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# Decision Games

## A Handbook for Marines

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The Old Headquarters Press  
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# How do I read this book?

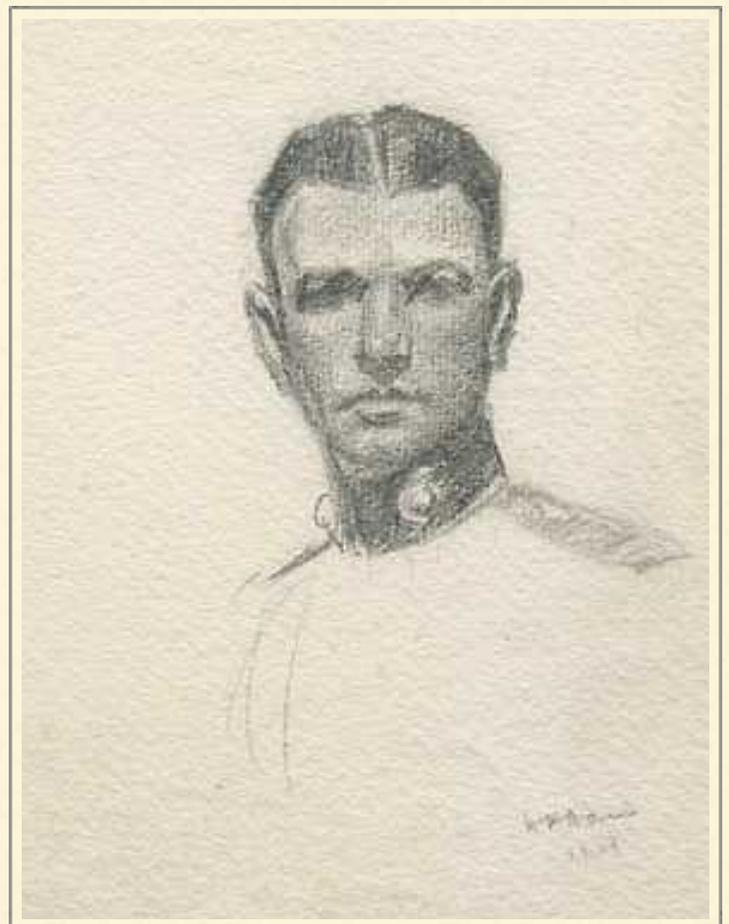
*Decision Games: A Handbook for Marines* provides an open-ended introduction to the playing, facilitation, and development of decision games. As such, it describes the fundamental features of decision-forcing exercises in a way that encourages, inspires, and facilitates further exploration of these powerful tools. In particular, the text of each of the component chapters of this work describes a foundational feature of decision games, the quotations invite the reader to learn more about the art of using problems to foster professional knowledge, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, teamwork, curiosity, and innovation.

Some readers will begin by reading the text of each chapter. Others will prefer to ponder the meaning of a quotation or two before diving into the descriptive material. Likewise, while some readers will prefer to read this short book from the beginning to the end, others will benefit by commencing with the chapters that deal with issues of particular interest to them. In the end, however, all readers should attempt to engage this work as a whole, using each part to challenge, complement, and illuminate the other.

Please note that, while the terminology used in the text has been used in a consistent manner, the nomenclature employed in the quotations, which come from many different times, places, and walks of life, will often be different.

The drawings that illustrate this book are all products of the pen of Lieutenant Colonel John W. Thomason, Jr., USMC (1893-1944.)

Unless otherwise attributed, all translations from foreign languages are the work of the author.





# 1

## The Purpose of Decision Games

America's Marines can reasonably expect to be sent any part of the world to do anything in any sort of situation. In fulfilling these missions, we will be called upon to cooperate with a wide variety of partners, oppose a wide variety of enemies, and deal with a wide variety of people who, being neither friend nor foe, defy those categories. Such actions, moreover, will often require that we employ familiar tools in unfamiliar ways and, at the same time, quickly make sense of novel devices, custom-tailored techniques, and unanticipated ways of thinking.

To prepare for this challenge, Marines must do a great deal of learning. Some of this involves the cultivation of an understanding of "persistent phenomena," things, such as the ethos of the Marine Corps and the fundamental nature of war, that stay the same no matter where in the world we find ourselves. Much of what Marines on active service need to know, however, is inherently dynamic, necessarily short-lived, and rarely reduced to writing. Because of this, one of the best ways that Marines can prepare themselves for the challenges of a necessarily uncertain future is to practice the art of quickly making sense of a wide variety of specific situations, devising solutions to the problems that arise from such scenarios, and communicating those solutions to all concerned.

Decision games provide Marines with a powerful, engaging, and low-cost means of practicing this sort of learning before we land on a foreign shore. In other words, while they cannot replicate the emotional, physical, or interpersonal stress inherent in the practice of maneuver warfare in an expeditionary environment, decision games can help us prepare our minds for service in "every clime and place."

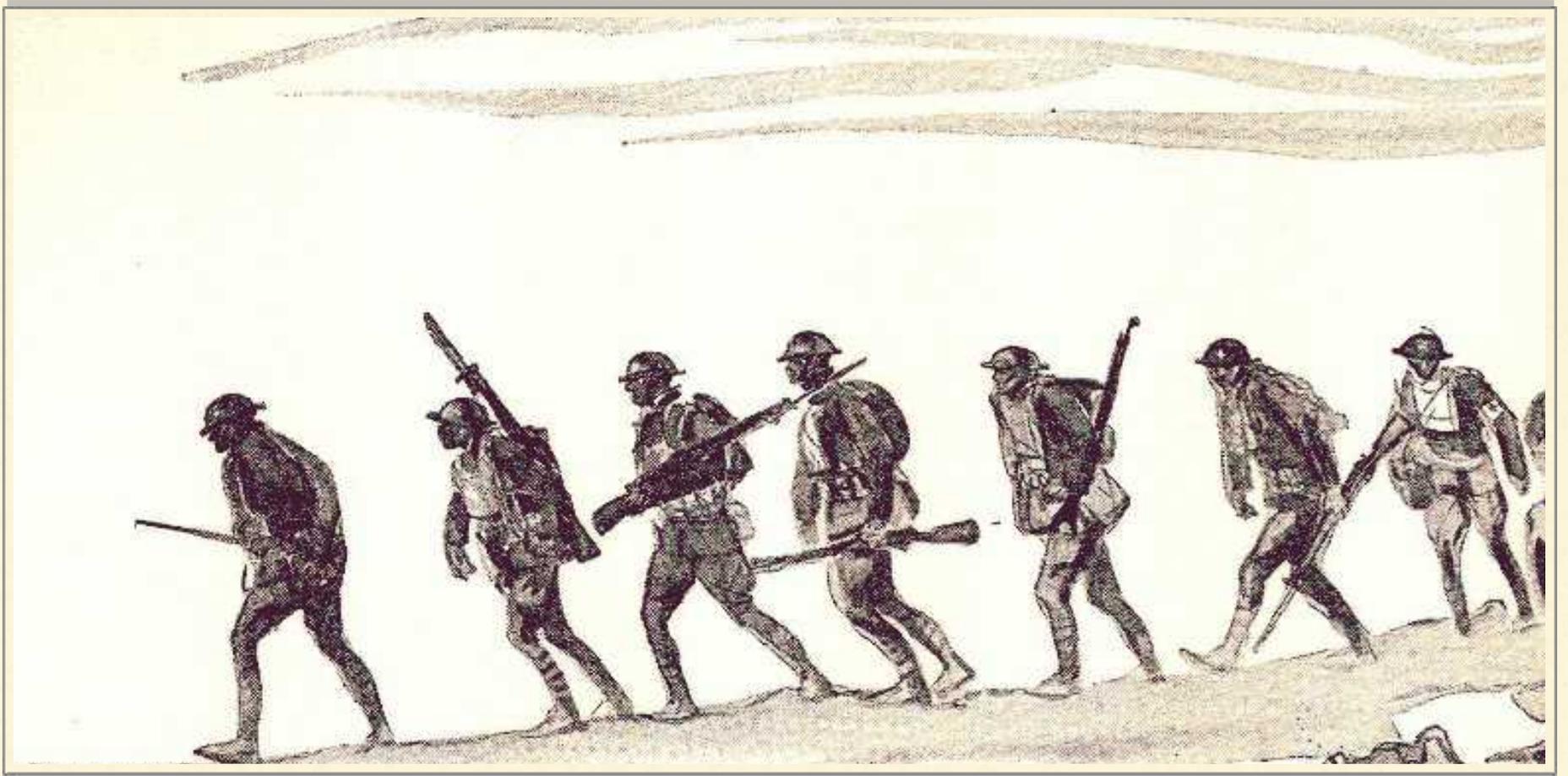
“In war, leaders of all ranks will frequently face problems to solve, problems of strategy, tactics, movement, and supply. In nearly all cases, these problems must be solved rapidly. The opportunity for action is fleeting. If orders are late, the favorable moment will have passed before they can be executed. Problems must often be solved under enemy fire, while suffering the pain of failure or the exaltation of success, or under the weight of great weariness.”

Captain Paul Simon, *L'Instruction des officiers, l'éducation des troupes et la puissance nationale* [*The Instruction of Leaders, the Education of Troops, and National Power*], (Paris: H. Charles-Lavauzelle, 1907), pages 17-18

“How often in the late war did carefully prepared plans, worked out by the staff and complete to the minutest detail, fail because an unforeseen center of enemy resistance was encountered or an unexpected movement of the enemy took place? The over-elaborated plan was thrown out of gear by the delay caused in dealing with the unforeseen.”

Captain Basil Henry Liddell Hart, “The Soldier’s Pillar of Fire by Night,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, November, 1921, page 618





# 2

## The Names of Decision Games

A decision game is an exercise in which Marines take on the role of a leader who is faced with a specific set of practical problems. In that role, the Marines engage in a Socratic conversation in which they devise, describe, and defend concrete solutions to those problems. This done, they examine their solutions, searching for insights that enhance their appreciation, not merely of time, technology, and terrain, but also of their own ways of thinking.

The central role played by problems in decision games is reflected in the names that Marines of the last century used to describe them. Between the 1920s and the 1980s, Marines often referred to decision games as “problems,” “map problems,” or “tactical problems.” (If the decision game in question was based on real events, Marines of the middle years of the twentieth century called it a “historical map problem.”)\*

Soldiers of the nineteenth century also used terms that reminded them that each and every decision game asked them to apply their professional knowledge to the crafting of a custom-tailored response to a particular military problem. They thus referred to the playing of decision games as “applied tactics,” and the use of decision games in courses of instruction as the “applicatory method.”

\*The single best source for “problems” from the 1930s is the *Infantry School Mailing List*. A journal in all but name, the *Infantry School Mailing List* published both problems based on imaginary situations and “historical map problems.”

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“Up to this place you must accept what you are told, but beyond here you must think for yourself!”

“Curiosity leads to investigation, which opens discussion, which gives rise to opinion, which breeds criticism, which results in improvement. Therefore we must cultivate curiosity, encourage investigation, stimulate discussion, and inspire criticism that will result in improvement.”

“As classes advance in scope and breadth, being designed for men of experience and maturity, they should become more and more open forums for discussion and dissection of special episodes.”

“As our problems are as unique as they are unexpected their solutions cannot be inelastically anticipated.”

“There is no formula for waging war or fighting battles; to apply a rule is to invite, or demand, disaster.”

“Military reasoning should be analytical and critical above everything, because military problems are not susceptible to academic proof; and that which has been proven by force of arms in one place has been disproven in another.”

“No matter what precedents there may be for what appears to be similar situations we always need to apply original analysis to every situation.”

Lieutenant General James Carson Breckinridge, USMC, “Some Thoughts on Service Schools,” *The Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1929, pages 230-238

