

# **Tactics**

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**U.S. Marine Corps**

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY  
Headquarters United States Marine Corps  
Washington, D.C. 20350-3000

4 April 2018

CHANGE 1 to MCDP 1-3  
Tactics

1. This publication has been edited to ensure gender neutrality of all applicable and appropriate terms, except those terms governed by higher authority. No other content has been affected.
2. File this transmittal sheet in the front of this publication.

Reviewed and approved this date.

BY DIRECTION OF THE COMMANDANT OF THE  
MARINE CORPS

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert S. Walsh". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'R' and 'W'.

ROBERT S. WALSH  
Lieutenant General, U.S. Marine Corps  
Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration

Publication Control Numbers:

Publication: 142 000002 00

Change: 142 000002 01

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY  
Headquarters United States Marine Corps  
Washington, D.C. 20350-1775

30 July 1997

FOREWORD

This publication is about winning in combat. Winning requires many things: excellence in techniques, an appreciation of the enemy, exemplary leadership, battlefield judgment, and focused combat power. Yet these factors by themselves do not ensure success in battle. Many armies, both winners and losers, have possessed many or all of these attributes. When we examine closely the differences between victor and vanquished, we draw one conclusion. Success went to the armies whose leaders, senior and junior, could best focus their efforts—their skills and their resources—toward a decisive end. Their success arose not merely from excellence in techniques, procedures, and material but from their leaders' abilities to uniquely and effectively combine them. Winning in combat depends upon tactical leaders who can think creatively and act decisively.

This book pertains equally to all Marine leaders, whether their duties entail combat service support, combat support, or combat arms. It applies to the Marine air-ground task force commander as well as the squadron commander and the fire team leader. All

Marines face tactical decisions in battle regardless of their roles. Tactical leaders must develop and hone their warfighting skills through study and practice. This publication serves as a guide for that professional development. It addresses the theory of tactics and its application in a chaotic and uncertain environment.

The concepts and ideas within this publication are battle tested. Throughout our history, one of the most important reasons for the success of the United States Marine Corps has been the military skill of our leaders at every level of command. Through their tactical skill and battlefield judgment, our commanders achieved tactical and operational advantage at the decisive time and place.

This publication is a revision of Fleet Marine Force Manual 1-3, *Tactics*, of 1991 and supersedes it. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-3 fully retains the spirit, scope, and basic concepts of its predecessor. MCDP 1-3 further develops and refines some of those concepts; in particular, a new chapter has been added on exploiting success and finishing, and some of the original material has been reorganized and expanded.

*Tactics* is in consonance with MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, and the other Marine warfighting publications. Presuming an understanding of maneuver warfare, MCDP 1-3 applies it specifically to the tactical level of war. Like MCDP 1, it is not prescriptive but descriptive, providing guidance in the form of concepts and ideas.

This publication establishes the Marine Corps' philosophy for waging and winning battles.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. C. Krulak'.

C. C. KRULAK  
General, U.S. Marine Corps  
Commandant of the Marine Corps

DISTRIBUTION: 142 000002 00

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## Chapter 1

# Understanding Tactics

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*“In tactics, the most important thing is not whether you go left or right, but why you go left or right.”<sup>1</sup>*

—A. M. Gray

*“There is only one principle of war and that’s this. Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain’t looking.”<sup>2</sup>*

—Sir William Slim



This book is about winning in combat. Winning requires a thorough understanding and knowledge of tactics. But what is tactics?

### AN ART AND A SCIENCE

Tactics is “the art and science of winning engagements and battles. It includes the use of firepower and maneuver, the integration of different arms and the immediate exploitation of success to defeat the enemy,”<sup>3</sup> as well as the sustainment of forces during combat. It also “includes the *technical* application of combat power, which consists of those techniques and procedures for accomplishing specific tasks *within* a tactical action.”<sup>4</sup> This description is from Marine Corps doctrine and reflects our approach to tactics. What does it tell us?

Tactics refers to the concepts and methods we use to accomplish a particular objective in either combat or military operations other than war. In war, tactics is the application of combat power to defeat the enemy in engagements and battles. Combat power is the total destructive force we can bring to bear against the enemy; it is a unique product of a variety of physical, moral, and mental factors.<sup>5</sup> Tactics results in the actions and counteractions between opposing forces. It includes the use of maneuver, supported by the application and coordination of fires, to gain advantage in order to defeat the enemy. In military operations other than war,