffective and quite possibly detrimental.

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For the commander, one of the primary steps of battle preparation is planning. His goal is to communicate a plan that will endure loss of control as well as unexpected changes in METT-TSL (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and fire support available, time, space, and logistics). To begin with, the plan requires a format for issuing instructions in a clear and concise fashion, which for us is the operations order.

Every good commander is concerned with effective order-writing skills, and he should be. Once the order is issued, contact between commander and subordinate may be broken completely until the next lull in the fight. Therefore, the order must state what the commander wants in enough detail so that subordinates can follow the

plan without him, but also with enough freedom of decision for them to act on their own initiative. To put it another way, the order should be written so that the subunit commander has the freedom to out-OODA-loop his opponent (i.e., complete the observe-orient-decide-act cycle faster), while ensuring that his OODA-loop still supports the master plan of the commander. For this purpose we have “commander’s intent.”

Commander’s intent is one of a short series of elements in the middle of the operations order that is the creation of the orderwriter himself. All of the elements that precede this are factual in nature and are provided mostly by the next higher command. Of all the created elements, this is the most important, and also the most troubling for commanders to write. Consequently, many such statements fail to serve the purpose they should. I believe this is true, not because of a lack of commitment to maneuver warfare by commanders or because of their lack of understanding of the purpose of the statement, but rather because we lack a prescribed method for creating it.

Good commanders have little difficulty devising schemes of maneuver, fire support plans, tasks, etc.; tactical experience and the study of warfighting make these routine. Articulating intent, however, involves something more than just experience. Each situation requires a unique mental picture spanning much more than what one can see at any given moment. It requires a conceptual outlook of the factors of the battlefield—something that is mentally more difficult to produce than are the other details written in the order.

Some commanders have a tendency to accept a mission and never broaden their perspective beyond that point. By not doing so, they skip a golden opportunity to see the bigger picture. The remainder of the order-writing process is a series of microscoping steps, ending in the assignment of tasks and coordinating instructions. Once this process is in motion, it is frustrating and complex to develop an adequate intent, since intent should be a broader view in terms of space, time, and other factors than the mission itself. To broaden perspective, once it has been narrowed, requires the commander to actually go backward mentally. Rather than force

this retrograde of thought, many find it easier to write intent statements that "fit" their schemes of maneuver, rather than the other way around.

Commander's intent is not a restatement of the mission, and it should not focus solely on friendly action. It is also not a byproduct of the mission, nor is it necessarily parallel to it. It should not suggest how to accomplish the mission, and it should not specify the intensity of that action. Making any of these mistakes will create a meaningless redundancy that does nothing to support the concept of maneuver warfare.

True commander's intent is a statement of what the commander intends to do to the enemy—with a concept of how his action will cause the enemy to behave in a particular way. Its purpose is to communicate to subordinates a goal that should be utmost in their minds as they execute the order. The mission, scheme of maneuver, fire support plan, and tasks are all fickle elements; one major change in the situation could render these outdated. Intent, while not impervious to change, remains a constant element in comparison. While doing battle, should a subordinate realize that the assigned mission will accomplish nothing, or may even ensure disaster, he can mentally page back to the intent in order to regain focus and momentum.

Imagine that you are a commander facing a particular foe. You have determined through your analysis that to force him to move in a certain direction will give you a decisive advantage. There are several possible courses of action that could make this happen, but you have chosen the one you feel is the best. If all you articulate to your subordinates is that one course of action, and then suddenly, in the confusion of the battle, the situation changes making that course untenable, they will be at a loss as to how to continue supporting your plan. If, however, you also tell them what your plan means in terms of the enemy, then they will be able to think their way to another viable course of action. By presenting them with both your plan for the maneuver of friendly forces and what behavior you want to elicit from the enemy, your subordinates will have a complete understanding of the plan, rather than just half of it.

The writing of intent requires a broad overview of the factors influencing the potential battle. The commander must, in a sense, step backward af-



ter receiving an order so that he can widen his view from the mission assigned. He needs a more comprehensive picture of the enemy's possible actions, what may happen over time, what terrain might influence movement, and so on. If by old habits he immediately narrows his view instead of widening it, he will most likely skip the opportunity to look over these factors and include instructions for friendly maneuver without true regard for the enemy perspective. Instead, he must consider the high likelihood of changes in METT-TSL and write his order to survive those changes. Only by writing a statement of intent, with the enemy as the object of focus, can this survival occur.

What I propose to simplify the perplexing challenge of formulating intent is a methodology of thought to be used during the maneuver warfare order-writing process. It includes a set of mental steps for the creation of Paragraph 3, placed in the order in which the mind most naturally flows—from broadest to narrowest focus. To describe the thinking involved in each step, I will use the model of a telephoto camera lens, referring to broadening one's view as "zooming out" and narrowing it as "zooming in." It is important to note the type of thinking necessary in each step:

Step 1: Receive the order from your superior. This is his best assessment of what must be done to accomplish the intent of his superior, given the current METT-TSL. Pay particular attention to the intent of both your commander and the commander above him. Crystal-clear understanding of the rest of the plan without the same understanding of intent could prove

disastrous; even slight changes in METT-TSL could render all but intent irrelevant. These two intent statements will therefore become the central theme for your own actions.

Step 2: You have received your mission from your commander's order. Many commanders typically zoom in from this point and begin developing their schemes of maneuver. Remember that METT-TSL components are all subject to instantaneous change; developing your scheme by focusing only on the mission assigned is likely to produce an incomplete or even outdated plan. Resist the temptation to zoom in, and instead zoom out; see more than what is visible at the present moment. Picture the possible outcome of your action from your perspective and then turn your map around and picture it from the enemy's perspective. To write your intent, consider several key items. Conduct a thorough analysis of METT-TSL and, most important, the enemy situation. Much of this intelligence will come from the order you have received; the rest must come from your own observations and reconnaissance. In studying the enemy, consider his vulnerabilities and determine which are the most critical. Decide, among all the intelligence gathered, which factor is the most critical on the battlefield—the one which, if you were to control it, would give you the decisive advantage over your foe. This critical factor and the enemy's most critical vulnerability are most often the same; in any case, both must be analyzed as preliminaries to the formulation of intent. Just as you consider the intent of the commanders two levels up from you, your subordinates will be doing the same

with your intent. It must be the first creation in your order.

Step 3: Write your intent using the following guidelines:

- Make the statement oriented on the enemy, not on friendly action.
- Make clear what you intend to do to the enemy.
- Consider strongly how what you intend to do will cause the enemy to behave in a particular way. Remember that you want to "out OODA-loop" your foe, so plan how to influence his behavior to your advantage.
- Keep your intent broad; do not specify or guide particular actions to be taken or the intensity of these actions.

Step 4: Zoom in, back to your mission. Double check your intent against your mission, the intent statements of the commanders two levels up, and all other METT-TSL elements. Your statement should be clear enough that even if your subordinates have no contact with you, they will still know how to serve the overall command most effectively.

Step 5: Zoom in. Develop your scheme of maneuver and fire support plan to support your intent, given the current METT-TSL. If your superiors have remained maneuver warfare minded, you should have nearly free rein to create

this plan in the way that you feel you can best support their intent.

Step 6: Zoom in. Develop task statements for the execution of the scheme of maneuver. Be mindful of providing the same freedom of action to your subordinates that was given to you. From this point, your subordinate commanders should follow the same process you did as they develop their orders.

There is nothing magic about the steps shown here. In order for the methodology to work well, it is essential that commanders up and down the chain follow it; otherwise, more junior commanders will have to develop statements of intent that only support their best guess about what higher commands really want. Maneuver warfare suffers due to weak links in the chain of operations orders—those where subordinates are told what to do, without being told the intent that should drive their initiative.

For our doctrine to become a reality, we actually need to change more than just the way we write orders. We also need to more fully define the term "mission-type order" by subsequently redefining our objective from a maneuver warfare perspective. Most offi-

cers, when asked, would describe mission-type orders as ones that state what will be done, without specifying how. While this is a good start, commanders are again likely to focus only on mission accomplishment unless they have a fuller understanding of mission-type orders. Commander's intent is crucial.

If we continue to teach our Marines that mission accomplishment is the most important objective of leadership, and in the chaos of the fight that mission loses its viability, then only those smart enough to disobey the order and lucky enough to find an alternate way to win on their own will prevail. When we have a clear statement of the commander's intent, it seems archaic to continue to call mission accomplishment our objective. The most important objective on the battlefield in the age of maneuver warfare is the *support of commander's intent*, not the accomplishment of the mission. If we can grasp that concept as a Corps, then we will finally realize the benefits that maneuver warfare and thinking Marines can provide.



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Commander's Intent Defined

by Capt Michael L. Ettore

In a move to standardize and clarify a key concept of maneuver warfare, the Marine Corps University has issued guidelines on commander's intent.

Several years ago the U.S. Marine Corps adopted maneuver warfare as its primary warfighting philosophy. The general concepts of this philosophy were outlined in *FMFM 1 Warfighting*, a publication intended to provide broad guidance on how the Marine Corps prepares for and conducts combat operations. While most of the content of *FMFM 1* can legitimately be labeled as purely common sense, there are several concepts which at the time of publication were new, unfamiliar ideas.

One of these new concepts was that of commander's intent. While most Marines have heard of this concept, it

is extremely rare to find two individuals with the same perspective as to what commander's intent really is. Any student of maneuver doctrine will agree that to be successful in this style of warfighting, subordinate leaders must be encouraged to use initiative during the execution of any mission. Commander's intent is designed to provide these leaders with the ability to deviate from a specific plan of attack if necessary, yet still accomplish the ultimate desires of their commander. This initiative is properly focused by a crystal-clear expression and understanding of the commander's intent.

Recently, the Marine Corps University conducted a Quarterly Curriculum Review Board which was attended by representatives of the various schools within the University system, as well as from other commands. One of the topics discussed was the concept of commander's intent and the need for a standard definition of the subject as well as specific guidance for its use during the conduct of Marine Corps operations worldwide. The following definition of commander's intent was forwarded to the President of the Marine Corps University and has subsequently been approved:

- The commander's intent statement will be depicted in a formal operations order in paragraph 3a (1) followed by the concept of operations in paragraph 3a (2). The higher unit commander's intent will be depicted in paragraph 1b.
- The commander's intent statement *must* include a statement of the end state of the battlefield as it relates to his force, the enemy force, and the