

FAST Capabilities, Challenges, and the Way Ahead

Any time, any place

by Maj Gary L. Cobb

In 1987, the Secretary of the Navy directed the reorganization of Naval security forces to better address global terrorist threats to naval installations and assets. This action essentially created the Marine Corps security force (MCSF) battalions that eventually merged at the regimental level and was the genesis of the FAST program. Initially limited in scope and function, the FAST platoons and companies were manned, trained, and equipped to perform defensive site security in support of the Navy. FAST platoons provided point site security afloat and ashore, and maintained the ability to deploy to enhance security at naval installations around the globe.¹ While FAST platoons were originally designed to provide the U.S. fleet commanders with a rapidly deployable, expeditionary antiterrorism security force for limited duration protection of naval assets, FAST missions and capabilities have evolved over the decades to the protection of national assets, such as embassies and consulates overseas. In the succeeding three decades, Marine Corps security forces have transformed many times, and the FAST program has adjusted to the changing nature of the terrorist threats facing the United States, although not without problems that have also grown with time.

Today there are 18 FAST platoons that are aligned with the geographic combatant commanders. Of these 18 platoons, 8 or 9 are operational at any given time, with the other platoons forming, training, or standing down.

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The platoons primarily deploy outside the continental United States (OCONUS) after being formed, trained, equipped, and certified by the Marine Corps Security Force Regiment and are then operationally employed by OCONUS FAST companies in support of the U.S. Fleet commanders, naval component commanders, and geographic combatant commanders.² Despite the

presence of larger, contemporary crisis and rapid response forces, such as MEU and Special-Purpose MAGTF–Crisis Response (SPMAGTF–CR), the FAST program remains relevant under the developing *Expeditionary Force 21* capstone concept. A brief look at FAST capabilities demonstrates that FAST is not a redundant capability; rather, FAST platoons and companies offer



Marine with the Black Sea Rotational Force participated in Exercise JUNIPER COBRA. FAST also participated in the exercise. (Photo by Cpl Kelly L. Street, 2dMarDiv Combat Camera.)

a truly complementary capability to MEUs and SPMAGTFs. If FAST platoons are underutilized in contingency operations, the cause is not the viability of the program, but the erroneous perception of redundancy and the aggregate burdens of outdated Department of the Navy (DON) instructions that govern employment of naval security forces, legacy command relationships under the Navy, and a battalion-level gap in the administrative command structure between the regimental and company level within MCSF.

FAST Capabilities

FAST platoons are not an elite force within an elite force. FAST platoons are not special operations forces, but they are specialists. FAST Marines are basically trained infantrymen with specialized training for a specific mission set. They are, pound for pound, the best platoon-sized positional defensive force within the Department of Defense. As the acronym implies, FAST platoons are designed to be mobile and agile, possess the flexibility to deploy rapidly anywhere in the world, and have an immediate, positive impact upon arrival, often in a less intrusive manner than other response forces. A FAST platoon is ideally employed prior to a dynamic event based on indicators and warnings to *deter*, *detect*, and *defend* against potential terrorist attacks. When employed after an attack or event, the platoon's primary function is to *mitigate* the effects of the attack or event.

Prior to deploying, each FAST platoon conducts an extensive nine month pre-deployment training program (PTP) that culminates with a full mission profile certification exercise. Broken into four blocks, the PTP evaluates individual and collective tasks required by the platoon's mission essential tasks, to wit:

- Deploy tactical forces.
- Conduct antiterrorism operations.
- Conduct ground security operations.
- Conduct embassy reinforcement.³

The PTP includes more than six weeks of specialty schools for individuals and teams, such as helicopter rope suspension training, designated marks-

manship, embarkation training, various courses for vehicle drivers, and running intelligence and combat operations centers. Each FAST Marine is required to obtain at least a secret-level security clearance and official passport; both requirements are extremely advantageous when employed in support of the Department of State. A platoon will conduct more than three weeks of advanced urban combat training, including close quarters battle and riot control techniques. FAST platoons will also conduct more than four weeks of site security training: mastering interior guard and post procedures, emplacement of heavy weapons, and fortification engineering.⁴

The crowning PTP event is the mission rehearsal exercise. During this week-long event, a FAST platoon will be evaluated on every aspect of the PTP. The mission rehearsal exercise is typically centered on a scenario replicating the most challenging environment in which a platoon will be expected to operate: reinforcement of a diplomatic facility in a foreign country. Since FAST platoons are aligned to a geographic combatant commander's area of responsibility, mission rehearsal exercise scenarios match this alignment. To add realism, the gaining OCONUS FAST company will typically participate in the exercise as the higher headquarters. By communicating with an OCONUS company headquarters, FAST platoons exercise reporting procedures and long-range communications that the platoon will be expected to use once deployed overseas. Additionally, Marine Corps Security Force Regiment coordinates with the U.S. State Department for a representative to serve as an evaluator during many of the mission rehearsal exercises. At exercise conclusion, platoons are certified "mission capable" in all METs by the Commanding General, Marine Forces Command based on the recommendation of the Commanding Officer, Marine Corps Security Force Regiment. Should a platoon fail to demonstrate proficiency in any area, it goes through remedial training and re-certification.⁵

Once deployed overseas, the FAST platoon will attach to a forward-sta-

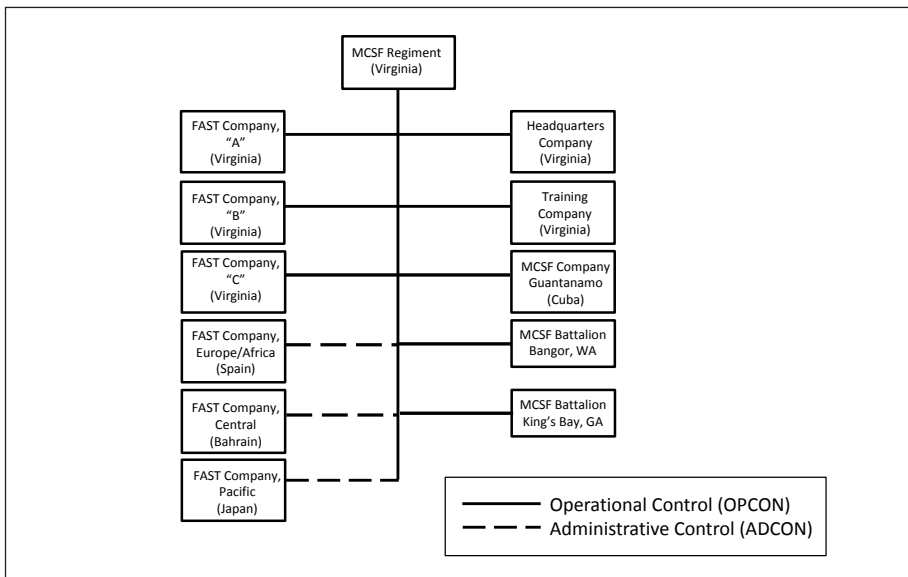
tioned FAST company for employment in support of the designated combatant commander, who will exercise either operational control (OPCON) or tactical control (TACON) of the OCONUS FAST company and attached FAST platoons. OPCON and TACON are typically delegated through the Naval component commander to the U.S. Fleet commander. Regardless of the operational command relationships, Marine Corps Security Force Regiment exercises administrative control of all FAST units.⁶

Policy Challenges

The Department of the Navy instruction governing the employment of all naval security forces, to include FAST, is *SecNavInst 5530.4D*. The current version, released in 2006, retains many of the regulations and restrictions for employment of FAST units contained in previous versions. Unfortunately, it also still applies a "one-size-fits-all" approach to informing Navy fleet, installation, and component commanders on how FAST should be employed. The nine years since publication have witnessed dramatic changes in the threat environment, modifications to the traditional employment criteria, the emergence of new crisis response capabilities, and a blurring of once-standard command relationships; a revision is very much in order.⁷

The Navy-pure security forces, such as the former maritime expeditionary security squadrons and the current coastal riverine squadrons, are now conducting historical FAST contingency missions in support of the fleet commanders. These missions include aircraft security teams, embarked security teams, and boarding parties in support of visit, board, search, and seizure operations. FAST platoons are more likely to be employed in support of degrading security situations at national assets, such as embassies and consulates, than in their traditional Navy security role.

This latter trend has been developing into the standard since the last reorganization of MCSF in 2008. It is especially the case in the European, African, and Central Command areas of responsibilities (AOR). In these re-



Marine Corps Security Force Regiment Organization circa 2015.

gions, the tendency is to view the FAST platoons forward deployed to Rota and Bahrain as strategic assets in support of the combatant commanders rather than operational assets for the naval component or fleet commanders. In practice, the Navy has shifted to a “care and feeding” role, often without the flexibility to employ FAST in support of Navy security requirements without first asking the combatant commander. As a FAST company commander, I witnessed a distinguishable hesitancy by the Navy operational chain of command to actively seek out possible missions for the assigned FAST

platoons. In other words, despite the “F” in “FAST,” the platoons have become *strategic assets* whose alert levels are managed at the combatant command or National Command Authority levels. This helps to explain why these platoons are more likely to be employed in support of the Department of State and at the direction of the combatant commander, Secretary of Defense, or the President.

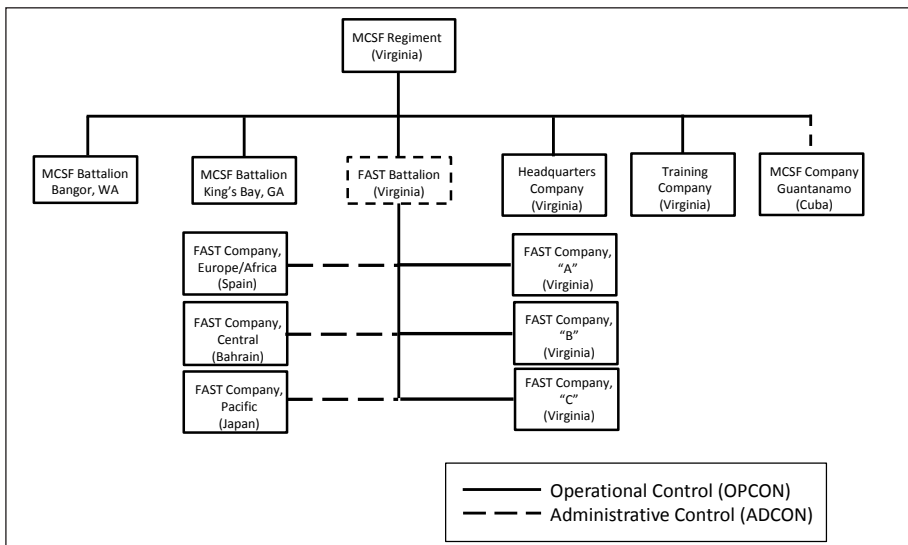
FAST platoons deployed to the Pacific Command AOR in support of the U.S. 7th Fleet tend to execute more historical FAST missions. These platoons remain directly employable by the fleet

commander, and in fact are more likely to embark and deploy aboard the 7th Fleet’s command ship for Navy security requirements or training exercises. The justification for the difference of employment criteria is unclear, but the reason may be found more in the nature of Pacific Command’s vast watery expanses than in a view of these forces as something less than a strategic asset. Whatever the reasoning for the disparity between overseas employment, it remains that *SecNavInst 5530.4D* does not fully articulate the contemporary differences of employment practices for FAST platoons in support of the U.S. 5th, 6th, and 7th Fleets and fails to incorporate other naval security forces that have matured since 2006.

One rationale for the “one-size-fits-all” approach is that *SecNavInst 5530.4D* retains a strong thread of the FAST employment model of the late 1980s and 1990s. At that time all FAST platoons were maintained CONUS, and only deployed at the request of commanders of the U.S. numbered fleets or naval installation commanders.⁸ This method continues to work well for CONUS-based missions, such as nuclear refueling and defueling operations. However, it fails to resolve many of contemporary employment challenges facing the OCONUS FAST units. The Department of the Navy should update *SecNavInst 5530.4D* with the goal of making it more applicable to contemporary organizations and employment models. The current version pre-dates the most recent reorganization of MCSF and fails to place enough weight on the importance of the current role played by other naval security forces. This revised document must draw a distinction between CONUS-based and OCONUS-based FAST units, and also attempt to capture and resolve many of the current challenges involved in the employment of these forces.

Command Relationships

The MEU has been for many decades the geographical combatant commander’s force of choice for initial crisis response operations. Employment of these forces in Central Command increased dramatically following the



Proposed Marine Corps Security Force Regiment Organization.

beginning of the Global War on Terror in 2001. During this period, the U.S. maintained a near-continuous MEU presence in the European, Central, and Pacific Commands. But a sharp decrease in amphibious shipping today requires MEU force sharing actions between the three theaters. One of the Marine Corps' solutions to continue to provide combatant commanders with crisis response capabilities comes in the form of special purpose MAGTFs—Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) which have deployed to support the African and Central Commands. *Expeditionary Force 21* outlines plans to deploy forward, and maintain, this ashore-based SPMAGTF capability. These SPMAGTFs are not designed to replace a MEU for the purposes of supporting crisis response missions, but merely to provide other employment options of Marine combat forces in-lieu of an available MEU. Typical SPMAGTF-CR composition includes a GCE constructed around a reinforced infantry company: an ACE consisting of a composite squadron of MV-22, C-130, and possibly AV-8B aircraft; and an LCE. These SPMAGTFs are assigned OPCON to the Marine component commander under the respective combatant commander.⁹

While conceived in 2008, the initial deployment of the SPMAGTF-CR was prompted by the deaths of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Department of State employees during the 2012 terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya. Hours after the attack, a FAST platoon was deployed to reinforce the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, Libya. This platoon was replaced within three months by a provisional Marine security force aggregated from forces deployed to the theater to conduct security cooperation training. When the initial contingent of the SPMAGTF-CR deployed in May 2013, this organization assumed responsibility for the reinforcement mission in Libya and bolstered the crisis response capability for Africa Command. A cursory analysis would lead to the belief that the SPMAGTF-CR capabilities are redundant to the capabilities of FAST. In truth, the two organizations present *complementary capabilities* that can be applied separately or in conjunction

to maximize strengths and minimize shortfalls of each force.

A FAST platoon's chief drawback is a reliance on external agencies or organizations for logistical support to the mission. Naval components do not have sufficient organic air lift to support the alert levels and tactical movement of a platoon and equipment. As a result, a FAST platoon must typically rely upon U.S. Air Force C-130s to support tactical movement to the objective area. Under normal conditions, these air assets are not collocated with the FAST platoons; rather they must be alerted and conduct movement to link-up with the platoon and its equipment. FAST platoons possess neither organic explosive ordnance disposal nor joint terminal attack controller capability. These

sure based on indicators and warnings of an increased threat.

The strength of a FAST platoon is centered on the *defensive capability* of the unit once in position. The skills and cohesion forged during a nine month pre-deployment training program, coupled with a robust weapons, equipment, and communications package, enable the platoon to place a proverbial "ring of steel" around an asset. The FAST platoon brings an organic capability to defend against a full spectrum of threats from protests using non-lethal weapons and tactics to precision target engagement to light antiarmor/antivehicle threats. The platoon arrives with all of these capabilities intact. The security clearance levels of the individual FAST Marines facilitate interoperabil-

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enablers must also be "bolted on" to the platoon upon employment or at times of increased alert levels. While these procedures are well rehearsed through recent contingency operations, the challenges of aggregating forces when time is of the essence are not insignificant. Additionally, due to the possible sources of support (Army, Navy, and Air Force) and the accompanying supporting relationships, achieving unity of command for critical decisions at employment will often not occur below combatant commander level. Add to these issues the fact that terminal logistics, specifically mobility from the point of debarkation to the objective of a FAST platoon, must be provided by the agency receiving the security support. In most contemporary situations of embassy reinforcement this is the Department of State country team. Advance engagement with the country team is essential for the successful coordination of the arrival of the platoon. These challenges illustrate why it is more problematic to employ a FAST platoon *during* a crisis as opposed to prior to the crisis as a preventive mea-

ity with the embassy country team at almost all levels. Once at an objective, the FAST platoon is capable of functioning in a less intrusive manner than other forces, such as an SPMAGTF or a MEU, because it does not have the requirement to continue to flow in follow-on resources in order to build capability and capacity.

SPMATGF-CR forces provide a combatant commander with a long-range and rapidly deployable force of combat trained Marines in support of a range of military operations, including embassy reinforcement. The fundamental strength of SPMAGTF-CR is the ability to place these Marines on an objective by MV-22 Osprey and then have an immediate impact on a situation in progress—to prevent or quell another Benghazi-like event. However, once these Marines have been inserted, there exists the very real possibility of having to continue to flow in material and equipment to establish a more permanent presence. In some diplomatic environments these follow-on actions could prove problematic for the country

team to coordinate and obtain approval to conduct. Additionally, due to the vast distances from friendly bases to some of the possible objectives, these land-based SPMAGTFs do not have the mobility of a MEU coming from the sea. The issue becomes leaving a lightly armed and equipped initial response element exposed to greater risk on the objective. Finally, once these crisis response forces are committed to one or two specific objectives, potential gaps are opened, and shortfalls created, for responses to another developing situation.

The OCONUS-based FAST companies in Spain, Bahrain, and Japan should have their command relationships modified to place them OPCON to the Marine component commander. Such a change would dramatically improve the employment options for the combatant commander and eliminate virtually all unity of command issues. FAST could then fall within the GCE of a SPMAGTF or remain a stand-alone rapid response force under the

Marine component commander. The shortfalls of FAST in the areas of logistics, movement/mobility, and enabler support could be resolved from within the SPMAGTF or the Marine component. The combatant commander could more easily incorporate FAST in the range of response options for a given situation. Whether used as a proactive option based on indicators and warnings, as a complementing or reinforcing force to a SPMAGTF-CR or MEU element, or as a bridging force for follow-on security options, FAST operational planning and employment would be vastly more responsive when combined with other crisis response forces under the Marine component. Finally, since the OCONUS FAST company headquarters are permanently assigned within the combatant commander's AOR, there exists a greater continuity of resident understanding about AOR that would improve the collective knowledge of deploying SPMAGTFs.

A FAST Battalion

The pathway of MCSF from dispersed barracks, companies, and detachments into the current regimental structure has resulted in a significant gap in the administrative chain of command. The CO, MCSF Regiment exercises command authority over two battalion-level commands, MCSF battalions at Kings Bay, GA, and Bangor, WA, and nine independent company-level commands spread across the globe.¹⁰ The mantra that “the sun never sets on MCSF Regiment” certainly is true considering the disposition of regimental forces. Compounding the challenges, the Regiment must accomplish two very distinct missions—strategic weapons security and the FAST program. The addition of a battalion-level command structure, a *FAST battalion*, to lead and coordinate the actions of the FAST companies, both CONUS and OCONUS, is warranted. Such an organization would complement the structure at Bangor and Kings



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The ability to place Marines on an objective by MV-22 can have an immediate impact. (Photo by Sgt Bobby Yarbrough.)

Bay, and would free up the regimental commander and his staff to focus on applicable refinements. Key areas that could be addressed would be the training and certification program, and an increase of engagements with key agencies and headquarters with the goal of advocating on behalf of both missions without being constantly pulled into the minutiae of the day-to-day FAST company operations.

With the development of a FAST battalion, the DON could return to the concept of a rapidly deployable, CONUS-based FAST organization whose purpose would be to support Navy-pure mission sets. Included in this category would be nuclear refueling and defueling missions, rapid augmentation of an installation's security force, Navy-centric theater security cooperation, and contingency operations exceeding the capabilities of the Navy's expeditionary security organizations. In the case of required support to Naval installations and activities, CONUS-based FAST units could be a *bridging force* to span the divide between the surge capabilities of the installation's security and auxiliary forces, and the deployment of additional security forces from CONUS-based Navy Reserves. The FAST battalion would be the coordinating unit for these support requests, and

could easily maintain alert levels, certification, and sustainment training of platoons and companies providing support. More importantly, a battalion structure would ensure consistency of training in support of Navy mission sets and increase proficiency of the Navy-focused platoons through more tailored and specific training programs.

Conclusion

Understanding the history of an organization will better guide informed decisions about future capability and capacity. FAST platoons have evolved from an operational asset designed to support the fleet commanders into a strategic asset that is viewed at the highest levels of our military command structure as a professional and reliable organization. This reputation comes from strong unit identity and cohesion, a solid and time tested employment model, and nearly three decades of successes during a multitude of no-fail missions. FAST platoons do not need to be dropped on top of an objective from an MV-22. FAST platoons do not need the latest version of the interim fast attack vehicle. What is required is something that has occurred numerous times since the inception of the program—a comprehensive review of the guiding instructions, command relationships, and command structure.

The FAST platoon model is sound, and FAST platoons have been, and will continue to be, successful upon employment. However, changes to the contemporary threat, current employment tendencies, and the maturation of other Navy security forces lead to a significant conclusion: it is now time for another reorganization of MCSF and an update to the instructions and orders that govern FAST employment. Additionally, serious consideration must be given to the current operational and tactical command relationships of the OCONUS FAST companies to better support the geographic combatant commanders.

Notes

1. U.S. Secretary of the Navy, *Physical Security, ALNAV 011/87*, 20 January 1987.
2. Col James Bright, "Marine Corps Security Force Regiment Command Brief," (Yorktown, VA: PowerPoint presentation, Headquarters, Marine Corps Security Force Regiment, 20 August 2014).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Department of the Navy, *Secretary of the Navy Instruction 5530.4D (SecNavInst 5530.4D), Naval Security Force Employment and Operations*, (Washington, DC: 3 October 2006).
8. Department of the Navy, *SecNavInst 5530.4A, Naval Security Forces Ashore and Afloat*, (Washington, DC: 25 March 1988).
9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: 4 March 2014).
10. Col Bright brief.

