

Bridging the Gap

The need to convert strategy into unit-level training and capabilities

by 1stLt David Laszcz

Force 2030: Strategic Goals Outpace Unit Capabilities *The Commandant's Force Design 2030 Annual Update*

Marines are all waiting for the star clusters to signal the CMC's strategic goals, composition, mission, and training revolving around the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR). On January 19 2018, then-Secretary Mattis commented on the *National Defense Strategy* stating, "We will modernize key capabilities, recognizing we cannot expect success fighting tomorrow's conflicts with yesterday's weapons or equipment."¹ This is objectively true; however, one key component is fundamentally missing—how expeditionary unit training is conducted commensurate to the modern capabilities and equipment necessary to do so. Many publications address high-level strategic aims, but what does this mean for the MLR element and subordinate units? More specifically, what are the mission sets that the future Marine Corps will operate in and how will they train? If the mission set is Distributed Maritime Operations and Expeditionary Advance Bases (EAB), then units must change how they train to adapt for the future. The Marine Corps must

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fining expeditionary training. Still, with all this excitement about the future, the unanswered questions remain: *where* will we train, *how* will we do so, and, most importantly, *what* will it look like at the unit level?

Background

How We Got Here and the Way Forward

Force Design 2030's divestment of tanks, the addition of Marine Littoral Regiment(s), and increased emphasis on Distributed Maritime Operations have unquestionably captured the attention of many. However, the capabilities and strategic goals are not married with *the Infantry Training and Readiness Manual (T&R)*—or maybe the call for a Littoral/Expeditionary Training and Readiness Manual (LET&R) altogether. The same is true for our CMC's mandate for Marines to conduct increasingly more complex distributed operations, but to what degree do unit leaders within the

not illustrated in small-unit training manuals. Fundamentally, there need to be new training and readiness requirements. Moreover, before strategic exercises focused on deterrence become a part of our daily training and operations, the Corps will need to develop these capabilities from the bottom-up at the company and even platoon levels. Filling these gaps begins with redefining training and seizing opportunities at the unit level, and the first stop should be the infantry or a LET&R.

As a young enlisted infantry Marine, I was bred to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver. Included in the training plan was our bible, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, and the infantry T&R. However, as the Marine Corps transitions into this era of competition, I and many small-unit leaders alike are left wondering: do all the parts of the training plan still apply? If yes, how so? And if not, what will change within it?

Between "how," "why," and "which," the one that appears most in need of a significant revision, if not complete re-write, is the infantry T&R. Much of what *Force Design 2030* calls for when it comes to distributed operations, employing long-range fires, signals intelligence and electronic warfare and integrating various unmanned systems are either rigidly defined or currently not in the manual altogether. Moreover, the manual lacks details on how we should train, much less evaluate our ability to execute distributed operations, including those partnered with our Navy counterparts in maritime environ-

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simulate the training environment to match the threat they face; regiment- and battalion-level training is begging to recalibrate. Much of the professional debate addresses strategic and operational aims without addressing how individual units should adapt to such a challenge. The starting point is rede-

MLR need to develop beyond traditional kinetic operations? Assuming the Marine Corps will operate onboard vessels or with low-density forces onshore with "a new micro-Marine Air-Ground Task Force built on the current rifle company,"² it will have to redefine unit-level training with what is currently

ments which are captured in the MEU T&R. Assuming the manual is revised or completely re-written, before 2030, will there be compatible venues, equipment, and resources for achieving these new T&R requirements? This article turns to a few suggestions that would maximize training within the MLR.

Unit Training and Modular Capabilities

Marine Corps Commandos | Building Organizational Structure Before the T&R

Force Design is the CMC's main effort. Reviewing the *Force Design 2030* report side-by-side with the infantry T&R highlights that much work needs to be done with the latter to comply with it. The infantry T&R or LET&R need to address maritime capabilities, organic precision fires, signals intelligence and electronic warfare, small unmanned systems, modular capabilities of non-traditional skill sets, and vessel capabilities with amphibious platforms. Before concentrating on what the T&R will focus on, the Marine Corps needs to nail the components of manpower, capabilities, equipment, and mission of the MLR.

Currently, the Marine Corps is building the knowledge and skill sets that apply to EAB, Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, and the MLR through the battlespace or grey-zone operations. A start to develop these skill sets would be to invest in understanding training and capabilities associated with Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewman, Reconnaissance, Riverine, and Patrol Torpedo Boat operations and lean in on Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC).³ Now the Marine Corps needs to bring these skill sets to the MLR and its subordinate units to develop the manpower, capabilities, equipment, and mission of the MLR from within. Reskilling preexisting expertise could aid with the development of the MLR to create a new LET&R or T&R for what will be required at the platoon and company level training for the LET&R. Moreover, fires capabilities appear essential to conducting the types of operations envisioned in the *Force Design 2030* report, with the expansion of HIMARS capabilities along with our

CMC's "Case for Change" article.⁴ So why not repurpose these skill sets to a blue map and retrain the manpower within these units and adapt the T&R to reflect? Indeed, time and money are vital constraints; however, previous *Gazette* articles claim:

The Chinese military possesses the world's largest Navy supplemented by a coast guard and a maritime militia that continues unimpeded bullying of allies and partners within the region. It also has the world's largest and most comprehensive long-range conventional missile force. Combat credible Marines—meaning distributed operations capable infantry formations armed with hundreds of organic loitering munition and supported by long-range fires while operating from relatively low-signature, affordable platforms within the range of these Chinese sensors and weapons—presents the CCP with a dilemma.⁵

If this is true, units need to fundamentally change their organizational charts, school pipelines, and unit training doctrines. Units and the T&R need to pivot to the water and away from the desert of Twentynine Palms.

Moreover, the proposed Light Amphibious Warships capable of "maneuver and sustainment vessels to confront the changing character of warfare"⁶ will be essential for the battlefield of 2030, but currently, the unit-level needs to build upon the training guidance and operating procedures, or manpower to meet this demand. The new light amphibious ship design calls for a crew of 40 Sailors to support up to 75 Marines, which is fundamentally different than what is currently present.⁷ These new expeditionary components signal a new skill set to be added to the Marine Corps' arsenal. Therefore, traditional skills acquired by Marines during antiquated predeployment Expeditionary Operations Training Group for the MEU exercises need to be redefined.⁸

Training should require unit leaders, especially those with the MLR, to organically employ loitering munitions, long-range precision fires, and signals intelligence and electronic warfare within their units. Organic Precision Fires will be essential for distributed

operations but are currently hindered by a lack of training capabilities and the equipment to do so. Battle proven and tested in 2020, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict illustrated how conventional warfare would be reliant on loitering munitions, precision fires, and electronic warfare.⁹ Yet, fire in support of infantry units has consistently relied on the same platforms for many decades and needs to change away from the desert of Twentynine Palms in order to match the global demands for great-power competition.

The New Littoral ITX? But Where?

"The Marine Corps is not organized, trained, equipped, or postured to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving future operating environment." —Gen Neller, 37th CMC

The battlespace, or grey-zone conflict, may revolve around highly trafficked shipping lanes within 200 nautical miles of the Exclusive Economic Zone. It will be necessary for the Navy and Marine Corps to learn how to co-exist, operate, and conduct warfare in congested waterways. The NECC is the home to green-blue integration, but currently, very few Marines are serving on the NECC staff. Moreover, EABs will require distributed maritime capabilities for rapid land-based operations within these zones. The EAB concept promotes the employment of mobile, agile, and low-cost capabilities forward of the fire element.

Suppose operating in contested waterways of highly trafficked shipping zones and EAB operations become a reality. In that case, the Marine Corps needs a new training ground, or perhaps littoral space, to match the CMC's and *National Defense Strategy's* direction. The current doctrines may be giving us advice on strategic level operations; however, the Marine Corps has yet to consistently create training capabilities and environments needed at the unit level. In "The Case for Change," Gen Berger made clear the necessity for Maritime Campaigning, but currently, the Marine Corps does not have the requisite ranges to make this happen. *Before campaigning, there must be training.* In 2019, the *Commandant's*

Planning Guidance called for the “need to refocus on how we will fulfill our mandate to support the fleet.”¹⁰ Suppose the Marine Corps will be a distributed force with long-range missile and signals/electronic warfare capabilities. In that case, we will have to expand beyond our current locations in San Diego, Hawaii, Camp Lejeune, and the institution’s primary combined arms desert training location in Twentynine Palms, CA. Gen Berger’s emphasis on conducting expeditionary advanced base operations in a future conflict demands that the Marine Corps change the way we train. So, where can Marines train with anti-ship cruise missiles, employ expeditionary systems, or practice sea control and sea denial operations? The new and unique training environment that the military has yet seen should be tied into economics, congested waterways, and over vast distances away from the command guidon in the grey zone. In great-power competition, the Services simply must prepare to train for a low-signature force that can survive in missile zones, conduct maneuverable maritime fires, and compete with technology, all against grey-zone actors. All to be said, the old-fashioned scripted training scenarios cannot be utilized in future Marine Corps training.

To train for the rise of the precision strike regime, gray-zone encounters, and the imperative of maritime campaigning the Marine Corps needs more than just water, it will need archipelagos. More specifically, the Corps is going to need a location to develop and train with small boats, loitering munitions swarms, and elements ashore to create a force ready to take on the new direction of the Marine Corps. It will be difficult for San Diego, Camp Lejeune, and especially Twentynine Palms to accommodate these requisites. The real focus should be on becoming an ever more nimble and lethal maritime expeditionary force. So where do we go to train from here? Like the Stockholm Archipelago where Swedish Marines train year-round in quasi disturbed maritime operations, the Marine Corps could do the same in areas like Norway, the Canary Islands, the archipelago of Alaska, and the Gulf Coast.¹¹ Washington has even signaled

interest for Gen Berger to send Marines to the state of Alaska for training to test near-peer threats.¹² Alaska could provide the remote location needed to conduct anti-ship cruise missiles capabilities, employ expeditionary systems, and practice both sea control and denial operations.

Moreover, it could accommodate a training ground to test both EAB capabilities and advanced naval logistics sites while providing scarce island chains to mimic that of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Alaska is already in the Pacific neighborhood backyard—a playground that warrants the attention of the Corps developing unit-level training exercises.

New training needs to be developed to address the new T&R of how to operate and conduct missions in the littorals. Taking learning objectives from exercises such as ARCHIPELAGO ENDEAVOR might be the exact process to develop in Alaska.¹³ The Marine Rotational Forces Europe annually conducts amphibious operations alongside Swedish Marines during which leaders are spread amongst the many islands that make up the Stockholm archipelago. To operate in these environments requires a *light agile force*, something Gen Berger has been pining for. This force would have the ability to maneuver, take calculated risks, formulate quick solutions, and make effective decisions in an unknown environment outside of the Marine Corps’ scripted, desert comfort zone. This is how we begin to train for the Indo-Pacific. Replicating this, to scale, in places such as Alaska may be another place to start but it must be addressed in training doctrine.

If the Marine Corps wants to use prepositioned sustainment and mobility, concealment, and deception to complicate adversary targeting, then Alaska, or even Louisiana, may be a more suitable venue in addition to Hawaii.¹⁴ Learning, replicating, adapting, and scaling training is essential to combat distributed challenges, multifaceted domains, and compete in hybrid warfare. To challenge the revisionist powers of China, there may be a more suitable training environment than Norway. A distributed training environment of the South and East China Sea can be replicated off

the coast of Hawaii, or even the Gulf of Mexico. These locations may be a more suitable venue to develop prepositioned sustainment and mobility, concealment, and deception to complicate adversary targeting necessary for complex conflict which will be demanded in the South and East China Sea. The Gulf of Mexico is already home to the 4th MarDiv in New Orleans. Here, the Marines could train in warm water year-round in a highly trafficked shipping environment to match that of the Indo-Pacific. The Gulf offers cargo shipping routes and traffic which is the environment that will be contested in both the Indo-Pacific and the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁵ If history tells us anything, economics and warfare are always in a dance with one another.

From a training standpoint, the Gulf Coast has all of the requisite traits for unit-level expeditionary maritime operations, dispersed islands hundreds of miles away, and manmade structures speckled throughout the waters—perfect to test maneuver operations for near-peer and great-power competition.¹⁶ Indeed, training in the Gulf of Mexico may raise concerns with long-range fires; however, using the Live, Virtual, and Constructive Training Environment, where units from different elements of the MAGTF can virtually train together as if collocated in the same environment, can be adapted to account for this training reality.¹⁷ The training environment chosen for such operations must allow the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Aviation Administration to limit airspace to plan coordinated maneuver and fires of our long-range weapon systems and signals capabilities. Logistically, we will have to either implement a rotational training force to develop the maritime capabilities, integrate established, yet antiquated, expeditionary forces, or move/expand the MLR to a new location altogether. Specifically, with new capabilities comes new evaluation, perhaps a new “Naval Integrated Training Exercise” for pre-deployment training to enhance maritime and distributed capabilities. How can the Navy and Marine Corps team collaboratively train for such an

exercise? If so, how can the small-unit leaders prepare for this exercise in advance? If Gen Berger's new *MCDP 7, Learning*, tells us anything, it tells us we need to learn and consistently challenge the way we approach training.

Recommendations

We cannot expect success fighting tomorrow's conflicts with yesterday's weapons, equipment, or training grounds. I acknowledge the financial and training constraints placed upon field- and company-grade levels. However, I humbly believe there is an opportunity to seize to get ahead of the new strategic direction and begin signaling to the NECC, radio battalions, Tactical Training Exercise Control Group, the operational force, or Training and Education Command to be flexible and explore within the organization. To do so, there needs to be feedback and reevaluation for the *Training and Readiness Manual* to adjust to the new battlespace. Second, the Marine Corps, in a broader sense, needs a new training ground to adjust to the new direction of the Corps. Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico are a starting point to reflect the maritime environment of EABO, contested maritime space, and the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps needs to shift focus to the Indo-Pacific, and with it, instill new unit-level training—starting with the T&R and new training exercises. As a junior enlisted Marine, my leadership reinforced the idea that *we are what we repeatedly do*, and it starts with how we train. Before we fight in a contested space, we must first look at the unit level and ask *how* the Service is going to train for it. The Marine Corps, is leading the pack in understanding this reality, but it also begs the questions: What more will be needed to challenge the fires capabilities and long-range weapons systems posed by China, Iran, and Russia? How will we adapt to an environment of high-volume shipping traffic? Lastly, how will we adapt to island-chain warfare? The new great-power competition will be essential for protecting trade routes

near the straits of Malacca, deterring the Iranians in the straits of Hormuz, or even deterring the Russians from blockading a nation, but how can the Services get there? There is much I do not know about the future; however, the writing is on the wall that the current training environment does not replicate the threat outlined in the *National Defense Strategy*. The Marine Corps and other Services will have to shift away from the traditional training environment of the desert to archipelagos or highly contested straits. I am excited about the new direction of the Marine Corps and *National Defense Strategy*, but I cannot help but think about what I can do now to train my Marines for 2030. It will be essential for both the service and its unit leaders to redefine training now, learn fast, and prepare to scale for the mission of tomorrow.

Notes

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