

Thinking Like Marines

By Michael Duncan Wyly

Copyright 1991 Michael D. Wyly, Republished Here By Permission

American businesses today are looking for a way to adapt rapidly in a changing environment, to focus sharply, but be able to shift that focus immediately when demand changes. They also want their organizations to be bonded together like teams. The U. S. military needed exactly the same things and found a way to get them. Many old military practices had to go.

Businesses Need to Think Like Warfighters, too

General Star, the surplus lines insurance subsidiary of the reinsurance giant, General Re Corporation, exercised its underwriters in a recent training session by teaching them the new U. S. Marine warfighting doctrine. The new doctrine is a way of thinking, not a set of new procedures. So it is just as applicable to business as it is to fighting. It equips marines to make rapid decisions on their own and act, seizing immediately on opportunities to shatter the enemy's cohesion. No more waiting for orders or blind obedience.

The new doctrine takes those thousands and thousands of really great human minds we have out there and lets them run free, reaping the power of independent thought. The leap that senior marines had to make and the worry that senior management in industry will have to get over, is how do we keep it all from degenerating into too much chaos? The U.S. marine warfighting doctrine is dependent on marines' pulling together towards a common cause—a higher calling. But doing so under a decentralized command.

What can businesses gain from studying warfare? The analogies are endless; but the primary one is that the way is the same. Our modern world demands a new approach to problems. And the choices in business and in war are adapt or die. So in our session with General Star, we worked on way of thinking. We did more than just tell them about it. We gave exercises to their employees and they experienced thinking like marines.

Speed Begins With Trust

Subordinates—individual soldiers—need to think like the boss, and be able to use much of his authority without waiting for orders. This takes a lot of courage on the part of the boss, to allow that kind of latitude. It also takes trust.

A sharp focus is called for but the rapidly changing customer environment may dictate that that focus change almost instantaneously. Many businesses are wondering how to do that. How do I focus but at the same time be readily and immediately adaptive to change? It is a dilemma—just as it is in war. Some armies have solved the problem, others have failed. In the Marines we began to study how those that succeeded did so, organizationally.

The other thing that businesses need now more than ever is cohesion, that is, a cohesive spirit, like the esprit that characterizes a top notch military unit. It can be very difficult to achieve. You can't order it up. And in this modern world you are never going to get it if you keep your employees under your thumb. You have to allow them the freedom to think independently. Studies of combat show consistently that marines and soldiers fight for their buddies, not mom and apple pie or the flag. In the military we worked long and hard since Vietnam on building "unit cohesion." Businesses are

now realizing that they need it, too. Those businesses that have begun to understand it are calling it "team building." Effective team building goes part and parcel with our new warfighting doctrine. Team building was a part of our charter in our work with General Star.

This new military model has been helpful to modern business because modern warfare demands this new kind of thinking. We found that out in Vietnam. The Iraqis learned the hard way in Desert Storm. But it goes beyond modern warfare. It is the way of the modern world. In a changing, often chaotic environment where we cannot instill order on demand, we need to become skilled in the alternative, to borrow a phrase from Tom Peters, "thriving on chaos." Neither warriors nor business men can afford to be afraid of chaos or disorder. Instead, we need to learn to deal with it, in fact, thrive on it. In the Marines, the new doctrine is called maneuver warfare. In the Army it is air-land battle. The Air Force has assimilated some of both.

The recent military success in Desert Storm was more than a story of overpowering technology. For the Marine Corps, it was the first time in action using the new fighting doctrine that went in effect in 1989. Similar changes had occurred in the U. S. Army. The result was that both services operated in a dramatically different way than they did in Vietnam.

This new way of thinking reflects adaptation to the modern world. Failure to assimilate modern thinking spelled defeat for the Iraqis. In my view, it was that very same sort of failure that led to our country's difficulties in Vietnam in the 1960's.

In General Star's training session, the underwriters worked through a couple of tactical exercises that I had developed in the Marine Corps to teach maneuver warfare. One was based on the move from Inchon to Seoul in 1950. The other was based on Rommel's crossing of the Meuse River in France in the spring of 1940. Underwriters were called upon to make decisions, sometimes rapidly, always with less information than they wanted — though they saw where decisions too poorly informed were fatal. Judgment was the commodity called for in every case.

New World Chaos

What has happened in the world that has so necessitated this new approach to problem solving in commercial and military sectors alike? We see the change in war now as only a part of a vast upheaval that is all around us today. Certainly, for me, it came most starkly with the experience of Vietnam. That was more than twenty years ago and it reflected only the beginning of what has become a world revolution. The reality of Vietnam and our nation's inability to have its way, uncontested technological superiority notwithstanding, ushered in for Americans a hint of what would soon be vividly visible. We soon saw our economic and then even our technological advantages being eroded by competition from Japan and Germany. American management practices, many derived from the way we built and ran our army in World War II began to seem as stultifying and irrelevant as the U.S. Army's World War II culture did in Vietnam. Like the American Army, corporations were characterized by centralized "command" and large staffs. Companies that only looked inward at their own structures and not outward at the changing environment began to go the way of the dinosaurs, the S & L's being one of the more visible examples.

Then, in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union we beheld a dramatic parody on the plight of the bureaucracy that resists change. A whole empire collapsed. It collapsed in the face of outspoken demand for participation by the people in their own affairs, and a demand to decentralize control. This revolution was driven by people who were looking outward at the world around them while their governments looked inward, seeking ways to prop up old bureaucracies.

Chaos in All Aspects of Life

Meanwhile, at home, we are confronted with charges that our educational system is a bureaucracy

supporting itself, looking inward and not outward, educating but little. Traditional fixes are not working. The drug problem rages on while our police forces and military find themselves not structured to cope. Large, prestigious companies, unable to adapt to changes in the market and in the economy are laying off employees, undermining valuable public confidence. Instead of divesting themselves of valuable human resources, they would often be better off divesting themselves of outmoded procedures. They need to adopt the new way of thinking that the Army and Marine Corps did and put their human resources to work with new trust and confidence. Of course for many, it is already too late.

There is no single, simple explanation for what has been happening in the world. But when you look at it closely you do find some common threads. Among the most significant to me is a realization by human beings world-wide that they, as individuals, deserve to count for something, regardless of social structure, or, to return to the military analogy, rank. An equally significant thread that runs through this modern revolution is the power derived through giving freedom of action to those who seek it. I call these two threads intertwined together, the "new freedom". It is as if the freedom upon which this country was based has matured into something new that for the first time is enabling us to gain the full benefit and power that our Constitution offers. But not only Americans are aware of it. And only a few Americans are aware at that. Most are unaware. In fact, overall, our awareness has been running somewhat behind that of people elsewhere in the world.

What (and How) We Learned in Vietnam

Now in retrospect we can see the Vietnam War as part of this new wave. Thus, I was able to gain some early impressions of what was going on from my two tours there, one working closely with the Vietnamese people, and the other working closely with (commanding) marine infantrymen. First, we learned a little from our enemy. They were hardly a model to emulate; however, they served as a source of some useful ideas. The Vietcong were not rigid when it came to tactics nor were their movements apparently slowed by bureaucratic layering, as ours were. They found out how to compete rather well against our high tech bureaucratized military. They did it without any airplanes, and no big bases or command centers, shattering myth after myth that had been taught in our war colleges. The North Vietnamese Army learned much from the Vietcong in the "how to think" category. And even our own forces, at the lowest tactical levels where I served, evolved towards a very loose structure. We definitely moved away from the World War II model under which we had entered the war. This change occurred down at the platoon and company levels, where I served; not in the higher echelons. Almost unwittingly, we, at the low levels, learned from our enemy.

As a commissioned officer, I never wore rank insignia in the field. We didn't fight in the formations we had learned at Camp Lejeune and Quantico because at the squad and platoon levels, definable targets such as a formation of men got shot to pieces. Our seniors didn't know it but we just quit doing it - quit using the structure. Nearly every man in Vietnam on both sides had an automatic weapon. That made fighting in formation obsolete—which made centralized orders obsolete. This proliferation of automatic weapons also made each individual count for something! Lieutenants made decisions without orders, in fact, sometimes violated orders, because at the lieutenant level in Vietnam, the survival instinct cut in. What created the lag in military reform after the war was that in most cases, for senior officers, because they tended to stay in safe command posts, their survival instincts were never brought to bear. They came home from the war, still unaware that a major revolution in how to wage war and how to run a military organization had taken place before their eyes.

It Is Broke

In the Marine Corps after Vietnam, we began to find ourselves in a situation that was distressingly similar to those that spelled defeat for tradition-bound American businesses. We had, in the Marine Corps, after all, a highly centralized structure. We had a doctrine that had served us well, seizing

islands in the Pacific in World War II. Because we had succeeded then, it was easy to espouse "if it ain't broke don't fix it". Questioning decisions made at the top was not healthy for the career. Some questioned forcefully and were forced out. Others learned to play the system and gained power in the bureaucracy. Now that we have the example of the Soviet empire, we do not have to stretch our minds too much to make an analogy there. We, the marines, if we didn't change, stood to land on the rubbish heap of history.

Two wars had passed since World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Both had placed new demands on us that went well beyond technological changes. Our "low-tech" enemies in those two wars had been powerful through their abilities to operate fluidly, infiltrate our formations, and often dominate the night. We had learned to cope with this but we hadn't learned. That is, marines in squads and platoons had adapted to a new kind of fighting, had survived, and had punished the enemy. But our large forces had not defeated an enemy force and sent him home. In fact, after November 1950, the date the Chinese entered the Korean War, no American force would take its enemy out of a war until Granada in 1983 - and, let's face it, that was pretty minor. But, interestingly, the marines who were selected to land on Granada, 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines under Colonel Ray Smith, were well familiar with maneuver warfare, were trained in it, and put it into practice on Granada! Colonel Smith is well recognized within the Marine Corps as one of the early leaders of the wave of change.

But in the 1950's and 60's, although neither the Chinese nor the Vietnamese army was powerful enough to send us home in disarray, neither were we able to send them home for good. All this was happening and we were not looking outward and coming to grips with it. Marines were asking questions, making minor adjustments, but the old order prevailed while major changes were called for. Finally, in 1989, we made the major changes, adopting a new doctrine and taking a new approach to education and training.

A New Way of Fighting Wars

The Army had adopted a new and different doctrine in 1982. The Marine Corps' 1989 changes were similar, yet in some ways more powerful. Because I worked on those changes in the Marine Corps from 1979 through 1989, I speak from a point of view skewed towards the Marine Corps. But my decade-long work kept me closely in touch with the Army, also. I became acquainted with the players in the Army's reforms and I lectured at the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, for five successive years on the subject of reform. What is interesting in both services is that this way of thinking that we worked on with General Star was and is the key. It is more important than what is written in the doctrine, than how the organization is structured, or what kind of equipment it uses. It can have superb doctrine, a perfect organizational structure, and the most sophisticated equipment; but, it will fail miserably if the way of thinking is out of touch with reality.

Command and Initiative, At All Levels

The model that we adopted after a decade of study, mostly study of military history, is decentralized but not democratic. That is, command authority in the military is still essential. It is still strict. But today's commanders expect different things of their subordinates and one of them is lots of initiative. Subordinates, in turn, expect a lot of latitude to exercise that initiative.

For management, the way of thinking to encourage initiative on the part of subordinates is to be in close touch with them, to be alert for breakthroughs, discoveries, and ideas that occur at the lowest level, to keep subordinates aware of corporate goals and values, always keeping sensitive to speed, so successful operations are never slowed. For subordinates, the way of thinking is using personal initiative and independent thought to serve corporate goals, close cooperation with one another, to take risks when opportune, to act now and never delay when action can reap advantage, act and inform rather than ask permission. And for management and subordinates alike, the focus is

always outward, on the environment: for business, focus on the customer; for war, on the enemy. The sales person cannot ignore issues of dollars and cents, competition, economic changes. They can kill him. But focus on the customer prevails. Loyal customers mean there is a future. For the soldier, it is the same. He cannot ignore terrain, routes of communication, changes in the weather. They can kill him. But focus on the enemy prevails. A disrupted, confused, demoralized enemy means success. The hill is yours when the enemy quits, whether you've reached the hill yet or not.

It's More than Just "Doctrine"

My friend and colleague, W.S. Lind, with whom I worked on the production of *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Westview, 1985) is fond of pointing out that in World War II, the German and the Italian armies both had the same tactical doctrine. If you compare the two armies' performances from 1939 through 1941, you see the Germans being eminently successful while the Italians meet repeated failure. Why? Way of thinking. The Germans had it and the Italians did not. It does not come automatically. For the Germans, a great deal of education was required. The *Kriegsakademie* in Berlin remains a model for successful tactical education. The Italian Army in its 1939 cultural state was simply unready for maneuver warfare. Though they professed speed and initiative they demanded centralized control. A hierarchical, stand-offish relationship presented both commander and subordinate with layer upon layer of bureaucracy that had to be gone through, seeking permission, reporting, and coordinating. Courtiership and stringent requirements of protocol stifled communications. Freedom of action was curtailed by self-indulgent officers, protective of their careers. Maneuver warfare demands action and freedom. Action requires boldness. These things only come in organizations where senior and subordinate seek a common goal and think alike.

Essence of Maneuver Warfare

So, what is maneuver warfare? Warfare directed towards destroying enemy cohesion as opposed to seizing real estate; at taking the enemy force out of play decisively instead of wearing him down through slow attrition; high tempo war; fluid war that has no defined fronts or formations; decentralized armies where troops act on their own with high initiative as opposed to centralized command structures where troops ask permission and wait for orders; war designed to place the enemy in a dilemma, to suck him in to traps of his own creation, taking advantage of his stupidities and weaknesses and avoiding his strengths; war where soldiers act on judgment not on rules; war without rules; war that seeks to penetrate the enemy rather than push opposing lines backwards and forwards; war waged by a cohesive team that is like a family or tribe with a common culture and common outlook; a willingness to fight close, not just applying firepower from a long standoff, but infiltrating when the opportunity arises, as did 1st. Marine Division in Desert Storm. I have neither time nor space to devote to the full development of each of these concepts in this article. suffice it to say here, that maneuver warfare is dramatically different from our methodical fighting style of the past. Modern business is finding that it, likewise, must depart from methodical, bureaucratic procedures.

I have described maneuver warfare in much greater depth, teaching a semester course on it and now I am doing a book on the subject that will probably comprise 500 pages. Shallow explanations breed shallow understanding. Shallowness is something we have enough of. Maneuver warfare requires depth of knowledge about the profession. General Star's management agreed with me that for them to operate the same way (and I found that they are doing so) requires employees with in-depth knowledge of the insurance profession. This is not a style for amateurs. When judgment is the key attribute called for, employees need to be top quality. We discovered the same thing in the Marine Corps.

Keep in mind that neither the Marine Corps nor the Army is deluded into believing that it has invented something new. On the contrary, we have taken some of the oldest of concepts, concepts Genghis Khan and Napoleon would have understood quite well. Likewise, Patton and Rommel.

Maneuver warfare would have been very applicable to the kind of fighting we experienced in Vietnam. In fact, it was on those battlefields that many of our ideas first came to us, especially to those of us who were in our youth at the time and were unhindered by a lot of conventional wisdom. Nor is maneuver warfare inapplicable to the issues that face us now and in the future: terrorism, drug traffic, and the new counter-culture that defies the structure of the nation-state and its armies.

Applying Maneuver Warfare Thinking to Business

I do not pretend that every one of these concepts is indeed applicable to business. But many of them are. If we can take the inimical aspect out of the word, "enemy", we see business that focuses on the customer where maneuver warfare focuses on the enemy. That concept is important. But, again, it is the way of thinking that is the common thread.

Business indeed must resolve many of the same dilemmas that we had to resolve. In Vietnam, our larger commands lacked focus. But the dilemma that faces the soldier as well as the business person is "How do I focus when I am operating in a constantly changing environment that is unpredictable?" The enemy, after all, has a mind of his own. Not only that, he is actively trying to destroy you. We have come to grips with this issue by adopting a concept that the Germans developed at some pains in the course of a century. It worked powerfully for them in the defeat of France, 1940, and continued to do so until they over committed themselves strategically and before Nazi politics began to really undermine their army. They called it the *Schwerpunkt*, but no direct translation suffices.

Exploiting Chaos (I): Focus and Direction

A *Schwerpunkt* at a very personal level might be that decision you make when you get up in the morning and it happens to be your anniversary, so you decide that all of your activities are going to honor your spouse in one way or another. You don't quit your job, you don't neglect your children, but you have focus. Tomorrow it will be something else. In fact, today it may be something else. If the roof develops a leak and starts to cave in you, your spouse, and every other family member will be doing something about that leak and you probably won't go to work. So your *Schwerpunkt* shifts from your spouse to the roof. But roof caving in *Schwerpunkt*'s are not the kind we like. The energy of the *Schwerpunkt* is not best used to shore up disaster. It is best used to exploit opportunity. A better example of a new *Schwerpunkt* on your anniversary would be if you suddenly got an opportunity to sell your house for a million dollars and go to the paradise-like location of your dreams. That is an opportunity or breakthrough. But you don't want to miss that opportunity because you were out of touch celebrating your anniversary so you leave your phone message recorder on. It is this kind of situation that, in military terms, I make my military students alert to. Every attack must have a *Schwerpunkt*. So must every defense. So must every business deal, or plan.

Exploiting Chaos (II): Multiple Thrusts

In seeming contradiction, I tell my students to go in multiple thrusts, to be always exploring, feeling, discovering, because the world is unpredictable and so is combat. One centralized boss cannot explore all the avenues, either. He needs to put those thousands of minds to work, not only exploring but acting on their discoveries. You don't know where the enemy's real vulnerability is going to be when you set out, I don't care who you are. But once you find it, you need to make it hurt for him, and hurt more and more by making every ounce of strength you can muster cause him to hurt more. Every man in the unit must understand this.

How do we do this? How can we have a *Schwerpunkt* and multiple thrusts at the same time without the one concept interfering with the other? We do it by exercising our minds together in solving problems, hypothetical and real, thus developing a common language and a common outlook, developing trust. We develop a common way of thinking through exercise. This is what the

exercises we did with General Star were all about. That is why in the Marine Corps, to prepare a battalion for maneuver warfare the battalion commander must participate in decision-making exercises with his subordinates. Corporate managers must enter into the same kind of relationship with their subordinates.

The Dilemma of Freedom

A related dilemma for management is the one discussed at the outset of this article. How do I take full advantage of all those thousands of brilliant minds out there without creating so much confusion that we lose our way? It is an age-old dilemma. When I studied Russian history in graduate school we called it "the dilemma of the reforming despot." Alexander II's dilemma: how do I free the serfs but not have them rise up against me? The answer: a great deal of trust is involved. Leadership from the front. And, a clear Schwerpunkt understood by all.

You begin to see why this takes a semester course or a five hundred page book to really teach well. But I think you can also see the direct applicability to business.

Businesses interested in maneuver warfare or, expressed another way, this "new freedom" which I see as an American counterpart to Glasnost, need to be forewarned. The new freedom is often difficult for older employees, especially middle management, to accept. Many older officers in the Marine Corps are still struggling with the concept. Much of their problem has to do with loss of control.

I should interject here that control is not what maneuver warfare is about. In fact it is not what warfare is about. As a commander in Vietnam I wanted to unleash my marines on the enemy, not control them. But every marine commander, we find, doesn't see it that way. Desire for control can be insidious.

A Different Concept of "Control"

Once a marine colonel adopts maneuver warfare or a civilian manager adopts the new freedom, he relinquishes control to those subordinates whom he tells to go out and think for themselves. If the marine colonel who thinks his marines are doing maneuver warfare knows where all his marines are (as I was always told to when I was a lieutenant and a captain under the old school) then whatever it is they are doing is not maneuver warfare. If his marines are taking initiative and fighting at the high tempo that maneuver warfare envisages, the commander cannot possibly know where all his marines are at any one time. So the commander or manager loses control in that he does not know where his people are or what they are doing a great part of the time. Whatever they are doing, they are not waiting for his orders. This can seem very threatening.

The other way in the Marine Corps that we found our colonels were threatened was that the lieutenants and captains—in fact sergeants and corporals and sometimes privates—in receiving an education about maneuver warfare were beginning to understand things about war with which the colonels were not familiar. This was indeed threatening! Lieutenants speaking in strange tongues!

It is for this reason that even now we cannot say that the reform of either our Army or Marine Corps is complete. There are still a lot of dinosaurs around!

But the young pick up on it. There is nothing so inspiring to the lieutenant right out of college as to realize that he or she is going to be called upon to make decisions on his own! It's the feeling that you can make a difference. From watching what was happening in the junior ranks of the officer Corps over the last two years, not only did we see a new flame of enthusiasm in the young ones we had, but we began to see indications we were attracting a more self-reliant lieutenant into the combat arms. We do, after all, get two distinctly different personality types in the Marine Corps.

There is the free-thinking adventure-seeker and then there is the less creative type who comes seeking structure. Under the old school of thinking, structure was in abundance while free thinking seemed pretty scarce. This was especially true in the infantry, artillery and tanks—less so in combat engineers and aviation. But this is changing. Now that we are talking maneuver warfare, the independent types are asking for infantry, tanks, and artillery more than they used to. This is, of course, to the Marine Corps' benefit because we get the kind of human material we need to work with if we are to do maneuver warfare. In a profession that is demanding high-risk and bold decision-making in a chaotic environment, there is little room for the kinds of personalities that seek structure and security.

Another thing we have to watch is what kind of environment we are thrusting these new young lions into. It is difficult to change an institution. As I said earlier, plenty of dinosaurs are still around. Since the dinosaurs often wear gold or silver oak leaves or eagles (sometimes stars, too!) you put your bold young lieutenant in a very uncomfortable position if you send him out to work for a dinosaur. Some of those dinosaurs are meat eaters and our lieutenant can get eaten up by the system. But this situation is purging itself over time.

Conclusion: Making It All Work in Business

What I will say, however, is that in working with General Star, amazingly few dinosaurs were evidenced. The irony, if not the tragedy, of the situation is that organizations that adopt the new freedom are generally those who need it least, or better said, already have it. Given that maneuver warfare requires a lot of boldness and openness, it is the bold and open organization that is unafraid to confront the "dilemma of the reforming despot" I previously alluded to. But this need not be unsettling. In maneuver warfare we say reinforce success, not failure. Put your Schwerpunkt where you are succeeding. Send your reserves through the breakthrough, not over where someone is beating his head against a stonewall. Bypass resistance!

So in bringing together two otherwise disparate cultures at General Star's Annual Meeting, we were simply doing more maneuver warfare: reinforcing success.

Return to War, Chaos, and Business