

The Marine Corps and Special Operations

Leveraging SOF to achieve the objectives
of the *Marine Operating Concept*

by Col J. Darren Duke

This issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette* will focus on the Marine Corps in relation to special operations. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is the Marine Corps' persistent contribution to special operations, but it does not represent the full scope of the Marine Corps' role in the special operations mission area; that topic is much broader. The recent operational successes against our Nation's adversaries by Marine and SOF units, working together in multiple theaters, represent a wide variety of command and operational relationships between the MAGTF and SOF formations, some involving MARSOC elements, others not. The numerous ways that Marine Corps capabilities intersect with SO mission sets require a more expansive Service-level consideration.

Having said that, the 12-year-old presence of MARSOC within USSOCOM has opened up new opportunities and insights that will benefit the Marine Corps as it adapts to the new challenges foreseen in the *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)*. Speaking to this, the *MOC* states that the Marine Corps and SOF are

naturally aligned in terms of the mission approach and execution ... deployed in similar regions ... engaged in shaping operations ... and able to immediately respond to crises.¹

American SOF has frequently established a forward presence in the same

>Col Duke currently serves on the staff at Headquarters, U.S. Special Operations Command. The conclusions expressed herein are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the views of MARSOC, USSOCOM, the U.S. Marine Corps, the Department of Defense, or any other governmental agency.

austere and conflict-ridden regions of the globe where MAGTFs deploy. The inherent numerical inferiority of SOF calls for a high value to be placed on effective intelligence, C², and logistics capabilities. Above all, SOF values the quality of its personnel, seeking to recruit and retain men and women with

mon interest with the Marine Corps, evincing that "natural alignment" from the *MOC*. The possession of its own element within these special operations efforts affords the Marine Corps the prospect to leverage commonalities and shared interests more effectively.

The goal of this issue is to explore several of these areas of significant potential by relating them directly to the imperatives outlined in the *MOC*. In these articles, MARSOC Marines, representing extensive experience in command and staff positions in the MAGTF and the Supporting Establishment, as well as special operations units, share their perspectives on opportunities for greater partnership with SOF and for leveraging the Marine Corps' SOF component (MARSOC) to benefit Marine Corps combat-development efforts.

In "Creating Comparative Advantage: Rethinking Combat Development in a 21st Century World," Col Daniel T. Canfield proposes a solution to "the enduring obstacles to leveraging and sustaining commercial-off-the-shelf systems"² by describing an alternate approach to combat development, arguing that the "Corps' traditional top-down, concept-based capability development processes must be augmented and, when



MARSOC logo. (Official USMC photo.)

the appropriate attributes for success in the special operations operating environment. USSOCOM makes substantial investments in their training and readiness to ensure success. All of these areas are of longstanding com-



Marines from Fox Company, 2d Raider Bn, hone their 60mm shooting skills at Fort Bragg, SC.
(Photo by Sgt Donovan Lee.)

appropriate, integrated with a more responsive, user-driven system that accelerates” rapid fielding and evaluation of commercial-off-the-shelf systems.³

MajGen Carl E. Mundy, Col Travis Homiak, and LtCol Justin W. Dyal (USMC(Ret)) take up the *MOC*’s manpower system, policy, and process challenges in “Innovating to Meet the Uncertainty Ahead: Older, Wiser Marines; a SOF Approach to Shaping Tomorrow’s Force,” calling for a retooling of our up-or-out system to expand the experience base among our combat leaders. Future conflicts will present a new complexity—“that ambiguous swathe between peace and war”⁴—that will require Marines who, over time, demonstrate the necessary attributes for success.

Col Jason Schmidt and LtCol Ian Fletcher each address SOF approaches to intelligence and logistics. The *MOC* envisions a distributed battlefield, “dynamic and fully contested” with “enabled small units [achieving] greater effects.”⁵ These Marines’ actions will be guided by intelligence from multiple disciplines (human intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, and open source intelligence) whose practitioners are trained to fuse and provide actionable intelligence at the tactical edge. They, their equipment,

and their supplies will be provisioned, contracted, maintained, and repaired by combat service support Marines of a similar multi-discipline nature. The Marine Corps can benefit greatly from the ground that SOF has broken in these areas.

In “ARG/MEU SOFLE Successes,” the MARSOC Staff shows how Marines “both contribute [to] and benefit from unique and complementary capabilities”⁶ of SOF through a robust

While the legends and lore about the Marine Corps in special operations and with special operations units is mixed, the actual record is very impressive.

special operations forces liaison element (SOFLE). Of all the efforts to find areas of full partnership and cooperation between SOF and the MAGTF, the SOFLE program has been the most efficient and successful. Sadly, it has also been the most under-resourced. In this article, the authors will provide an account of how the small investment of personnel and equipment provided critical shared-situational awareness between deployed ARG/MEU and SOF units. This collaborative planning led

to optimal employment of both SOF and Marine Corps capabilities with withering effects on the enemy. In the end, they will call for renewed efforts to restore this program to its original capacity in order to realize the *MOC*’s goal of a full and complementary partnership between SOF and the MAGTF.

In “Partnership for Purpose: MARSOC and the MAGTF,” Maj Michael S. Stevens proposes a closer MAGTF relationship with MARSOC’s primary force contribution, the Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC). Because both the MEU and the MSOC grow out of common Marine Corps ethos and warfighting doctrine, they share a common focus on a wide array of operational capabilities and concerns. These range from training methods to targeting methods, to operations and intelligence integration, to shared adeptness at mission command. If these are capitalized in a deliberate way, they offer to create additional pathways for the ARG/MEU to access the SOF network and its resources and to bring the combined arms and logistics resources to apply in support of the MSOC. He goes on to suggest mutually supporting models led by either organization that promise to improve our (U.S. Marine) lethality within the joint force across the range of military operations.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Marines and special operations Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen value esprit de corps. This deep feeling of pride and fellowship flows from, among other things, a unit’s history of achievements. But, although critically important, history, for all these storied Marine and SOF units, is not ultimate. The mission is ultimate, and its accomplishment lies yet in front of us all.

While the legends and lore about the Marine Corps in special operations and

with special operations units is mixed, the actual record is very impressive. Our professional responsibility as Marines is to acknowledge and learn from the best and worst of our history in order to better serve the future mission. The best outcome for the joint force and for the Nation is a Marine Corps and USSOCOM partnership in which each values history and traditions and works together to deploy complementary capabilities that address pressing security challenges among our geographic combatant commands.

Two book reviews in this edition of the *Gazette* address this issue. The purpose of these particular book reviews is to remind of us of the facts of our past and inspire us to future teamwork and success. One review recalls a lesser-known but very successful effort by Marines and Sailors in China during World War II, where many Marines, to include a future commandant, conducted what would be defined today as special operations behind Japanese lines in contested China. The other is a review of a recent work that lays out the complex path America has taken to its current special operations capability and details key security challenges that perhaps can only be addressed by the Marine Corps and SOF working cooperatively.

Service and joint assessments about the future operating environment converge on a set of common characteristics that will be faced by both Marines and SOF units now and in future operations. Regional competition and instability wrought by shifting strategic relationships, changes in economic and demographic fortunes of competing states, and the continued flow of humans to large mega-cities are forecasted to increase. Added to this will be the continued proliferation and commoditization of advanced technologies once reserved for superpowers. In this complex environment, our adversaries will pursue asymmetric strategies in an attempt to blunt historic areas of American military strength.

The first American combat elements to this fight will be SOF and the MAGTF—the former because of its global network of international partner-



MARSOC Marines complete a fast rope/rappelling course at Camp Lejeune. (Photo by LCpl Mackenzie Gibson.)

\$19.95/\$17.96*

“DEVIL DOG” MEN’S COLOGNE

WWW.MARINESHOP.NET

* member price only.

ships built over the course of the present war against terrorism and the latter because of the MAGTF's ability to rapidly exploit maritime access with a ready, sustainable, expeditionary combined arms capability. The combination of these two partners in a future scenario will be a lethal and effective answer to challenges against American interests and resolve.

To achieve this partnership, it is critical that Marines gain a more thorough understanding of SOF beyond the externals and the lore, and vice versa. SOF and the MAGTF—both elite and exquisite national capabilities—operate frequently in the same battlespace but do so according to operational approaches, authorities, and permissions which are ultimately complementary but can appear competitive at the tactical level. Differences in approach to force size are an excellent example of complementary and mutually enabling capabilities misunderstood as competition. U.S. Army Special Warfare doctrine envisions a politically sensitive, hostile, and/or denied operating environment where a large American footprint increases the risk to American interests but where a small, multi-functional team of Soldiers enabled by robust communications and intelligence resources can still achieve desired outcomes.⁷ The 14-man U.S. Army Special Forces Operational Detachment–Alpha is purpose-built to address this requirement for that small footprint. Consequently, U.S. Special Forces embrace a minimalist view of force design, seeking the fewest number of Soldiers possible to accomplish the task, and may accept risk in certain combat functions to keep the footprint small.

The Marine Corps envisions a very similar operating environment but takes a very different view of force design based on its role in the joint force. The Marine Corps “is optimized to be *expeditionary*—a strategically mobile *middleweight force* that can fill the gaps created by the ... tradeoff” between the size of larger Joint Force capabilities and the speed of response.⁸

Furthermore, the Corps is

usually task-organized and employed as Marine air-ground task forces

(MAGTFs) ... light enough to leverage various combinations of amphibious shipping, maritime prepositioning, and intertheater airlift to quickly get to the scene of action, yet heavy enough to either accomplish the mission or provide a stopgap pending the arrival of additional forces.⁹

Instead of seeking the smallest footprint possible, Marines seek the right task-organization of MAGTF capabilities to achieve the mission.

With such radically different perspectives in view, it is easy to imagine how the competition forms. If a small footprint is what the right force design looks like, then the MAGTF must be the wrong force. Alternatively, if the world is viewed through a lens of combined arms with logistical sustainment meant to take and hold ground, the operational detachment is a poor effort indeed. In reality, however, the small SOF footprint and the flexibility and scalability of the MAGTF represent a powerful combination in the American arsenal. Because of its robust communications and intelligence networks and capabilities, SOF can provide the MAGTF situational awareness, which facilitates accurate and effective planning, during the amphibious approach march to the crisis area. The MAGTF brings a combination of aviation and ground combat, combat support, and logistical competencies that can achieve operational objectives from afloat or ashore. So, the competition is largely perception more than reality.

With this being the case, the future of the Marine Corps and SOF relationship must be one of intentional and dedicated effort to exploit the core competencies of each formation. Recent years have seen more progress than ever because of the hard work and creativity of many Marines. But attempts to establish regular, deliberate interaction and interoperability—in spite of battle-proven benefits from such initiatives—have been the exception rather than the rule. The potential for a joint SOF-MAGTF partnership at the tactical edge that offers the geographical combatant commander or joint task force commanders increased flexibility in an increasingly complex set of

security challenges is substantial and needed. Closer and intentional integration can provide a joint task force commander more operational flexibility by allowing the MAGTF's combat power to be brought to bear in earlier stages of the crisis for a variety of tasks, adding credibility to, and reducing risk in, joint force entry operations.

The intention of this edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette* is to open the aperture of thought about what the Marine Corps might do to exploit these opportunities for combat development, manpower and talent management, intelligence and logistics, and ultimately deploying and fighting the MAGTF. This is meant to be the continuation of a promising dialogue, not the final word on the issue. SOF and the Marine Corps will continue to develop capabilities; the Marines of MARSOC see value in a strong USMC-SOF relationship that will ensure that these developments lead to mutual success on the battlefield.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *The Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: September 2016).
2. Ibid.
3. See page 16.
4. See page 15.
5. *MOC*.
6. Ibid.
7. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-05, Special Operations*, (Washington, DC: August 2012).
8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-0, Marine Corps Operations (wl Change 1)*, (Washington, DC: 26 July 2017).
9. Ibid.

