

2025 LtCol Earl “Pete” Ellis Essay Contest: Honorable Mention

Digging is Winning

Persisting Inside the WEZ

by LtCol Brian Kerg

The Marine Corps is in a bind. In its relentless pursuit to ready itself for the future fight, it is aggressively chasing dazzling capabilities that are indeed revolutionary but which will not be fully brought to bear for many years to come. This is impeding the development of simple, cheap, and achievable solutions that are within reach today by using equipment and resources already in the Corps’ hands.

Considering the threat the Marine Corps faces as a stand-in force, it can give itself the greatest advantage to persist, survive, fight, and win by using the terrain it stands on to optimize force protection in the first island chain (FIC). Vulnerable command posts and key nodes are sitting ducks for the first salvo that will inevitably be launched by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in any regional war, and you cannot command and control if you are dead.

Standing command posts that reside within an enemy’s weapons engagement zone (WEZ) will only survive if they are beneath the earth, not on top of it. In this scenario, digging is winning. If the Marine Corps wants to win, then the Marine Corps needs to dig.

Exquisite Ways to Win Will Arrive Too Late

As a Service, the Corps continues to optimize itself to fight against modern threats in accordance with Force Design initiatives. This pursuit includes a host of visceral, expensive, and laborious changes that could be revolutionary, but whose promise requires more time, resources, and experimentation to come to fruition.¹

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Many initiatives have required the creation of entirely new formations, the acquisition and fielding of new weapons and mobility platforms, and the modernization of information warfare capabilities. The most salient example is the stand-up of the Marine littoral regiments (MLR), transforming straight-leg infantry regiments into formations

fielding of new capabilities, significant challenges remain before their promise will be fulfilled. Only one MLR is reportedly fully operational, and it is out of position in Hawaii instead of residing within the FIC.² The future of the surface connectors needed to maneuver the MLRs remains in limbo, and forecasted dates for their receipt continue

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optimized for maritime reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance, and sea denial. Other compelling initiatives include the pursuit of surface connectors such as the Landing Ship Medium intended to maneuver the MLRs around the FIC, air defense capabilities like the MADIS (Marine Air Defense Integrated System) and the lighter, more mobile L-MADIS, the maturation of Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control, and the integration of artificial intelligence at lower echelons through programs like Maven Smart System.

Despite the incredible amount of attention and fanfare given to the activation of such units or the initial

to get kicked down the road.³ Fielding plans for MADIS and L-MADIS have only just started and will not fully execute until 2035, well beyond 2027, the year that Xi Jinping demanded his military be ready to seize Taiwan.⁴ While AI and Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control offer boundless promise for warfighting applications and information advantage, their integration and utility still seem to be a distant dream for most Marine commanders and their staffs.⁵

Still, it is these high-end, game-changing, and glamorous capabilities that continue to receive the most attention from the Service and the national



Marines with 8th Engineer Support Battalion complete the construction of underground bunkers during a field exercise. (Photo by LCpl Meshag Hylton.)

security commentariat, despite the pernicious difficulties that continue to delay their fielding. This is not to discourage their pursuit; all change is difficult, these platforms will be game-changing, and new capabilities always take time to mature.

But this leaves the Service with a compelling question: What can it do *right now*, and what capability is *currently fielded*, that could actually optimize the ability of the Marine Corps to fight and win?

In the endless chase after the glamorous and unproven, the simple and reliable is often forgotten or ignored. It is the simple and reliable that can answer this very important question. There exists one simple and reliable way—perhaps the *most reliable* way, time-tested and adopted by allies, partners, and enemies alike, but somehow not yet adopted by today's Marine Corps—through which we can persist forward indefinitely inside the WEZ. How do we do this? Simple.

We dig.

The Problem with Persistence

The primary warfighting concept that continues to inform the Marine Corps' Force Design initiatives is the Concept for Stand-in Forces. Among other functions, "SIF deter the appli-

cation of military power on the part of adversaries by establishing forces designed to *persist forward alongside allies and partners within a contested area*, providing the fleet, joint force, interagency, and allies and partners more options for countering an adversary's strategy."⁶

A cornerstone of the SIF includes those bases and stations already within the WEZ of the PLA. For the Marine Corps, that includes primarily its installations on Okinawa, which comprise those advanced bases from which the Service will fight. No longer conceived of as sanctuary areas only for the marshalling of forces into theater, the many installations on Okinawa are now understood to be forward-deployed fighting positions. They will be the fulcrum for force generation and the coordination of fires and effects in any fight against the PLA within the FIC.

The problem with "persisting forward" is that it is hard to do when your location is static, already known, and very likely already on an enemy's target list. The exact location of every command post across Okinawa can be found by the reader in seconds with a mere Google search. They all reside on the surface of the earth, and they are no more reinforced than any other building across the island. While they will

hold fast against the typhoons that hit the island every year, the first shots from the PLA's deep magazines of precision munitions will make short work of these facilities. Alternate command posts and continuity of operation sites could be selected, but the other Marine Corps facilities that would serve this purpose are equally visible, vulnerable, and targetable.

While dispersal and movement offer some hope for survivability, this presumes command posts and their staffs have moved before they are struck. But this is unlikely on Okinawa. The circumstances in which the Marine Corps' contribution to SIF would include the defense of America's allies and partners—circumstances in which the enemy will almost certainly hold the cards for first mover advantage by striking first. This is the play consistently made by red players representing the PLA in open-source wargames involving contingencies in the FIC, and it is made consistently because it aligns with PLA doctrine and would yield the most strategic advantage.⁷ Even with indications and warnings, the laborious authorities of Japanese law to permit the movement of U.S. forces off U.S. bases make it unlikely that dispersal could be achieved until after the first wave of decisive strikes has occurred. Movement authorization of U.S. forces off their bases and onto Japanese land, even onto federal Japanese property, requires the official announcement of designated security situations by the Japanese government.⁸ In its current form, this requirement will never be met until after the first PLA rounds are striking targets on Okinawa.⁹

In addition, air defenses are insufficient to deal with such a threat. Readers will not find a single terminal high-altitude area defense system deployed on Okinawa, or similar systems within range to provide adequate defensive coverage. Even if they did, the ratio of PLA precision munitions compared to the U.S. air defense munitions that could be placed in the FIC significantly favors the PLA. Enemy munitions would simply oversaturate U.S. defenses, and the key nodes on Okinawa would be decimated.¹⁰

So, if you cannot move until after you are shot at, and you cannot knock the enemy's missiles out of the sky before they land on you, what other options do you have?

The simplest and most practical answer is the least flashy. You move your key nodes underground and put as much earth as you can between yourself and those munitions.¹¹ Now, as it ever was, earth is the most important armor against any barrage.

Historical and modern cases bear out this fact. To provide the closest test case available and to match the terrain in which the SIF will have to persist first and longest, we need only to turn back the clock and turn the map around.

A Lesson from Our Former Foe

The effectiveness of bunkers for the Japanese during the Battle of Okinawa was substantial, fundamentally shaping the fight into a protracted and costly campaign of attrition for the American forces.¹² The Imperial Japanese troops on Okinawa spent months preparing an intricate and heavily fortified defensive network, particularly across the rugged southern portion of the island. This system consisted of a labyrinth of tunnels, fortified caves, pillboxes, and mutually supporting positions often dug into the reverse slopes of ridges to shield them from direct naval fire.¹³

Before the amphibious assault on 1 April 1945, American forces conducted a massive preliminary bombardment of Japanese entrenched positions and bunker complexes.¹⁴ This bombardment included sustained naval gunfire, as well as massive air strikes intended to further soften up enemy positions. In the final seven days before the main landing, U.S. naval guns fired more than 13,000 large-caliber shells at the shore.¹⁵

While these fires yielded some effects, this pre-landing bombardment proved largely ineffective in destroying or significantly degrading the main Japanese defensive lines that were underground and inland. The Japanese deliberately chose not to defend the beaches, instead placing their primary defenses deep within the interior and on the reverse slopes of terrain features such as Kakazu

Ridge and the Shuri Line.¹⁶ The extensive network of deep, reinforced tunnels and caves effectively sheltered the vast majority of the Japanese forces and their artillery from the heaviest shells and bombs.

As a result, while the initial American landing on the Hagushi beaches was virtually unopposed, the advance inland quickly stalled when U.S. ground troops encountered the heavily fortified, intact Shuri Line defenses in the south.¹⁷ The Americans were then forced into slow, grinding frontal assaults, often only gaining ground yard by yard in brutal and costly close combat. This protracted fighting demonstrated that the dug-in bunkers successfully fulfilled their purpose of protecting the Japanese forces from bombardment, leaving most of their forces intact to maximize American casualties during their advance.¹⁸

The robustness of such facilities is evident today: the former underground headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Navy remains in marvelous shape in Okinawa, so much so that it remains one of the top tourist spots.¹⁹ It could

wise serve as the "JTAC (joint terminal attack controller) of the Joint Force," Marine Corps Installations Pacific, in coordination with Marine Forces Pacific, should build the underground command posts required to withstand joint firepower strikes of the PLA.

Lessons from Our Allies

A staggering disparity becomes immediately visible when comparing the inadequate force protection posture of U.S. forces in Okinawa to the remarkably robust protective posture of U.S. forces and our allies outside of Okinawa. They clearly understand the threat and have built their command posts accordingly.

South Korea

Most notably, allied forces in South Korea took the North Korean threat of long-range fires to heart decades ago. Even before the advent of the Kim regime's nuclear arsenal, North Korea frequently rattled the saber of an artillery and rocket barrage that it could rain upon the Republic of Korea (ROK) at a moment's notice. With the ponder-

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be easily converted into a command and control (C2) node for the Japanese Self-Defense Force or a bilateral U.S.-Japan headquarters.

What was good for Imperial Japan on Okinawa in 1945 will be good for U.S. Marines on Okinawa today. While the SIF concept is not focused on the traditional tactical defensive task of protecting positions and retaining terrain against a groundbased attack, it is imperative that SIF can persist forward indefinitely. A critical requirement under the circumstances is reliable protection from precision fires. To ensure that command posts can employ their forces for sea denial, reconnaissance, and counterreconnaissance, and other-

ance of the Korean People's Army and its artillery stationed at or near the Demilitarized Zone, North Korea could fire thousands of rounds per minute against targets in the South.²⁰

To ensure its leaders could command their forces even under this threat, the U.S. and ROK militaries quite sensibly looked to the shelter of the earth as the most immediate, achievable, and affordable solution. A case in point is Command Post Tango. Reportedly able to survive even a tactical nuclear strike, Command Post Tango is a military bunker complex from which the commanders and staffs of United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, and U.S. Forces Korea



Digging underground facilities is the best and most immediate approach to survivability and persisting inside an enemy's WEZ. (Photo by LCpl Meshaq Hylton.)

would lead a fight in the defense of the ROK.²¹ It is not uncommon for U.S. leaders and ROK leaders alike to visit Command Post Tango to offer public remarks during major exercises on the Peninsula, presumably as a form of strategic communication that even a surprise barrage by North Korea will not paralyze C2 capabilities of the U.S.-ROK Alliance.²²

Taiwan

Taiwan has also taken the importance of subterranean command posts to heart. Taiwan itself lives within the closest proximity to the entire gamut of PLA long-range fires and would itself be the objective of a CCP-directed cross-strait attack. As such, it has put a host of its key nodes and air forces under the protection of the earth itself.

This includes the Hengshan Military Command Center, from which the president of Taiwan and his most senior officials would direct the defense of Taiwan. It also includes an air operations center emplaced deep within what is colloquially known as Toad Mountain, from which air defense officials would coordinate the defense against both enemy fighters and inbound missiles.²³

Taking the principle well beyond the need to protect command posts alone, Taiwan has even dug out an underground mountain-fortress to accommodate nearly 200 fighter aircraft.²⁴

These subterranean hangars, built into the mountains near Hualien along Taiwan's east coast, are equipped to refuel and rearm Taiwan's aircraft as well, allowing sortie generation to originate under constant protection.²⁵ As the best place to destroy an enemy's aircraft is on the runway, and a PLA attack would almost certainly begin with precision strikes against Taiwan's airfields, this strategy is pivotal to the preservation of Taiwan's combat power.

Where Do We Dig?

The Marine Corps should seize the initiative and start breaking ground on underground facilities wherever it reasonably expects to command forces and generate sorties, forces, or fires.

The best place to start is underneath the terrain it currently holds, that is, beneath the bases and stations that currently exist in Okinawa. These areas are most vital, as the preponderance of III MEF is already stationed at these locations, and both MEF and Marine Corps Installations Pacific commanders alike will employ them as advanced bases in a fight against the PLA.

As such areas will be within the fenceline of standing U.S. bases, there will be no hurdles to moving forces to protected areas whenever U.S. commanders make that call. As it stands, to move U.S. forces off their bases requires authorization from the Government

of Japan, which is a remarkably time-consuming process. This is the biggest hurdle to using dispersion and mobility, ceding the initiative to the CCP, and granting China an enormous first-mover advantage should they initiate a war with a strike against regionally based U.S. forces.

Secondarily, the Marine Corps should explore the feasibility of building underground sites for use in the Philippines, another U.S. mutual defense treaty ally that is the target of increasing Chinese aggression. This would require greater diplomatic effort. The United States has had no bases of its own in the Philippines since its prior basing agreement ended in 1991.²⁶ Since that time, the United States has only been able to deploy forces for brief periods of time to Philippine-approved locations known as Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites.²⁷ With support from the Department of State, the U.S. could advocate either for U.S. underground bases, to work with the Philippines to develop bilateral, joint-use bases, or to develop underground Philippine bases that would be authorized for use by U.S. deployed forces in a manner similar to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement arrangement.

Digging is Winning

The Marine Corps needs its emerging capabilities. Marine littoral regiments, surface connectors, organic air defense, AI integration, and other high-end means will be needed for any MAGTF to fight as an optimized stand-in force. But the very nature of these new technologies as cutting-edge inherently requires a longer lead time for development and fielding.

What is within reach now, time-tested, and requires no research and development, is quite simple and affordable: use the earth as your shield. It is not novel, but it works. Not only does it work, but it is a far more effective, reliable, affordable, and feasible means of protection from PLA long-range precision fires than any counter-air capability that could be cooked up by Anduril, Palantir, Lockheed-Martin, or any other defense company. It is borne

out by the simplest physics and proven in the only lab that truly matters: the test of battle. The enemies we fought in the Pacific in World War II used underground shelters to great effect, and our allies and partners in the Pacific today are doing the same.

The Marine Corps' key nodes and assets cannot afford to be caught flat-footed on the surface of the earth when the enemy decides to strike. Rather, they must assume a fighting crouch, where they can persist forward indefinitely, despite the enemy's regional overmatch in precision munitions. Do you want to win? Then start moving the earth.

Digging is winning.

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