

# Change is Hard, and No Less So in the Marine Corps

The imperative to modernize

by LtGen David J. Furness

***“There’s historically been resistance to change in any large organization, particularly an organization that has been so successful as the Marine Corps.”<sup>1</sup>***

***—Gen Charles C. Krulak,  
10 October 1997***

Every rifleman knows you are always checking out the next firing position, terrain feature, and axis of advance. Similarly, the Marine Corps continues to look beyond its current position to identify future challenges, potential missions, and likely adversaries across the globe. This constant probing allows the Service to see and understand a new strategic environment as well as significant changes in the character of war. Every Marine also knows that when the strategic situation changes, concepts and capabilities ought to follow suit. As Marine warfighting doctrine states, “war is both timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously.”<sup>2</sup> The vision and courage to change is how we keep our sacred promise to be “most ready when the Nation is least

***>LtGen Furness is currently the Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policy and Operations, Headquarters Marine Corps. An Infantry Officer, he has commanded at every level in the Marine Corps from platoon to division and commanded the Combined Joint Task Force, Horn of Africa.***

ready.”<sup>3</sup> *Force Design 2030* serves as the main effort of our transformation to confront the changing operating environment. It is informed by the rapid advancements of America’s potential adversaries, the proliferation of sensors and long-range precision strike weapons, and information-related capabilities that present challenges to the Naval Services.<sup>4</sup> *Force Design 2030* embraces the naval character, expeditionary nature, crisis response mindset, and warfighting ethos of the Marine Corps. It forces change where needed most while maintaining sufficient capability to ensure the Service meets the challenges of the present.

While the United States fought simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, China, amongst numerous other potential foes, made major advancements in their military capabilities and developed concepts designed to counter U.S. military strengths. As a result, the Marine Corps has a brief window of opportunity and a moral obligation to our Nation to transform itself for future warfare. The Service is leveraging its most important asset—the tough, creative, and initiative-driven Marine—along with advances in technology to prepare for these looming challenges. Accordingly, new concepts and tactics

must reflect new battle-changing technologies and, ultimately, the changing character of war. Thus, we are in the midst of a long-overdue transformation rooted in our combat history and traditions.

## **Our History of Change**

The history of the Marine Corps is filled with inspiring examples describing how the Service became the fighting force that America has grown so fond of.<sup>5</sup> The Continental Marines manned guns, participated in boarding and landing parties, and ensured good order and discipline aboard Navy ships. Before the Civil War, the Marine Corps honed its amphibious capabilities at Vera Cruz and fought in the Halls of Montezuma during the Mexican War (1846). For the first three decades of the 20th century, the Marine Corps fought small wars in Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and Latin America to protect American foreign interests. In World War I, Marines fought in Belleau Wood (1918) and on the plains of Western Europe as infantry battalions. By then, our Corps had nearly 150 years of loyal combat service to the Nation, and our victories in World War I represented the birth of the “modern Marine Corps.”<sup>6</sup>

In the 1920s, Army and Navy planners grew increasingly concerned over Japan's growing military strength and regional aggression.<sup>7</sup> Pete Ellis began writing the initial idea that informed the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* in 1921. In 1925, the 13th commandant, Gen John A. Lejeune, foresaw the need for change and suspended the Marine Corps Officers' Schools in Quantico so that its student officers could participate in joint Army and Navy studies, war games, and maneuvers on landing operations.<sup>8</sup> Later in 1927, a document called the *Joint Action of the Army and Navy* defined the Marine Corps mission as "land operations in support of the fleet for the initial seizure and defense of advanced bases ... essential to the prosecution of the naval campaign."<sup>9</sup> Seven years later in 1934, the Marine Corps published the *Tentative Manual of Landing Operations* (later published as a U.S. Navy Landing Operations Doctrine Publication).<sup>10</sup> It was another eight years, in August 1942, before the Marine Corps finally demonstrated its amphibious combat capability on the beaches of Guadalcanal. The Marine Corps' first amphibious assault cost nearly 1,200 men over six months, but its success marked the start of America's strategic offensive in the Pacific.

We must never forget that the Marine Corps succeeded at Guadalcanal and in many other amphibious landings over the next three years because it started thinking, planning, and adapting to a changing military environment long before war erupted. Still, that period of transformation gives me pause. Seventeen years passed from Lejeune's actions in 1925 until the Service's first amphibious landing in combat using its new doctrine. Change is hard, and it takes time, but the Marine Corps today does not have the luxury of seventeen years to develop transformative changes.

Change is the norm in our Service. Despite the demonstrated success of amphibious operations in World War II, this would not be the last time the Service underwent a dramatic change. Marines in the 1970s and 1980s fought traditionalists and enacted a change to answer claims that the Service was "an under-gunned, slow-moving monument

to a bygone era in warfare."<sup>11</sup> Forward-thinking leaders, leveraging the Soviet threat and U.S. Navy *Maritime Strategy*, adopted pre-positioning strategies and created the doctrine of *Warfighting*.<sup>12</sup> When the strategic environment changes, our Service has always answered the call, and this is where we are today.

### Change Feels Hard Because It is Hard

When Marines, as well as any student of war, look back on the Marine Corps' transformations with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to forget how difficult the process was at the time. This is not unique to the Marine Corps. For instance, the Navy's nascent aviation community faced skepticism from the

## Change is the norm in our Service.

surface community during the interwar period. Moreover, the Army did not appreciate the value of strategic bombing during the same period. During the Cold War, the Air Force questioned the value of intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched nuclear weapons as they remained locked in a World War II paradigm, "the bombers will always get through," and felt bombers provided an adequate strategic capability for the Nation.<sup>13</sup>

Why is change hard? There are at least two common-sense reasons why.

*We get too comfortable.* Fundamentally, military organizations, in the most practical sense, will strive to hold onto the ideas and technologies that succeeded in the past, unless jolted by catastrophic events. In World War II, the loss of Navy battleships during the Pearl Harbor attack propelled aircraft carriers to the forefront of battle. More recently in 2020, in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's forces used Turkish unmanned air combat systems and Israeli loitering munitions to overwhelm Armenian military forces. Azerbaijan wanted to avoid another war of attrition with Armenia—similar to the one they lost two decades earlier—so they employed new tools and tactics

to exploit the seams and gaps of their opponent. In contrast, the Armenians reinforced many of the same capabilities that helped them achieve victory years earlier and suffered those consequences on the modern battlefield.<sup>14</sup> For too many, the old way of war seems like the right way of war, and past combat experiences often cause a mental lag that stymies adaptation to the changing character of warfare. If we just keep doing more of the same, we will incur costly battlefield adjustments that will be paid in blood, treasure, time, and credibility. We must avoid this fate.

*It is hard to get it right.* Former Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates once said, "Our [U.S.] record of predicting where we will use military force since Vietnam is perfect—we have never once gotten it right."<sup>15</sup> Historically, the French paid the price during the interwar period as they expected another drawn-out war of attrition with Germany. They developed a "methodical battle" system that kept artillery and tanks at the division level and above, and they only advanced forces in a lock-step fashion so it could centrally manage and concentrate its most deadly weapon systems. However, this approach stifled the initiative of its lower maneuver elements and played into German hands. In contrast, the Germans emphasized rapid action, offense, and small-unit leadership to prosecute a lightning war against any weakness in French defensive lines. The French made significant changes in the interwar period, but they got it wrong, and the Germans would capture France within six short weeks in the summer of 1940.<sup>16</sup>

Secretary Gates was correct. The Marine Corps will not predict the next battle with complete certainty so there is always tension during organizational change. The Marine Corps is clear-eyed as it conducts analysis, wargaming, testing, experimentation, and major refinements to our force for a potential high-end engagement against a near-peer opponent. The Chinese military poses extreme challenges to our past way of naval warfare and our previous understanding of combined arms. Vast ocean distances, militarized islands, anti-access/area-denial systems, new

warfighting domains, and the natural advantages gained from their defensive posture and tight interior lines of communication are establishing a future combat environment that necessitates new ways and means. If today's Marine Corps is going to win tomorrow's fight, it cannot idle along or only make superficial changes on the margins. Not for the type of fight we see ahead of us.

I joined the Marine Corps in 1987 and have had the privilege to command infantry formations at all levels from platoon to division and have seen the Marine Corps undergo significant change in the 90s and then again in the early 2000s. From my perspective, the changes the Marine Corps is experiencing in *Force Design 2030* are indicative of the culture the Service fosters—that of a learning organization. I am encouraged by the ongoing debate surrounding Force Design, the work done in our military classrooms, and the many legions of thinkers and doers making this happen. Major changes in our combat organization should always spark a healthy and respectful discourse inside and outside of our Service. Debate is healthy. Debate demonstrates we are invested and care deeply about ensuring the Marine Corps' future success. I would be more concerned with an absence of spirited debate. I cannot recall any consequential decision during my service that did not include impassioned disagreement. Through a healthy discourse, we learn, we change, and we do it again until we get it right. The discourse is ongoing and will continue. This is how we become more lethal, mobile, survivable, and agile as a fighting force.

### **The Contemporary and Future Environment**

The People's Republic of China—the Marine Corps' pacing challenge—is the threat by which the Service will not only measure its capabilities but also its rate of adaptation. Combined arms, a skill that served our Marines so capably in the past, is evolving into domains once considered science fiction. Marines are combining traditional arms with effects in space and cyberspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the informa-

tion environment. Marines must now learn how to integrate these arms on battlefields saturated by sensors, where technology accelerates kill chains, decreases decision space, and increases the number of attack avenues. While China remains the pacing challenge, it is not the only threat. The proliferation and diffusion of technology allow states with relatively meager resources to field capabilities that were once only

### **Enablers of Change**

The Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) represents just one key aspect of the Marine Corps' transformation as it represents a major bid for success in the Indo-Pacific arena. While critics of the MLR claim it represents an ill-informed detour from the proven Marine air-ground task force, this simply is not the case.<sup>17</sup> The 3d MLR will lead Service experimentation efforts and inform the

---

***While the MLR is tailored for high-end maritime combat with peer competitors, we continue to enhance our MEUs and MEFs to provide flexible, amphibious combat units ...***

---

the purview of great powers including deep strike unmanned aerial systems, loitering munitions that leverage artificial intelligence, and offensive cyber capabilities.

In a world of accelerating change, the Marine Corps' rate of adaptation matters. Our processes were designed in an earlier era where speed of adaptation mattered less and the U.S.'s technological superiority remained unchallenged. The Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System defines requirements, the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution process provides funding, and the Defense Acquisition System manages programs through a series of milestones and reviews. These processes are designed at *getting it right* instead of *getting it fast*. As a consequence, their inflexibility is poorly suited to "Competing in Time" against adversaries unencumbered by similar bureaucracies who transform at the pace of commercial innovation. Today, our commercial sector is driving technological advancements, and innovating at speeds that outpace defense acquisitions by years. Incremental defense solutions no longer set the speed of U.S. commercial innovation, nor are they pacing with the People's Liberation Army. Given where the Marine Corps stood in 2019, bold course corrections were required.

development of subsequent regiments. It is a logical outgrowth of years of concept development and wargaming, and it will continue to increase in lethality as we refine its missions and capabilities. The MLR is a standing formation, purposefully organized to support sea control, postured to win the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle, and ready to impose a range of challenges against the People's Liberation Army. Its story is far from over, and this formation is getting better every day through the hard work and dedication of Marines on the ground.

The challenge that the People's Liberation Army offers, and the speed with which they pursue advantage, denies the Marine Corps the luxury of building a less specific formation or maintaining this force in any lower state of readiness.<sup>18</sup> While the MLR is tailored for high-end maritime combat with peer competitors, we continue to enhance our MEUs and MEFs to provide flexible, amphibious combat units that can operate across the entire spectrum of conflict.

### **The MEU and the MEF**

Carefully structured to respond to a broad range of missions, MEUs continue to respond to our Nation's security demands even as they too transform.<sup>19</sup> MEUs combine ground, aviation, and



logistics elements under a single commander, embarking this force aboard three of the Navy's amphibious warfare ships, known as an amphibious ready group. MEUs deploy worldwide to perform missions including amphibious assaults, raids, embassy reinforcements, humanitarian assistance, and noncombatant evacuation operations. Marine expeditionary units, consisting of about 2,200 personnel, form the smallest of the Marine Corps' MAGTFs. The Marine Corps is in the midst of deploying its first MEU with the Amphibious Combat Vehicle, and we will continue to experiment and transform these units for other future combat scenarios.

MEFs are the largest of the MAGTFs. The MEF exceeds 40,000 personnel with its command, ground, aviation, and logistics combat elements. The MEF will remain ready to respond to crisis, and in the future, they will incorporate MLRs into their concept of operations. Often with less fanfare than the MLR, our MEFs are transforming in subtle yet consequential ways to support the naval and Joint Force.

This includes well known shifts such as the divestment of tanks, prioritization of longer-range precision-guided fires over cannon artillery, and greater investment into the skills of our infantry Marines. We do not yet have it right. Our current infantry battalion experimentation, called IBX30, is showing us that we may need to make further adjustments to the infantry battalion; including novel combined arms formations that equip Marines with beyond-line-of-sight precision strike capabilities and requisite sensors.<sup>20</sup> Our traditional understanding of combined arms employs organic mortars, supporting artillery fires, rotary and fixed-wing aviation assets, all in support of infantry Marines maneuvering onto the objective—to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy. The 202X battlefield demands a refinement of the traditional employment of combined arms. Marine learning and experimentation are iterative and there is a long way to go before we are done.

## Conclusion

As recently demonstrated during the

difficult and tense withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Marine Corps remains America's premier crisis response force. The Service's warfighting ethos is constant, and it is an essential source of strength. Accordingly, the Marine Corps grounds its force design efforts in its naval heritage and focuses on supporting the "broader naval campaign" just as it did a hundred years ago. *Force Design 2030* recognizes that the character of war is drastically changing and is driving us to re-conceptualize the future maritime battle. As our former commandant, Gen Alfred M. Gray eloquently wrote, "our approach to warfighting must evolve. If we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming outdated, stagnant, and defeated."<sup>21</sup> We must change to remain the most ready when the Nation is the least ready.

## Notes

1. Charles Krulak, "Marine Corps Future," *CS-PAN*, 15:32, October 10, 1997, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?92628-1/marine-corps-future>.

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1989).

3. Charles C. Krulak, "Preparing the Marine Corps for War," in *The Legacy of Belleau Wood: 100 Years of Making Marines and Winning Battles*, ed. Paul Westermeyer, (Quantico Marine Corps History Division, 2018).

4. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).

5. Mark Folse, "Marine Corps Identity from the Historical Perspective," *War on the Rocks*, May 13, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/marine-corps-identity-from-the-historical-perspective>.

6. Paul Westermeyer, ed. *The Legacy of Belleau Wood*, (Quantico: Marine Corps History Division, 2018).

7. Edward Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945*, (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 2007).

8. Capt William Parker, *A Concise History of the United States Marine Corps 1775–1969*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps History Division, 1970).

9. The Joint Board, *Joint Action of the Army and the Navy*, (Washington, DC: 1927).

10. Department of the Navy, *Landing Operations Doctrine*, (Washington, DC: 1938).

11. William Lind & Jeffrey Record, "Twilight for the Corps?" *Proceedings*, July 1978, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1978/july/twilight-corps>.

12. *FMFM 1, Warfighting*.

13. Kris Hendrix, "The Bomber Will Always Get Through," *Royal Air Force Museum*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/blog/the-bomber-will-always-get-through>.

14. John F. Antal, *7 Seconds to Die: A Military Analysis of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Future of Warfighting*, (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate, 2022).

15. Charley Keyes, "U.S. Military Needs Flexibility Due to Poor Predictions, Gates Says," *CNN*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/05/24/gates.speech/index.html>.

16. Robert A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919–39*, (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2014).

17. LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, "Jeopardizing National Security: What Is Happening to Our Marine Corps?" *Marine Times*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.

18. Sydney Freedberg, "SASC Seeks Sweeping 'Roles & Missions' Report: Wither the Marines?" *Breaking Defense*, June 6, 2018, <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/06/sasc-seeks-sweeping-roles-missions-report-wither-the-marines>.

19. Mallory Shelbourne, "Pentagon Sending 3,000 Troops To Evacuate U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan," *USNI News*, August 12, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/08/12/pentagon-sending-3000-troops-to-evacuate-u-s-embassy-in-afghanistan>.

20. *Force Design 2030*.

21. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1993).

