

An MSTP for the Future Force

Evolving to address the complexities of a dynamic and challenging future operating environment

by The MAGTF Staff Training Program

The Marine Corps was originally introduced to the newly formed MAGTF Staff Training Program (MSTP) back in a 1994 *Marine Corps Gazette* article by then-Colonel James F. Amos, the Deputy Director of MSTP and eventual 35th Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC).¹ Much has changed, however, in the ensuing 22 years. The birth of the cyber domain, the expansion of activities in the information environment, and the sophistication of potential adversaries across the globe are just a few examples. Additionally, resource shortfalls in people and equipment further complicate matters, especially as adversary capabilities continue to expand. Consequently, MSTP, as a

self-proclaimed learning organization, has new demands placed on it as it strives to keep pace with change. Following the relatively recent transition away from Iraq and Afghanistan-related mission rehearsal exercises, MSTP now leverages an assortment of Service and joint partners as it evolves to meet the complexities of the future operating environment. Guidance and perspective contained in the 37th CMC's *FRAGO 01/2016: Advance to Contact*, and other sources,² informs the growth and evolution of MSTP. The path forward is reasonably well lit.

The Main Effort

MSTP supports Marine Corps readiness through its enduring focus on an

institutional imperative: excellence in MAGTF warfighting. MSTP's mission, codified in *Marine Corps Order 1500.53B*, is to

provide training in MAGTF operations across the range of military operations, within the context of a joint and/or combined task force environment, to improve the warfighting skills of senior commanders and their staffs.

This mission and its purpose are critically important, as MSTP is the single organization in the Marine Corps charged with training the warfighting MAGTF.

The specified task to provide "training in MAGTF operations," by necessity, precludes a narrow focus on just the MAGTF command element (CE), instead demanding a MAGTF-wide view that encompasses all of the MAGTF's major subordinate commands (MSC). Because MAGTF headquarters don't achieve operational success by themselves, all elements of the MAGTF have real relevance in the training MSTP designs and executes. It is the integration and interaction among all the elements of the MAGTF that meets the MAGTF commander's intent and ultimately determines mission success. With this approach, there can be no "primary" and "secondary" training audiences (TA).

MSTP's primary focus is on MEF and MEB warfighting through a comprehensive, five-part training package that is designed to train each MAGTF (MEF and MEB) at least once every two years. This five-part training package consists of: (1) Battle Staff Training (BST); (2) a Warfighting Seminar



MSTP supports Marines by providing them with realistic training scenarios, including role-play exercises. (Photo by LCpl Mark Garcia.)

(WFS); (3) a Planning Practical Application (PPA); (4) a Command Post Exercise (CPX, also known as a final exercise or FINEX); and (5) a Facilitated After-Action Review (FAAR). BST consists of command and control systems (C²) training and internal MAGTF CPXs to rehearse and build staff cohesion and proficiency. The WFS introduces MSTP-observed trends in MAGTF operations with corresponding classes to address them, as well as core courses in design, MAGTF operations, breakout sessions on specialized topics, and an assortment of other planning and warfighting topics.

For the PPA, MSTP presents a planning problem to the MAGTF derived from an exercise or real-world scenario. The TA convenes an operational planning team with MAGTF instructor support from MSTP and uses the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCP) to produce a detailed, executable written order. Reinforcing the criticality of a MAGTF-wide approach, MSCs also plan to provide the required bottom-up refinements for the MAGTF CE to develop a complete and highly integrated MAGTF plan. As part of its enduring assessment, MSTP provides written feedback to the MAGTF CE and its MSCs on their orders prior to CPX execution. The CPX provides the MAGTF commander and staff a venue for implementing their plan and exercising staff processes in a simulated, highly complex operational environment. A CPX normally runs 7 to 10 days—long enough for the complete execution of several targeting, air tasking order, and battle damage assessment cycles. At the conclusion of the CPX, MSTP facilitates an after-action review for the MAGTF and MSC commanders and their staffs focused on identifying those actions and processes that should be sustained or improved. The facilitated after-action review is comprehensive, lasting over two hours, and covers the MAGTF's performance from planning through execution. Roughly 30 to 45 days after the completion of the CPX, MSTP delivers a final exercise report to the MAGTF commander, an even more comprehensive mission essential task-based assessment that numbers in



MSTP uses real-world scenarios. (Photo by SSgt T.T. Parish.)

excess of 40 pages. All told, this is no small investment of time for MSTP or the MAGTF it trains. The exercise life cycle, from the initial Concept Develop Conference for the exercise to the electronic delivery of the final exercise report to the MAGTF commander can span nearly one year.

Relevance of the Future Operating Environment

MSTP is nothing if not credible and relevant. The program's credibility derives in part from the quality and upward mobility of the active duty and reserve personnel (IMA detachment)

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assigned to the program. Perhaps most critical to the credibility of the program, however, are the Marine Corps' highly qualified experts—senior mentors, retired general officers (historically, lieutenant generals) who collectively provide expertise across all elements of the MAGTF. Without a pool of senior mentors that can combine experience

as Wing, Division, MLG, MEB, and MEF commanders, MSTP is far less effective in its role as MAGTF trainers. Since the training of MEB and MEF commanders, and their staffs, suffers greatly without senior mentor presence, the Marine Corps must pay very close and continuous attention to recruiting and sustaining this valuable effort.

MSTP's relevance comes from a willingness to appreciate and embrace future challenges in warfighting, effectively designing exercises that bring those challenges squarely into every combat operations center across the MAGTF. MSTP has, therefore, fully embraced the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity's publication, the *2015–2025 Future Operating Environment: Implications for Marines*, to include its top-five findings³:

- Global communications and social media and its impact on the speed of decision making of our adversaries.
- The ability of adversaries to commercially acquire technology and capabilities that rival or exceed our own.
- The prevalence of ambiguity and uncertainty in the future operating environment.
- The proliferation of threat capabilities with stand-off that exceeds that of Marine Corps and joint forces, placing friendly forces perpetually within the threat rings of adversary weapons,

enabling adversary area denial and greatly challenging friendly access.

- Adversary pursuit of overmatch in the information environment, as defined in its broadest sense.

In order to address these challenges, MSTP typically uses a hybrid threat, one conceived as a conventional “near-peer competitor”⁴⁴ effectively integrated with unconventional forces and criminal threats and able to influence actions in all five warfighting domains. This hybrid threat creates a complex operational environment for the MAGTF and precludes a singular or overly-narrow focus on any one geographic area or adversary capability. Significant threat capabilities generally include:

- A navy capable of coastal defense/area denial.
- An integrated air defense system and fourth-generation fighter aircraft.
- Robust cyber and information warfare capabilities.
- Unmanned, networked aircraft systems at all levels.
- Effective integration of combined arms.
- Active and capable special operations forces.
- Irregular tactics (e.g., improvised explosive devices, rear area ambushes, swarming).
- Coordination with irregular forces, criminal organizations, and other non-state actors.
- A limited chemical weapons capability.

Faced with this threat, the MAGTF works with the joint force to define conditions for shaping such as the destruction of coastal defenses and the neutralization of integrated air defense systems, before the MAGTF can decisively employ forces in Phase II or Phase III operations. While decisively engaged, the MAGTF must employ combined arms to overcome a threat possessing ground and air defense systems that frequently outrange its own, a formidable endeavor by any measure.

MSTP has also been working closely with MCIA, Marine Forces Cyber Command, and the Marine Corps Information Operations Center—the aforementioned Service partners—to

create realistic operational environments requiring MAGTFs to continuously embrace information warfare.⁵ They must also be able to operate with degraded communications against adversaries capable of success in the information environment. Along with its “thinking” opposing force, MSTP forces the MAGTFs to adjust plans and make decisions shrouded in uncertainty. Scenarios also provide ample opportunities for MAGTFs to demonstrate a maneuver warfare mindset in both the “physical and cognitive dimensions of conflict.”⁶ In the spirit of *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), decentralized execution, employment of combined arms, a bias for action, boldness in execution, and tempo in order to overwhelm and defeat the adversary are always rewarded.

FRAGO 01/2016: Advance to Contact

Armed with an appreciation for the future operational environment, MSTP has similarly embraced *FRAGO 01/2016* and its specified and implied tasks for the program. Specifically, the *FRAGO* states that the Marine Corps

will immediately frame exercise and experimentation of MEF and Marine Expeditionary Brigade warfighting as part of a naval campaign in a crisis, and as part of an A2/AD [anti-access/

area-denial] environment in the 2025 timeframe.

The guidance in the *FRAGO* also demands training that emphasizes the basics of combined arms and expeditionary operations; operations in a degraded command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence environment; operations in a nuclear, biological, and chemical environment; and decision making in rapidly unfolding and uncertain situations. Said another way, *FRAGO 01/2016* sharpens MSTP’s focus. When taken collectively with the enduring thrust of *MCO 1500.53B, Marine Air-Ground Task Force Staff Training Program*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, March 2013), it provides MSTP with a clear path forward in its efforts to design and execute warfighting exercises that drive naval and joint integration and meet the complex demands of the future operational environment.

In recent practice, MSTP endeavored to design and execute warfighting exercises that meet the full scope of the guidance received. In all cases, the MAGTF is part of a combined and/or joint task force. MEB exercises typically focus on Phase II operations and feature an amphibious assault or take place just after a permissive landing. MEF exercises typically focus on Phase



MSTP designs exercises that requires the MAGTF to operate as part of a combined joint force.
(Photo by Cpl Shantiel Dominguez.)

III operations following a forcible entry and/or permissive landing and offload in Phase II operations. A naval expeditionary deployment (usually a combination of amphibious and maritime prepositioning) enables all exercises. Exercise history provides examples of both combine force land component command (CFLCC) and combined force maritime component command (CFMCC) constructs, and both have been used to meet some or all of the guidance contained in *FRAGO 01/2016* and other supporting documents.

Often times these exercises see a MEF operating under a CFLCC during sustained operations ashore. During the LARGE SCALE Exercise 2016 (LSE 16), however, MSTP provided a CFMCC and staff as the MEF's higher headquarters. While an unpracticed command and control arrangement for MSTP, it was employed at the MAGTF's request for the specific purpose of enhancing perspectives on naval integration. It was facilitated by augmentation from the Naval War College (to include a retired flag officer) and the U.S. Navy Fleet Forces Command. In practice, this effort proved successful in addressing the MAGTF's training goals. The relative size of the landward area assigned to the MEF significantly challenged the CFMCC's ability to effectively resource the needs of its assigned forces during the conduct of sustained operations ashore. C²; logistics; integration of fires; and provision of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance all proved complicated. Tensions between two echelons of headquarters and a recurring collision of priorities, realism that MSTP prefers, generated sharpened perspectives—and significant learning—both within MSTP and the training audience. A Canadian brigade operating within the GCE proved equally helpful.

MSTP supports integration with naval and joint forces in every exercise it designs, executes, and supports. In order to do this effectively, MSTP leverages relationships with other Marine Corps and joint organizations, some previously mentioned. Of particular note, MSTP is an accredited Joint National Training Capability (JNTC)⁷ program, which grants it access to support managed by



While MSTP is undeniably successful, some aspects of warfighting fail to translate to the simulated environment. (Photo by Sgt Tia Dufour.)

the Joint Staff J-7 (Joint Force Development) that enhances Service training through the incorporation of joint support and systems. MSTP has seized on this program, incorporating over 350 joint force enablers for MAGTF exercises since fiscal year 2012. For all exercises, MSTP establishes a simulated combined air operations center (CAOC) and a U.S. Army battlefield coordination detachment (BCD) supported by U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army augments. U.S. Special Operations Command supports the establishment of a special operations force (SOF) response cell and SOF liaison elements at the MAGTF CE and GCE. MSTP also establishes a theater logistics cell supported by U.S. Army theater logistics subject matter experts. MEF and MEB exercises also emphasize interagency interaction through country team role players collocated with the MAGTF and the higher and adjacent headquarters response cell. In combined Navy-Marine Corps exercises, such as BOLD ALLIGATOR, the MAGTF (MEB) works alongside its counterpart, the expeditionary strike group staff, while MSTP works with its U.S. Navy counterparts at Carrier Strike Groups 4 and 15 to provide naval exercise design support.

As MSTP continues its efforts to meet the 37th CMC's intent and op-

erationalize an exercise improvement philosophy, it seeks to generate realistic naval and joint integration wherever possible while presenting the Operating Forces with the complexities of sustained operations ashore. The reality is MSTP is challenged to truly drive naval integration in exercises that are not Navy-Marine Corps exercises due to a lack of U.S. Navy participation. MSTP, therefore, always endeavors to do the following:

- Maximize U.S. Navy participation to extent possible and driving naval unity of effort.⁸
- Include a naval component within every exercise, although not necessarily always the higher headquarters for the MAGTF.
- Ensure a CFMCC is always an adjacent force or another headquarters within the JTF.
- Scope the amphibious portion of exercises in order to focus on executing operations ashore.⁹
- Support the transition from MEB-level amphibious operations under a CFMCC to MEF-level sustained operations ashore under a CFLCC.

Beyond the specific issues of joint and naval integration, and squarely within the intent of *FRAGO 01/2016*, MSTP strives to further challenge MAGTF commanders and staffs (and their coun-

terparts at the MSC level) by: (1) better simulating the level of adversary information warfare capabilities; (2) enhancing the fidelity of MAGTF information warfare effects; (3) refining practices to better portray an adversary's efforts to overcome friendly information warfare effects; and (4) strengthening the employment of nuclear, biological, and chemical capabilities. MSTP can also drive improvements in: the participation of Marine Corps forces in sea control and counter-A2/AD efforts, as was done with a scripted coastal defense cruise missile threat during LSE 16; the assessment of losses resulting from adversary A2/AD systems; the conduct of advance force and pre-landing operations; and the overall quality of "unity of effort in littoral warfare."¹⁰ While U.S. Army units or foreign military forces fighting within or adjacent to the MAGTF are always pursued, strengthening interactions with joint and coalition partners, as well as host-nation security forces and civilian populations, is always meaningful.

Lastly, to better address the enduring "conduct training in MAGTF operations" task, MSTP is on solid ground with any exercise enhancement that does one or more of the following: (1) presents the MAGTF with diverse adversary capabilities highlighted in the *MCIA Future Operating Environment*; (2) stresses the information environment; (3) generates a collision between opposing wills in one or more warfighting domains simultaneously; (4) forces the MAGTF to appreciate its battlespace and battlefield framework and the concept of the single battle, to include the single naval battle; (5) presents the MAGTF with problems of such complexity that only MAGTF solutions will suffice (as opposed to single MAGTF MSC solutions); and (6) demands decision making despite incomplete knowledge or insufficient understanding.

Challenges and Limitations

As MSTP takes stock of meaningful exercises improvements, its most prevalent challenges and limitations are currently in the areas of simulation capability, exercise duration, and subject matter

expertise. Some aspects of warfighting simply don't model particularly well.¹¹ Exercise control personnel, instructor controllers, and response-cell personnel must, therefore, conduct additional training to overcome simulation limitations associated with these challenges and others in the cognitive space. While the MAGTF Tactical Warfare Simulation (MTWS)¹² accurately models weapons systems effects, it does not model the adversary's cognitive reactions to friendly information warfare efforts. As a result, exercise control and response cell personnel must understand the MAGTF's information warfare plan and how it has been designed to influence the adversary. The opposing force must then manually alter the adversary's activity within the simulation. On order

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to mitigate this shortfall, MSTP has added an information warfare battle manager during exercises to better integrate, and replicate, the effects of information warfare activities on both the MAGTF and the opposing force. Working with the Marine Corps Information Operation Center, this initial effort will be expanded to a cell in the near future to enable greater realism. A recently developed MSTP-run cognitive working group (first implemented during LSE 16), spearheaded by exercise control during execution, considers the quality of MAGTF information operations planning, how well the MAGTF fights with information, and puts that in competition with the realities of the opposing force. MSTP grants the MAGTF "credit" for its information environment planning and execution accordingly. The MAGTF analyzes MSTP developed and disseminated intelligence reporting and other injects

in order to determine what they have achieved. This analysis is done squarely within the MAGTF; MSTP provides no specifics. While the doctrinal foundation in *MCDP 1* for this focus on mental factors is well-established, and such a focus is consistent with the *Marine Corps Operating Concept's* stress on the cognitive dimension of warfighting, this is new exercise ground that MSTP will continue to plow.

While MSTP recognizes certain processes would take longer in real-life execution, exercise duration can be a limiting factor in addressing some identified improvements. For example, MAGTF commanders have, in the past, explored opportunities to further examine compositing, but complexities associated with doing so during an MSTP-sponsored CPX limit the ability to address other important training goals and objectives. Similarly, operations designed to destroy an adversary's A2/AD capabilities in order to facilitate forcible entry operations could realistically take days, weeks, or longer. Exercising this portion of the problem would limit the amount of time available to train the MAGTF in its core mission essential tasks—the critical blocking and tackling. One way to mitigate this challenge would be to design an exercise in two parts: a short Part A that would involve advance force operations to roll back an A2/AD threat, while a longer Part B would focus on either an amphibious assault by a MEB or sustained operations ashore by a MEF. Currently, MSTP-sponsored exercises simply don't last long enough to do both.

Finally, adequate subject matter expertise within MSTP to accomplish the mission is both a "type" (simulation, technical, and warfighting) and a "quantity" (depth) discussion—and a direct contributor to program credibility and relevance. As mentioned throughout this article, MSTP leverages a community of interest that borrows warfighting subject matter expertise from throughout the Marine Corps and joint community in order to conduct the best possible MAGTF training. As critically important warfighting expertise is not organic within MSTP, this effort seizes upon information warfare,



Command post exercises are part of the MSTP package. (Photo by Cpl Tyler Dietrich.)

intelligence, cyber, special operations, technical, and other Service and joint expertise to keep pace with previously identified challenges. With an organizational structure that limits depth in personnel by granting MSTP roughly two dozen active duty Marine Corps officers on-hand to service the full scope of MAGTF warfighting training, a healthy portion of the program's subject matter expertise comes from its contractor force (a group generally three times as large as MSTP's active duty officer contingent). Acknowledging the perceived downward pressure on reducing contractors, significant degradation of MSTP's contractor force would prove catastrophic to mission success absent a corresponding—and significant—increase in officer staffing. Contractors are the lifeblood of MSTP.

Conclusion

Even a cursory read of General Amos' 1994 article reveals one constant: MAGTF warfighting excellence remains the mission of MSTP. Considering projections on future threats and operating environments, there is always continued room to improve exercise quality, with an eye toward designing and executing more realistic and challenging exercises that highlight the implications for future warfighting. MSTP fully embraces the imperative to evolve and present the Marine Corps'

MEF and MEB commanders with the challenging problems of the 21st century operational environment, not those of the last conflict. MSTP does not, however, seek MAGTF comfort and ease in execution. It seeks to challenge commanders, planners, and staff officers with realistic scenarios and adversary actions that demand reflection well beyond the facilitated after-action review and generate an unease that lingers. Reinforced through well-established connections with the Marine Corps and joint partners that strengthen the joint and combined context and expand available subject matter expertise, MSTP endeavors to present MAGTF commanders and their staffs with the truly thorny operational problems they have undoubtedly heard so much about. There is certainly more that can be done on this front, and MSTP is eager to do it, for a healthy measure of Marine Corps warfighting readiness depends on it.

Notes

1. Col James F. Amos, "The MEF is Our Mission ... the MAGTF Staff Training Program (MSTP)," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February, 1994), 26–27.
2. In the design and conduct of its training exercises, MSTP embraces the September 2016 *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (which supersedes *Expeditionary Force 21*) and the MCIA's

publication, the *2015–2025 Future Operating Environment: Implications for Marines*.

3. See the MCIA, the *2015–2025 Future Operating Environment: Implications for Marines*, 5.

4. MCIA's Future Operating Environment document asserts that "regional conflict with a peer or near-peer competitor remains a significant risk." Accordingly, the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* asserts the MEF will "remain capable of conducting major operations in the littorals, ashore, and inland," to include "large-scale, forcible entry operations."

5. Per page 20 of the *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, the Marine Corps "will have to fight for information and with information ... [and will] confront adversaries who seek to disrupt, degrade, or destroy our information capabilities and systems." They must be countered with an "information warfare approach integrated with C², ISR, and precision fires ..."

6. See the *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 8.

7. Established in 2003, JNTC seeks to improve joint training by increasing joint context in service and USSOCOM training. JNTC uses a mix of live, virtual, and constructive forces, models, and simulations in an integrated network of persistent training sites to provide the most realistic collective joint mission training experience possible.

8. Theme from the *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 12.

9. In addition to MSTP exercises, MSTP is also engaged with MARFORCOM's Maritime Working Group (MWG) and Campaign Plan for Amphibious Operational Training (CPAOT) efforts to better align exercise scheduling with ship availability and the integration of experimentation into amphibious exercises.

10. See the *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 12.

11. Typical modeling limitations include information warfare, casualty play, UAS/counter-UAS, infrastructure targeting, and others.

12. MTWS is the Marine Corps' Program of Record constructive training simulation. Advantages of MTWS include its ability to represent ground, air, and maritime operations. Compared to constructive simulations operated by other Services, MTWS is relatively cheap and simple to operate. As portions of the code are more than 30-years-old, MTWS needs updating in order to remain a relevant USMC training tool.

