

SEA DRAGON 2025

The uber squad

by Sgt Taylor Alligood & 1stLt John Habert

LtGen Victor H. “Brute” Kruhlak once said that “the United States does not need a Marine Corps. The United States wants a Marine Corps.” He attributed this to our ability to fight on short notice and win. The *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)* acknowledges that “the Marine Corps is currently not organized, trained, and equipped to meet the demands of a future operating environment” and that “superior infantry is a Marine Corps asymmetric advantage.”¹ In order to continue being the force that the United States “wants,” we must figure out a way to improve our infantry. This is done by improving the way we man, train, and equip the infantry. The purpose of this article is to discuss the way we are equipped. As the “uber squad” squad leader, I have been given the unique opportunity to test out new weapons, optics, and load bearing and communications equipment during several live fire and field exercises, including Integrated Training Exercise (ITX) 1-18. In its most basic form, the job of an infantry Marine is to shoot, move, and communicate. Our equipment should enhance our ability to do so. We can generally agree that the current individually issued equipment does not sufficiently enhance our ability to shoot, move, and communicate to the degree we need it to. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the manner in which our new equipment has enabled our squad to do its job better, the deficiencies we have found, and our recommendations for the future.

Shoot

The Marines in my squad are equipped with the M27, NT-4 suppressor, and a squad day optic (SDO). The M27 fires 5.56 x 45mm NATO, has a free-floating barrel, and is short stroke

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The uber squad, Bravo Company, 1st Bn, 6th Marines. (Photo provided by the authors.)

gas piston operated. The free-floating barrel allows it to be more accurate than the M4. It is also more dependable because the piston operation keeps carbon away from the bolt. The *MOC* says that “to be detected is to be killed.”² Suppressors have allowed us to greatly reduce our battlefield signature. For example, on Range 400 and 410A, we occupied support-by-fire positions and began engaging targets as maneuver elements closed with the objective. The Coyotes, who were in charge of safety on those ranges, noted that downrange with the maneuver element, it was difficult to tell whether our support-by-fire had begun or ceased their fires. My squad had another optic available, the Leupold Mark 4, which was a medium-range optic. On Range 400, this enabled us to positively identify and engage targets at

600m, much farther than the standard SDO or rifle combat optic. Our ability to support maneuver was far greater than squads without this capability, and it helped the supported unit close with the objective more quickly.

A deficiency became readily apparent later on during ITX when we began military operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT). During Range 220, when we were fighting house to house, clearing rooms and buildings, my Marines had difficulty manipulating their M27s through door frames and around corners. The barrel length, especially with the suppressor added to the end, was much too long. This isn't a new problem. Marines were having the same exact difficulties before the Corps made the move from the M16A4 to the M4. Another issue during MOUT was



Marines from the uber squad during a training exercise. (Photo provided by the authors.)

that the SDO was a single power (3.5X) magnified optic and was not ideal for close-range room clearing. A low power (1X) or an offset holographic/red dot sight would be better suited for short-range engagements while clearing rooms. We were taught to look over our sights while clearing buildings, but in certain situations (engaging targets deep inside a larger room and/or down a long hallway), we needed to be able to quickly transition from using the optic and looking over the optic to accurately engaging those enemy threats.

The squads of the future should be equipped with a variant of the M27 and a suppressor. The fire team leader, rifleman, and assistant automatic rifleman should have M27s with a 14.5-inch barrel, much like the M4. This weapon should be equipped with an optic that can quickly transition between higher magnifications (at least 4X) or low to no magnification (0 to 1X). Another approach would be to provide an offset red dot or holographic sight that allows for rapid, accurate engagement in close-range MOU environments. With this weapon, the rifle squad would be effective in the MOC's crowded urban littorals.³ The automatic rifleman should carry a longer-barreled weapon, like the current M27, with the addition of higher capacity magazines. This

would allow them to provide the accuracy and duration of suppression the squad needs to close with the enemy. The squad should also have one designated marksman with a long-distance sight, like the Leupold. This would give the squad a unique precision fire capability that allows it to positively identify and guarantee first-round effects when engaging targets at longer distances.

Move

The ability of my squad to close with the enemy has been directly affected by our flak, helmet, packs, and night optics (MARSOC SPEAR set). We were equipped with the Adaptive Vest System (AVS) plate carrier. Compared to the standard-issue plate carrier, it was lighter and more durable and had a wider variety of pouches that could be attached, allowing for more individual customization. For example, it had a turtle-shell pouch for small arms protective inserts (SAPIs), which meant that the plates could be removed quickly. There was also a separate component underneath that had been custom fit to the Marine. In addition, our plates weighed 30 percent less than the standard enhanced SAPI. (It is also important to note that based off of casualty data collected by MARSOC, we have not been issued side SAPIs). During the

large-scale ranges we conducted during the workup (Range 400 and the IPBC [Infantry Platoon Battle Course]), the overall weight, comfort, and especially fit of the plate carrier made maneuvering easier. As a result, my Marines were less fatigued as they closed with the objective. We were also equipped with the high-cut, lightweight ops core helmet. It weighed less than the standard-issue helmet and had a rail system on both sides, allowing it to be quickly customized to the mission. The guts of the helmet are where the money is made. It had an adjustment knob in the back that tightened for the proper fit, so you avoid having the oversized helmet that constantly shifts.

Our Mystery Ranch assault packs were amazing. They had pads on the back that prevented your pack from sliding around during movement. It also had the "V" zipper instead of the standard oval zipper system. This is especially useful during patrol exercises when you are expected to be able to get up from your position in a moment's notice. The takeaway: our kit made us lighter, faster, and more effective.

The biggest game changer was the PVS-31A. They were white-phosphorus tubed binocular night vision optics with much higher resolution and better depth perception than the current PVS-14s. I

am not exaggerating when I say I could read a book with zero percent illumination. With the added depth perception, you don't have to worry about tripping over things that you think are five meters in front of you. During my platoon's 410A run, my squad moved faster and more confidently through the trenches and breach sites than the others because we saw every detail around us, including the enemy wire obstacles. In fact, we clearly saw concertina wire from over 50 meters away. In comparison, the other squads got caught in the wire before they ever noticed it. While approaching the breach sight, we handed the optics to our combat engineers, who were able to detect each and every enemy early detection device. Later, we were able to sprint through the rocky and uneven terrain, actually exploiting the breach site while every other squad slowly walked and tripped through. The takeaway: PVS-31As have exponentially increased our lethality at night. The Marine Corps should purchase these for the infantry as soon as possible.

The biggest deficiency in the equipment we received was the lack of size of the Mystery Ranch main pack. These "main" packs were slightly larger than the assault pack, which severely limited our ability to pack sustainment loads.

The rifle squad of the future should be equipped with the AVS plate carrier, ops core helmet, PVS-31A, and packs similar to those made by Mystery Ranch. All of this gear is being used today by MARSOC, which means it is available for mass purchase *now*. Furthermore, it seems to me that working with SOCOM in equipping our infantry units would go a long way toward increasing the interoperability we seek in Marine Corps and SOCOM concepts for integration, interdependence, and interoperability.⁴ We could leverage SOCOM's large budget and limited size to test out the latest and greatest gear and then adopt what works best.

Communications

Every Marine in my squad was issued a hi-threat headset that attached to our helmets. These headsets connected directly to our AN/PRC-152 radios and had a connector box with four different

After fourteen years of war the ground services, the Army and Marine Corps, remain starved of new, cutting-edge, lifesaving materiel ... [and] might have had a better day in Afghanistan had the nation spent a bit more to give them an overwhelming, in fact dominant, technological edge over the enemy.⁵

—MG Robert Scales, USA(Ret)

channel relays. This means you can attach up to four radios to the same headset, allowing the wearer the ability to monitor multiple nets. In addition, my squad was given our own net because of our increased communications equipment. At first, this increased capability took some getting used to, but after a while, it became one of our greatest capabilities. For example, in urban terrain, we were able to quickly and quietly orient the squad to the enemy. Regardless of dispersion, I was able to pass tasking statements to the team leaders, and their teams simultaneously heard. The team leaders could then coordinate with each other and execute while I communicated with higher headquarters. We were able to observe, orient, decide, and act faster than the enemy and other friendly units.

Let's return to observation as it relates to communications, specifically our small unmanned aerial systems (SUAS) capability. It should be no secret that SUAS allow one to have a better understanding of the battlefield and reduce a great deal of the fog of war. Our experience did not differ, but the impact was substantial. For example, during a patrol, my squad utilized an intelligence update and our SUAS to get eyes on the enemy before we could see each other. The operator was then able to call for fire and maintain observation as we maneuvered, providing constant updates on the enemy's activities, the effects and geometries of our fires, and friendly locations. Every individual Marine in the squad received realtime information, increasing initiative-based decision making.

We are convinced that the rifle squad of the future should have increased

communications and SUAS capabilities. Specifically, they should have the ability to share their SUAS feed with adjacent squads and instantaneously pass up position reports to higher. Each Marine should have radios so that they can communicate up, down, and laterally. To that end, our recommendation is to establish unit SOPs that prevent the nets from getting cluttered and combat the obvious and inevitable energy problems associated with the number of radios that will be used.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this equipment is a massive step toward providing the infantry the advantage it needs to fight and win. We all know that gear does not make proficient warfighters but rather amplifies their lethality. However, if we are to stay a step ahead of the enemy in this time of technology proliferation, we must constantly seek feedback on our equipment and find ways to improve, acquire, and field it immediately.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, (Washington, DC: September 2016), available at <http://www.mccdc.marines.mil>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. MG Robert Scales, USA(Ret), *Scales on War*, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2016).

