

# Marines Ought to Play More Games!

Wargaming can have a synergistic effect

by LtCol Gregory A. Thiele

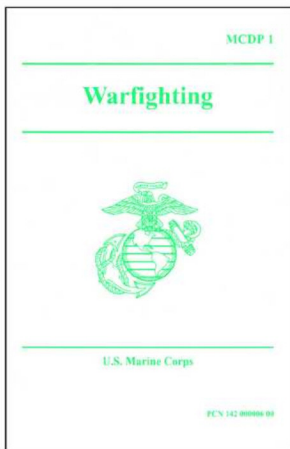
As the Marine Corps entered a period of fiscal austerity, a previous Commandant attempted to reinvigorate the Corps' intellectual efforts. In late 2012, Gen Amos released White Letter 4-12, which reinforced the importance of reading. This was a useful step in creating a professional force. If the Marine Corps is truly serious about improving the military education possessed by Marine leaders, there is an additional measure the current Commandant could take. The Commandant should encourage wargaming.

In the late 1990s, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles C. Krulak, encouraged Marines to play games provided by the Corps. In *Marine Corps Order 1500.55 "Military Thinking and Decision Making Exercises"* (dated 12 April 1997), Gen Krulak laid out his vision. Marines were encouraged to have tactical discussions each day and to play wargames. This was a worthy initiative. As Gen Amos attempted to reinvigorate the professional reading program, Gen Neller should encourage wargaming to allow Marine leaders to exploit every available opportunity to enhance their professional military education.

The Marine Corps requires leaders of all ranks to have a deep understanding of war and the employment of force. *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP-1)* reminds all Marines that

The military profession is a thinking profession. Every Marine is expected to be a student of the art and science of war. Officers especially are expected to have a solid foundation in military theory and a knowledge of military history and the timeless lessons to be gained from it.<sup>1</sup> *MCDP-1* goes even

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**This document demands intellectual development.**

further in describing the importance of intellectual development for Marine leaders:

... every Marine has an individual responsibility to study the profession of arms. A leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare—the intellectual content of the military profession—is a leader in appearance only. Self-directed study in the art and science of war is at least equal in importance to maintaining physical condition and should receive

at least equal time. This is particularly true among officers; after all, the mind is an officer's principal weapon.<sup>2</sup>

Marine leaders of all ranks have a fundamental responsibility to continuously study the art and science of war, on duty and off, in or out of formal schools, as part of a command-directed education plan or individually.

As always, the key component of this program is the involvement of commanders. According to *MCDP-1*, "All commanders should consider the professional development of their subordinates a principal responsibility of command."<sup>3</sup> *MCDP-1* goes further and states that, "Commanders should see the development of their subordinates as a direct reflection on themselves."<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis in original.) Commanders must exhaust every avenue in order to teach their Marines and prepare them for war. Wargames can be an excellent tool in this respect. Without emphasis from the Commandant, however, an initiative to encourage wargaming is unlikely to gain traction, and the potential benefits will go unrealized.

Wargaming can provide Marines with a better understanding of the nature of war. While the conduct of war changes, the nature of war (friction, uncertainty, violence, etc.) does not. In addition, *MCDP-1* reminds Marines that, "the enemy is not an inanimate object ... While we try to impose our will on the enemy, he resists us and seeks to impose his own will on us. *Appreciating this dynamic interplay between opposing human wills is essential to understanding the fundamental nature of war.*"<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis added.) It is critical that Marines find ways to incorporate a hostile, independent will into train-

ing if we are to be prepared for the battlefield.

One method of introducing an opposing will into training events is to conduct free-play force-on-force exercises. Although *MCDP-1* recommends free-play force-on-force exercises, very few Marine Corps units train in this manner.<sup>6</sup> Current training often takes the form of attempting to master techniques and procedures. While there may be some value in this, it is far outweighed by the inward focus that results. Exposed to such a training regime over time, Marines acquire a distorted view of war as a one-sided affair in which the actions of the enemy are largely inconsequential. Such sterile preparation is a poor environment from which to draw an understanding of war. Wargaming is a simple, low-cost method of introducing an opposing will into training. Ideally, wargaming complements a training regime that consists largely of free-play force-on-force exercises.

When played against an opponent, wargames allow participants to experience conflict with a hostile, independent will. In order to win, Marines will be forced to think constantly about the enemy, how they can thwart the enemy's plans, and how they can accomplish their own. Marines will also learn to remain flexible in their approach. Well-balanced games will force players to be creative and resourceful, maximizing any advantage—no matter how slight—in order to win. Wargames will develop in participants an outward focus on the outcome desired, rather than an inward focus on process and methods.

Wargamers will also gain a better understanding of other characteristics of war. The internal focus that predominates in many Marine Corps units often leads to processes that are ineffective in combat (for instance, an operations order that is too long, too detailed, or too prescriptive). Playing wargames will remind Marines that military actions rarely occur exactly as planned. Wargaming helps develop an understanding of the need for plans that are adaptable. Wargaming should help leaders to craft a flexible plan, a clear commander's intent and an order



A screenshot of the Panzer Corps game. (Photo by Slitherine.)

that enables subordinates to use their individual creativity in unforeseen circumstances.

Wargaming will also provide Marines with the vicarious experiences that are very difficult, or too expensive, to accomplish under normal conditions. How many Marines have maneuvered a brigade, division or MEF/corps on the battlefield? Wargames allow Marines to simulate such maneuvers and, with careful thought, Marines can begin to glimpse some of the challenges that they may face in leading such organizations or in planning their employment. More, they can gain an understanding of the context within which smaller units decide and act.

Wargaming can have a synergistic effect when paired with a carefully structured professional reading program. Because wargaming often requires a greater degree of involvement than does reading, the fidelity of the vicarious experience may be greater than that provided by reading a book on the same subject. Marines can select battles and campaigns that interest them, read about the campaign, and then play a wargame dealing with the same battle or campaign. Due to the great variety of wargames available, many battles can be wargamed at the tactical level and the campaigns of which they formed a part can be gamed as well in order to provide operational-level context regarding how and why the battle occurred. Such structured gaming may lead to a greater

interest in the battle or campaign and even more reading, lighting a fire of interest in the individual Marine as he tries to understand historical events.

By their very nature, wargames are also progressive tactical decision games. As the game develops, each player is presented with situations with which he must cope and for which he must devise solutions. Players are required to make a large number of decisions in each game. Every new situation acts as a template that may assist leaders in making recognition-primed decisions in similar real-life situations.

When played as a team, wargames can assist seniors and juniors in building implicit communication. In such team games, decisions must be clearly communicated to subordinates so that orders may be properly executed. As time goes on, subordinates will begin to develop a sense of what their leaders expect from them with shorter communications and perhaps even when orders are entirely lacking. Such implicit communication will build trust between leaders and led and facilitate decentralized decision making.

In a fashion similar to the Commandant's Professional Reading List (CPRL), the Commandant should create a list of recommended wargames. One option is to divide the games into categories based upon the traditional levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic). Such a list would allow Marines to select the appropriate games for their rank and billet.

Such a list ought to serve as a guide and should not be considered prescriptive or all encompassing.

What would such a list of recommended wargames look like? There are a variety of games available to Marines off-the-shelf. Many computer-based games can be found online, and these games can often be downloaded and played in minutes.<sup>7</sup> There are games that Marines can play on their smart phones, tablets, or computers. For example, just imagine Marines playing wargames and developing their decision-making skills as they wait in line for a routine screening at sickbay! Just as important, these games are fun, so Marines will want to play them even in their off-duty time. A list of currently available titles is listed below. In a manner similar to the CPRL, any list of wargames should be updated every few years to provide an opportunity to add the most up-to-date wargames available.

Marines must seize upon every opportunity to advance their professional growth. Wargaming offers Marines a fun and enjoyable way to increase their understanding of war and conflict. When paired with a thoughtful individual reading program, wargaming offers rich opportunities to gain insights into how and why historical events unfolded as they did. Such knowledge is of inestimable value to Marine leaders. Given the low cost and the potential benefits, it is time for the Marine Corps to reenergize the wargaming effort and encourage Marines to play games.

### Recommended Games

#### Smart Phone.

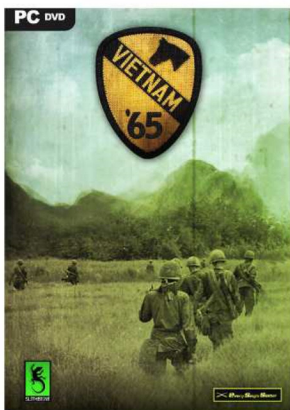
- **Frontline: Road to Moscow** (Slitherine): a simple tactical-level game that simulates early battles on World War II's Eastern Front between the German and the Soviet armies.
- **Frontline: The Longest Day** (Slitherine): similar to Road to Moscow above, but it simulates World War II battles on the Western Front in 1944.

#### Tablet.

- **Panzer Corps** (Slitherine): a simple, yet enjoyable series of com-

puter games that can be learned quickly but will prove difficult to master.

- **Desert Fox** (Shenandoah Studios): an area movement game that is simple but surprisingly subtle, simulating World War II campaigns in North Africa.
- **Drive on Moscow** (Shenandoah Studios): area movement game that simulates Operation Typhoon, the German drive on Moscow in the Fall of 1941.
- **Battle of the Bulge** (Shenandoah Studios): area movement game that simulates the Battle of the Bulge on Western Front in World War II.



**Vietnam 65 is also available for tablet users.**  
(Image by Slitherine.)

- **Vietnam 65** (Slitherine): an attempt to simulate the duality of counterinsurgency and large-unit operations in Vietnam in 1965. Allows players to “buy” and employ a variety of units—at a cost to domestic U.S. support—in an attempt to defeat the Viet Cong and pacify South Vietnamese villages.

#### Home Computer/Laptop.

- **Panzer Corps** (Slitherine): same as above, but for a computer. There are no differences in graphics or game play.

- **War in the East** (2x3 Games): a massive operational-level simulation of the Eastern Front in World War II. Extremely playable for its size but loaded with detail.
- **War in the West** (2x3 Games): does for World War II's West Front (from Sicily to the invasion of Germany) what War in the East (above) did for the Eastern Front.
- **The Operational Art of War** (Slitherine): an older game that simulates campaigns from across history.
- **Close Combat series** (Slitherine): this series of games puts players in tactical situations and attempts to model the real behavior of soldiers in combat.

#### For Further Reading

1. Philip Sabin, *Simulating War: Studying Conflict Through Simulation Games*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
2. Martin Van Creveld, *Wargaming: From Gladiators to Gigabytes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

#### Notes

1. *MCDP-1*, (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 57.
2. *MCDP-1*, 63–64.
3. *MCDP-1*, 63.
4. *MCDP-1*, 63.
5. *MCDP-1*, 4.
6. *MCDP-1*, 61.
7. There are also a large number of excellent board wargames. They can be harder to find and will appeal mostly to those Marines who are hooked on wargaming, enjoy standing over a map as they make decisions, or just prefer maps and cardboard pieces to computers.

