

# The Strategic Corporal in Kosovo

by Capt Paul C. Merida

*Decentralized operations mean new challenges for small unit leaders .*

On one particular afternoon in Kosovo, a Marine corporal, a mortarman by trade, stands post at a checkpoint his platoon has established in order to confiscate weapons and establish a presence in the area. He leads a fire team of four Marines including himself. His post contains a number of obstacles to slow traffic down as well as a sandbag bunker containing a PRC-119 and an M249 squad automatic weapon. It's hot this day, and they've been at this for 3 weeks now with very few problems. In the corporal's opinion, his biggest challenge has been keeping his Marines focused on the mission. His fire team searches a vehicle and lets it continue when a single shot rings out. The round impacts in the sandbags not 2 feet from one of his Marines. Immediately the corporal acts. He and another Marine return fire at the suspected enemy sniper. He orders another Marine to get on the radio, call the platoon commander, and summon the react force. The two Marines fire a total of eight rounds at the sniper who is at least 400 meters away on a hilltop behind a

clump of bushes. The sniper jumps up and dashes over the top of the hill. Within 5 minutes the platoon react force is on the scene, within 30 minutes a nearby light armored vehicle platoon is there as well as a section of AH-1W Cobras. The corporal's quick thinking enabled the Marines to suppress the sniper fire and bring an overwhelming amount of combat power to the scene within half an hour. No Marines were injured, and under fire for the first time, they demonstrated both poise and fire discipline.

This was just one example of how Marine noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in Kosovo operated and succeeded during Operation JOINT GUARDIAN, June-July 1999. Writing in the January 1999 issue of the *Gazette*, Gen Charles C. Krulak said:

Success or failure will rest, increasingly, with the rifleman and with his ability to make the right decision at the right time at the point of contact.

In Kosovo the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable), or 26th MEU(SOC), was tasked with implementing the terms of the Military Technical Agree-

ment signed by the leaders of the Serbian Armed Forces and North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The MEU operated in a very large sector that contained an abundance of Serbian, Albanian, and ethnically mixed villages and towns. Battalion Landing Team 3 8, the ground combat element of the 26th MEU(SOC), in an effort to cover as much territory as possible, operated very decentralized. Individual company sectors were much larger than one would expect, and it was common for platoons to be separated by several miles. The method of employment meant that the bulk of the decisionmaking, of necessity, would fall on the shoulders of the fire team leaders, squad leaders, and the staff sergeants and lieutenants that led them. The mission was difficult and often confusing. Violence between Albanians and Serbs was widespread, and Marines found themselves in the middle of dangerous and potentially explosive situations. For NCOs this meant that, as the former Commandant said, success or failure would rest on their shoulders.

My 81mm mortar platoon was garrisoned in an Albanian town astride the main supply route. Our platoon sector was about 25 kilometers long and included several Serbian and Albanian villages. We operated two permanent traffic control points (vehicle checkpoints) on either end of town and ran constant motorized as well as foot mobile patrols all over our sector 24 hours a day for a month. Obviously my staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) and I could not be everywhere all of the time, thus our corporals and sergeants ended up making most of the decisions and were the ones on the scene when most problems arose. During our training workup, we had hardly scratched the surface of these areas. The majority of our time was spent on being mortarmen as well as the primary TRAP (tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel) force for the MEU. The NCOs were forced to develop standing operating procedures for peace enforcement security operations on the fly, basically making them up as they went along. I provided my input when I thought it necessary and changed things if I thought they were wrong, but their judgment was nearly always sound. Their overall performance was superb.

A month later when we were replaced by the Army and headed back to the boats, it was easy to recognize the impact and difference we had made. The Marine sector was a more peaceful area, hundreds of weapons were confiscated, arrests were made, crimes were solved, property was returned to its rightful owners, and we had established a firm presence in the area—a presence that meant business and didn't tolerate violation of the

rules. Marines were fired on and returned fire when necessary. Marine NCOs were the post commanders and patrol leaders, they were the vehicle commanders and the sniper team leaders. They made decisions, exercised judgment, and got the job done.

How do we as officers and SNCOs develop this caliber of leadership and ensure that our NCOs are truly "Strategic Corporals"? Numerous articles have been written on this question alone, for everyone recognizes the importance of having topnotch small unit leaders. In my opinion, developing decisionmaking within Marines takes practice. Marines don't pin on corporal and automatically become expert decisionmakers. Their ability needs to be developed, tested, and critiqued. For infantrymen there is no better tool for doing all this than the tactical decision game (TDG). TDGs not only test the decisionmaking ability of those who participate, but in addition, they teach valuable tactical and technical concepts. For example, while on boat in the Adriatic, my NCOs did a TDG every night. They weren't just learning about maneuver warfare; they were learning to make decisions. They were forced to make decisions. Ethical decision games and wargaming rules of engagement do the same thing. They cultivate the decisionmaking ability of Marines and improve the judgment they use to reach their decisions. This is vital because as Gen Krulak said:

these missions will require them to confidently make well-reasoned decisions under extreme stress—decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion.

We also need to set our young NCOs up for success. We can do this by ensuring they receive the professional and tactical education they deserve and need. Professional military education courses like the Corporal's Course and Sergeant's Course, as well as advanced courses like the Squad Leader's Course and those for machinegunners and mortarmen, are essential for developing proficient, well-educated, and well-rounded NCOs. Nothing breeds confidence and respect like military occupational specialty proficiency.

Lastly, our training both in the field and in garrison needs to support our desire to develop strong NCOs. We must give them the responsibility they desire and rate, and trust them to get the job done. We also, as leaders, need to have the moral courage to accept the fact that things won't always get done exactly the way we want them to and that people will make mistakes. It goes without saying that a Marine who is afraid to make a mistake will be less likely to make a decision. It's our responsibility to create an atmosphere that promotes decentralized decisionmaking, encourages initiative, and is based on trust. If we do this constantly, both in and out of the field, we will have the NCOs needed to ensure mission accomplishment in a real-world operation. We will have the type of NCOs who are truly "the backbone of the Marine Corps."

US MC

>Capt Merida remains on duty with 3d Bn, 8th Mar. His article took 5th Place in the Kosovo Writing Contest.

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## Quote To Ponder

### **A Lesson From Clausewitz**

**"Every war is unique, with its own causes, characteristics, and strategic and political environments. . . . Each conflict must be analyzed, both before and after, from a solid historical foundation but within its own unique context. This is one of Clausewitz's lessons. War is not a science, and a willful adversary often will do the unexpected."**

**—LtCol Brantley O. Smith  
Proceedings, January 2000**