

Operational Agility

Functional competency and the span of influence

by LtCol Robert L. Burton

In February 2015, political turmoil within Yemen necessitated a rapid evacuation of American citizens. Despite prior planning efforts, coordination, and force posturing by both U.S. Marine Forces Central Command (MARCENT) and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), neither Service conducted the actual evacuation.¹ While many military and political variables were likely at play, this event exemplified the reality that for many crises in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), Marine forces will not be the force of choice.² However, the amphibious forces of the Navy and Marine Corps have traditionally provided the most capable 9-1-1 crisis response capability to protect U.S. interests abroad for decades. This operational dominance has been impacted in part by a growing national infatuation with and increasing

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disposition for using highly specialized special operations forces (SOF) operating in landbased counterinsurgency environments. While highly complementary in many circumstances, the fact remains that the unique capabilities of amphibious forces also provide tremendously flexible response options for the combatant commander (CCDR), particularly in the littoral regions.

The current forward deployed posture of Marine forces in the CENTCOM AOR presents a fleeting opportunity to increase operational relevance within the theater and reestablish maritime forces as the premier crisis response force option for the CCDR. The Marine

Corps' current capstone document, *Expeditionary Force 21 (EF 21)*, says,

The relevancy of the MEB is directly related to its ability to rapidly respond and meet the GCCs' operational requirements from crisis response to forcible entry operations, with a special focus on crisis response. The MEB's ability to rapidly composite forces forward and project power to defeat adversaries enhances the strategic agility and operational reach of the naval enterprise.³

Integration of the 5th MEB (formerly known as Command Element, Marine Forces Central Command (Forward) or MARCENT (FWD) and the Navy's Task Force 51 (TF-51) staffs and their forces under the combined forces maritime component commander (CFMCC) would best optimize the amphibious forces and crisis response capabilities in theater by improving unity of command and enhancing operational agility.

Seizing the Opportunity

In recent years Commander, MARCENT (COMUSMARCENT) pursued opportunities to assert relevancy of the Service component in the CENTCOM AOR by supporting numerous combatant command (COCOM) crisis response and theater security requirements. This initiative culminated in the Service's decision to establish a subordinate tactical-level headquarters for C² of designated Marine forces in theater.⁴ Concurrently, COMUSMARCENT actively promoted greater naval integration with Commander, NAV-



Setting up for a command post exercise is just part of the C² for joint and combined forces.
(Photo by Cpl John Baker.)

CENT (COMUSNAVCENT). The subsequent assignment of a common commander for 5th MEB and TF-51 has enhanced cross-component communications and coordination in supporting requirements for Operation Inherent Resolve, steady state operations, and planning for executing other ancillary crisis response requirements in the AOR. However, to achieve the true potential of naval integration, the Navy and Marine Corps should streamline existing C² relationships and consolidate naval forces postured for crisis response. With all land- and seabased amphibious forces under command of a single commander whose staffs function as one team, there is no better opportunity to fully integrate naval crisis response forces. Merging forces under a single commander moves the two Services closer to the “single naval battle” construct, blurring the line between land and sea.

Operational Agility: Compositing the MEB

One of the greatest strengths of the MAGTF is the ability to conduct disaggregated operations to expand span of influence or assess surfaces/gaps yet rapidly mass forces when necessary or desired. The ability to composite a larger MAGTF (i.e., a MEB) would yield even greater response options. The *Joint Concept for Entry Operations* states, “To be globally agile, forces capable of entry must be properly postured in order to permit rapid forming of a mission-tailored force sufficiently responsive to emerging crises.”⁵ Within CENTCOM, the collective and complementary capabilities of both 5th MEB (Special Purpose MAGTF–Crisis Response–CENTCOM) and TF-51 (ARG/MEU, fleet antiterrorist support team, afloat staging base) would generate greater synergy, wield exponentially more combat power, and foster greater agility in response options. However, in the current operational environment, Marine forces are currently aligned under two separate Service components requiring coordination through two operational chains of command (MARCENT and NAVCENT) in order to shift or composite forces. This command construct



Who has tactical control is only one of the C² questions that has to be answered. (Photo by Cpl Leah Agler.)

inhibits operational responsiveness, diminishes tactical flexibility, and narrows the CCDR’s options by impeding the aggregation of a larger MAGTF. *EF 21* states, “At the operational level, Marine, Navy, and Coast Guard components will integrate resources in a manner

Although *EF 21* calls for greater naval integration, few opportunities to do so exist beyond the ARG/MEU. To date, the commentary and advocacy for innovative naval integration has not been matched by practical application.

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that provides the GCC with the most responsive and effective support from the maritime domain.”⁶ Joint doctrinal concepts also acknowledge the hindrances posed by component seams. The *Joint Concept for Entry Operations* says:

Command and control structures for these operations (forcible entry) must allow joint commanders to integrate all forces, joint and multinational, across combatant command boundaries in order to conduct maneuver through multiple domains to achieve entry, even in immature theaters of operations.⁷

Enhanced Unity of Command

Joint doctrine has embraced functional component, as have the CCDRs. As stated in *EF 21*, “To provide the unity of command necessary to operate most effectively in the maritime domain, afloat Marine Corps forces normally operate as part of larger naval task forces under a joint force maritime component commander (JFMCC) or fleet commander.”⁸ During any expeditionary operation, Marine forces will be assigned to either the joint forces land or maritime component. But why constrain Marine forces to an operation or crisis to forge those command

relationships and compromise temporal advantage? Assigning tactical control of the 5th MEB to the CFMCC (5th Fleet) during steady state operations offers an opportunity to enhance the COCOM's crisis response capacity while pursuing innovative naval integration initiatives that promote both U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps Service capabilities. Alignment under the CFMCC would also centralize planning and execution of naval expeditionary forces and streamline mission command. Furthermore, this operational concept could also yield tangible doctrinal changes that support long-term Service goals.

Back ... to the Future?

Following the 11 September attacks, Gen James N. Mattis, then-Commander, 1st MEB, was designated as Commander, Joint Task Force–Consequence Management (JTF–CM) for CENTCOM. In anticipation of possible amphibious raids into Afghanistan, Gen Mattis made himself and a few planners available to the Commander, U.S. Fifth Fleet. Following a CENTCOM planning order in late October, ADM Charles W. Moore, Jr. designated Gen Mattis as Commander, Task Force 58 (CTF–58) and entrusted him with command of two ARG/MEUs. Task Force 58 went on to command and control combat operations successfully for four months and has arguably become a model for naval integration efforts.⁹

With the flexibility, trust, and empowerment bestowed by his superiors, Gen Mattis was able to create an integrated Navy-Marine Corps staff and foster the unity of command integral to their success. Additionally, alignment under a functional component (CFMCC initially) was also critically important to both creating an integrated staff and achieving the operational agility to respond quickly and provide mission command afloat and ashore. The opportunity to resurrect and improve on TF-58's innovative organizational model exists right now in the Middle East region.

Conclusion

The Navy-Marine Corps Team already has the right forces postured right



5th MEB reactivation ceremony was held in October 2015. (Photo by Cpl Sean Searfus.)

now to respond to a crisis. Through operational maneuver from the sea, this team is capable against asymmetric challenges and can achieve specific military objectives such as establishing a seabase or conducting an amphibious landing in order to influence events and shape follow-on operations ashore. This article proposes an innovative arrangement that would continue the Navy's and Marine Corps' progress toward greater naval integration and provide the most ready and relevant forces for the spectrum of conflict. Alignment of command relationships with the functional component would best optimize Marine forces for a crisis and exploit the operational agility inherent in the naval services.

Notes

1. Barbara Starr, "Pentagon in Position to Evacuate U.S. Embassy in Yemen," *CNN*, 20 January 2015, accessed 14 November 2015 at <http://edition.cnn.com>.
2. Staff, "Marines Destroyed Weapons before Leaving Yemen, Military Says," *Stars and Stripes*, (Washington, DC: 12 February 2015), accessed 14 November 2015 at <http://www.stripes.com>.

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: March 2014), 23, accessed 13 November 2015 at <http://www.mccdc.marines.mil>.

4. Alexis R. Mulero, "Marines Activate Historic 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, 'The Right Force, Right Now,'" Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System, accessed 15 November 2015 at <https://www.dvidshub.net>. Originally established as "Command Element, Marine Corps Forces Central Command, Forward" or "MARCENT FWD" in 2010, 5th MEB was formally reactivated in October 2015.

5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Concept for Entry Operations*, Joint Electronic Library, (Washington, DC: April 2014), vii, accessed 8 November 2015 at <http://dtic.mil>.

6. *Expeditionary Force 21*, 29.

7. *Joint Concept for Entry Operations*, vii.

8. *Expeditionary Force 21*, 20.

9. Nathan S. Lowrey, *From the Sea: U.S. Marines in the Global War on Terrorism*, (Washington, DC: History Division, United States Marine Corps, 2011), 78–87.

