

Green Water SOF

How MARSOC can achieve the Commandant's vision for Navy-Marine Corps integration in the return to great power competition and beyond

by Maj William H. Strom

Marine Forces, Special Operations Command (MARSOC) can achieve the Commandant's vision for naval integration and serve as a synthesizing function between the Marine Corps, Navy, and United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Marine Raiders of MARSOC are the optimal warriors for littoral, or Green Water, special operations in the return to great power competition.

In several recently published documents, the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen David Berger, directed sweeping changes to the Marine Corps to prepare for future challenges as the Nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness.¹ His vision lays out plans and intent to reshape the Service to better address how the Marine Corps will integrate with the Navy to gain advantages over adversaries in great power competition as outlined

>Maj Strom is an Infantry Officer and Marine Raider who has held multiple billets across the infantry and special operations community to include command at the platoon, MSOT, rifle company, and MSOC levels during six combat deployments to CENTCOM and one UDP to INDOPACOM. He is a recent graduate of the Naval War College.

in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*.² A key component of this vision is to pivot from sustained combat operations ashore in the Middle East and re-align the service to comply with its Title 10 responsibilities to seize or defend advanced naval bases and conduct land operations to support a naval campaign.³ Concurrently, the previous Commander of U.S. Marine Forces, Special Operations Command published his long-range vision of the future of Marine Special Operations Forces (MARSOF) that included guidance for the component's role in greater integra-

tion and synchronization of U.S. global capabilities with interagency, coalition, and partner forces.⁴

First, MARSOF can achieve the Commandant's vision by supporting expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO). Second, MARSOF can act as a connector between Special Operations Forces (SOF), conventional forces, coalition forces, partner forces, and the interagency. Finally, MARSOF can support the Joint Forces Commander (JFC), Joint Forces Land Component Commander (JFLCC), and Joint Forces Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) by integrating its cross domain core capabilities across warfighting functions to gain access to maritime terrain and facilitate the movement of naval forces inside the weapons engagement zone (WEZ) of an adversary's anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) bubble. MARSOF can do all these things while maintaining a small footprint and low signature profile.

Past to Present

MARSOF has a rich history of supporting maritime campaigns and enabling naval operations. Perhaps most well-known is the Marine Raider Battalions' support to naval campaigns in the Pacific during the Second World War. In the fall of 1942, Marine Raiders from 1st Raider Battalion, commanded by LtCol Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, conducted clandestine landings to gain



SOFs have a long history of maritime operations. (Photo by Maj Cesar H. Santiago.)

and maintain key maritime terrain. On Guadalcanal, the Raiders defended the famous Henderson Airfield at the Battle of the Bloody Ridge. The airfield would go on to support naval operations across the theater. This is a perfect example of how gaining and maintaining control of key littoral terrain directly contributed to successes in the overall maritime campaign. The same principle still applies to how SOF supports a larger campaign today.

Presently, MARSOF are flexible, tailored, and scaled to meet unique mission requirements starting with a base unit of Critical Skills Operators (CSOs). Special Operations Capabilities Specialists (SOCS) and special equipment are then added as needed based on mission analysis and needs of each supported commander. MARSOC currently has SOF formations of all sizes with unique, tailored enabler packages deployed across the globe.

MARSOC support to EABO

MARSOC can support EABO almost immediately. The Marine Corps' concept of EABO is intended to counter adversary attempts to deny U.S. regional access through forward-force posture and mitigation of enemy long-range weapons that would otherwise destroy major friendly bases.⁵ This concept is particularly relevant given the Commandant's concern over the rise of "Mature Precision Strike Regime" adversaries with long-range precision strike capabilities.⁶ Further, this concept relies on a low-signature and difficult to target dispersed force that is operationally relevant inside an adversary's WEZ.⁷ In other words, littoral warfare requires an asymmetric force that can survive and conduct fire and maneuver through littoral seas within the adversary's WEZ.⁸ Marine SOF are tailor-made for this mission as the Commandant already alluded to with his discussion of "recent experiences by our own highly distributable ground units operating in an adversary's WEZ, including our own SOF."⁹ They thrive in austere, politically sensitive, and denied environments and can operate either unilaterally or multilaterally with combined joint and partner forces or interagency players.¹⁰

MARSOF can operate without straining or stressing conventional supply chains, which further contributes to their ability to maintain a low profile. MARSOF are uniquely capable of self-sustaining off the local economy and have been practicing this concept for the past ten years in austere locations across the globe to include U.S. Central Command, U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. The logistics capability that is organic to a Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC) is robust and has been proven effective time and again. This capability is the definition of what the EABO handbook refers to as a "forage force" that can reduce the stress and strain on traditional supply chains.¹¹ Through a mixture of contracting, host nation infrastructure, and reach back to both conventional and SOF logistics chains, combined with a Marine culture of "improvise, adapt and overcome," MARSOF logisticians are well adapted to provide support to forces dispersed across a theater.¹²

As the EABO concept suggests, gaining access and operating freely in an adversary's WEZ and A2/AD bubble before and during conflict requires an operationally mobile integrated maritime defense in-depth and the ability to enable operational fires to target adversarial naval and aviation platforms.¹³ MARSOF's ability to conduct both of these requirements with the flexibility of mind required for SOF success demonstrates that they are the spearhead of inside naval forces in support of EABO.¹⁴ Through clandestine or low signature infiltration and insertion methods—such as commercial or private indigenous vessels, parachute operations with airborne containerized delivery system drops of equipment, and subsurface operations—MARSOF can gain access to contested terrain and establish small footprint infrastructure to support naval operations. By utilizing clandestine networks and sensitive activities, MARSOF could establish mobile missile sites enabled by lightweight vehicles and containerized missile systems for both offensive and defensive fires in support of naval operations.¹⁵ Further, with a few minor training and

acquisition additions, MARSOF could integrate with the Navy's networked systems such as the Aegis combat system to provide integrated air defense and over the horizon targeting support to naval forces.¹⁶ This capability would provide the JFC and JFMCC a landbased node to integrate into the naval scheme of maneuver. With a combination of sensors, unmanned aerial, surface and underwater vehicles, weapons such as ASCMs and defensive fires platforms, MARSOF could directly contribute to sea denial while at the same time providing a "land-based anti-access umbrella," thus providing shelter and facilitating access for friendly naval forces.¹⁷

MARSOF as a Connector

The first pillar of MARSOC's vision for the future is that MARSOF will serve as a connector between SOF, conventional, coalition, partner, and interagency equities. In other words, MARSOF is the "ideal integrator and synchronizer of U.S. global capabilities with USSOF and partner nation actions."¹⁸ MARSOC is currently capable of serving as this connector, primarily by organizing and deploying O-4, O-5, and O-6 level SOF headquarters to synchronize efforts and conduct Phase 0 through Phase III operations—precisely what it has been doing for the past ten years.

MARSOC is uniquely trained and organized to seamlessly integrate into the joint force. They can immediately deploy a skeleton O-5 or O-6 headquarters and source a fully trained and capable MSOC as a supporting command.¹⁹ This force could facilitate shaping in Phase 0 and build long-term relationships necessary for SOF operations. This headquarters would serve as the synchronizer of USSOF efforts and integrate other equities while maintaining the ability to serve as a crisis response headquarters should it be needed. The headquarters could be sourced to full strength at the beginning of Phase I and continue through the duration of the conflict. Additionally, MARSOC can source a Special Operations Forces Liaison Element to MEFs and subordinate units such as MEUs. Currently, the Special Operations Forces Liaison Element

is sourced from across USSOCOM, but it should solely come from MARSOC because of the shared culture between Raiders and conventional Marine units.

Once Phase 0 infrastructure is established and forces are dispersed and conducting EABO, MARSOF can serve as a connector between other naval forces by providing eyes, ears, and supporting fires. Marine Special Operations Teams, or even partial elements thereof, could be networked into the Navy's Aegis system via mobile, low-signature, landbased platforms to provide defensive protection to U.S. warships as well as offensive fires from ASCMs. MARSOF's small footprint, ability to operate in austere, sensitive environments, and mature force make them the ideal force to undertake this mission. Additionally, MARSOF could utilize the concept of networking with Aegis to control maritime terrain as an inside naval force. Networking with Aegis would integrate MARSOF into chokepoint control operations and naval blockades of enemy shipping, thus directly facilitating containment of enemy forces.²⁰

MARSOF can gain access to denied or sensitive terrain through partner forces. Once relationships and surrogate networks are established in Phase 0, MARSOF could provide an advantage similar to that in the World War II Battle of Leyte Gulf. In that example, guerilla forces throughout the Philippines provided critical reporting on Japanese ship movements and order of battle.²¹ MARSOF units of today can build surrogate networks to do the same. Further, MARSOF trained and advised partner forces can contribute to the overall campaign objectives by providing limited offensive operations against an adversary in line with JFC and U.S. interests.

In addition to integrating into blockade and chokepoint control operations, MARSOF can serve as a connector between naval forces by supporting amphibious operations in Phases I through III. The fruits gained in Phase 0 from operational preparation of the environment through relationships and sensitive activity infrastructure development would directly support amphibious op-

erations. Consider the Falklands Islands conflict of 1982 where the British SAS conducted reconnaissance of potential amphibious landing zones during Operation SUTTON.²² MARSOF can conduct this same type of operational level special reconnaissance and direct action unilaterally, partnered, or through a surrogate.²³

MARSOF Supports the JFC with Multiple Capabilities across Warfighting Functions

MARSOC is already providing the JFC more bang for the buck with scalable task organized forces operating across the globe. Additionally, MARSOF is directly responsible for maintaining proficiency in the following SOF core activities: direct action, special reconnaissance, counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, counterinsurgency, support to counter weapons of mass destruction, and support to unconventional warfare.²⁴ MARSOF can leverage these skills and apply them across the warfighting functions.

vide multiple platforms to collect from. MARSOF is capable of multiple types of special reconnaissance as a core activity by technical methods, surrogate employment, or traditional unilateral conventional reconnaissance through clandestine infiltration into denied or contested terrain. MARSOF is currently equipped and proficient with unmanned aerial systems and could easily adapt to employ unmanned underwater and surface systems that could be launched from EABO platforms to gather information on enemy forces and terrain for decisions at the operational level. Finally, MARSOF are organized and proficient with organic all-source intelligence analysis capabilities that can fuse organically collected and shared intelligence with operations while leveraging the full weight of the intelligence community at the tactical edge.

Fires: MARSOF are organized with joint terminal attack controllers and can call for fires from any available asset. The Commandant has stated that he wants the conventional Marine Corps to divest of traditional tubed artillery

Networking with Aegis would integrate MARSOF into chokepoint control operations and naval blockades of enemy shipping thus directly facilitating containment of enemy forces.

Command and Control: MARSOC is organized, trained, equipped, and capable of providing O-4, O-5, and O-6 level SOF headquarters to integrate and synchronize U.S., coalition, partner, and interagency assets in support of the JFC's mission.

Intelligence: MARSOF provides organic multi-disciplined intelligence operators with emphasis on human and signals intelligence collection to support operations from Phases 0 through III. By employing these assets in Phase 0, the supported commander gains established networks and infrastructure that will pay dividends in future conflicts. Employing MARSOF in dispersed EABO operations will pro-

in favor of long-range assets and land-based anti-ship cruise missiles such as Tomahawks to facilitate sea denial and sea control.²⁵ With minor training and logistics adjustments, MARSOF could easily become proficient in the deployment and employment of this capability at the lowest level.

Maneuver: MARSOF can support the maneuver of larger naval forces through multiple means. During Phase 0, MARSOF can conduct strategic shaping and reconnaissance operations, such as human network and infrastructure development. Additionally, they can gain access through security force assistance, foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, and ongo-

ing counter-terrorism operations with partners in the region. During Phases I through III, MARSOF could support naval maneuver with offensive and defensive fires; special reconnaissance of key physical, human, and cyber terrain; employment of unmanned systems; partner force advise, assist, accompany, and enable (A3E) operations; direct action raids; sabotage of enemy infrastructure; and vessel boarding, search, and seizure.

Logistics: While MARSOF are not currently able to move large amounts of equipment and supplies organically, they can support the JFC's logistics preparation of the battlefield by establishing contracts and network infrastructure as advanced forces in preparation for a larger campaign. Such contracts could include land use agreements for basing solutions and commercial and private vessel leasing in support of clandestine and low signature infiltration and insertion.

Force Protection: As part of a networked Aegis-like system with organic sensors and fires, MARSOF could provide force protection to friendly networked ships in the littoral theater. A MARSOF element deployed to key terrain such as a chokepoint inside an adversary's WEZ could easily be equipped with air and missile defense systems that could provide protection to ships from landbased platforms when networked to the Aegis system.

Information: MARSOF can support the JFC through organic information operations nested with higher headquarters lines of effort and organic offensive and defensive cyber operations. Although these capabilities are in their nascent stages, MARSOC already has touchpoints with conventional units such as Marine Corps Forces, Cyberspace Command (MARFORCYBER), and the Marine Corps Information Operations Center (MCIOC).

According to joint maritime operations expert, Professor Milan Vego of the Naval War College, a key element of sea control is a balanced composition of naval forces. Indeed, diversity in naval combat arms is required for successful littoral warfare.²⁶ As previously noted, MARSOF provides this cross domain

balance and diversity and punches far above its weight class which provides the JFC a disproportional gain for a minor investment. All activities conducted by MARSOF are synthesized by the SOF headquarters to maximize effects against an adversary and help mitigate their A2/AD bubble. Perhaps most importantly, MARSOF can do all of this with a small footprint in a denied, austere environment.

Counter Argument

Critics of employing MARSOF as littoral SOF would argue that MARSOF is not the right force for achieving the Commandant's vision of reintegration with the Navy in a maritime campaign because the Commandant has already begun to re-structure the general-purpose Marine Corps forces for this exact mission.²⁷ Although MARSOF originates from conventional Marine units and is supported with equipment, maintenance, administrative functions, and funding from the Service, they work primarily for USSOCOM. As a result, MARSOC units typically have no direct command relationship with the MEF. The Commandant's vision clearly indicates that he wants conventional Marine units to conduct the types of missions and support to a larger naval and maritime conflict in the littorals as discussed in the above paragraphs. Other than a brief discussion of how to provide personnel support, MARSOC is not mentioned in any of the planning documents published by the Marine Corps as either a supporting or supported element in great power competition.

Rebuttal

MARSOF *is* the right force for littoral warfare because it meets all the Commandant's criteria for the force of the future and is ready now. With just a few minor adjustments to training and acquisitions, MARSOC can support integration with naval forces by conducting strategic shaping and reconnaissance operations in Phase 0; establishing footholds and supporting EABO; acting as a connector between SOF, Marine Corps, Navy, coalition, partner, and interagency equities; sup-

porting amphibious operations; and satisfying USSOCOM's requirement to support the JFC in a maritime conflict. At a minimum, MARSOC should be established as the advanced force to conduct these missions until conventional Marine units are organized, trained, and equipped to conduct them unilaterally. The Commandant has stated that part of the requirement for achieving his vision is that he wants "smarter grunts" and a more educated force; he has raised the GT score requirements for infantrymen.²⁸ MARSOC already has a regiment's worth of highly trained and intelligent CSOs. The required GT scores for CSOs are higher than the requirements for infantrymen.

Additionally, CSOs undergo a rigorous selection process that screens candidates for integrity, effective intelligence, physical ability, adaptability, initiative, determination, dependability, teamwork, interpersonal skill, and stress tolerance.²⁹ These are the exact attributes that make Marine Raiders ideal for the challenges of littoral warfare. Finally, MARSOF is generated out of the conventional Marine Corps. Every Raider spends a tour in the conventional forces before applying to become a CSO.³⁰ MARSOC leads the way in SOF and conventional force integration, interoperability, and interdependence (I3) by being the first to source personnel for the SOFLE program and frequently transitioning Marines back and forth between MARSOC and conventional Marine units. Examples include SOCS with multiple tours in MARSOC and conventional units and some Special Operations Officers (SOOs) such as a current MEU commander. Recruiting from conventional Marine units combined with personnel rotating between MARSOC and conventional units further promotes I3 and results in Raiders with Marine Corps DNA who understand Marine Corps culture, speak Marine Corps language, and by extension speak Navy language. They are the ideal warriors to fulfill the Commandant's vision of integrating Marines with the Navy in support of maritime campaigns.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Employing MARSOF in the littorals to serve as an inside naval force in support of a greater maritime campaign promotes symbiosis between the Marine Corps, Navy, and USSOCOM. It achieves the Commandant’s vision of reintegrating Marine Corps and naval forces and supports USSOCOM’s requirement to support the JFC with SOF in great power competition. MARSOC was born out of the legacy of World War II Marine Raiders who fully understood and integrated into the needs of the naval forces in the littorals. MARSOC, with the concurrence of USSOCOM, should support the Marine Corps’ integration with the Navy by having MARSOF focus on the INDOPACOM area of responsibility as a priority. MARSOC should acquire and become proficient with the tactical equipment and sensors such as unmanned aerial, surface, and underwater systems as well as ASCMs and defensive platforms that will enhance its ability to conduct strategic shaping and reconnaissance while also providing offensive and defensive fires from maritime terrain. MARSOC should continue to develop and validate this type of new equipment for eventual employment in the conventional Marine Corps. Further, MARSOC should network into the Navy’s Aegis system and future generations of that capability to supplement the protection of naval maneuver in the littorals. MARSOC should continue deploying forces to the Pacific and explore new partnerships that will facilitate access in places such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Finally, Special Operations Command, Pacific in conjunction with MARSOC, should establish a Marine O-5 Special Operations Task Force headquarters in the Pacific area of responsibility to begin building Phase 0 relationships and infrastructure necessary to support future operations.

Due to historical ties, deeply embedded Marine culture, flexible force design and cross domain capabilities, MARSOF are clearly the force of choice for today’s maritime special operations in the littorals and can easily achieve the Commandant’s vision of Navy-Marine

integration during the return to great power competition.

Notes

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