

# Avoiding the False Choice

Marine Corps growth through SOF integration

by Majs Joshua C. Waddell & Brent C. Birchum

Following the release of his planning guidance last year, the Commandant of the Marine Corps recently unveiled the initial results of the *Force Design 2030* working group. This initial rudder-steer has solicited lively discussion in the defense community regarding the wisdom of the Commandant's decision to re-orient toward developing a 21st century FMF. The core of the argument has congealed around the dispute as to the risks associated with the Marine Corps divesting of capabilities that have traditionally been employed in the last twenty years of counterinsurgency warfare in favor of pursuing modernization goals tailored to high-end competition against peer threats—particularly China.

Advocates for the Commandant's actions note the necessity for the Corps to return to relevance in naval campaigning after decades of serving as a second land army. This "return to roots" is supported by warfighting concepts such as Expeditionary Advance Base Operations and Littoral Operations in Contested Environments, which show how a small, lethal, dispersed FMF could augment a naval strike group and confound adversary actions through anti-access/aerial denial (A2/AD) methods.<sup>1</sup> Skeptics rightfully note, however, that the true history of the Marine Corps is not in landing craft assaulting Pacific isles but rather as practitioners of unconventional operations in a myriad of small wars since the nation's first overseas military adventures.<sup>2</sup> The reality, however, is that this dispute is centered around a false choice. As the Corps undergoes this decade of trans-

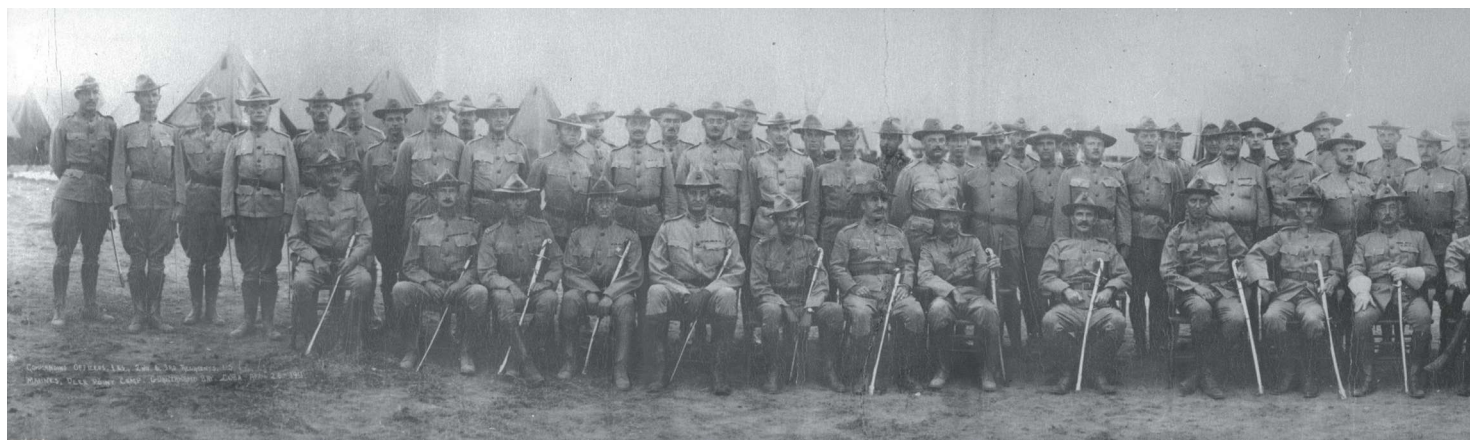
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**Legends of the Corps like Puller and Daly learned their tactical skills fighting small wars in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Haiti. (Leath-erneck file photo.)**

formation, there is an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past with regard to special operations by adding a focused line of effort to Marine Corps force design targeted at overhauling the Corps' integration and interoperability with United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). *Force Design 2030* contains capability developments and modernizations that would also be highly useful against unconventional threats alongside partners in the special operations forces (SOF). Critically, most of the remaining barriers to SOF integration reside at the policy and doctrine levels, not materiel, requiring little in the way of resource investment. This integration effort can be thought of as managing risk associated with the Corps' enemies' "most likely courses of action"<sup>3</sup> while undertaking the necessary preparations to confront future adversaries' "most dangerous course of action."<sup>4</sup>



*Just as in the past, whether in future small wars or peer-on-peer conflict, the quality of Marine infantry will be crucial. (Leatherneck file photo.)*

### Marines and Small Wars

The Marine officers and NCOs that formed the core of the forces storming trenches and assaulting the beaches in the last wars between great powers gained their combat experience fighting in small wars, taking part in what we would label today as “Special Operations.” The iconic LtGen “Chesty” Puller was awarded his first Navy Cross as a lieutenant conducting raids on Nicaraguan bandits in 1930.<sup>5</sup> Dan Daly earned his first Medal of Honor fighting in a counterinsurgency action in China during the Boxer Rebellion long before he stepped foot in France during the First World War.<sup>6</sup> However, the establishment USSOCOM in 1987, and the Marine Corps’ decision to not participate in said organization’s founding,<sup>7</sup> has resulted in the Marine Corps taking a back seat in global contingency operations. The Marine Corps largely accepted this as it stood by the MAGTF concept that worked so effectively during the early days of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. In the years that followed, however, the Corps found itself again fighting what became protracted small wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which persist to this day. In fact, doctrinal employment of the MAGTF has been increasingly rare because its capabilities have become less relevant to the conflicts America sees itself engaged in. In parallel with this, USSOCOM grew exponentially and remains deployed nearly to the breaking point in conflicts around the globe.<sup>8</sup> While combatant commanders remain

hesitant to fully employ MEUs, there is a continual demand for MARSOC teams, which comprise roughly 1.5 percent of the Marine Corps’ manning. In the eyes of combatant commanders, the force provider for traditional Marine Corps missions such as raids and strikes has shifted to USSOCOM, relegating the Marine Corps to a low-end crisis response and/or disaster response force. Gen Berger is aggressively acting to address this identity crisis for the Service. These efforts, however, run the risk of focusing too heavily on “Mahanian” concepts of conventional fleet battle while ignoring the unconventional roots of the U.S. Navy itself, dating back to the raiding days of John Paul Jones.<sup>9</sup> We argue, therefore, that the Corps’ path to relevance should be twofold: continued wargaming and force development actions aimed at high intensity conflict in accordance with the NDS and advancing the Corps’ relationship and interoperability with SOCOM by using MARSOC as the point of entry for other units of employment. This second path should be simultaneously enabled through staff integration and training as well as force modernization and maturation.

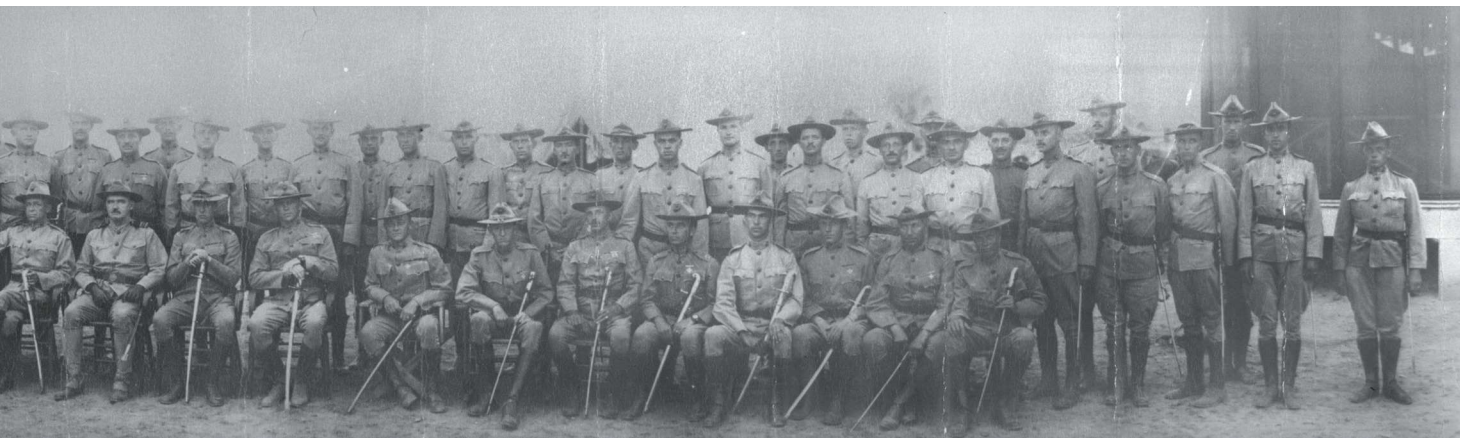
### Path to Integration

The ultimate goal in this line of effort should be to provide USSOCOM a natural partner in their global operations. ADM McRaven defines a Special Operation as,

conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific

target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (in the case of hostages), is a political or military imperative.<sup>10</sup>

The Corps’ forward-deployed nature and culture of operational flexibility inherently positions Marines as a Special Operations Force. To further the working relationships, the Corps will need to gain more interoperability with USSOCOM; thus, a focused effort should be made to increase staff-level integration between existing Marine Corps staff officers and those at both the Theater Special Operations Commander (TSOC) and USSOCOM headquarters level. While Marines already have a significant capability in terms of staff training through its resident professional schools, additional certification courses could be provided through the Joint Special Operations University in order to educate and train Marines in the peculiarities of USSOCOM authorities, capabilities, and funding lines. The Marine Corps should pursue changes to the joint manning documents related to USSOCOM staffs in order to increase its equity in those organizations and develop resident competency among Marine staffs for future utilization alongside TSOC staffs. Examples include filling out the J37 Training Section in SOCOM with additional capacity to evaluate and certify Marine Corps and SOCOM related schools and exercises. The Marine Corps should source additional billets within the TSOCs to cross-level staff capacity across each Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) and facilitate MEU and Special Purpose MAGTF



opportunities. It is highly likely that providing more support to USSOCOM staffs would be welcomed because of existing shortfalls. As noted by one recent analyst:

The most glaring and critical operational deficit is the fact that, according to doctrine, the theater special operations commands are supposed to be the principal node for planning and conducting special operations in a given theater—yet they are the most severely under resourced commands.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the Marine Corps' first step towards becoming SOF's natural partner most logically begins at this staff level.

In order to gain the full confidence of USSOCOM and test the interoperability of the FMF with SOF elements, the Corps must also revise how it certifies its units for deployment. We propose reviving the "Special Operations Capable" qualifier as a training standard for deploying units. This certification should be developed and evaluated with the full participation of SOCOM planners and warfighters in order to determine what mission sets the Marine Corps can most directly support. The pinnacle of Marine Corps ground combat evaluation can no longer be the traditional combined arms breach exercise at Twentynine Palms, evaluated only by fellow Marines. At a minimum, this SOC certification should include command and control "plug and play" interoperability between any deploying units with its geographically associated TSOC, demonstrate rapid response planning capabilities in partnership with TSOC crisis response methodologies, and demonstrate tac-

tical proficiency in designated direct action and reconnaissance tasks. With USSOCOM as a full partner in the certification of deploying units, combatant commanders will gain the confidence they need to deploy Marines alongside, or even in place of, SOF as an economy of force measure. This would allow the Corps to reclaim many of its traditional missions with the full confidence of joint force commanders while allowing SOF to focus on the missions to which they are uniquely trained.

### Force Development

In order to meaningfully contribute to USSOCOM missions, the Marine Corps will need to continue on its path to develop certain critical capabilities as well as mature legacy capabilities. In terms of newer capabilities, recent history in Syria and Iraq has shown the effectiveness of partnering special operations teams with Marine Corps fires and other supporting agencies.<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, the Marine Corps has balked at the thought of splitting up the MAGTF into component units in such a manner. However, Gen Berger's guidance has already noted that new formations will likely be necessary in the future operating environment that do not mirror traditional MAGTF employment. This flexibility should be applied to tailor-made support to USSOCOM, informed by Joint Special Operations and Marine staff cooperation.

In terms of capabilities, there are few investment decisions in the *Force Design 2030* report that cannot also be utilized in the small wars and special operations context. As the Comman-

dant noted in a recent interview, the design philosophy of the force design planners assumes that a force capable of winning against a peer threat can also be employed against lower tiered threats.<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate this, Gen Berger's team specifically highlights large investments in long-range precision rocket artillery, high endurance unmanned systems, and additional investments in countering "grey zone" activities.<sup>14</sup> These capabilities would be enthusiastically welcomed by TSOCs wherever Marines are deployed.

In terms of force maturation, it has already been noted that Marine Corps infantry units must undertake new mission sets and employ new capabilities.<sup>15</sup> This requirement applies to integration with SOF units as well. The reality is that the future operating environment, be it in future small wars or high-end conflict, will require more from our infantry than can be effectively trained at a thirteen-week boot camp (of little tactical training value) and a five-week basic infantry course. The Commandant's decision to decrease the overall size of the infantry force should be seen as an opportunity to slow the training pipeline in order to re-develop entry-level training into a more comprehensive course aimed at producing "naval commandos" more in line with the British Royal Marines. Future conflicts will demand professional warriors, and the attrition of experienced NCOs from combat units cannot be tolerated much in the same way talent retention is prioritized in SOF. This new infantry formation must be treated like a technical specialty and

be exempt from any administrative requirements, such as traditional assignments of infantry NCOs to recruiting or drill instructor duty. Reduced future force manning requirements also allows for greater discretion in quality control at the schoolhouses.

Put simply, our infantry should offer unique capabilities both to Naval planners and to TSOCs that justify the risk associated with their employment. As a Marine infantry officer recently put it, “I’ve never heard anyone in a wargame say they wish they had more light infantry.” This problem can be solved by developing a naval commando force that can open new options to combatant commanders while maintaining high standards of professionalism. In absolute terms, this would be a modest investment that could help address the question, “What makes a special operations unit of action?” We argue that the Marine Corps has the resident capability of filling many missions reserved for “special” units, and this capacity could be greatly expanded through changes to manning and training of the Corps’ principal units of employment.

### Force Employment

To achieve the Commandant’s guidance from the *Force Design 2030*, the Marine Corps must invest in sensitive areas that require a high degree of inter-agency support typical of special operations. The TSOCs routinely facilitate missions that support the country plans already developed within host nations and deliberately engage with the assets at U.S. Embassies. The major drawback is that typical TSOC units of action lack the size and assets to be a meaningful threat against a near-peer sized element. This is where the symbiotic relationship between Marine Forces and SOCOM can prove to be a fruitful investment. The Commandant comments, “Force design places new demands on our FMF that require us to revisit our current manpower policies supporting MARSOC.”<sup>16</sup> We recommend increasing MARSOC structure to enable their ability to be the shaping force of choice and to allow expanded roles in all GCCs to support FMF objectives. This includes greater intelli-

gence and logistical support to ensure the facilitation of FMF employment is possible.

In terms of penetrating the Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ), there are a multitude of non-standard possibilities to insert low-profile Marine/MARSOC elements to create battlefield effects at key locations within the acceptable risk threshold. To achieve this requires years of battlefield preparation and targeting training efforts, which cannot violate the SOF maxim that “Competent Special Operations Forces Cannot Be Created After Emergencies Occur.” However, we argue the best way to conduct an amphibious landing is to already be there prior to the crisis, which is a condition best facili-

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tated through activities in partnership with SOCOM. Once within the WEZ, the Marine Corps could benefit from fires capabilities already developed by MARSOC in concert with forecasted capabilities acquisition by the FMF according to *Force Design 2030*.

With regards to crisis response operations, access and placement are key to enabling the Marine Corps to remain the Nation’s “crisis response force-in-readiness.” While the MEU traditionally sought to fill this role, recent conflicts have necessitated the creation of new force construction to meet battlefield requirements such as the SPMAGTFs in Europe and Central Command. A ready opportunity exists to expand this role. The recently vacated position of the Crisis Response Force mission by U.S. Army Special Operations Command is a mission that could logically be undertaken by existing Marine Corps structure.<sup>17</sup> We recommend assigning a reconnaissance company to backfill

this capability across all GCCs except Northern Command. Additionally, we recommend allocating helicopter lift support, intelligence support as well as a command slated O-5 or O-6 to represent the unit to the TSOC and GCC commanders as his primary crisis response force. This could be done separate from existing SPMAGTF structure or as an expansion of those existing organizations. This expanded mission for the Corps relieves the requirement for a SOF Liaison element program because the Reconnaissance Company can allocate personnel and provide a direct link between SPMAGTF, the MEU, and other SOF elements or country teams. We recommend working with the MARSOC Raider Training Center to develop a shooting package that meets the Special Forces Advanced Reconnaissance, Target Analysis, and Exploitation Techniques Course and Special Forces Sniper Course levels of training. We recognize there are historic issues with the Crisis Response Force mission, but if the Marine Corps scopes the mission well, it could give Marines access to resources and allow Marines to fully retake their role as the primary crisis response force to the GCC. Rather than being a loss of capability for MEU commanders, this concept instead increases the utility of the MEU’s traditional reconnaissance asset. The best way the reconnaissance element can be the eyes and ears of the MEU commander is to be forward deployed in key locations with networks linked to the Nation’s most sensitive of intelligence capabilities.

Lastly, we recommend that the emerging Littoral Combat Regiments operate, at least in part, much like SPMAGTFs have operated in Iraq. As in that conflict, cooperation between MARSOC and conventional Marine units can be utilized during the Phase 0 operations focused on that regiment’s area of responsibility. Missions would include confronting violent extremist organizations and pre-positioning assets to respond to potential regional crisis escalations. These actions could be taken in tandem with traditional theater security cooperation activities and humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations. The addition of

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SOCOM authorities and capabilities to these traditional missions opens entirely new possibilities for the Corps. Though operating in this manner may violate historically sacred Marine Corps axioms, consistent engagement of this type will ensure that Marines are postured to respond to hostilities in an expeditionary fashion in line with the commander's intent of *Force Design 2030*.

### Conclusions

At its heart, *Force Design 2030* seeks to forecast what the Marine Corps needs in terms of capabilities in support of "our historical roots as Fleet Marine Forces" in a manner that "directly supports our Title 10 responsibility to seize and defend advanced naval bases, and perform all such duties as directed by the President."<sup>18</sup> While planners rightly prioritize the requirements of the future operating environment against high end threats, they should also address how the Corps might accomplish the type of missions that have historically been its specialty. We reject the notion that there is a binary choice between great power competition and competency in small wars and other steady state operations. The answer to the problem largely rests on the bureaucratic decision to choose to engage with our brothers and sisters in USSOCOM and exploit the opportunities that will be generated as a result. As the Marine Corps looks to shape its future, it is increasingly clear that a strong relationship with SOCOM must be a key element of that future force.

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### Notes

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