
Adapting to Win

*A Future-Oriented Study
of Learning and Adaptation in the Last 100 Years
of Marine Corps History*



2019

Adapting to Win

The coming decade will be characterized by conflict, crisis, and rapid change—just as every decade preceding it. And despite our best efforts, history demonstrates that we will fail to accurately predict every conflict; will be surprised by an unforeseen crisis; and may be late to fully grasp the implications of rapid change around us.

*~General David H. Berger,
38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*

Introduction

Nations and militaries enter war with a hypothesis, a prediction, for the war's character and conduct built on national and military culture, means available, and an analysis of historical lessons. Military operations, however, generate new information that tests this hypothesis and requires learning and adaptation to secure success across the levels of war: strategic, operational, and tactical. Organizations that learn and adapt appropriately at all levels of war win; those that do not lose. Further, the uncertainty of what the next war holds confronts policy makers and military leaders with the challenge of preparing for war with the goal of beginning higher on the inevitable learning curve to save blood and treasure. In other words, the goal of military leaders across history is to enter a conflict "more right than wrong" in their hypothesis and thus their preparations.

In support of the Commandant's direction that, during the 244th anniversary of the birth of the Marine Corps, all Marines intensely study their profession to "grasp the implications of rapid change around us," this case study reviews four historical examples of the Marine Corps learning and adapting to the changing character of warfare. This case study will reinforce three primary objectives in that regard. First, Marines will understand the historical precedence for adaptation. Second, Marines will recognize and embrace in mind and spirit the imperative to meet current and future operational challenges. Third, Marines will kindle a Corps-wide enthusiasm for learning and adaptation as embodied in their legacy.

As Dr. Wray Johnson, long-time Marine Corps University faculty member, believes that today's Marine students of military history must "interpret the past with an eye to the present and future in a manner that enables them to develop problem-solving skills and . . . improve their judgement." Accordingly, this study begins with Marines

fighting on the battlefields of Europe in the First World War and concludes with Marines facing a changing conflict in the deserts and streets of Iraq. Each of the cases—World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Iraq—are touchstones of a legacy in which Marines should be justifiably proud and include many demonstrated successes. But war is the most difficult of human endeavors, and winning is hard. An honest and critical review of the record will show that the Marines were often challenged to find the correct path forward given the chaotic, uncertain, and violent conditions they faced. Marines and their leaders are expected to examine these cases critically, exploring the successes and failures, with an eye toward preparing for the next crisis or conflict.

Marines have 244 years of experience adapting to win America's battles in any clime, place, and conflict. This legacy, however, does not preordain success in future conflicts. Only through rigorous study and preparation will the Marine Corps be prepared for the nation's call.

Case Study Execution

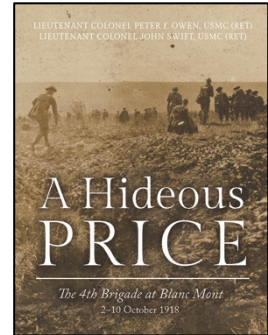
In terms of executing this case study, unit leaders at all levels should use the reading, analysis, and discussion of the four historical cases to accomplish the Commandant's goals above. The execution of this study, however, can be tailored to the needs of a specific unit or the approach desired by the unit leader. For example, a chief of staff might task the staff to read across the individual case studies from World War I to Iraq. Alternatively, a platoon commander might task each individual section or squad to read deeply into the historical cases to connect the lessons across the examples during discussion. It is important that all Marines read and analyze these cases for themselves, using and enhancing their critical thinking to draw out the crucial lessons. Each of the four historical cases includes primary readings, supplemental readings for additional detail and depth, and study questions. The supplemental reading material includes links to a number of primary source documents, such as unit combat reporting, unit histories, after action reports, and post-battle assessments that provide a view of combat for the leaders of the time. These documents were provided by the Archives Branch, History Division, at Quantico, VA. Finally, the study and discussion questions are intended to focus study of the material but do not constitute a complete list of potential issues for consideration.

This case study was developed as a collaborative effort by faculty of Marine Corps University, which can assist unit leaders with shaping the case study to meet specific requirements. The primary point of contact for support is Dr. Edward Nevglowski at history.division@usmcu.edu.

Case Study #1:

The Marine Experience in the First World War (Belleau Wood and Blanc Mont)

- Primary reading and study material (109 pages):
 1. *The Bravest Deeds of Men: A Field Guide for the Battle of Belleau Wood* by Colonel William T. Anderson, USMCR (Ret)
 2. *A Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Blanc Mont, 2-10 October 1918* by Lieutenant Colonel Peter F. Owen, USMC (Ret), and Lieutenant Colonel John Swift, USMC (Ret)
- Supplementary research material:
 1. Volume 6, Headquarters 2d Division, August to October
 2. Volume 6, Headquarters 2d Division, June to August 1918
 3. Volume 6, Headquarters 2d Division, October to November 1918
 4. Volume 6, Headquarters 2d Division, March to June 1918
- Study and discussion questions:
 1. The U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. 2d Division achieved a victory at Belleau Wood. Why did they sustain such high levels of casualties? Did they understand the character of war in which they were engaged?
 2. What key lessons did the Marine Corps and the 2d Division take away from the first battles against the Germans during the summer of 1918?
 3. Why did the 2d Division and the Marines appear to achieve a better understanding of combined arms at Blanc Mont? What does this battle tell you about learning and adaptation, leadership, character of war, and military culture?
 4. Would you consider the Marine Corps a learning institution at the end of 1918? How would you compare this institution with the Corps today?



Case Study #2:

Marines in the Second World War (Tarawa, Saipan, and Okinawa)

- Primary reading and study material (140 pages)

1. *Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa* by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret)

2. *Breaching the Marianas: The Battle for Saipan* by Captain John C. Chapin, USMC (Ret)

3. *The Final Campaign: Marines in the Victory on Okinawa* by Colonel Joseph H. Alexander, USMC (Ret)



- Supplementary research material:

1. Okinawa: 6th Marine Division, Special Action Report, Phases 1 and 2, Volume 2, 30 April 1945
2. Okinawa: 6th Marine Division, Special Action Report, Phase 4, Volume 4, 30 June 1945
3. Okinawa: 6th Marine Division, Special Action Report, Phase 3, Volume 3, 30 June 1945
4. Okinawa: 6th Marine Division, Special Action Report, Phases 1 and 2, Volume 1, 30 April 1945
5. Saipan: Commander, Amphibious Forces, Pacific, Task Force 52.2, August 1944
6. Saipan: Northern Troops and Landing Force Report, August 1944
7. Gilbert Islands: Commander, 5th Amphibious Force Report, 4 December 1943 [1 of 2]
8. Gilbert Islands: Commander, 5th Amphibious Force Report, 4 December 1943 [2 of 2]

- Study and discussion questions:

1. The Marine Corps developed amphibious doctrine in the interwar period. What does the fighting on Tarawa tell us about doctrine development and doctrine in contact?
2. You are a Marine veteran of the 2d Division who fought on Tarawa and you have been asked to brief the 4th Marine Division. What key lessons from Tarawa would you share?
3. The U.S. Marine Corps and Army fought together in Guadalcanal, but tensions between the Services escalated on the island of Saipan. What joint lessons could you draw from the operation?
4. As with Tarawa, you have survived the fighting on Saipan. Now, you are asked to compare and contrast the lessons from Tarawa with those from

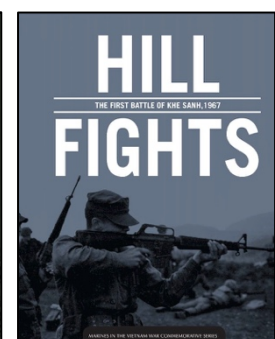
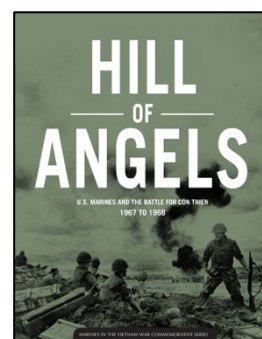
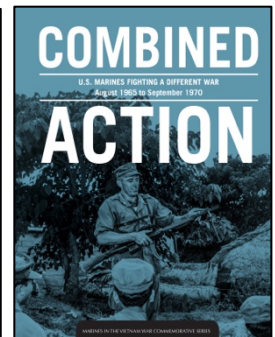
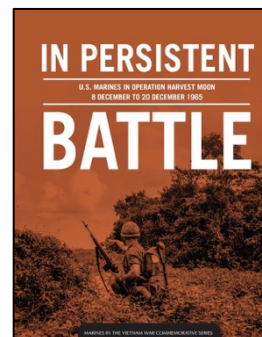
- Saipan in the following areas: Japanese fighting methods, leadership and command, and learning and adaptation. What would you report to the 6th Marine Division in preparation for the Okinawa campaign?
5. Some practitioners and historians feel that the invasion of Okinawa and subsequent campaigns constitute a high-water mark in the annals of Joint operations. What are your thoughts on this view?
 6. In preparation for the invasion of mainland Japan, you have been asked to report on lessons once again. What would you report in terms of Joint operations, Japanese fighting methods, leadership and command, and learning and adaptation?

Case Study #3:

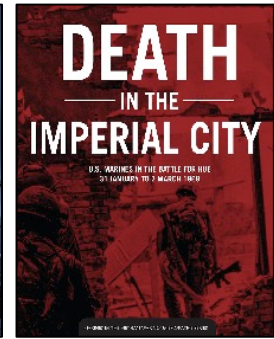
Marines in Vietnam (Operation Starlite, Operation Harvest Moon, Combined Action Platoons, Con Thien, Hill Battles, Khe Sanh, and Hue)

- Primary reading and study material (450 pages)

1. *The First Fight: U.S. Marines in Operation Starlite, August 1965* by Colonel Rod Andrew Jr., USMCR (Ret)
2. *In Persistent Battle: U.S. Marines in Operation Harvest Moon, 8 December to 20 December 1965* by Nicholas J. Schlosser, PhD
3. *Combined Action: U.S. Marines Fighting a Different War, August 1965 to September 1970* by Master Sergeant Ronald E. Hays II, USMC (Ret)
4. *Hill of Angels: U.S. Marines and the Battle for Con Thien* by Colonel Joseph C. Long, USMC (Ret)
5. *Hill Fights: The First Battle of Khe Sahn, 1967* by Colonel Rod Andrew Jr., USMCR (Ret)



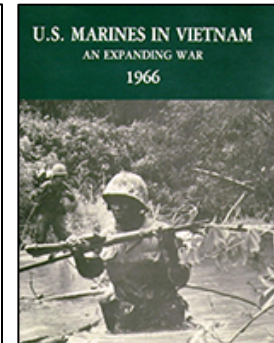
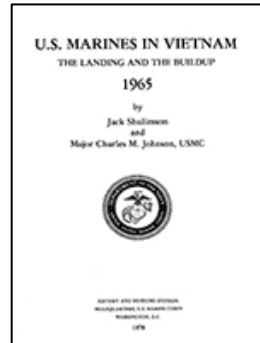
6. *Ringed by Fire: U.S. Marines and the Siege of Khe Sahn, 21 January to 9 July 1968* by Colonel Richard D. Camp, USMC (Ret) and Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol, USMC



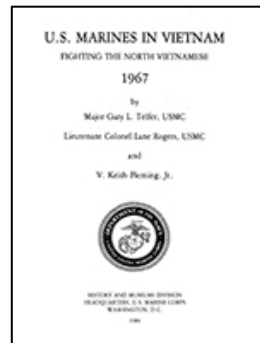
7. *Death in the Imperial City: U.S. Marines in the Battle for Hue, 31 January to 2 March 1968* by Colonel Richard D. Camp, USMC (Ret)

- Supplemental reading and study material

1. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* by Jack Shulimson and Major Charles M. Johnson, USMC (pp.1-65, 212)

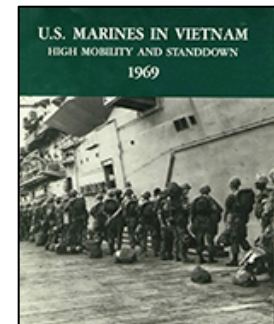


2. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* by Jack Shulimson (pp. 1-64, 312-20)



3. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* by Major Gary F. Telfer, USMC, Lieutenant Colonel Lane Rogers, USMC, and V. Keith Fleming Jr. (pp. 1-30, 255-60)

4. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* by Jack Shulimson, Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol, USMC, Charles R. Smith, and Captain David A. Dawson (pp. 1-52, 652-54)



5. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969* by Charles R. Smith (pp. 1-78, 319-22)

- Supplementary research material

1. Vietnam: Operation Starlite

a. Regimental Landing Team-7, After Action Report (Operation Starlite), 31 August 1965

b. 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, Vietnam War Command Chronology, August 1965

c. 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, Vietnam War Command Chronology, August 1965

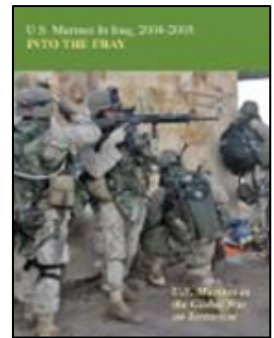
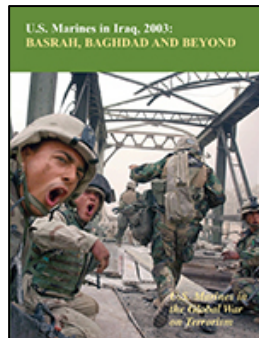
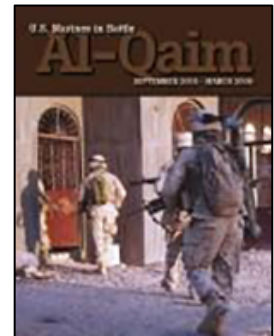
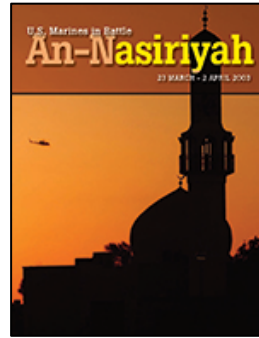
d. After Action Report, Operation Starlite, 18 August to 18 September 1965

- e. Marine Aircraft Group 16, Vietnam War Command Chronology, July–August 1965
 - 2. Vietnam: Operation Harvest Moon
 - a. 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, Vietnam War Command Chronology, December 1965
 - b. Task Force Delta, After Action Report, Operation Harvest Moon. 8 to 20 December 1965
 - 3. Vietnam: Khe Sanh
 - a. 3d Marine Division, After Action Report, Battle of Khe Sanh, April–May 1967
 - b. 3d Marine Division, Critique of Operations, South of Khe Sanh, 2 to 19 June 1968
 - 4. Vietnam: Hue
 - a. Task Force X-Ray, After Action Report, 31 January–2 March 1968
 - b. Vietnam, City Maps of Hue
- Study and discussion questions:
 1. The Vietnam War (1954–75) is still a contentious topic in the United States. For many reasons, clearly identifying the character of war is often fraught with major difficulties. The war in Vietnam encompassed many layers and complexities. This is true in all wars, and it is often referred to as the “spectrum of conflict.” The Marines faced well-trained insurgents (COIN) and very well-trained and motivated People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) regular troops (peer versus peer). In the context of this reality, how would you describe the character of war in Vietnam based on the readings for the CAP program, Operation Starlite, Operation Hastings, Con Thien, and Khe Sanh?
 2. What do these debates tell us regarding the need to learn and adapt to the spectrum of conflict and to fight an enemy who poses both an insurgent and a peer threat?
 3. You are a Marine from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, who served during the Hill Battles outside Khe Sanh in 1967. As the fighting escalates near Khe Sanh in early 1968, what lessons would you share with the 26th Marines?
 4. How well prepared were the Marines in Task Force X-Ray to deal with an urban battle in Hue?
 5. Was the Marine Corps a learning institution at the end of 1971? How would you compare that institution with the Corps today?

Case Study #4:

Iraq (Full spectrum: Race to Baghdad, an-Nasiriyah, 2004-5, Fallujah, an-Najaf, and al-Qaim)

- Primary reading and study material (195 pages)
 1. *U.S. Marines in Battle: An-Nasiriyah, 23 March-2 April 2003* by Colonel Rod Andrew Jr., USMCR
 2. *U.S. Marines in Battle: Fallujah, November-December 2004* by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Timothy S. McWilliams and Nicholas J. Schlosser
 3. *U.S. Marines in Battle: An-Najaf, August 2004* by Frank X. Kozlowski
 4. *U.S. Marines in Battle: Al-Qaim, September 2005-March 2006* by Nicholas J. Schlosser
- Supplemental reading and study material
 1. *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2003: Basrah, Baghdad and Beyond* by Colonel Nicholas E. Reynolds, USMCR (Ret) (pp. 1-164)
 2. *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004-2005: Into the Fray* by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Estes, USMC (Ret) (pp. 1-152)
- Supplementary research material
 1. Iraq: an-Nasiriyah
 - a. An-Nasiriyah Battle Slides (1st day notes)
 - b. Command Chronology, 2d Marine Regiment, January-June 2003
 - c. Command Chronology, 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, January-June 2003
 - d. An-Nasiriyah Battle Slides (1st day)
 - e. Executive Summary, an-Nasiriyah History
 - f. Command Chronology, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, January-June 2003
 2. Iraq: an-Najaf
 - a. Command Chronology, 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, July-December 2004



b. Command Chronology, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, July–December 2004

3. Iraq: Fallujah

a. Operation al-Fajr

- Study and discussion questions:
 1. The U.S. military experienced the spectrum of conflict during the war in Iraq. How well prepared do you think the Marine Corps was in dealing with major combat operations in the initial invasion and with insurgents in the summer and fall of 2003?
 2. What do the battles of Fallujah and an-Najaf in 2004 tell you about learning and adapting to the changing character of war in Iraq?
 3. The operations in al-Qaim in late 2005 and early 2006 also demonstrate adaptation in war. What key lessons would you take away from al-Qaim? Is there danger in drawing lessons from unique case studies?
- Final question: Reread the quote from General Berger's guidance:

The coming decade will be characterized by conflict, crisis, and rapid change—just as every decade preceding it. And despite our best efforts, history demonstrates that we will fail to accurately predict every war; will be surprised by an unforeseen crisis; and may be late to fully grasp the implications of rapid change around us.

What do these four case studies tell us regarding the need for rapid adaptation as we prepare for the next war?