What If . . . ? The Essence of The COA Wargame

by the MSTP Staff

Wargaming assists the commander in developing his vision for success by identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each friendly course of action in relation to enemy actions.

The Marine Corps’ warfighting philosophy of maneuver warfare seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of swift, focused, and unexpected actions that create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope. The course of action (COA) wargame embodies this philosophy of maneuver warfare by testing our COAs against those of an enemy, represented by the intelligence section or red cell, that thinks and acts with an independent will. Wargaming allows the commander, his staff, and planners to gain a common understanding of friendly and enemy COAs. It helps identify the advantages and disadvantages of each friendly COA in relation to enemy actions.

Throughout planning and wargaming, we must maintain a focus on the enemy. Focusing on the enemy allows us to understand the unique characteristics that make the enemy’s system function so that we can penetrate it, tear it apart, and, if necessary, destroy the isolated components. Achieving this goal requires us to “get inside” the enemy’s thought processes and see the enemy as he sees himself. It is essential that we understand the enemy on his own terms—we should not assume that the enemy thinks, fights, or has the same values or objectives that we do.

What Is a Wargame?

Joint Publication 1–02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, defines a wargame as:

A simulation, by whatever means, of a military operation involving two or more opposing forces, using rules, data, and procedures designed to depict an actual or assumed real life situation.

A good definition, yet three additional concepts should be considered:

- Scalable
- Time dependent
- Adversarial

A wargame is scalable in the sense that the personnel (battalion through Marine expeditionary force (MEF) level) conducting the wargame can adapt the methodology to meet their particular circumstances. Wargaming is time dependent in that the thoroughness of the wargame is based on how much time is available to conduct the wargame. If time is short, the wargame may be no more than a “what if . . . ” drill done by the commander and his staff on the hood of a HMMWV. However, if time is not as crucial, the wargame may be a week-long, full-scale, computer simulation conducted by the MEF and their major subordinate commands. In keeping with the Marine Corps’ maneuver warfare philosophy, the wargame should be adversarial in nature by using a thinking and reactive enemy to fight the enemy COA.

What Are the Benefits of Conducting a Wargame?

We conduct a wargame to refine our COAs and to develop the best possible COA within the timeframe available. The staff evaluates the effectiveness of friendly COAs against both the enemy’s COAs and the commander’s wargaming guidance. Each friendly COA is wargamed against selected enemy COAs. COA wargaming helps the commander determine how best to apply his strength against the enemy’s critical vulnerabilities while protecting his critical vulnerabilities. Wargaming pits friendly COAs against enemy COAs—it does not compare friendly COAs against each other. The commander and his staff may change an existing COA or develop a new COA after identifying unforeseen critical events, tasks, requirements, or problems. They also identify branches and sequels that may become “on order” or “be prepared” to missions. The wargame assists the commander in developing his vision for success—his operational design. Wargaming helps the commander:

- Fight the single battle.
- Determine how to maximize combat power against the enemy while protecting the friendly forces and minimizing collateral damage.
- Build common situational awareness.
- Build common expectations of anticipated battlefield events.
- Determine conditions and resources required for success.
- Determine when and where to apply the force’s capabilities.
- Focus the intelligence collection and analysis effort on enemy strengths, vulnerabilities, and desired end state.
- Identify the coordination requirements that produce synchronized results.
- Determine the most flexible COA.

It’s not good enough to just test the friendly COAs or just identify their strengths, weaknesses, associated risks,
and shortfalls. We must capitalize on what we have identified by strengthening the weaknesses, mitigating the risks, and eliminating the shortfalls to improve the COA. The improvement of each COA by the planners, based on the results of the wargame, provides the commander the best possible COAs from which to make his decision during the next step in the planning process—COA comparison and decision.  

What Are the Results of Wargaming?

The wargame produces many planning and execution tools. It also generates professional discussion about the feasibility and flexibility of the COAs being tested. It is these professional discussions that allow the commander and his staff to react quickly to unforeseen battlefield developments faced during execution. It facilitates:

- Identifying and refining the enemy’s most likely and dangerous COAs.
- Identifying likely times and areas for enemy use of weapons of mass destruction and friendly nuclear, biological, and chemical defense requirements.
- Testing the enemy reaction to planned deception efforts.
- Refining the commander’s critical information requirements and incorporating them into the reconnaissance and surveillance plan.
- Finalizing the reconnaissance and surveillance plan.
- Developing the intelligence collection and dissemination plan.
- Refining location and timing of the decisive actions.
- Identifying key terrain and determining how to use it.
- Identifying critical events.
- Estimating the duration of the operations and its critical events.
- Projecting the outcome of each critical event.
- Determining the timing of force concentration and initiation of the attack or counterattack.
- Identifying the location and commitment of the reserve.
- Identifying or confirming the locations of decision points, named areas of interest, targeted areas of interest, and the information needed to support the decision points.
- Identifying tasks the unit must retain and tasks to be assigned to subordinate commanders.
- Refining task organization, to include forces retained in general support of the command.
- Allocating resources to subordinate commanders to accomplish their missions.
- Identifying additional requirements for support.
- Developing a synchronization matrix and decision support template.
- Developing fire support, engineer, air defense, information operations, and combat service support plans.
- Determining movement times and tables.
- Integrating the targeting process, to include identifying or confirming high-payoff targets and determining attack guidance.
- Identifying the location of the commander and unit command posts.
- Refining command and control requirements, to include control measures and updated operational graphics.
- Identifying additional hazards, assessing their risk, developing control measures to reduce risk from all identified hazards, and determining residual risk.

The wargame is an essential tool for the honing and testing of COAs. When conducting a wargame, the commander and his staff must bear in mind one of the critical tenets of maneuver warfare—focus on the enemy. The commander relies on his staff for their professional opinions and judgment. The wargame provides a venue for the staff to validate their positions and justify their opinions—all to facilitate the commander’s decisionmaking process.

Notes
1. For an indepth discussion on the red cell, refer to draft Marine Air-Ground Task Force Staff Training Program (MSTP) Pamphlet 2-0.1, The Red Cell, available at the MSTP web site <www.mstp.quantico.usmc.mil>.
2. For further discussion on the details and methods of conducting the wargame, refer to Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-1, Marine Corps Planning Process, Chapter 4 and Appendix E.

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Quote To Ponder

Training

“Battles are fought by platoons and squads. Place emphasis on small unit combat instruction so that it is conducted with the same precision as close-order drill.”

—GEN George S. Patton, Jr.
War as I Knew It, 1947