26th MEU at Operation Odyssey Dawn

Small MAGTF, big punch

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The MAGTF, in its present form, has served the Nation's interest since 1962.[1] As part of a U.S. Navy ARG composed of three amphibious ships and an associated MAGTF, usually a MEU, there are seven of which permanently exist. The MEU/ARGs represent America's global amphibious foot forward. The MEU is a relatively small force, composed of a battalion landing team (BLT), an ACE, a command element, and a logistics element—all told about 2,400 Marines and a reinforced medium-lift squadron. MEUs stand ready to conduct a range of contingency missions, guarding U.S. interests as well as protecting and aiding both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens from natural and man-made disasters. One such occasion was during Operation Odyssey Dawn, in which the 26th MEU and its ARG highlighted the unique and essential capabilities of the MEU/ARG team.

In early 2011, the Arab Spring broke across north Africa. The leaders of Tunisia and Egypt were overthrown. By mid-February, Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi was threatened to be outsted by insurgents. The uprising was especially profound in Benghazi. Qaddafi took aggressive action, threatening to unleash his military to quash the revolt. A coalition of nations—including, perhaps most importantly, the Arab League—took notice and called on the United Nations to establish no-fly zones over Libya. On 17 March, Qaddafi threatened to burn Benghazi to the ground. In response, that same day the U.N. issued Security Resolution 1973 which established no-fly zones and authorized "all necessary measures … to protect civilians."[2] Two days later the first airstrikes, flown by a force of twenty French strikefighters, hit Libyan military targets near Benghazi.[3]

About seven hours later, a massive Tomahawk (TLAM) cruise missile

Grunke recognized. MajGen Jon M. Davis, right, CG of 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, congratulates Maj J. Eric Grunke, AV-8B Harrier pilot with Marine Attack Squadron 542, upon his recognition as the Marine Corps Aviator of the Year by the Marine Corps Aviation Association, for his role in a Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel mission to rescue the pilot of an Air Force F-15E that had crashed near Benghazi, Libya. ***(Photo by Cpl Tyler J. Bolken, USMC, Defense Visual Imagery Service.)***

A Harrier on the flight deck in the evening. An AV-8B Harrier operates off the deck of the USS* Kearsarge.** ***(Photo by Cpl Jesse Johnson, Defense Visual Imagery Service.)

strike, fired from U.S. warships and a British submarine, slammed into Libyan air defense and command and control points. Coalition airstrikes followed. B-2 bombers flying from Missouri struck Libyan targets close after the TLAMs. With the Libyan air defense system staggered, coalition fighter bombers staging from coalition bases in Europe began to pummel Libyan military forces. Among the 150-coalition aircraft composing the ODYSSEY DAWN strike force were six Marine Corps AV-8B Harriers flying from the USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3). While the closest base for U.S. jets flying ODYSSEY DAWN strikes was at Aviano, Italy, which was 1,300 miles across the Mediterranean, the *Kearsarge* was positioned within 150 miles of Benghazi. The Harriers represented only a small portion of the ODYSSEY DAWN force, but their proximity to Libyan targets gave them a disproportionate punch. In a tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel (TRAP) mission later in the campaign, Harriers and MV-22 Ospreys executed a high-profile rescue mission. Again, this fast response to the emergency was leveraged by the proximity of the *Kearsarge* to Libya.

The 26th MEU had departed North Carolina in August 2010.[4] The turmoil in North Africa, on-going counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, and floods in Pakistan made it a busy deployment. In January the MEU commanded by Col Mark J. Desens disaggregated. Its BLT (3d Bn/8th Marines), six of its MV-22s, and four Cobras (AH-1Ws) deployed into Afghanistan in support of Regional Command Southwest. The ACE for the 26th MEU was VMM-266, the "Fighting Griffins," commanded by LtCol Romin Dasmalchi. What was left of the ACE, six AV-8B Harriers (a detachment from VMA-542), four MV-22s, and three UH-1N Hueys, remained aboard the *Kearsarge* and was commanded by VMM-266's executive officer, LtCol Christopher Boniface. The USS *Carter Hall* (LSD 50) remained in the Arabian Gulf. When the popular uprising associated with the Arab Spring spread to Libya, the 26th MEU sailed in early March through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean. The MEU had gained another BLT, 1st Bn, 2d Marines, flown into the theater from Camp Lejeune. These Marines came aboard the *Kearsarge* at Souda Bay, Greece, on 4 March. The MEU's detachment of two KC-130s was positioned at Sigonella Naval Air Station, Italy. The *Kearsarge* and USS *Ponce* (LPD-15) took station about 150 miles off the coast of Libya on 6 March for contingency operations support of ODYSSEY DAWN.

As noted, with the onset of airstrikes in support of ODYSSEY DAWN, the MEU's Harriers flew in the first wave of strike fighters that hit targets near Benghazi during pre-dawn of the 20th. They flew every night thereafter until ODYSSEY DAWN ended on 31 March and actually continued for a few days under Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR, the U.N. follow-up to ODYSSEY DAWN.

The Harriers' seabase put them close to the fight. At only 120 miles, the Harriers could be over the battlefield in 30 minutes. Although they might not carry the ordnance load of other strike fighters, they were able to cycle sorties and generated, at times, eight to ten sorties per night. The Harriers strike coordination and reconnaissance missions melded into the joint forces air component commander's (JFACC) overall air campaign plan. The MEU pre-briefed the kind of targets they were looking for, once the target criteria was met, the Harriers went self-contained with a strike. This eliminated the "middle-man" in the target approval process (i.e., the JFACC's Air and Space Operations Center that approved strikes for Air Force and coalition jets). According to Col Desens, "The Harriers were able to present a plan and they got everything they wanted."[5]

The availability of the MEU's two organic KC-130 aerial refuelers of VMGR-252 gave the Harriers four hours over the battlefield. In comparison, transit time for Aviano, Italy-based coalition aircraft was at least 2.5 hours and required aerial tanking, going and coming, and probably another plug over Libya. One sortie per day is all that could be expected. The 26th MEU's Harriers produced results, eliminating 75 tanks or mobile tactical vehicles in the short span of 13 days of ODYSSEY DAWN, in which they flew approximately 80 tactical sorties.[6]

When ODYSSEY DAWN began, Qaddafi's forces were on Benghazi's doorstep and his artillery was already shelling the city. On that first night, four Harriers, each carrying laser guided bombs, launched off the *Kearsarge* in pre-dawn darkness. One of the pilots, Capt John E. "CJ" Grunke, recalled

approaching Libya at over 20,000 feet. He saw the effects of the TLAMs and Air Force strikes, smoke, fire, and secondary explosions around Benghazi; it was "surreal." Grunke dropped bombs on a couple of tanks he targeted with the very capable Litening targeting pod (T-pod) that each Harrier carried.[7]

The Litening pod, besides providing excellent targeting capability for the Harriers, was a superb resource for gathering intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) information. The quick-start nature of Odyssey Dawn did not initially allow unmanned systems to prowl the battlefield and give ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) information to the JFACC. The Harriers' Litening pods filled this gap and provided realtime and immediate ISR to both the *Kearsarge's* joint intelligence cell and the JFACC.

Targeting intel, especially for mobile targets, needed to be fresh. The close positioning of the *Kearsarge* allowed for a quick turn to hit the mobile targets. Pilots got immediate and relevant intelligence gained from their own Litening pods' scan of the terrain. Sorties could be launched to strike the recently discovered targets with little delay. Aircraft flying from distant bases in Europe did not have this quick reaction capability. Without a quick prosecution of attack on actionable intelligence, the T-72, the armored personnel carrier, or mobile artillery piece had likely displaced to another position.[8] Supplementing this capability was the MEU/ARG mobility. It could constantly reposition to follow the fighting ashore.

The close proximity of the *Kearsarge* to Libyan shores brought another key aspect of a Marine expeditionary force to bear during Odyssey Dawn. This was a tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, the TRAP mission. As Commanding General of the Fleet Marine Force Atlantic in the late 1980s, Gen Alfred M. Gray added TRAP to the Marine amphibious (later changed to expeditionary) unit's special operations missions. His reasoning being that the Marine Corps needed this rescue capability if no other force was around to do it:

> The Marine Corps, with its TRAP capability, is the only maritime, forward-deployed, rescue and recovery force available to the United States military. The inherent flexibility and virtually assured access of a maritime force such as an ARG with embarked Marines provides the geographic component commander, joint task force commander, or MAGTF commander with a ready and relevant platform from which to launch trained CSAR forces such as a Marine TRAP force.[9]

Marines assigned to the 26th MEU conduct electronic checks on a CH-53E Super Stallion before it takes off to rescue a downed Air Force F-15E Strike Eagle pilot and weapons officer. ***(U.S. Marine Corps photo by SSgt Danielle M. Bacon.)***

In recent years, downed aviators in a hostile area have had great strategic implications. The very fact that an American jet has been downed is a great morale and public relations victory for the enemy. The capture of American personnel is a great prize that can be another great public relations victory, a bargaining chip for concessions. This unfortunate event would have a powerful impetus for the U.S. or coalition to shift, or alternate, its strategic or tactical game plan.

The Marine Corps' former Commandant, Gen Charles C. Krulak, advanced the concept of the "strategic corporal." This concept asserts that a junior Marine, by their actions in real-world operations, can have a powerful effect on public opinion and that can powerfully effect tactics and strategy. The execution of TRAP missions today is especially visible and consequence laden. The TRAP is conducted on the world stage.

On the third day of Odyssey Dawn, 21 March, an Air Force F-15E crew experiencing an aircraft mechanical problem ejected within 30 miles east of Benghazi. This was hostile territory; a rescue was imperative and, as with most TRAPs, it needed to be done rapidly. Allowing the Air Force aviators to be captured would throw an unwanted and difficult strategic problem into the coalition's game plan.

Col Desens and LtCol Boniface were alerted of the downed F-15E at about 2300 and told to prepare to launch the TRAP. Although there was an Air Force CSAR (combat search and rescue) unit poised on the *Ponce,* the MV-22's speed compared to the HH-60s made the choice an easy one. In addition, the Marine infantrymen, which the Ospreys carried as part of the TRAP package, would secure the area around the downed aviators. The F-15E had gone down in enemy territory. Marines expected and prepared for a gunfight.

With six of the squadron's Ospreys in Afghanistan, this left only four aboard the *Kearsarge.* The ARG had been heavily tasked with supporting the various contingencies resulting from the Arab Spring uprisings. The ARG was often over 600 miles from logistic hubs.

Osprey deck launch. *(Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Casey Moore USS* **Kearsarge** *(LHD 3).)*

Therefore, VMM-266 Ospreys and CH-53s had assumed the "replacement at sea" mission. They flew regular mail and cargo flights, shuttled VIPs, and stood on-alert for non-combatant evacuation operations in Egypt.[10] The operational tempo had resulted in two of the four Ospreys being in a down status. Boniface only had two Ospreys available for the TRAP mission. As these were readied for flying the TRAP mission, mechanics discovered that an auxiliary power unit (APU) on one of the available MV-22s was bad and had to be replaced. This is where the "strategic corporal" happens to be an aircraft mechanic. To change out an APU normally takes at least 90 minutes. Boniface told his Marines they had 40 minutes to change out the APU. They did it.

Fifteen recon Marines from 3/8 loaded aboard each of the two Ospreys. A quick reaction force of 1st Bn, 2d Marines boarded two CH-53s that would fly in trail of the Ospreys. Those Marines and the CH-53s would be on-hand to deal with any opposition forces that might impede the rescue. They also backed-up the rescue effort. At this point, only the pilot of the two-seat F-15E had been located. The weapons system operator's condition was unknown.

First off the *Kearsarge* were two AV-8Bs headed for the downed Air Force aviators; their location was approximately 20–30 miles east of Benghazi. Leading the section of Harriers was Capt Grunke with Capt Travis Morris on his wing. Grunke was especially qualified to lead this high-profile and complex mission. He was a weapons and tactics instructor (WTI) and forward air controller (airborne) qualified. As the Harriers raced toward Libya's coast, Grunke talked with an Air Force F-16 pilot who was in contact with the downed F-15 pilot, Maj Kenneth Harney. The F-16 pilot had taken command of the rescue effort and strafed near Harney to ward off pursuers.[11] With fuel running low, he passed the on-scene commander responsibility to Grunke. Dialing in Harney's frequency, Grunke and Morris were immediately pulled into Harney's situation. Over the radio, wind whistled, and Harney whispered. There were vehicles close by, voices, and barking dogs. Within five minutes, Grunke had positively located Harney's position and spotted a Libyan tactical vehicle nearby. At the same time, Wingman Morris used his T-Pod to watch for enemy moving toward Harney, and coordinated with the on-station KC-130 for inflight refueling if required.[12] Cleared to employ weapons, Grunke dropped a laser-guided bomb that, after 50 seconds of flight time, directly smashed into the vehicle. He then saw another tactical vehicle; he targeted and demolished it with his second 500-pound bomb. In the meantime, Morris was ready to drop on any targets that might also approach. After Grunke's second bomb, the Libyans seemed to have gotten the message: "stay back!" With the Ospreys on the way, Grunke found a landing site for them and passed the coordinates to the MV-22 pilots.[13]

The Ospreys flew at 270 knots and 500 feet over the Mediterranean to avoid radar detection. They too were on Harney's frequency. He urged them: "Hurry, hurry." The Harrier pilots overhead also urged speed; the situation was degrading. Harney was feeling the threat; he emotionally implored the overhead pilots to tell his wife he loved her, tell her goodbye.

Maj Benjamin J. "Narco" DeBardeleben, a WTI graduate, was section leader of the two Ospreys, with co-pilot Capt Rebecca Massey. Capts Joe A. "Angry" Andrejack (WTI), with co-pilot Erik B. "Brillo" Kolle, flew the wingman MV-22. The Osprey pilots originally planned to circumnavigate Benghazi to avoid enemy fire, "but after getting an update on the objective area and how close the enemy was we cut the corner over the water to expedite the recovery."[14] They were at Harney's location within 41 minutes of taking off.[15]

Within 10 miles of the coast, the Osprey pilots pushed their birds down to 200 feet. They expected the coast of Libya to be darkened, but it was well lit up, a well-populated area—which added to the threat of being identified and targeted. DeBardeleben led the section toward the darkest spot among the lights.[16] They flashed over the ground in a "whispered rush," not like a helicopter that can be heard from miles away.[17] Grunke provided a good word picture of the landing zone to the Osprey pilots. With Harney's position positively identified and with the Osprey's sophisticated navigation system, the two Ospreys were soon near Harney's location. The pilots transitioned to helicopter mode for landing, this made a tremendous racket and a huge dust cloud. Harney made a radio call, "I hear you! Don't leave me!" The wingman MV-22 was in

AV-8B Harrier that Capt John "CJ" Grunke flew on the 23 March 2011 TRAP mission over Libya. This Harrier is now in VMA-231, commanded by LtCol Grunke, "a very special plane to me," he attested. *(Photo by author.)*

a better position and they lowered into a landing. Harney sprinted at full tilt for the Osprey. He ran up the rear ramp, sat down, buckled up, and gave the thumbs up signal. The security force hardly had time to set up a safe perimeter. They were immediately called back and the MV-22 lifted off. The Osprey and the security force were on the ground for only 90 seconds.[18] The total time from hearing of the F-15E's crash to rescue of Harney was just under three and one-half hours. Of the thousands of sorties flown by the 28-nation Odyssey Dawn coalition, this was the most important.

The rescue was an impressive operation and entirely successful. Much of the success of the Harriers' attack missions and the TRAP, beyond pilot and aircrew skill, was the effectively tight cohesion of the MEU/ARG team. This was so even though the 26th MEU had been split with the part of the MEU dealing involved in Odyssey Dawn a much-reduced force. The MEU nevertheless needed no warm-up or practice time. It was ready to accomplish a range of contingencies, including the above described TRAP. As Col Desens remarked, one has to expect warts (for instance on Odyssey Dawn's second night, some coalition strike fighters had to spend the night in Sigonella when aerial tankers did not show up, and were not able to fly in day three), "it's part of the friction of war. By contrast, the Navy/Marine Team's engine had been running for seven months … they had five months of training before the deployment, the engine is already running when you put us out there."[19] Marines and Sailors had practiced the TRAP mission hundreds of times, there was no room for failure. All that hard work paid off in Operation Odyssey Dawn.

Notes

1. COL Douglas E. Nash, Sr., USA (Ret), "The Afloat-Ready Battalion," *Marine Corps History,* (Quanitco, VA: Marine Corps University, Summer 2017).

2. James G. Foggo III and Michael Beer, "The New Operational Paradigm," *Joint Forces Quarterly,* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013); Joe Quarataro Sr., Michael Rovenolt, and Randy White, "Libya's Operation *Odyssey Dawn," Prism*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013); and Staff, "Odyssey Dawn*," Global Security*, (2020), available at https://www.globalsecurity.org.

3. David Cenciotti, "Operation Odyssey Dawn Explained, Day One," *The Aviationist,* (March 2011), available at https://theaviationist.com.

4. The following narrative leans heavily on: *26th MEU and VMM-266 Command Chronologies, 1 January–30 June 2011,* (Quantico, VA, U.S. Marine Corps History Division Archives); and Col Mark R. Desens interview with Chris Ubik on 17 Jul 2012.

5. Ibid.

6. Col Mark R. Desens interview with Chris Ubik. This is an estimate given by Desens.

7. Maj John E. "CJ" Grunke interview with Fred H. Allison on 16 May 2012.

8. Col Mark R. Desens interview with Chris Ubik.

9. Maj Paul A. Fortunato, "Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel: A Relevant Capability for a Moral Obligation," (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College 2002), available at https://apps.dtic.mil. Interestingly this Paul A. Fortunato flew the Osprey that picked up downed Air Force Scott O'Grady in Bosnia in 1995.

10. *VMM-266 Command Chronology, 1 January-30 June 2011*, (Quantico, VA: Gray Research Center).

11. The second man in the F-15E, the weapons system operator, Capt Tyler Stark, USAF, had been rescued by friendly Libyans and taken to a safe spot in Benghazi. He was turned over to Americans the next day.

12. Personal email correspondence between LtCol John E. Grunke and author on 21 February 2020.

13. Maj John E. "CJ" Grunke, interview with Fred H. Allison on 16 May 2012.

14. Personal email correspondence between Maj B.J. DeBardeleben and author on 27 Feb 2020.

15. Staff, "The Execution of the TRAP Mission Over Libya: Interview with Maj Benjamin Debardeleben," SLD Info, (undated), available at http://www.sldinfo.com.

16. Personal email correspondence between Maj B.J. DeBardeleben and author.

17. "The Execution of the TRAP Mission Over Libya: Interview with Maj Benjamin Debardeleben."

18. Personal email correspondence between Maj B.J. DeBardeleben and author.

19. Col Mark R. Desens interview with Chris Ubik.