

# Partnership for Purpose

MARSOC and the MAGTF

by Maj Michael S. Stevens

**S**OF-MAGTF *F*<sup>3</sup> (*Special Operations Forces—MAGTF Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence*) continues to be a highly discussed topic by USSOCOM (U.S. Special Operations Command) and USMC senior leaders, yet a definitive, institutional framework remains elusive.<sup>1</sup> Our Nation’s involvement in two prolonged wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) forced greater interoperability to occur between SOF and all Service components. Tremendous tactical successes occurred after significant trial and error, but these successes were achieved without lasting solidarity.<sup>2</sup> As discussed in a separate MARSOC article (see *MCG*, Jan18), ARG/MEU SOFLE (Special Operations Force Liaison Element) has achieved noteworthy successes, amplifying the ARG/MEU’s employment through supporting SOF across a multitude of mission sets and contributing to the accomplishment of the supported GCC’s (geographic combatant commander) regional objectives. But what if the SOF-MAGTF relationship could be furthered and institutionalized across the Service, with Marine Corps forces integrated within special operations formations, achieving a heightened and purposeful capability that provides more options to JTF (joint task force)-level commanders than either option alone or to date?<sup>3</sup>

A proposed *SOF-MAGTF F*<sup>3</sup> institutional framework is provided, centered on the developing relationship between MARSOC (Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command) and the MAGTF, with recommendations for an integrated formation that’s mutually supportive, enhances Service lethality, and serves as a model for 21st

**>Maj Stevens is the Future Operations Officer, Marine Raider Regiment.**

century warfare.<sup>4</sup> This model harnesses the unique Marine synergy that exists between both entities, yet to be fully achieved by any formation to date. An exploration will examine the capabilities of MARSOC to promote understanding and provide rationale as to why the MAGTF should seek MARSOC’s partnership and transition to a proposed framework of integration between the two entities, offering a potential preview of the next evolution of the Marine Corps’ lethality.

## Understanding MARSOC’s Capability

MARSOC is the smallest of the SOF Service components with approximately 2,750 active duty personnel, yet it provides a distinct capability to the SOF enterprise through its primary force contribution, the MSOC (Marine Special Operations Company).<sup>5</sup> The MSOC serves as the base of employment for MARSOC, and task organized, special operations forces are generated from its framework to deploy in support of the GCCs via the TSOCs (Theater Special Operations Commands).<sup>6</sup> Subordinate MSOTs (Marine special operations team) are the maneuver elements of the MSOC, and their size and skill composition are also scalable based on operational requirements. The MSOC has been the preeminent formation within MARSOC since the command’s incep-



**Marines of Fox Company, 2d Marine Raider Battalion, conduct combat patrols during a recent training exercise. (Photo by Sgt Donovan Lee.)**

tion as its holistic capability has yielded monumental successes at all warfighting levels, most recently achieving strategic success through its tactical strike capability that severely degraded ISIS's hold in Kurdistan, which galvanized Kurdish political willpower to reclaim their semi-autonomous region from the group's control and ignited a spark that began to turn the pivotal momentum against ISIS in Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

The underlying key to the MSOC's success starts with its organizational design. The command applies the MAGTF methodology, minus organic aviation, to generate its task-organized formations. The MSOC utilizes the MAGTF concept to field and develop enhanced capabilities across all warfighting functions, with its core focus on the ability to harness its intelligence and operations cycles into one, fusing them together to form a highly lethal targeting cycle. The MSOC is a cross-functional formation that conducts all manners of intelligence (most prominently, all source analysis, collection, and fusion) and combines them within its operational framework to combat a given theater's illicit threat networks. This intelligence and operations synthesis is the critical skill that MARSOC's task-organized formations spend several months and tremendous resources training to achieve. To support this skill, the MSOC is poised to possess greater organic ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capability in support of deliberate or dynamic target acquisition and prosecution—critical in the development of its precision strike capability. The formation also possesses a robust communications capability to support distributed theater operations and a logistics element that facilitates greater unit maneuverability, short duration sustainability, and force protection measures.

The MSOC feeds its operations and intelligence cycle through a well-established targeting process that has become the command's *modus operandi*—the F3EAD (find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate) counter-terrorism methodology. The F3EAD model has become *the* standard design in the C-VEO (counter-violent extremist orga-

nizations) line of effort across the SOF enterprise; a succinct description is below for further understanding:

To *find* a target (individual or capability) involves the utilization of various means of intelligence (human, signals, or geospatial) to confirm its location; to *fix* involves the refinement and continued surveillance of a target through the above intelligence means; to *finish* a target results in its incapacitation (e.g. kill/capture or targeted munition strike); to *exploit* refers to the ability to recover material and personnel at the target site for evidence retrieval; to *analyze* is the examination of material and interrogation of personnel recovered from the target site to discover their connection to other individuals or networks; to *disseminate* is the application of the evidence and intelligence gleaned from the target site to develop new individuals or capabilities as future operational targets, as the cycle begins again.<sup>8</sup>

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### **... MARSOC's success starts with its organizational design.**

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The ability to harness the collective synergy from the F3EAD framework to strike at terror networks, resultant in the illumination, deterrence, and degradation of such networks, is *the key capability that defines the command's lethality*. The application of this lethal framework has garnered the command tremendous accolades across its operating environments, with increased demand across the TSOCs, U.S. interagency, and multiple partner nations to work with MARSOC. The command's proficiency in the F3EAD methodology is how MARSOC advanced past its initial creation as a direct action oriented force; it is *not* the mechanical skills involved in a direct operation that make it special, it is the integration of surface and aviation fires, the level of maneuver complexity and ability to lead a partnered force to an objective, and the application of multiple intelligence disciplines (hu-

man, signals, and geospatial) on site channeled into actionable effects to finalize the fix and finish of a select target, controlled by the command's highly skilled operators. MARSOC's F3EAD prowess at wielding multiple options to combat trans-regional networks has the command poised on the precipice of advancing beyond regional operations based on its highly skilled application.

All of this capacity is collaboratively organized to conduct *mission command* across the SOF environment. Mission command is a doctrinal joint term, and is applied as an increased function of command and control, as it places greater emphasis on the human element in joint operations, emphasizing trust, force of will, initiative, judgment, and creativity.<sup>9</sup> Mission command poses more challenges than command and control of operations due to the multiple warfighting levels (tactical–strategic) that SOF operations oftentimes simultaneously impact.<sup>10</sup> Within the mission command function, the critically important role of the commander is illustrated to a new level—driving the operations process to develop a battlespace through mission analysis and joint intelligence preparation of the battlefield; establishing an operational framework with lines of effort and measurable effects within a joint and interagency environment; developing teams across the U.S. interagency, joint, and coalition environments, and informing and influencing these and other audiences—all through the commander's application of command and his ability to control, and MARSOC's task-organized formations are superbly defining this capability. The command is discovering that part of its unique value to USSOCOM is MARSOC's ability to generate a dynamic, self-supportive, task-organized force that executes mastery of all warfighting functions, most prominently exercising mission command in the conduct of full-spectrum special operations. This is the capability gap that joint force commanders have in their subordinate units, and MARSOC task-organized formations are overwhelmingly meeting this requirement.



### Why Partner with MARSOC?

Over the past several years, the Marine Corps' role in partnering and supporting SOF has grown significantly. The Service recognizes USSOF's organizational flexibility, scalability, and lethality that postures SOF as the lead DOD entity to engage in the periphery against nation state adversaries and C-VEOs; this capability is why SOF has become the preferred U.S. military response option for U.S. policymakers. SOF's ability to conduct operations in austere, politically sensitive environments by, with, and through partner nation forces, surrogates, and coalition allies is the quintessential skill that will continue to place a high demand on their services for the foreseeable future.

USSOF has a range of operational capabilities and authorities that U.S. conventional forces do not possess. This is true of MARSOC's task-organized formations as well and is exercised across the range of operations the command executes regionally.<sup>11</sup> These authorities gain SOF greater access and placement to facilitate their operations, to include the permission to conduct such operations in highly sensitive and politicized environments. The access that SOF has, and will maintain, to conduct their broad range of activities highlights their role as the premier military option to conduct the most daunting operations in support of U.S. national security objectives.

As the Marine Corps reestablishes the Navy-Marine Corps Team through enhancing U.S. naval power projection and preparing for future littoral environments, an element is missing. While the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* eloquently defines the Service's future requirements for maneuver warfare against peer adversaries, the Service's role in this intricate environment of adversarial competition and C-VEOs is less clear.<sup>12</sup> For the Marine Corps to be truly, actively engaged against the Nation's most pressing threats, a partnership with MARSOC is required. MARSOC is the natural partner for the Marine Corps based on shared lineage, organizational processes, capabilities, and ethos; the commonalities are bountiful yet are often not achieved



**MARSOC is the primary force contribution to the employment of SOF assets by a Service component. (Photo by Sgt Donovan Lee.)**

because of cross-organizational misunderstandings. MARSOC offers the Marine Corps a path to merge together elements of the MAGTF with the command's forces to form the next generation of a warfighting formation—one that synthesizes the capability strengths of each entity to produce the ultimate MAGTF that combats trans-regional threats with advanced lethality, precision, skill, and ingenuity.

### Partnership Framework

A viable MARSOC-MAGTF partnership framework starts with defining integration—its meaning and application relative to an enhanced formation. In this context, integration is the purposeful and synchronized arrangement of MARSOC-MAGTF capabilities, authorities, and actions in support of national and theater strategic objectives.<sup>13</sup> Integration is the most important of the three I<sup>3</sup> terms—integration, interoperability, and interdependence—as it contains the key to the next phase of I<sup>3</sup> success. As recently highlighted by U.S. Army LTG Michael K. Nagata, a well-respected general officer throughout both the joint SOF and U.S. interagency realms, integrated environments foster the conditions for greater mission accomplishment and unity of effort and are necessary to bring the wide range of

U.S. interagency capabilities together to combat our foes in complex domains.<sup>14</sup> To maximize the advantages of both MARSOC and the MAGTF within our resource-constrained environments, an integrated formation is necessary to achieve enduring success in the uncertain operating environments going forward.<sup>15</sup>

Much can be gained from this partnership, as it offers the Marine Corps an opportunity to employ its highly skilled collective capabilities (intelligence, fires, expeditionary logistics, aviation, and select combat capability) within MARSOC's formations as a *unique team of equals*. This integrated team can be an institutional model of capability advancement and reciprocity for the Marine Corps, solidified through staunch mentorship, to enhance recruitment and training mechanisms of MAGTF personnel into MARSOC, and return to the MAGTF an enhanced Marine who can navigate operational ambiguity at all warfighting levels and achieve striking success. Integrated MARSOC-MAGTF formations also offer the Marine Corps the opportunity to tap into the greater global SOF network;<sup>16</sup> leveraging the heightened capabilities of USSOCOM as a functional combatant command with near instantaneous access to all manner of resources, through

full-scale U.S. intelligence community integration and support, the ability to rapidly resource and fund capability gaps globally with precision, and the interconnected network of global SOF operators, teammates, and partners to surge all efforts toward a pressing issue. This level of organizational agility is a distinct game-changing advantage that the Marine Corps can access through integration within MARSOC.

This level of integration is beginning now, as elements of the MAGTF and MARSOC are woven together within one formation, achieving this very level of I<sup>3</sup> success against a particular GCC's counter-terrorism line of effort. The successes generated from the MAGTF out of this formation are highly notable: specialized topographic and cryptographic intelligence analysis and linguistic support that has further illuminated multiple terror networks; MAGTF tactical ISR coverage and analysis that has led to critical aviation and ground fires disrupting and degrading these regional threat networks; tactical logistical support that has facilitated SOF mobility, weapons repair and functionality, and embarkation; and select combat capability that has bolstered SOF-distributed operations across a highly sensitive operating environment. This MAGTF capability has complemented MARSOC forces in a clear manner, one in which a unified partnership is a reality through mentorship, unity of effort, and a purposeful task organization. This integrated task force is on its second iteration, and its successes are only projected to further evolve.

This model of integration is not inclusive to solely MARSOC-led formations—such a model holds applicability for the MEU as well. Select elements of either MARSOC or the MEU could support one another for periods of operational integration, based on concurrence from the TSOC, theater Marine forces, and Navy fleet commands. Instead of providing forces for intermittent, on-call supporting roles to USSOF, what if a select MEU capability were to become an *integral element* within a MARSOC task-organized formation, *crucial* to the formation's operational framework and success?

Picture a MARSOC force with dedicated aviation; fully complementing combat capability; greater range of intelligence collection, processing, and exploitation; greater range of analysis and production capabilities; and robust logistical support, all integrated within its already highly potent formation, fixated on a defined area's most illicit trans-regional threats. The same paradigm can be applied to MARSOC forces as well, filling the MEU's information gaps through MARSOC forces' access and placement via their specialized capabilities, and facilitating the interoperability and integration of complementary MEU capabilities within a combined MARSOC-MEU scheme of maneuver, all operating under a unified relationship. This framework involves formalized MEU interoperability training touch points with MARSOC's task-organized formations to develop key relationships, trust, and understanding between both entities—critical for operational integration—all of which are occurring now across both east and west coast MEUs. MARSOC is the *only SOF entity* that truly understands the MAGTF's capabilities, shares Service commonalities, and can utilize its capabilities to facilitate a *greater role* for the MEU in facing a region's most pressing security concerns.

The argument exists that the MARSOC-MEU integrated model has come and gone, as such a framework was attempted upon the command's inception. This initial model saw a MSOC attached to and under the command of a MEU during its transit to a given theater, and then it was disembarked from the MEU and commanded by the TSOC. This model failed after only a few rotations because of improper command relationships, capability misunderstandings, and a lack of sustainment mechanisms to the MSOC from the MEU.<sup>17</sup> This was a pivotal failure that caused both MARSOC and the Marine Corps to shelve their fledgling alliance for several years, significantly impacting the relationship. Some of these causes of failure are now obsolete, but for this proposed model of integration to move forward, the recognition of the viability of the command relationship model of

*supported* and *supporting* is imperative for future success. This is the preeminent command relationship model, and it works because neither entity possesses expertise in the employment of one another; the supported-supporting relationship provides the supported unit the authority to provide direction, prioritize information requirements, and conduct actions for coordination and efficiency. The same relationship enables the supporting command to understand the supported unit's requirements and organize its forces for employment to accomplish its assigned tasks and those of its supported command.<sup>18</sup> Opportunities for both MARSOC and the MAGTF to serve as the supported command throughout this partnership will occur—this is not a one-sided command relationship.

Imagine the possibilities of what the MARSOC-MAGTF partnership could accomplish; an integrated formation with enhanced lethality across multiple domains, masterfully and organically executing the full F3EAD cycle with every MAGTF capability complement, conducting mission command across the joint environment, and combatting trans-regional threats with precision strike capability. This is the capability and standard that redefines both integration and full-spectrum capabilities and provides a competitive edge against other SOF and Service entities. The possibilities are endless when mission focus takes precedence, and the unique roles of both MARSOC and the MAGTF are merged to become the ideal model of lethality. The MARSOC-MAGTF partnership offers a glimpse of what could be: an adaptable, lethal formation conducting the most demanding operations for the GCC.

## Conclusion

The MARSOC-MAGTF team has returned to the forefront, and its future is promising. Its focus now must be to achieve the next level of operational excellence as both entities further evolve to face our Nation's enemies. The MARSOC-MAGTF team has the ability to become the most distinguishable and capable element facing a given region's most pressing problems. This



team represents the epitome of military virtues and warfighting excellence through its combined, relentless pursuit of excellence. The MARSOC-MAGTF partnership presents the opportunity to create a profoundly unique formation that transcends the boundaries of each other. This partnership could forge an operationalized entity that progresses the institutional equities of the Marine Corps to a never-before-reached prominence, thereby enhancing the Service's ability to support national and regional commanders' goals and objectives. The opportunity to truly become the model Service of the 21st century is at hand—both entities must be audacious in this pursuit, driven by the existing need and requirement for perfection.

## Notes

1. Draft of new *Marine Corps Reference Publication 3-30.4, CF-SOF (Conventional Forces-Special Operations Forces): MTTP (Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures) for CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup> (Conventional Forces and Special Operations Forces Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence)*, short title *CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup> MTTP*. This is the primary draft doctrinal publication that discusses the I<sup>3</sup> topic and utilizes the following sequential order in its I<sup>3</sup> term usage; integration, interoperability, and interdependence. Still, there is no proscribed or correct sequence when using the I<sup>3</sup> term, as well as for *CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup>*, as appropriate deviations (e.g., *SOF-MAGTF I<sup>3</sup>*) have become commonplace.

2. Glenn Harned, Preston Plous, and Jason Westbrook, "Special Operations Forces & Conventional Forces: Integration, Interoperability and Interdependence," *Prism: A Journal for the Center of Complex Operations*, (Online: December 2016), available at <https://www.cco.ndu.edu>.

3. Draft *CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup> MTTP* discusses the term "integration" and its definition relative to *CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup>*.

4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC): How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: 2016). This document discusses the service's future operating requirements for the 21st Century.

5. The term "SOF enterprise" refers to USSO-COM and its sub-unified functional units and

theater headquarters units (to be defined in the next note as TSOC (theater special operations command) units), and the Service SOF components; USASOC (U.S. Army Special Operations Command), AFSOC (U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command), NAVSPECWARCOM (U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command), and MARSOC (U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command).

6. The TSOCs are sub-unified SOF headquarters units that provide SOF command and control and applicable SOF counsel to the regional GCCs. The TSOCs are aligned in the following manner to the respective GCCs: SOCCENT (Special Operations Command Central) with CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command); SOCAF (Special Operations Command Africa) with AFRICOM (U.S. Africa Command); SOCEUR (Special Operations Command Europe) with U.S. European Command; SOCPAC (Special Operations Command Pacific) with PACOM (U.S. Pacific Command); SOCSOUTH (Special Operations Command South) with U.S. Southern Command; SOCNORTH (Special Operations Command North) with U.S. Northern Command; and SOCKOR (Special Operations Command Korea) with U.S. Pacific Command, but operational command of SOCKOR is delegated to USFK (U.S. Forces Korea). For further clarity on the TSOCs and their role, reference *Joint Publication 3-05, Special Operations, I<sup>3</sup>*.

7. Series of author conversations with select MSOC G leadership concerning key lessons learned from their deployment to Iraq, Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, 2016.

8. Joint Staff, *JP 3-26, Counterterrorism*, (Washington, DC: 2014). The F3EAD methodology is described here in further detail.

9. Joint Staff, *JP 3-31, Command and Control for Land Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2014). This section provides clarity of the term mission command and its function across the joint environment. It also bears notation that *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: October 1996) discusses mission command in Chapter 3, highlighting several similar principles utilized within the Marine Corps philosophy of command and control as compared to mission command.

10. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrinal Publication 6-0, Mission Command*, (Washington, DC: 2012). This publication discusses the specificities of mission command as a function,

as the publication is widely cited and sourced across the joint force.

11. MARSOC's operational collective forces have a regionalized focus, yet execute missions not exclusive to any sole area of operational responsibility.

12. *MOC*. The term "adversarial competition" has most prominently been linked to numerous statements from both current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., and former U.S. Secretary of Defense, the Honorable Mr. Ashton Carter, describing the geopolitical complexities the U.S. faces in its relationship with growing powers Russia and China, and to a lesser extent, the nations of Iran and North Korea.

13. Draft *CF-SOF I<sup>3</sup> MTTP*. Definition of the term "integration."

14. Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, "A View from a CT Foxhole: LTG Michael K. Nagata, Director, Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning, NCTC," *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, CTC Sentinel*, (West Point: 2017).

15. Joint Staff, *Joint Operating Environment 2035 (JOE 2035)*: "The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World," (Washington, DC: 2016). The *JOE 2035* discusses the future operating environment along six core contexts: violent ideological competition, threatened U.S. territory and sovereignty, antagonistic geopolitical balancing, disrupted global commons, a contest for cyberspace, and shattered and reordered regions.

16. The term "Global SOF Network" is further defined within *JP 3-05, Special Operations*.

17. Author discussions with select members of MARSOC with operational knowledge of the initial deployments of the MSOC attached to the MEU (2016-2017).

18. G.R. Bechtold, *After-Action Review of MSOC (Marine Special Operations Company) Lima's Participation in the 26th MEU RUT (Realistic Urban Training) Exercise*, (2017).

