

Acquisitions Speak for the Warfighter

This is what we are talking about

by Col Wendell B. Leimbach, Jr.

The sad but completely understandable reality is that, to the vast majority of the Marine Corps, the acquisitions process (buying “stuff”) is a complete mystery. To most, new gear or capabilities just arrive, or don’t, without any understanding from the warfighter about what is, or isn’t, going on behind the scenes. In one respect, this is the preferred situation, as the warfighter is already fully engaged in accomplishing his real-world missions. However, in a practical sense, it is unfortunate that the warfighter is ill informed on such a critical aspect of how the Commandant of the Marine Corps conducts his task of making and *equipping* the forces he provides to the combatant commanders.

Anyone who has spent any time around a program management office, or an HQMC office that deals closely with the acquisitions process, has been exposed to the sea of acronyms that pervades the world of systems acquisitions management. While all aspects of the military are rife with acronym usage, the acquisitions process seems to have taken the propensity to an absurd level that requires years of experience to truly master. After my initial assignment to an acquisitions billet, I was confounded by the bizarre language used to describe the vast number of intertwined processes used to “buy stuff.” I admit, it was a dark day when I realized that I could follow the acquisitions conversations that were being held around me, and it was outright shameful when I realized that I was “speaking in tongues” myself.

In order to improve the dialogue between the acquisitions community

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and the Operational Forces that we serve, this article will define some of the most relevant and common terms used by acquisitions professionals in the process of buying stuff. Hopefully, by providing some translations of the acquisitions language, the warfighter will be able to converse with those who operate behind the acquisitions curtain. Additionally, this article will attempt to correlate some acquisitions verbiage to common doctrinal terminology so that the warfighter may better understand how the acquisitions process works.

To fully understand a free-flowing acquisitions dialogue, one has to learn

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hundreds of acronyms as well as a myriad of complex processes that put context to their appropriate usage. However, there are a handful of acquisitions terms that roughly correlate to the operational military vernacular of the Marine Corps. Below is a list of acquisitions acronyms and the military terms that are most similar to them, along with a brief description of when and how the terms are used.

Acquisitions People/Billets

Program Manager (PM). Regimental-level commander who is responsible for the execution of a set of related programs and ensures that they are fielded to the warfighter with the level of capability that is required, in a timely manner, and within the cost parameters established in the Program Objective Memorandum (POM) (see page 18).

Product Manager (PdM). Battalion-level commander who is responsible for the execution of a specific program (made up of multiple related projects) and ensures that it is fielded to the warfighter with the level of capability that is required, in a timely manner, and within the cost parameters established in the POM.

Acquisitions Team Leader. Company-level commander who is responsible for the execution of multiple related projects and ensures that they are fielded to the warfighter with the level of capability that is required, in a timely manner, and within the cost parameters established in the POM.

Project Officer. Platoon-level commander who is responsible for the execution of a specific project or projects and ensuring that they are fielded to the warfighter with the level of capability that is required, in a timely manner, and within the cost parameters established in the POM.

Contracting Officer (KO). A member of the program management office who is the only person *legally* able to “spend” Government dollars. Without the KO, no money is “spent” and no new capabilities are fielded. The actual process that KOs go through to spend money is remarkably detailed and complicated. Be nice to them.



Weapons and ammunition each have their own funding line. (Photo by Sgt Ricky Gomez.)

Field Service Representative (FSR). A subject-matter expert for a new system or capability that is paid for by the program office. The FSR supports the transition of a new capability by continuing to provide on-the-job training for new operators and maintainers. Additionally, the FSR is able to provide direct feedback to the PM and the manufacturer of a new system to improve initial training, material and manufacturing quality, and the suitability of the system and spare parts allocations.

New Equipment Training Team (NETT). A group of Marines who are part of the program management office and who conduct initial training for units that are receiving a new capability. The NETT usually travels to the receiving units with the new equipment and provides on-site initial training for operators and mechanics. Once the NETT training is complete, FSR support usually remains with the receiving unit for some period (one to two years, depending on the complexity of the new system) to provide additional follow-on training and support.

Acquisitions Documents

Initial Capabilities Document (ICD). The operational situation that describes where the Marine Corps has some sort of capability gap, given its Title X re-

sponsibilities and the likely enemy/global context.

Capabilities Development Document (CDD). Division-level operations order that describes a new capability that the Marine Corps needs to acquire given the situation described in the ICD. This capability may be in the form of new equipment, an alternative organizational structure, a computational capability, etc.

Capability Production Document (CPD). Similar to the detailed execution paragraph of the operations order derived from the CDD that defines the specific product to be acquired by the PM as well as its *required* performance parameters.

Material Fielding Plan (MFP). One of a myriad of documents prepared by the PM and staffed with the units designated to receive new equipment. The MFP is similar in its utility to the logistics portion of paragraph four in the operations order. It details how the equipment will be fielded to the unit, the training for the unit, the support needed for the fielding, etc. (See *NETT* above.)

Acquisitions Events

Developmental Testing (DT). Testing that is conducted by the PM to determine if the prototype systems being evaluated meet the specified re-

quirements. When DT shows that a requirement has not been met, a decision needs to be made on whether to fix the system being evaluated and test it again, change the requirement to a performance level that can be met, or find a different system to evaluate.

Operational Testing (OT). Tests conducted with operational units by an independent agency, not working for the PM, to determine if a new system is *effective* (i.e., it does what the requirements say it should) and *suitable* (i.e., it is actually usable and supportable by the Marines who will receive it). OT includes various levels, to include operational assessments (OA) (battalion-level field exercise event) and the initial operational test and evaluation (IOT&E) (regimental-level combined arms exercise event).

Initial Operational Capability (IOC). D-Day, or the date that the warfighter will have the first opportunity to use the new capability. The IOC may be as small as a platoon or company set.

Full Operational Capability (FOC). The date that the entire planned capability is fully fielded to the warfighter and supported by the Corps' supply and maintenance systems. The FOC may be several years after IOC for large programs such as F-35 or ACV (assault combat vehicle) 1.1.

Other Acquisitions Terminology

Requirement. A description of a capability derived from the CDD that is shared with industry so that it knows what its system has to be able to do to support the Marine Corps mission. Requirements are usually written with a *threshold* and an *objective*.

- Threshold requirements are something that the system *must* be able to do. An example would be that a vehicle must be able to go at least X miles per hour on an improved surface road.
- Objective requirements are something that it is *desired* for the system to be able to do. An example would be that the same vehicle must be able to go X miles per hour over cross-country terrain with a 1,000 pound payload.

Initial Provisioning. The spare parts block that is fielded by the program