

Rediscovering the Small Wars Manual: A Guide to 21ST Century Warfare

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Rediscovering the Small Wars Manual: A Guide to 21ST Century
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The "New" Form of Warfare

Since the end of the Cold War, the face of modern warfare has changed. The United States no longer expects to meet a massive Soviet-style mechanized army on a conventional battlefield. The enemy is now obscure. He can appear in the form of a conventional or semi-conventional soldier, dissolve into the populace, and then revert to asymmetrical guerrilla warfare. The most dangerous enemy is now a vague non-state entity. In addition, the United States is the sole superpower in the world, and it has the responsibility of sponsoring worldwide humanitarian assistance. In response to these "new" threats and "new" military missions, the phrase Operations Other than War (OOTW) has been adopted, and considerable academic effort has been dedicated to defining the meaning of this term. The search to define OOTW will lead one to discover that an approach to combating these "new" threats and missions exists in a pre-World War II Marine Corps document called The Small Wars Manual. This rediscovered manual provides relevant and battle-tested guidance for combating the 21st century's unconventional enemy. The Marine Corps should use The Small Wars Manual as a guide for its future doctrine development concerning Military Operations Other than War.

The Development and History of the Small Wars Manual

The Marine Corps published The Small Wars Manual (SWM) after a detailed study of lessons learned from a series of campaigns from 1915 to 1940 which became known as the "Banana Wars." These campaigns were characterized by the introduction of small Marine forces into countries such as Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic to reinforce, legitimize, or reconstitute a supported government's authority and to impose national policy. Both students and veterans of the campaigns captured the lessons learned and compiled them in a single document which later became known as the SWM. This document outlined a sequence of small wars phases ranging from introducing forces, battling insurgency, and creating stability, to achieving national policy goals, followed by withdrawal.¹

The Marine Corps developed and published the SWM in 1940 during a time when it was searching for a mission to justify its existence. The SWM described the Marine Corps as the nation's expeditionary force which could conduct deployments throughout the world to respond to small contingencies and to influence national policy. At the same time, the Marine Corps was also developing The Tentative Manual for Landing Operations, which provided the framework for the amphibious operations in the

¹Major Allen S. Ford, USMC. "The Small Wars Manual and Marine Corps Military Operations Other Than War Doctrine." U.S. Army Command and Staff College, Ft Leavenworth, KS, 2003. pg. 22-24.

Pacific and European theaters during World War II. As a result, amphibious operations against conventional forces became the primary mission of the Marine Corps, and the SWM was rarely referenced.² The SWM was further lost to common Marine Corps readers when it became a restricted publication, and it spent years locked deep in units' security containers.³

Toward the end of the 20th Century, the SWM was rediscovered because the warfighting and support methods that the marines used in operations like Somalia and Kosovo paralleled guidance provided in the SWM. By 2003, complicated operational environments like Iraq and Afghanistan prompted further revitalization of the SWM and the study of small wars in order to better combat contemporary insurgency while promoting the legitimacy of new local governments. The SWM has always remained relevant to these types of expeditionary operations, but its direct influence as a document of recognized doctrine has diminished.⁴

² Keith B Bickel . Mars Learning: The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915-1940. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001. pg. xi

³ Ford. Pg. 27

⁴ Scott R. Moore, Major USMC. "Small Wars Lessons Learned." *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 1993, 32-36.

Relevance of the SWM Today

The SWM is relevant today because it details the warfighting nature of the complex contingency operations that marines encounter. The title, 'Small Wars Manual' is appropriate because it implies that Marines should plan and execute support and stability operations with the same detail and scrutiny as major combat operations. The term OOTW is misleading, and it creates a benign context for the environments in which marines currently operate. The locations where the Marine Corps conducts humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts are dangerous and should be treated as warfare environments. In addition, firefights with non-state insurgents look similar to those with conventional forces when portrayed on international news broadcasts. Marines can still die by similar means in both conventional wars and operations classified as 'other than war'. If planners fail to recognize OOTW as a dangerous form of warfare, oversights will occur and the lives of marines will be at risk. In the future, the Marine Corps should use the term 'small wars' in place of the term 'OOTW'.⁵

A key part of contemporary OOTW missions is that military forces are often used in conjunction with the Department of State and other non-government organization. The SWM contains

⁵ Ford. 51-55.

the correct definition of the small war that still holds true for today's OOTW missions. The SWM states,

"...small wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation."⁶

This definition indicates that the government introduces military forces because something must be done, but the well-defined political objective may be elusive or constantly changing.

The SWM emphasizes that military actions should be contained within the national political objective. In addition, the manual describes how the national political objective has a tendency to be in flux, which is still a common factor in today's small wars. The manual stresses that marines receive education about, and remain constantly aware of, the purpose of their deployment. If a marine does not know why he is deployed or the goal of his actions, there is a great risk that he will make poor decisions, which can result in negative strategic impacts.⁷ For example, observers can interpret marines raising the United States flag after a battle with insurgents as

⁶ Department of the Navy, Headquarters United States Marine Corps. FMFRP 12-15: Small Wars Manual. Washington D.C., 1940, 1990(reprint). Section 1-1.

⁷ Department of the Navy, SWM. Section 1-6

occupation rather than the intent of restoring stability and legitimacy to a local government.

Small Wars Principles

The numerous planning considerations outlined in the SWM still apply to today's complex operating environment. The SWM outlines the requirement for unity of effort, security, restraint, perseverance, and legitimacy.⁸

- **Unity of Effort:** The SWM describes unity of effort by stating that the actions of marines need to coincide with the actions of State Department officials, non-government aid agencies, the local supported government, and the community in general. The SWM stresses the need for a singular commander with designated authority to avoid both contradictory actions among organizations and the transmission of conflicting messages to the local populace. The manual also indicates that unity with the State Department is crucial to maintaining the political objective. In addition, the manual explains that the best way to remain united with the local government and populace is by developing and supporting a constabulary. Cooperating with the local government, army, or constabulary keeps U.S.

⁸ Ford. Pg. 57

forces in accordance with the intricacies of the resident culture(s), which helps to foster local support.⁹

- Security: The SWM stresses that marines should plan for their own security (force protection) and for the security of the local populace. The manual describes the need for a balance in security. Marines need to protect their operating bases, but not to such an extent that they isolate themselves from the locals. The SWM indicates that marines need to interact with the locals and become familiar with their culture and social system. By doing this, marines will gain the locals' trust and valuable intelligence which will further support security.¹⁰

- Restraint: The SWM indicates that minimal destruction and loss of life is necessary to be able to achieve a lasting peace. The Manual states, "Caution must be exercised, and instead of striving to generate the maximum power with forces available, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and consequent minimum loss of life." The use of restraint will be perceived as a sign of mutual respect and cooperation. The SWM also indicates that educating marines

⁹ Department of the Navy, SWM. Section 1-20

¹⁰ Department of the Navy, SWM. Sections 1-9, 1-20, 5-1. And Moore

about the culture, psychology, and customs of local inhabitants will result in restraint.¹¹

- Perseverance: The campaign examples used in the SWM indicate that the Marine Corps should not plan small wars as small tactical operations. Major Allen Ford, USMC, in his thesis "The Small Wars Manual and the Marine Corps Military Operations Other Than War," identifies five phases within the SWM that a small wars campaign may follow:

Phase 1: Initial demonstration or landing and action of vanguard.

Phase 2: The arrival of reinforcements and general military operations in the field.

Phase 3: Assumption of control of executive agencies, and cooperation with the legislative and judicial agencies.

Phase 4: Routine police functions/elections.

Phase 5: Withdrawal from the Theater of operations."¹²

The SWM phases above are still applicable to today's operating environment, and they indicate the need to consider a larger campaign mentality during planning.

- Legitimacy: The SWM's reference to legitimacy is related to the political objective of the operation. The manual emphasizes the importance for the actions of marines to portray an image of legality, morality, and righteousness. If

¹¹ Department of the Navy, SWM. Sections 1-5,1-8, 1-17, 1-29, 2-2, 2-13. And Moore

¹² Ford. Pg 62-63

marines abuse their authority or break local laws, they should receive adjudication quickly and appropriately. The actions of all organizations within in an area of operation should not give the perception of favoritism or alienate a certain group. Most importantly, the military actions taken should resolve the problem at hand.¹³

The above SWM planning considerations provide a model for planning contemporary expeditionary operations. The SWM's content is still relevant to today's operating environment and should be used in current planning.

The SWM: A Foundation for Future Doctrine

The SWM outlines the true nature of a small war, and the Marine Corps should use it to guide the development of future small wars doctrine. The authors of the SWM intended for the document to be doctrine. The Marine Corps defines doctrine as, "a teaching of fundamental beliefs... on the subject of war, from its nature and theory to its preparation and conduct."¹⁴ Today, the SWM is not considered doctrine because there are many parts of the manual that are outdated, and one can argue that the manual is too specific to certain scenarios. Still, to update

¹³ Ford. Pg 63-64

¹⁴ United States Marine Corps, MCDP 1. *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 20 June, 1997), pg 55-56.

future small wars doctrine without referencing the SWM would ignore valuable lessons learned that still have relevance.¹⁵

In addition, small wars doctrine that develops in response to today's contingencies must not be allowed to follow the pattern of atrophy that the SWM suffered after 1940. New missions and new challenges emerging from the operational environment should evolve our doctrine rather than replace it.¹⁶

Conclusion: The Small Wars Manual-A living Document

Marines are proud of their enduring warfighter legacy. The marines of the Banana Wars had the same warfighting spirit as today's marines. During small wars, marines still need to maintain the "No better friend, No worse enemy"¹⁷ mentality. Referring to current operations as actions 'other than war' is an insult to the sacrifices and actions made daily by marines in the contemporary operating environment. The Marine Corps should eliminate the term OOTW and replace it with "Small Wars" to indicate the gravity of unconventional missions. Both technology and the enemy may change, but the nature of the small war will remain constant. A support and sustainment operation among insurgents was treated as a form of warfare in the early

¹⁵ Ford. Pg 70-72

¹⁶ Ford. Pg 73-77

¹⁷ General Mattis, In his Letter to 1st MARDIV prior to OIF

20th century, and that should be the case today. The lessons learned that contributed to the SWM are battletested and applicable to the current operating environment. The SWM provides an understanding of the violent and complicated nature of the unconventional expeditionary operation, and it should be used as a guide for future small war doctrine. More importantly, as small wars doctrine continues to develop, it must be maintained and updated. The Marine Corps must not once again disregard the lessons learned from small wars.

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