As is more often than not the case with military capabilities, a commander confronting an urban combat operation will likely find himself with more reconnaissance tasks than assets to carry them out. Given that this commander has melded an organization capable of making the most of all elements of his intelligence collection system, he should be able to somewhat reduce the number of tasks assigned to ground reconnaissance units. Such wise use of the intelligence system also reduces the risk to which Marines in those units are exposed because reconnaissance obtained via unmanned or longer-distance means precludes the need to put individuals unnecessarily in harm’s way. Ultimately, however, urban missions undertaken within the next five years will surely demand Marine boots on urban turf, for no other capability can see where they can see or go where they can go. Equally and surely, there will be more in the way of things to see and places to go than there are reconnaissance Marines to undertake the tasks.

The extent of these future shortfalls will in considerable part be a function of decisions made now. It is fortunate that many decisions can have immediate and significant effect. The role of STA teams, the nature of SOTG training, and the degree of flexibility designed into reconnaissance TTP are among those that can be altered in a matter of months after the provision of guidance so directing. Others, such as developing innovative urban infiltration techniques and testing them during exercises, experiments, and actual operations, will take more time, but developing an initial set of options for consideration should not be overly time consuming. A third class of decisions may extend beyond the grasp of immediate action. If
Marine Corps leadership seeks to significantly modify the character of force reconnaissance responsibilities but feels that firm joint community commitments exist, change (if desired) could be delayed by long negotiation and reallocation of strategic missions.

Whatever the outcome of decisions, be they maintenance of the status quo or dramatic revision, resultant urban combat ground reconnaissance TTP must be part of a training, planning, leadership, and operational execution system capable of continuous adaptation. Evolution of tactics in urban environments is potentially very rapid. The force that reacts quickly and effectively will have an edge over those that do not. A military capable of influencing an adversary’s adaptation will have a further advantage in the ultimate struggle that is combat.

The mind-set of the current Marine Corps reconnaissance community and the service at large appears to be one conducive to favorably considering innovation and even radical change if the benefits merit. That it is time to initiate the development of reconnaissance TTP for urban ground combat operations has been recognized. Doing so from the perspective of perpetuating business as usual would corrupt the effort. The past offers much of value, but meeting the demands of the urban environment requires thinkers without too great a respect for “the way we’ve always done it.”

Those fortunate enough to be given this important mission of creating a first-ever set of urban combat ground reconnaissance TTP should constantly remind themselves that Marine reconnaissance is both a system and a component of greater service, joint, multinational, and interagency systems. All of these systems change over time. The Marine that solves the problems of today without considering how environments, problems, and solutions will evolve by tomorrow has failed to best serve those at the cutting edge. Yesterday’s urban combat was very manpower intensive. Today’s commander has assets that allow him ever so slightly to reduce the number of his Marines that must burrow through buildings and meet the enemy in 25-meter engagements. The future will offer more in the way of such capabilities. Capitalizing on those to the extent possible ought to be a bull’s-eye on which the Marine Corps lays its sights.