

Tanks on the MEU

Re-examine tank prepositioning strategy
to increase operational flexibility

by Capt Kyle Endyke

Embarking tanks with MEUs may become an antiquated approach of providing armor protected firepower to the GCE in the current and future operating environment. Tanks are a critical combat asset, but the applicability of a single tank platoon aboard an ARG should be seriously examined. The current and future operating environments will test the flexibility of the MAGTF. With the physical space aboard ship taken up by a platoon of tanks, the MAGTF's ability to tailor its organizational embarkation is hindered by an asset that supports a small percentage of the range of military operations (ROMO). The Marine Corps should re-examine the M1A1 tank preposition strategy, which may involve removing tanks from the ARG/MEU and replacing them with forward staged equipment. This option provides flexibility to the commander to address

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load plans that are more complex in the future. The amphibious combat vehicle (ACV) has been sourced to BAE Systems with an order of 30 vehicles to be delivered by 2020. The ACV has a diminished troop-carrying capacity in relation to the AAV because of requirements for crew and passenger safety from blasts. Therefore, additional ACVs are required to transport the future infantry formation with a requirement of water-born amphibious transport on a MEU.¹ In the same regard, the joint light tactical vehicle (JLTV) is larger than the HMMWV and requires more space for similar capabilities.²

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the ROMO in the future operating environment. This article addresses the reasons to re-examine the prepositioning strategy, including removing tanks from ships in an ARG/MEU construct, while retaining the personnel and platform by strategically positioning tanks forward under the MEU command.

The Marine Corps has procured replacements for both the AAV and HMMWV. These platforms present a unique set of challenges which will

The JLTV is in production stages to replace the HMMWV and requires twice as much space for the same crew size (1,280 feet compared to 630 feet).^{3 4} There are multiple units within the battalion landing team (BLT) that utilize the small vehicle motorized capability. Specifically, combined anti-armor team platoons and motor transport currently rely on HMMWVs as transportation and motorized weapon platforms. The transition to the JLTV will increase the

current BLT footprint aboard ship. The integration of the ACV and JLTV into the MEU equipment density list, along with future equipment requirements to support expeditionary advance base operations (EABO), will force MEU commanders to make hard choices on what equipment to take based on the theater of operations they will be working in. Moving tanks to a forward-staged position is one example of the flexibility that provides a MEU commander by having equipment prepositioned and maximizing the space on the ship with equipment that is used more frequently. Historically, the Marine Corps has used three amphibious ships in an ARG task organization to embark the entirety of a MEU. All three of the ships in this construct have well decks capable of transporting substantial amounts of MEU equipment. The 15th MEU was the first MEU to alter this construct. Instead of an LHD, which can move the largest amount of MEU assets, it employed the USS *America* (LHA 6).⁵ The *America* class ships (LHA 6 and 7) do not have a well deck capable of supporting BLT assets.⁶ Therefore, the MEU will be constrained to two well decks in a three ship ARG with more spatial requirements. The change in spatial restrictions not only affects the MEU from a technical standpoint, but also from a capability standpoint. There is a noticeable shift occurring regarding the employment of MEUs in that they are engaging in a wider variety of operations. This shift in the capabilities required of the MEU combined with the lack of connectors/prime movers are significant factors in how often tanks are used for exercises around the globe.

Over the last decade, deployed MEUs have not conducted amphibious combat operations. As recently as 2016 and



Marines with Alpha Company, 2d Tank Battalion, 2d MarDiv, load tanks into a landing craft utility at Onslow Beach. (Photo by Cpl Ed Galo.)

2018, MEUs were used in humanitarian assistance missions after disasters in Japan and Haiti. In these instances, with relatively no enemy threat, tanks not only used well deck space that could be occupied with additional construction equipment and supplies, but the movement of tanks ashore would be an imposing image for the native populations. M1A1 Abrams tanks are combat vehicles and do not possess substantial lift capability for equipment or personnel besides ammunition. They have no use in humanitarian assistance operations. Other types of MEU missions, such as support for long-range, small-scale, precision operations, also make it impractical to ship tanks because of the space they take away from other units.

The MEUs typically support international exercises and special operations to increase the partnership with allied countries and deter an adversary from taking hostile actions against an allied country(s). Their support often comes in the form of rapid airlift quick reaction force (QRF) capabilities. In this capacity, tanks provide QRF capabilities. A QRF that comes from a prepositioned posture could have increased capabilities with the availability of additional space—including rapid insertion ground vehicles, such as utility task vehicles, which can be airlifted

with the QRF. Removing tanks from shipping will give the MEU commander more freedom to customize his MEU for anticipated missions. Whether the MEU needs to rapidly shift course to respond to a natural disaster or support special operations, the space provided by removing tanks will be occupied by equipment that is more practical for the mission.

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In a peer-to-peer conflict in a contested amphibious environment, there are conditions that must be set prior to employing any ground platform effectively. The Marine Corps' use of its combined arms by direct or indirect fires coupled with air support proves to be effective in providing protection from top-down attack, which is one of the many threats that the GCE faces. The *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (MOC) addresses the fact that United States air supremacy is far from guaranteed, and the proliferation of surface-to-air systems threatens this protection even further.⁷ In a contested littoral environment, tanks, logistical support, and airfields present

an extremely vulnerable high payoff and high value target for an enemy that challenges friendly forces for air superiority. Air supremacy in this scenario is highly unlikely. The risk of an air threat can be mitigated by forward staging equipment in permissive environments with the understanding that it takes infrastructure and other things to maintain such an area. However, this will come at an increased cost to the supporting unit. Prepositioning tanks that support a MEU or MEB provide the ability to retain the capabilities that tanks provide while allowing commanders to adjust the EDLs and become a more mission-tailored MAGTF.

The Marine Corps already has many of the requirements in place to adjust its approach to tanks in the MEU construct. A 2017 article in *Proceedings* specified why the MEU needs tanks: breaching ability, lethality, increasing survivability, and deterrence.⁸ While the logic in the article is sound, an alternative is to preposition tanks and other equipment to provide additional options to commanders. The Marine Corps already has a footprint of tank unit equipment in different geographical locations.⁹ A forward-staged tank unit from platoon- to company-sized will give the Marine Corps the ability to respond to any crisis or pacing threat hostility with at least a platoon of tanks—provided that the lift is available to get them there. If forward staging the equipment becomes a suitable option, the MEU must continue to have a tank platoon attached to the BLT that executes pre-deployment training, gets on ship to be part of the planning process, and then falls in on forward-staged tanks. The disadvantage of this is that the skills of those Marines will atrophy while sitting on ship with no equipment and limited training conducted; in contrast, the advantage of this is that the Marines get to experience shipboard life, while within sight and mind of other members of the command.

The Marines attached to the BLT can utilize tanks from their tank battalion to participate in pre-deployment training with the MEU. This will ensure the Marines are qualified on the tanks as a platoon. Aboard ship, tank platoon

maintenance is extremely limited. Much of the maintenance on a tank requires movement of the tank and the turret, which cannot be done in ship storage. Forward-staging the tank platoon partially solves this problem if the proper amount of time is allotted to prepare the vehicles before use. As the MEU deploys, the Marines will go forward to where the tanks are located in the most likely theater that the MEU deploys. Not only will the Marines be able to train on the tanks they would use in combat, but they can also maintain the tanks in an appropriate environment. Since tanks are not the first vehicles to go ashore in an amphibious operation, the benefits of being able to train on and maintain the tanks drastically outweigh their need to be physically located on ship.

There are two notable counter arguments to this plan: delays it would cause in battlefield tempo and the hypothetical decrease in relevance of tank units. Although tanks would not be the first vehicles to land ashore in an amphibious operation, it is not rare for them to be planned for the second or third waves. Forward staging tanks could mean it will take longer to get a tank to the battlefield. With tanks being a MAGTF's most substantial armor protected firepower asset, the lack of them in a rapid assault could prove costly to the survivability of the assault force. If tanks are not immediately available, operational tempo could force the commander to move forward without them. The second counter argument is the result of commanders viewing the process of getting tanks to the operation as too difficult and time consuming. Over time, the use of tanks in exercises and small-scale operations would decrease, leading to the platform becoming obsolete. Capt Martin Wetterauer's previously mentioned *Proceedings* article stated, "When MEUs are considering equipment to embark when space is limited, the M1A1 should not be the first asset to go."¹⁰ The first argument is all but invalid when one understands predictions for the future operating environment, and the second argument can be addressed by proper utilization of the Marine Corps Planning Process.

The only logical way to arrive to the conclusion that a single platoon of tanks will always be needed immediately for an amphibious assault is to assume the future fight will be exactly the same as the last fifteen years. Against an inferior force, with friendly air supremacy conducting a very limited scale raid, the delay in tempo could cause a measurable difference. In the future operating environment, a single platoon of tanks aboard ship will have little to no effect on the strategic battlespace. In peer combat, a platoon of tanks without support does not possess the firepower to change the fight, therefore the timing is irrelevant. Outside of peer-level combat, long-range precision fires are more practical for power projection and deterrence, and their equipment footprint aboard ship should reflect that.

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The Service requirement and desire to conduct armor maneuver in support of the GCE will prevent tanks from fading into irrelevance. The tank units should continue to do pre-deployment training with the BLT. Throughout this process, the platoon leadership should ensure the tank platoon is integrated into planned exercises and operations for the duration of the deployment. Ideally, there will be a balance between the platoon's participation in deployed training with the MEU and time spent at their forward-staged position maintaining the tanks.

The tank capability must remain at the MEU level if the Marine Corps perceives this as the application of the flexible nature of the MAGTF. The current organization of equipment, with regard to tanks, applies only to a tiny section of the ROMO and neglects the predominant theories of the future of warfare. A tank's capabilities make it invaluable in any ground combat op-

eration. The further overlapping of the five domains in future operating environments, however, requires their application to be focused and extremely well-coordinated to avoid substantial loss of combat power and life. Tanks should remain a MEU asset, but forward-staged to respond to the specific set of circumstances they are designed for, rather than occupy space on ships that could be taken by equipment that must be more readily available.

Notes

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9. "Keep Tanks with the MEU."

