

Maneuver Warfare Handbook

William S. Lind



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Maneuver warfare, often controversial and requiring operational and tactical innovation, poses perhaps the most important doctrinal questions currently facing the conventional military forces of the United States. The purpose of maneuver warfare is to defeat the enemy by disrupting his ability to react, rather than by physical destruction of forces. This book develops and explains the theory of maneuver warfare and offers specific tactical, operational, and organizational recommendations for improving ground combat forces. The author translates concepts--too often vaguely stated in discussions of maneuver warfare--into concrete doctrine. Although the book uses the Marine Corps as a model, the concepts, tactics, and doctrine discussed apply to any ground combat force.

William S. Lind is an advisor on military affairs to U.S. Senator Gary Hart, president of the Military Reform Institute, and a Resident Scholar at the Institute for Government and Politics of the Free Congress Foundation.



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Westview Special Studies in Military Affairs

First published 1985 by Westview Press

Published 2018 by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 84-20934

ISBN 13: 978-0-86531-862-5 (pbk)

Composition for this book was provided by the author

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Foreword, Colonel John C. Studt USMC (Ret.)</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
1 The Theory of Maneuver Warfare	4
2 Tactics and Operations	9
3 Techniques and Organization	25
4 Amphibious Operations	36
5 Education and Training	41
Conclusion	49
<i>Notes</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	<i>58</i>
Appendix: Fundamentals of Tactics, <i>Colonel Michael D. Wyly, USMC</i>	
Foreword, William S. Lind	69
Introduction	71
Lecture I: Surfaces and Gaps	73
Lecture II: Mission Tactics	98
Lecture III: The Main Effort	107
Lecture IV: The Concept of the Objective	123
Lecture V: The Concept of the Reserve	129



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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I owe a great debt to Captain R. S. Moore, USMC, who not only provided much of the material on which Chapters III and IV are based, but indeed first suggested that this book be written. Colonel John C. Studt, USMC (ret.) not only provided a very generous Foreword, he was also of great assistance in reviewing the draft, as were Colonel Michael D. Wyly, USMC, Colonel John Boyd, USAF (ret.), Major Kenneth Estes, USMC and Major William Woods, USMC. Colonel Wyly also provided an excellent appendix to the text in the form of his lectures on tactics delivered to the Amphibious Warfare School in 1981-82. Last but in no way least I owe a major debt to my typists, Mrs. Barbara Shortridge and Ms. Sandra Erb, who succeeded in turning my disorganized drafts and impossible handwriting into a presentable paper, and SSgt. Les Amen, USMC, who drew the maps.

For any errors in the book, as well as for any passages at which some may take offense (as some invariably will), I take full and sole responsibility.

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Foreword

Colonel John C. Studt, USMC (Ret.)

The author of this book has never served a day of active military duty, and he has never been shot at, although there are no doubt some senior officers who would like to remedy that latter deficiency. Yet he demonstrates an amazing understanding of the art of war, as have only a small handful of military thinkers I have come across in my career.

I served over 31 years active duty with the Marine Corps, saw combat in both Korea and Vietnam, and attended service schools from The Basic School to the National War College. Yet only toward the end of my military career did I realize how little I really understood the art of war. Even as a Pfc in Korea, after being med-evacued along with most of my platoon after a fruitless frontal assault against superior North Korean forces, it seemed to me there had to be a better way to wage war. Seventeen years later, commanding a battalion at Khe Sanh, I was resolved that none of my Marines would die for lack of superior combat power. But we were still relying on the concentration of superior firepower to win--essentially still practicing Grant's attrition warfare. And we were still doing frontal assaults!

When I first heard Bill Lind speak, I must confess I resented a mere civilian expressing criticism of the way our beloved Corps did things. After all, he was not one of us, he had not shed blood with us in battle, he was not a brother. And I had strong suspicions that he would have difficulty passing the PFT. But what he said made sense! For the first time I was personally hearing someone advocate an approach to war that was based on intellectual innovation rather than sheer material superiority: mission-type orders, surfaces and gaps, and Schwerpunkt, instead of the rigid formulas and checklists that we normally associate with our training and doctrine. It was a stimulating experience! Through Lind's articulation, years of my own reading of military history began to make a lot more sense.

But why all this from a civilian instead of a professional soldier? In fact, the entire movement for military reform is driven largely by civilian intellectuals, not military officers--one notable exception being retired Air Force Colonel

John Boyd. When you think about it, this is not surprising. We have never institutionalized a system that encourages innovative ideas or criticism from subordinates. Proposing significant change is frequently viewed as criticism of superiors, since they are responsible for the way things are, and borders on disloyalty if not insubordination. So it is not surprising that the movement for reform comes from outside the military establishment.

And it is not surprising that the author of this book should be in the forefront of the reform movement and president of the Military Reform Institute. A magna cum laude history major from Dartmouth, Bill Lind was gifted with a brilliant mind and a rare talent for translating the lessons of history into practical application. He has studied and researched war, and has delved into the minds of the more successful practitioners, as no professional military officer I know of has done. His crusade to sell "maneuver warfare" has made him well known--if not well loved--by those who read the Marine Corps Gazette and other current military literature.

In this handbook Bill Lind lays out the concept of maneuver warfare in clear, understandable language, and he supports and illustrates his theories with excellent historical examples. What he has produced is a text book on how to conduct warfare, and it calls for a totally different approach than we teach in our schools today. Yet it is no more than a compilation of theories proven on a hundred battlefields throughout history. But it would seem that only the Germans and Israelis have institutionalized the practice of maneuver warfare in recent times.

B. H. Liddell Hart once remarked that "The only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old one out." In 1925, when he was expounding such heretical theories as the "indirect approach," the American General Service Schools' "Review of Current Military Literature" dismissed one of Liddell Hart's major works as: "Of negative value to the instructors at these schools." I expect Marine Corps schools to receive this publication with similar enthusiasm. But I cannot believe a professional military officer would not benefit by reading it. For the first time in our history we face a potential enemy with superiority in men and material. Against such an enemy we cannot win with the firepower/attrition doctrine we embrace today. In this book Bill Lind offers an alternative.

Introduction

Although this book has been written to be helpful to anyone interested in land warfare, it is addressed primarily to Marines. Most Marines have already heard or read something about maneuver warfare. It has been the subject of many articles in the Marine Corps Gazette. The 2nd Marine Division, under Major General A. M. Gray, Jr., adopted maneuver warfare as doctrine. General Gray established a Maneuver Warfare Board to help spread the concept throughout the division, and also carried out a series of maneuver warfare field exercises at Ft. Pickett, Virginia. The Junior Officers' Tactical Symposium in the 1st Marine Division has also worked to understand and develop maneuver warfare ideas. For a brief period, maneuver tactics were taught as doctrine at Amphibious Warfare School.

Nor is maneuver warfare just of academic interest to Marines. 2nd Battalion 8th Marines, under Lt. Col. Ray Smith, used it on Grenada. As this author wrote in a Military Reform Institute report:

Although the Marine units on Grenada never met much opposition, they did face a number of confusing and urgent situations, which they seem to have handled well. Reflecting their parent 2nd Marine Division's emphasis on maneuver warfare, they did not attempt to follow a rigid plan but rather adapted swiftly to circumstances as they changed. The speed with which the Marines acted and moved was decisive in one interesting case. The Grenadians had about one platoon of troops defending St. George's, which ultimately did not fight. Part of the reason it did not was explained by a senior Grenadian officer after his capture. He said the Marines appeared so swiftly where they were not expected that the Grenadian Army's high command in the capital was convinced resistance was hopeless, the best possible outcome in maneuver warfare.¹

Despite all the attention, maneuver warfare remains a subject of much confusion. Some say, "It's just a fancy new name for what we've always done." Others call it "common sense tactics," as if all it requires is a bit of common sense. Terms such as

mission-type orders, reconnaissance pull, surfaces and gaps, and Schwerpunkt are thrown around with little understanding of their meaning or significance.

The purpose of this handbook is to try to clear up the confusion. It has been written as a ready reference for field Marines, not an academic monograph. It seeks to define and explain the basic concepts and terminology of maneuver warfare; to show some practical ways to apply maneuver theory; and to spur further thinking, reading, and writing on the subject by Marines.

Why should Marines care about maneuver warfare? Why should anyone bother to write a book on the subject especially for Marines? Maneuver warfare has special meaning and potential for the Marine Corps, for three reasons:

First, the Marine Corps has traditionally been an innovator. In the 1920s and 1930s, when the common wisdom said amphibious warfare was impossible under modern conditions, Marines responded with some uncommon wisdom. They studied history with great care, thought about what they had read, and gave their imaginations free rein. They developed new amphibious concepts, doctrine and techniques. With strong support from their Commandants, they took their new ideas to the field and tested them.

When war came in 1941, the new ideas were ready, and they worked. As General Alexander A. Vandegrift said, "Despite its outstanding record as a combat force in the past war, the Marine Corps' far greater contribution to victory was doctrinal: that is, the fact that the basic amphibious doctrine which carried Allied troops over every beachhead of World War II had been largely shaped -- often in the face of uninterested or doubting military orthodoxy -- by U.S. Marines, and mainly between 1922 and 1935."²

Second, Marines know they are likely to fight outnumbered. In Europe, the Warsaw Pact fields more combat units than NATO. In the Persian Gulf, nations such as Iran and Iraq have armies of 500,000 or more men. In other parts of the Middle East, in Asia, and even in Latin America our shortage of amphibious lift, the relatively small size of the Corps and the many commitments facing the Army mean that Marines could be sent into battle against a numerically superior enemy.

History suggests God is on the side of the bigger battalions -- unless the smaller battalions have a better idea. A slugging match against someone much stronger than yourself is never very promising. Even if you win, the cost is usually high. But if you can use judo against your larger opponent, if you can psych him out, throw him off balance, and use his own momentum against him, you can win, and often you can win quickly and at small cost.

Maneuver warfare can be thought of as military judo. It is a way of fighting smart, of out-thinking an opponent you may not be able to overpower with brute strength. As such, it offers Marines the best hope of winning the battles, campaigns and wars they may face in the future.

Third, to a Marine, nothing is more important than combat. In some other services, the most important things sometimes seem to be engineering or management or high technology. Marines have not fallen into these traps. They do not introduce themselves at