

A Special Relationship

SOF AT&L and MCSC
by Maj Jonathan Ritchey

The special and mutually beneficial relationship between Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology and Logistics (SOF AT&L) and Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) is the result of common requirements, continued technology collaboration, and persistent capability transition. Relatively speaking, this is a very young relationship that only started after the initial designation of U.S. Special Operations Command as a functional combatant command in 1987.¹ Although SOF AT&L's name has changed several times since then, its relationship with MCSC has grown into a close collaboration environment of shared capabilities and vision.

Background

To better understand the relationship

>Maj Ritchey is an active duty 8061, Marine Acquisition Officer, assigned to Special Operations Forces Acquisition Technology & Logistics. He is currently stationed at MacDill, Air Force Base, Tampa, FL.

between SOF AT&L and MCSC, it is important to understand each organization's mission. SOF AT&L's mission is to provide rapid and focused acquisition, technology, and logistics to special operations forces.² MCSC's mission focus is to equip and sustain Marine forces with the most capable and cost-effective systems for current and future expeditionary and crisis-response operations.³ These statements are very similar, with the main difference being who is supported. However, the different communities supported by these organizations share many common missions and much operational utility.

Common Requirements

The Marine Corps is the premiere crisis response force of the United States. This creates a need for the Marine Corps to always be ready to conduct force projection across the globe at any time. The *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance* further identifies the Marine Corps as a Naval Integrated Force that must learn to maintain a persistent naval forward presence.⁴ This requires Marines to be able to sustain themselves autonomously and continuously without traditional logistical and operational support and a large requirement for long-range communications capability at the small unit level. This is something that the SOF community has been doing for a long time, which has pushed them to develop some of the best secure, long-range, and scalable communications capabilities.

For example, in the Program Executive Office (PEO) for Command, Control, Communications, and Computers, a SOF requirement for the AN/PRC-161, also known as the Handheld Link 16 radio, allows a dismounted user access to the Link 16 network, which dramatically reduces the kill chain time for long-range fires. The PRC-161 allows for full participation in joint and partner nation tactical data link networks. Since 2019, when SOCOM began fielding the capability, there have been additional use cases across the services beyond long-range fires because of the close collaboration with SOF AT&L. This capability is now fielded



SOF AT&L and MCSC have a mutually beneficial relationship. (Photo by MSgt Barry Loo.)

to the Marine Corps and is critical for the Marine Corps to be successful in the implementation of the *38th Commandant's Guidance* for more complete naval integration.⁵

Technology Collaboration

At SOF AT&L, the Marine acquisition professionals are comprised of five Marine acquisition officers assigned throughout the nine PEOs of SOF AT&L and one Marine Corps Systems Command liaison officer to Special Operations Command. This team identifies requisite counterparts within MCSC program offices to compare acquisition strategies of similar equipment to see if there may be some cost-sharing, development-sharing, or acquisition strategy sharing between the commands.

In addition to these relationships, MCSC has a direct relationship with Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) as reflected in the Memorandum of Agreement for using Marine Corps Special Operations Command as a user jury.⁶ This allows MCSC to work with MARSOC to rapidly assess equipment and potentially rapidly field commercial off-the-shelf technologies for the Marine Corps and SOF community.⁷

In PEO-SOF Warrior (SW), they have developed the SOF Warrior Innovation, Technology, Collaboration Huddle concept to align the community of interests towards integrated deterrence.⁸ This government-only concept takes common interests within the purview of PEO-SW and the other Services, including the Marine Corps, and identifies future collaboration, unified strategic messages, common messages to industry, and acquisition strategy alignment. Many times, a technological breakthrough, such as a special type of ammunition for a specific SOF purpose, is developed. However, over time, it is more beneficial for that capability to be transitioned to one of the larger Services, as long-term ammunition sustainment is better suited for a larger Service like the Army.

Additionally, in PM Precision Strike, PEO-SW, the SPIKE Non-Line of Sight capability was tested by MARSOC uti-



In addition to collaboration with SOF AT&L, MCSC has a direct relationship with MARSOC.
(Photo by MSgt Barry Loo.)

lizing a combat evaluation. After a successful combat evaluation, MCSC and SOF AT&L co-funded the procurement of three additional systems utilizing an Other Transactional Authority. These three systems are planned to be fielded to MARSOC in 2022 giving them Initial Operational Capability (IOC). Furthermore, this capability is being looked at by MCSC as a potential candidate for SOF to service transition.

It is important to collaborate with other organizations that have similar objectives ...

In PEO-Special Reconnaissance (SR), quarterly meetings have been established between Portfolio Manager (Pfm), Command Element Systems (CES) to review relevant programs within each command to identify technology integration and potential SOF to Service transition opportunities. These meetings have included members of the Combat Development and Integration (CD&I) division of Marine Corps Combat Development Command to also identify potential material solutions

within SOF AT&L that have already been developed before developing a potentially duplicative capability that takes longer to get to a Marine downrange.

There are few times great ideas are generated from a single organization for that single organization's purpose. It is important to collaborate with other organizations that have similar objectives in the technological space to develop the best capabilities relative to the needs of the community. Applying current technology to new problem sets or requirements can lead to innovative approaches that create evolutionary advances of current technology. In other words, looking at current SOF AT&L technology and looking at it through a Marine Corps requirements lens can lead to new applications of that technology and potential ideas for further advancing it, which subsequently benefits SOF AT&L or vice versa.

Persistent Technology Transition

Technology or capability transition from SOF AT&L to MCSC is commonly understood as a SOF-to-Service transition. This is when a program that currently resides in SOF is transitioned to another Service. It is important to understand that this is only a transition of program oversight and not necessarily a transfer of capability, as many times

SOF AT&L continues to maintain the capability. This allows a Service with a larger budget using Major Force Program 2 (MFP-2) funding, instead of the MFP-11 funding that SOCOM uses, to manage the program, potentially providing large cost savings with economies of scale. This is mutually beneficial to the Service as the Service saves time in development by transitioning an already mature capability that may only need a minor development cycle to match service requirements.

PEO-SW has conducted a SOF-to-Service transition with their Program Manager (PM) Family of Special Operations Vehicles (FSOV) and is set to complete yet another. Initially, the Marine Corps had an Urgent Needs Statement (UNS) for a lightweight, internally transportable, agile, and off-road logistics vehicle.⁹ Instead of going through the long process of developing their own capability, they were able to use the Polaris MRZR, a Utility Task Vehicle that SOCOM had already developed and fielded to the SOF community. After several years, this capability is being phased out and replaced by the Ultra-Light Tactical Vehicle, which was also developed at SOCOM and is set to be fielded to the Marine Corps in 2022.¹⁰

This is not only an example of a successful SOF-to-Service transition but also an example of close collaboration between SOF AT&L and MCSC. During the development of the Ultra-Light Tactical Vehicle, the MCSC program office and PM FSOV of SOF AT&L regularly collaborated during development to ensure the requirements remained common for both organizations. This is the more common scenario for a SOF-to-Service transition. It is rare for any Service to randomly look to SOF AT&L for a capability and stumble on to the next perfect capability fit for its new requirement. There is usually a service member at SOF AT&L that is collaborating with their service counterparts to create these opportunities that benefit the SOF community as well as the other Services.

Challenges

Although this article focuses on the successes of the SOF AT&L and MCSC

relationship, there are always challenges when trying to match requirements and synchronize competing acquisition strategies and timelines between SOF AT&L and MCSC. One of the common challenges is matching requirements. There are times when there is a clear technological advancement that would be advantageous for the Marine Corps to possess; however, our counterparts at CD&I have not published a requirement yet. To be fair, there are many times CD&I cannot anticipate requirements as many arise quickly as the result of a new adversary capability or knowledge of a new technological breakthrough in a certain area. Additionally, publishing a requirement is a deliberate and arduous process to ensure that a capability is both needed and not duplicated. That said, there must be a conversation about having a more streamlined process for writing requirements for an already existing capability that exists outside of the Marine Corps.

Another common challenge is a lack of direct programmatic counterparts. For example, an MCSC program may include equipment and capability that reside in separate PEOs at SOF AT&L. This means there are several different contracting strategies and potentially competing priorities between PEOs, which could further complicate a potential capability transition. This can be an obstacle when trying to transition a capability on a single contract effort or within the scope of a single system.

These challenges are not insurmountable and the team of Marine acquisition professionals at SOF AT&L have solved these problems in the past and will continue to solve them in the future.

Summary

The special relationship between SOF AT&L and MCSC continues to thrive. The SOF-to-Service transition is the most tangible output of this relationship; however, it should not be seen as a sole measure of success. As outlined in this article, the regular close collaboration between SOF AT&L and MCSC has led to acquisition strategy confluence, knowledge of other SOF-to-Service transitions that the MCSC

can still benefit from, and a better understanding of potential future capabilities for the Marine Corps. Finally, the common requirements, continued technology collaboration, and persistent capability transition will continue to provide the Marine Corps with streamlined opportunities for getting the right equipment quickly into the hands of the Marines downrange.

Notes

1. Staff, *US SOCOM History*, 6th Edition, (MacDill AFB, FL: USSOCOM History and Research Office, 2008).
2. Staff, "JSOU Course 22A Course Introduction," (MacDill AFB, FL: Joint Special Operations University, n.d.).
3. Information available at <https://www.marcomsyscom.marines.mil>.
4. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
5. Ibid.
6. Memorandum of Agreement: Use of U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command as a User Jury.
7. Ibid.
8. *PEO-SW Systems Brief*.
9. Maj Cesar Lopez, "The Ultra-Light Tactical Vehicle: How working with industry and the FMF can result in a Swiss Army Knife for future lethality," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: August 2021).
10. Ibid.

