

MARINE CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE # 13, WHAT IF...? THE ESSENCE OF THE COURSE OF ACTION WAR GAME

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) war game 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.¹ 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 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 they enemy thinks, fights, or has the same values or objectives that we do.

What is a War Game?

Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines a war game 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 when thinking about wargaming—**scalable**, **time-dependent**, and **adversarial**.

A war game is **scalable** in the sense that the personnel (battalion through MEF-level) conducting the war game can adapt the methodology to meet their particular circumstances. Wargaming is **time-dependent** in that the thoroughness of the war game is based on how much time is available to conduct the war game. If time is short, the war game 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 war game 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 war game should be **adversarial** in nature by using a thinking and reactive enemy to fight the enemy COA.

What are the Benefits of Conducting a War Game?

We conduct a war game 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 war game 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 situation awareness.
- Build common expectations of anticipated battlefield events.
- Determine conditions and resources required for success.

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- 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 war game, 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.²

What are the Results of Wargaming?

The war game 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, and 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.

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- Identifying additional hazards, assessing their risk, developing control measures to reduce risk from all identified hazards, and determining residual risk.

The war game is an essential tool for the honing and testing COAs. When conducting a war game, 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 staffs for their professional opinions and judgment. The war game provides a venue for those staffs to validate their positions and justify their opinions—all to facilitate the commander's decisionmaking process.

¹ For an in depth discussion on the Red Cell refer to draft MSTP Pamphlet 2-0.1, *The Red Cell*, available at the MSTP Website www.mstp.quantico.usmc.mil.

² For further discussion on the details and methods of conducting the war game refer to MCWP 5-1, *Marine Corps Planning Process*, Chapter 4 and Appendix E.