

ARG/MEU SOFLE Successes

Building partnerships with USSOF
by Staff, MARSOC

The ARG/MEU SOFLE (Special Operations Forces Liaison Element) has successfully brought together two cultures with similar ethos to support GCC (geographic combatant command) goals and missions. Since its inception, the ARG/MEU SOFLE program has enabled the creation of full partnerships between the ARG/MEU and USSOF (U.S. Special Operations Forces) based upon complementary capabilities, reciprocity, and mutually beneficial augmented capacity. The increased levels of I³ (Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence) between deployed SOF and MEUs, facilitated by the ARG/MEU SOFLE, provide a sea-based, synergistic, and flexible capability to the GCCs. To do this, the SOFLE team developed relationships and exercises with deploying USSOF units and the MEU. The training and the relationships established during predeployment training are the stepping stone for them to launch into their deployment and increase the MEU and TSOC (Theater Special Operations Command) commanders' confidence levels. The ARG/MEU SOFLE is the crucial element to break down cultural norms between SOF and CF (conventional forces) by facilitating each other's operations through networking, planning, and coordination.

Background

The ARG/MEU-SOFLE Program was established following an April 2013 USSOCOM-USMC-USN wargame. The wargame revealed that a mutual lack of familiarity and integration led to sub-optimal operational employment of both the ARG/MEU and SOF. Consequently, senior leaders decided to close

this gap through the establishment of an ARG/MEU SOFLE for PTP (pre-deployment training program) and deployment. To facilitate the program, USSOCOM (U.S. Special Operations Command) tasked MARSOC (Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command) to provide pre-mission training for the SOFLE and facilitate ARG/MEU/SOF integration. The first ARG/MEU SOFLE conducted PTP with the 11th MEU and deployed in July 2014. Since then, a SOFLE has trained and deployed with each east and west coast ARG/MEU. In 2017, CDRUSSOCOM (Commander, USSOCOM) revalidated the SOFLE Program as an operational requirement with some caveats. CDRUSSOCOM approved changes to the program, reduced PTP participation, reduced the SOF person-

nel requirements, spread SOF personnel resourcing across the USSOCOM enterprise, and changed the command relationship to "supported" (ARG/MEU) and "supporting" (SOFLE).

SOFLE Mission

The SOFLE's mission is to improve the ARG/MEU's ability to access and leverage SOF's global network, improve coordination with the respective TSOCs, and facilitate interdependent ARG/MEU-SOF OAA (operations, actions, and activities) to better support GCC's steady state and crisis operations.

SOF and CF support the priorities and achieve the objectives of the GCC and enable the other component commands to accomplish assigned tasks. The coordination and synchronization efforts of the SOFLEs reduce risk to

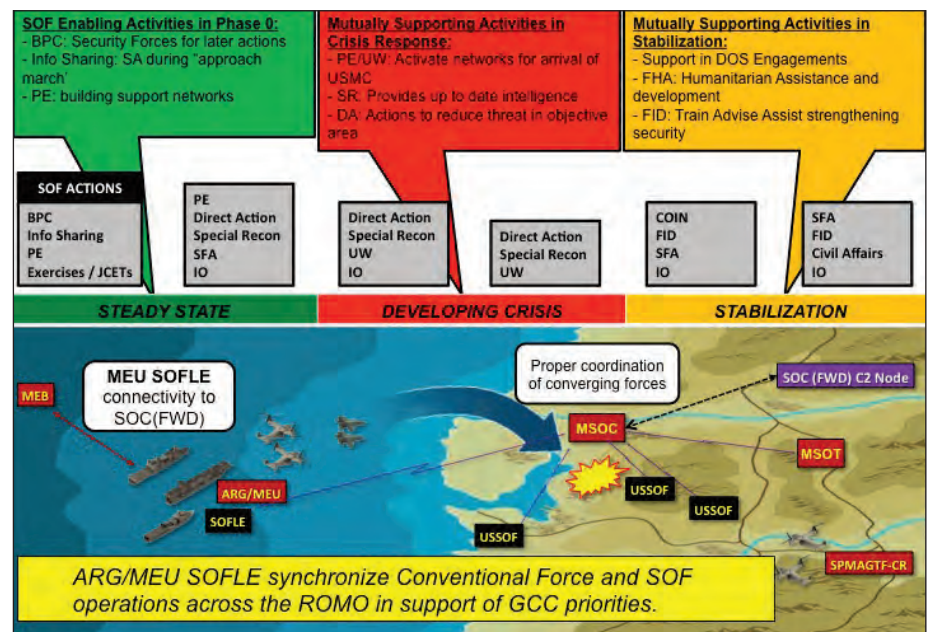


Figure 1. ARG/MEU SOFLE concept of employment.

force and mission, enable intelligence sharing, maximize opportunities, and maintain mutual situational understanding during current and future operations. The long-term goal of the SOFLE program is to foster and institutionalize SOF-CF interoperability, integration, and interdependence for maximum operational success.

Command Relationships

During PTP, SOFLE personnel are under OPCON (operational control) of CDRUSSOCOM and are collocated with the respective MEU commander prior to deployment. Upon deployment, the SOFLE remains collocated with the ARG/MEU in a supporting-supported relationship and OPCON is transferred to the appropriate TSOC commander. The SOFLE acts as a supporting SOF element to the ARG/MEU (supported unit) for operational planning and information exchange. Throughout the deployment, ADCON (administrative control) of SOF personnel is retained by the sourcing command. Marine augmentation members are assigned to the MEU Command Element and attached to the ARG/MEU SOFLE. Figure 2 graphically depicts the C² relationships.

Successes

LNOs (liaison officers) have always been employed to facilitate interoperability between units. The ARG/MEU SOFLE program is an enhanced LNO team with SOF capability, and the results demonstrate its value. To date, ARG/MEU SOFLEs have facilitated over 180 planned/executed MEU-SOF OAAs across five GCCs, to include USCENTCOM (U.S. Central Command) and USAFRICOM (U.S. Africa Command) AOR (areas of responsibility). These OAAs include R/W (rotary-wing) and F/W (fixed-wing) CAS (close air support)/expeditionary strikes; PR (personnel recovery)/TRAP (tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel); QRF (quick reaction force); casevac (casualty evacuation); MIO (maritime interdiction operations)/VBSS (visit, board, search, and seizure); advisory operations; F/W fire support; R/W assault support; joint/combined AFSB (afloat forward staging

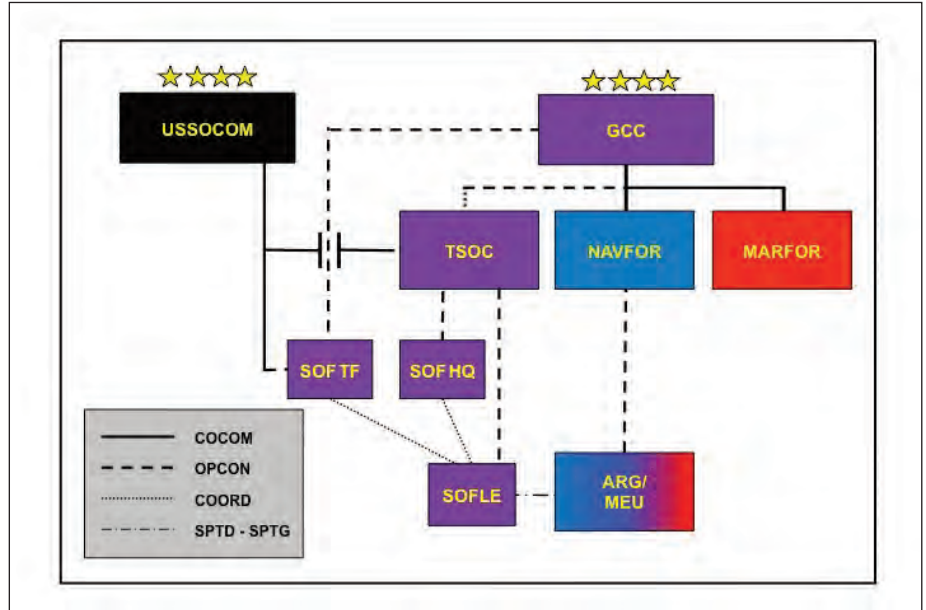


Figure 2. ARG/MEU SOFLE command relationships.

base); ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance); target development, information operations, country surveys (in support of the ISP (integrated survey program)); and TSCP (theater security cooperation plan) activities. AAR (after-action reports) from the six previous ARG/MEU SOFLE deployments each included comments regarding the utility- and value-added

The ARG/MEU SOFLE program is an enhanced LNO team ...

capabilities that the SOFLE provides by coordinating planning and intelligence sharing, between the MEU and SOF elements in both USAFRICOM and USCENTCOM, serving as the critical connecting file to develop and sustain SOF-CF I³ (Special Operations Forces-Conventional Forces Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence).

The TSOCs have consistently expressed a need for more aviation, logistics, and intelligence support. The MEU has both the capability and capacity to readily source these requirements. The ARG/MEU SOFLE has become the conduit for initial and follow-on coor-

dination for this support and is integral in supporting the planning and execution of operations where all SOCOM forces are able to leverage ARG/MEU amphibious shipping to support operations such as AFSB or VBSS operations.

The ARG/MEU is agile and flexible and supports SOF with a task-organized capability that is leading to improved outcomes for GCC priorities. ARG/MEU SOFLEs provide ARG/MEUs access to the SOF global network of operational and intelligence capabilities and provide a COP (common operational picture) for better integrated efforts. Recent examples of the ARG/MEU SOFLE successes are MEU-SOF collaborative efforts in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia, where MEU forces supported SOF formations with QRF, PR/TRAP, casevac, and CAS.

In the past, SOF awareness of ARG/MEU capabilities has been limited primarily to predeployment briefings and MEU command visits to SOF units. Though beneficial, awareness of the ARG/MEU attenuated over time due to a lack of robust intra-deployment touch points. ARG/MEU SOFLE access to the USSOCOM SIE (SOF information environment) removes this factor and allows early ARG/MEU integration into SOF planning. The SOFLE's ship-board SOF-specific C⁴I (command, control, communications, computers,

and intelligence) nodes and intelligence fusion are critical to the success of this planning and execution. Now, the MEU rapidly and clearly communicates its capabilities to deployed SOF as requirements arise for ongoing operations.

Figure 3 depicts the number of days during deployment the ARG/MEU supported SOF over the last seven MEU deployments. Figure 4 depicts the number of MEU-SOF OAs executed during each of the last seven MEU deployments.

SOFLE Predeployment Training

The ARG/MEU SOFLE predeployment training is a critical element for developing relationships between the SOFLE and the MEU staff as well as MEU and SOF elements that will be deployed at the same time to the same AOR. ARG/MEU SOFLE integration into the ARG/MEU's PTP is facilitated by MARSOC to ensure the SOFLE can effectively facilitate ARG/MEU/SOF operations when deployed overseas. Planned ARG/MEU/SOF interoperability training results in a shared understanding of capabilities, SOPs, and TTP (tactics, techniques, and procedures) prior to execution of operations. Additionally, educating SOF personnel on MEU capabilities creates opportunities for future joint operations and develops closer relationships between the Navy, Marine Corps, and SOF. This training and the relationships it produces have been cited by many MEU commanders during their AARs as critical elements to their successful support to operations while forward.

The original SOFLE training and deployment cycle consisted of 12 months of PTP and a 6-month deployment. Once personnel were identified, the SOFLE team completed a 12-month PTP coordinated and facilitated by MARSOC utilizing existing USN/USMC exercises and training events. To further enhance relationships and improve I³, MARSOC coordinated with USSOF units deploying to the MEU's future AO (area of operations). As a result, deploying SOF teams were routinely integrated into the RUT (realistic urban training) and the final ARG/MEU exercise certification training.

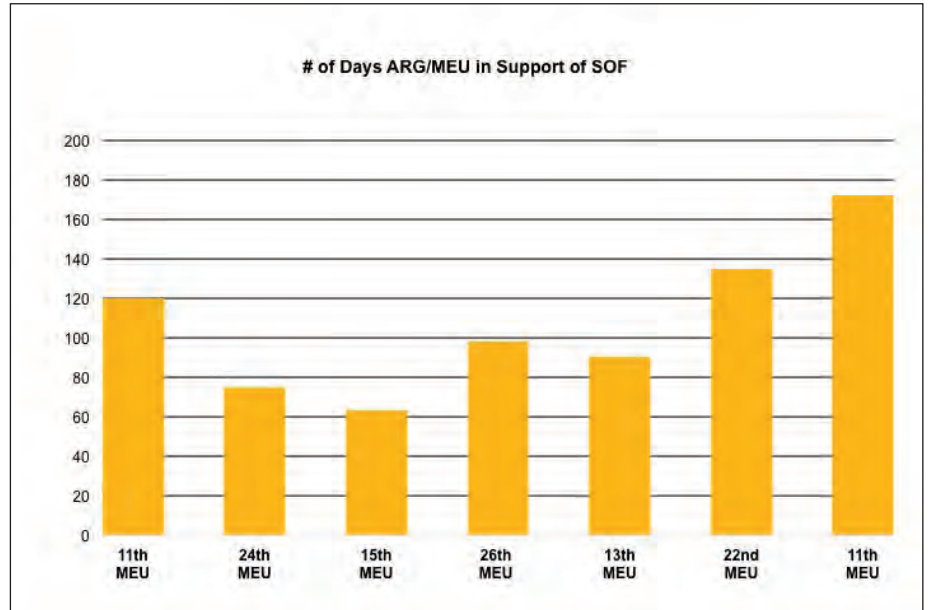


Figure 3.

In addition to coordinating SOF participation in MEU PTP events, MARSOC's ECG (Exercise Control Group) and response cell worked closely with the MEF EOTG (Expeditionary Operations Training Group) throughout the MEU PTP planning cycle. This close collaboration with EOTG enabled effective integrated training events for the ARG/MEU, the SOFLE, and deploying SOF. MARSOC ECG provided both synthetic and

live SOF response cells to simulate forward SOF command elements. Training was facilitated through combined SOF-CF intelligence and operational injects. MARSOC provided role players, contracted SOF ISR, and simulated battle effects for the SOF/MEU training locations. SOF and contracted ISR drove the ARG/MEU SOFLE's training objectives and forced the staffs to integrate and support each other's operations.

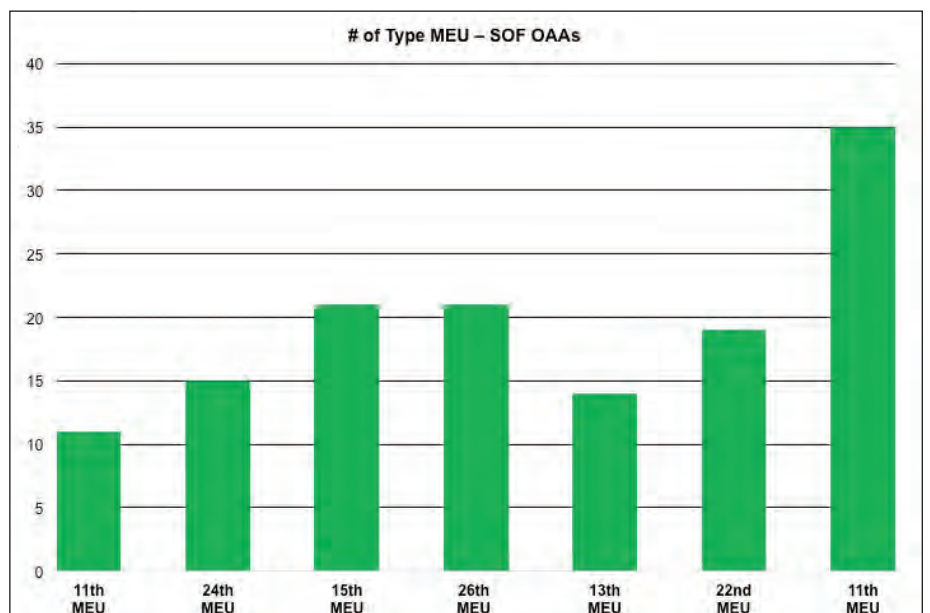


Figure 4.

Just one of the many success stories of the realistic SOF-CF training facilitated by MARSOC occurred during a recent RUT and CERTEX (certification exercise) for a MEU that is currently deployed. During the RUT, MARSOC facilitated MEU training with two deploying USSOF teams in the southwest U.S. The deploying USSOF teams and the MRF (MEU's maritime raid force) conducted simultaneous DA (direct ac-

In January 2017, USSOCOM directed a program modification that reduced the predeployment training timeline for the ARG/MEU SOFLEs by 50 percent to improve USSOCOM manning efficiencies and to relieve pressure on the force. The impact of this decision was the removal of the MARSOC training cell and the ARG/MEU SOFLE from key MEU PTP events and exercises such as RUT. The new train-

two Marine communications technicians. The SOFLE OIC and the 2IC (second-in-charge) act as the primary liaison and SOF advisor-planners with the ARG/MEU. The two SOF communicators support access to the SIE (SOF information environment). The two Marine communications technicians support both the liaison with the MEU/ship's company communications elements and the installation, operation, and maintenance of afloat communications requirements for the SOFLE. The 2IC billet is sourced by the TSOC when the MEU is in its AOR. Currently, it appears as though the 2IC individual will reside with the TSOC and not physically integrate with the MEU staff. Figure 5 provides a graphic of the SOFLE team organization and capabilities.

This reduction in SOF manning for the ARG/MEU SOFLE directly affects the MEU. At the current manning level, the SOFLE lacks the capacity to conduct the key tasks for the current deployment requirement of three MEU-distributed operations/areas. To address this challenge, the MEU will be forced to prioritize its MEU staff personnel and their limited SOFLE assets to establish the most effective coverage. The loss of the SOF intelligence member will also create gaps in SOF-MEU intelligence fusion, requiring added effort to sustain a common intelligence picture.

While C⁴I is a critical element that enables the ARG/MEU SOFLE to accomplish its mission and to maximize SOF-CF I³, the modified program also creates challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge in this regard is training on the shipboard SOF-specific communications equipment. These suites differ substantially from other SOF-specific communications equipment. The reduced SOFLE PTP and SOF manning will require creative training solutions to achieve and maintain proficiency during PTP and deployment. MARSOC will continue to train these Marines through its MNOC (MARSOC Network Operators Course) during the MEU's work-up training. But these Marine communicators, like the SOF communicators, will require time with this communications equipment to en-

While C⁴I is a critical element that enables the ARG/MEU SOFLE to accomplish its mission and to maximize SOF-CF I³, the modified program also creates challenges.

tion) raids on urban facilities with MEU air, fires, QRF, TRAP, and casevac support. Following the RUT, the MEU SOFLE remained integrated with the MEU throughout their "at sea" periods and worked hard to establish and train on their SOF-specific shipboard communications gear.

During the MEU CERTEX, the SOFLE actively participated in all MEU battle rhythm and mission-specific planning events, assisted in the intelligence development cycle, and exercised a split SOFLE capability with the MEU's forward command element. These activities facilitated the synchronization and integration of MEU and SOF activities on nearly all missions conducted during the exercise. The SOFLE made exceptional gains in SOF-CF integration and interoperability by working closely with the ARG/MEU staff and SOF units. MARSOC's training cell set up and facilitated three days of MEU F/W and R/W strikes in support of participating SOF units. The SOFLE relationships developed with the MEU staff during the MEU PTP enabled this SOFLE team to be more effective during CERTEX. Not surprisingly, this deployed MEU SOFLE team is currently conducting effective operations in three main locations as well as many other areas of interest. These deployed relationships were developed and enhanced during an integrated PTP.

ing plan includes an ARG/MEU/SOF workshop at the USSOCOM Headquarters, the SOFLE OIC's (officer-in-charge) participation in the ARG/MEU PDSS (predeployment site surveys), and the SOFLE team's participation in the ARG/MEU's third "at sea" training period. Ideally, deploying SOF units will participate in a minimum of one live exercise during the ARG/MEU PTP's third at-sea training period to expose the ARG/MEU to SOF operations and to promote ARG/MEU and SOF interoperability. The reduced SOFLE PTP limits the opportunities, prior to deployment, where the relationships among the MEU staff, SOFLE, and deploying USSOF units are established and the MEU commander's confidence in the SOFLE is developed.

SOFLE Composition

The initial ARG/MEU SOFLE teams consisted of six SOF personnel globally sourced from the SOF enterprise. Teams consisted of a team leader with theater SOF experience, an assistant team leader, one intelligence analyst, and three communications specialists. Following USSOCOM's decision in January 2017 to modify the SOFLE program, the ARG/MEU SOFLE is now comprised of four SOF personnel with operational and communications MOS backgrounds, augmented by

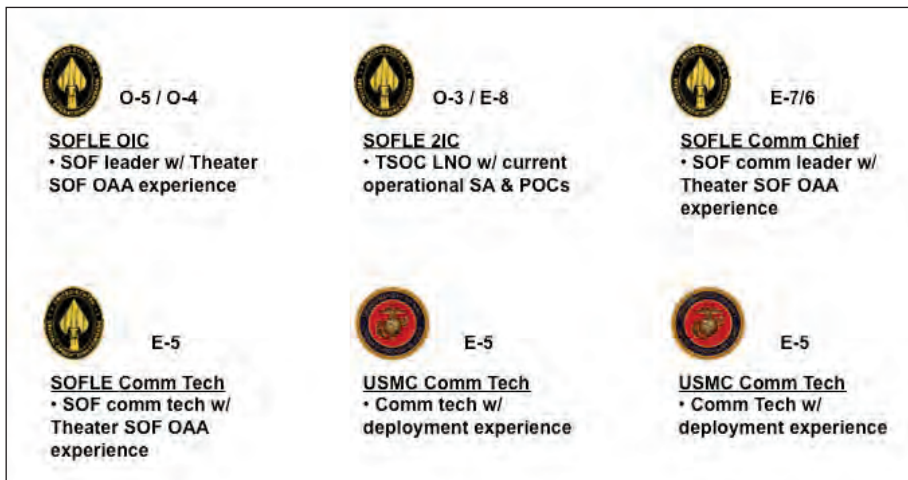


Figure 5. New ARG/MEU-SOFLE organizational structure.

sure the ARG/MEU SOFLE’s ability to perform their mission.

The first MEU to deploy with this new ARG/MEU SOFLE construct is in their predeployment training now. Overall success or failure of the new SOFLE construct will not be truly validated until lessons learned and after-action reports from the next several iterations of MEU SOFLE deployments are collected, processed, and evaluated. Until then, MARSOC will continue to coordinate and facilitate training and integration opportunities under the new construct wherever possible.

Opportunities

The ARG/MEU SOFLE program has achieved true and unprecedented levels of SOF-CF I³ by any measure of success. The GCC has benefited from this partnership through the advancement of GCC strategic objectives. The ARG/MEU and SOF units have seen increased employment of core capabilities with substantial tactical success. While USSOCOM must manage increased operational tempo and demand for SOF against appropriate personnel dwell concerns in the near term, options do exist for preserving the SOF-CF I³ gains wrought by the ARG/MEU SOFLE since 2014. The first course of action is for the Marine Corps to assign this function wholly to MARSOC, increasing the personnel and equipment allocations required for sustained SOFLE generation. This would require minimal Service struc-

ture investments and advocacy with USSOCOM for the required MFP-11 funding increases. For this modest investment, the Marine Corps would maintain access to the SOF organizational and technical networks that have been of such benefit to the MEU. The chief drawback of this option is the loss of the joint SOF flavor of the initial SOFLE composition. A second option—and likely a more challeng-

In other words, a forward-deployed MAGTF augmented by a SOFLE provides the GCC the opportunity to leverage the complementary capabilities of this sea-based joint force across a range of military activities and operations, ...

ing one—is a Navy-Marine solution involving both NSW (Naval Special Warfare) and MARSOC. NSW is currently manning and training to shipboard communications and could be well suited to support manning/training the SOFLE’s communications personnel. NSW intelligence personnel may also bring SOF-specific skills that can sustain that beneficial access to the SOF intelligence network that augments the MEU intelligence picture. A drawback of this option is that NSW has a well-established liaison with Navy component commands. To some, this prior arrangement might

seem to make a separate investment in the ARG/MEU SOFLE redundant and unnecessary. NSW units, however, have frequently been the beneficiaries of the ARG/MEU SOFLE’s successes, and this fact may create sufficient room for that dialogue to move forward.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 2014, USSOCOM’s ARG/MEU SOFLE program has provided the GCCs a viable, synergistic, and flexible capability to accomplish its goals and objectives. The ARG/MEU SOFLE routinely merges two distinct cultures with a similar ethos into a joint team. The ARG/MEU and USSOF relationships are developed and enhanced during realistic predeployment training and exercises supported by MARSOC’s training cell, which then evolve into full partnerships during deployments. These full partnerships enable the ARG/MEU and USSOF to capitalize on the capabilities and strengths of each other while simultaneously amplifying the effectiveness of the other partner. Ultimately, these partnerships provide the GCC

enhanced capabilities and employment options to accomplish assigned tasks. In other words, a forward-deployed MAGTF augmented by a SOFLE provides the GCC the opportunity to leverage the complementary capabilities of this sea-based joint force across a range of military activities and operations, from military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence in times of relative peace—through crisis response and limited contingency operations—to large-scale combat operations. The preservation and sustainment of such a capability should be a Marine Corps priority.

GLOSSARY

Acronym	Definition	Acronym	Definition
2IC	second in charge	MIO	maritime interdiction operations
AAR	after-action reports	MNOC	MARSOC network operators course
ADCON	administrative control	MOS	military occupational specialty
AFSB	afloat forward staging base	MRF	maritime raid force
AOR	area of responsibility	MSOC	Marine special operations company
ARG	amphibious ready group	MSOT	Marine special operations team
BPC	building partner capacity	NAVFOR	naval forces
C ²	command and control	OAA	operations, actions, and activities
C ⁴ I	command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence	OIC	officer in charge
CA	civil affairs	OPCON	operational control
CAS	close air support	PE	preparation of the environment
CASEVAC	casualty evacuation	PR	personnel recovery
CDRUSSOCOM	Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command	PTP	predeployment training program
CERTEX	certification exercise	QRF	quick reaction force; quick response force
CF	conventional forces	R/W	rotary-wing
COCOM	combatant command (command authority)	RUT	realistic urban training
COIN	counterinsurgency	SFA	security force assistance
COORD	coordination	SIE	SOF information enterprise
COP	common operational picture	SIGINT	signals intelligence
DA	direct action	SOC(FWD)	special operations command (forward)
DOS	department of state	SOF	special operations forces
ECG	exercise control group	SOFLE	special operations force liaison element
EOTG	expeditionary operations training group	SOP	standard operating procedures
F/W	fixed-wing	SPMAGTF-CR	Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force –Crisis Response
FHA	foreign humanitarian assistance	SPTD	supported
FID	foreign internal defense	SPTG	supporting
GCC	geographic combatant command	SR	special reconnaissance
HQ	headquarters	TF	task force
HUMINT	human intelligence	TRAP	tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel
I ³	integration, interoperability, and interdependence	TSCP	theater security cooperation plan
IO	information operations	TSOC	theater special operations command
ISP	integrated survey program	TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
ISR	intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance	USAFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
JCET	joint combined exchange training	USCENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
LNO	liaison officer	USMC	U.S. Marine Corps
MAGTF	Marine Air Ground Task Force	USN	U.S. Navy
MARFOR	Marine Corps forces	USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
MARSOC	Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command	USSOF	United States Special Operations Forces
MEB	Marine Expeditionary Brigade	UW	unconventional warfare
MEF	Marine Expeditionary Force	VBSS	visit, board, search, and seizure
MEU	Marine Expeditionary Unit	VTC	video teleconference

