

2021 LtCol Earl “Pete” Ellis Essay Contest: Honorable Mention

Preparing for War

Operationalizing the installation without
installationalizing the operational force

by Col Maria McMillen

The future in the Pacific is very different than it was envisaged just a decade ago. Gone are the days of unmatched military superiority, the ability to act unilaterally, and the defined line separating the forward edge of battle area from the rear echelon. In order to effectively operate and achieve victory in this new world order of battle, the Marine Corps must make a paradigm shift from assignment policies based on unit type to policies based on unit-location. III MEF and the Marine Corps units deployed and based in the first island chain live and breathe a “fight now” mentality, not because it is a catchy slogan but because it is the reality of operating and living in close proximity to China: the United States’ peer competitor. The Marines in the units are witnesses to the great power competition happening dozens of miles offshore on the sea and in the air. These units do not have the luxury of setting the force when crisis or conflict is sparked; they must be ready now. The complicated chains of command and dependent capabilities reliant on external forces must be discarded and replaced with common sense structures that work across a warfighting spectrum that can rapidly shift from competition to conflict and back while eliminating the inefficient necessity of a unit to vacillate between command reporting hierarchies depending on the actions of the adversary.

We have an obligation to act now following China’s unexpected hypersonic missile launch demonstrating to the world capabilities beyond those of our own arsenal. At the same time, China

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continues to flagrantly demonstrate air power encroachment by conducting 149 incursions into the air defense zone surrounding Taiwan during a four-day period in October 2021—a number that represents 40 percent of the total number of destabilizing flights conducted in all of 2020. China is also conducting hundreds of flights that narrowly miss deliberate airspace incursion but nonetheless require exhausting responses from Taiwan’s air force while testing their defenses.¹ Meanwhile, China is nurturing a malignant bilateral arrangement with Russia while also using every military, economic, and diplomatic tool possible to intimidate and weaken its neighbors. Each of these actions below the level of war is concerning; collectively, they are alarming. China has ramped up their aggressive behaviors presenting an apocalyptic future we do not have to wait for—it is here.

Because “our way of war may be upset at any moment,” we must ensure that the totality of the Marine Corps in the Indo-Pacific region is prepared.² In doing so, we must ensure that our installations are best positioned to support the FMF from competition to conflict and everywhere in between. Inherent in this preparation is ensuring the installations

in the first and second island chain are resourced and leveraged to support the future force in its training and execution of expeditionary operations, to include expeditionary advanced base operations. Since expeditionary advanced base operations involve operating in a distributed manner across vast distances, we must guarantee that these U.S. installations abroad are given the proper resources. Ensuring that the burden of operating these advanced bases with their air stations, family housing, child development centers, and DOD Education Activity schools rest with the installation commander and not with those commanders assigned to the FMF. Those warfighting commanders tasked with prosecuting expeditionary operations need to be assured that when they return to these advanced bases they are able to rest, refuel and reset while knowing their families’ needs are being met. To accomplish this, the Marine Corps must abandon the preconceived and entrenched notion of installations and bases being the bill payer, particularly for personnel and funding, and replace it with an innovative and revolutionary mindset that provides a functional foundation to support force design structural changes and implement the mission sets those structures are intended to execute across the maritime environment. Otherwise, making III MEF the “focus of effort” and “pivoting to the Pacific” are merely catchy bumper stickers.³

Currently, installations are the last organizations to receive needed funds and the first to have that money rescinded if an urgent priority arises. Additionally, no Marine was ever told a tour at an instal-

lation command would make them more professionally competitive. An honest look would validate that installations are the bill payers to man, train, and equip the warfighter. This mindset was at least understandable when resources were funneled to the warfighter facing the enemy across the forward edge of the battlefield. However, as current and future conflicts blur the distinction between the front and rear lines, the rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul allocation of funds and personnel no longer is a legitimate balance of resources; this shortsighted view now presents a serious risk to mission because it fails to consider follow-on effects particularly during crisis or conflict.

The Marine Corps has committed fully to an organizational structure designed to support the naval force while operating in contested maritime spaces, facilitating sea control and executing distributed maritime operations. This redesign is now positioning III MEF to facilitate the larger naval campaign within China's weapons systems threat ring.⁴ A new mentality must accompany this newly designed force to efficiently and effectively operate in the littorals surrounding the East and South China Seas. The simplicity of war has eluded the United States for the last two decades, and—as the withdrawal from Afghanistan highlights—the complexity of peace may be the toughest battle yet, and as such it is imperative to get this right. The tensions between China and U.S. allies along the rocky shoals and spits of sand that are so prevalent in the waters off Japan and the Philippines create a cauldron of uncertainty where underreaction or overreaction may lead to the same nonsensical outcome—an outcome no nation wants. The littoral nature and outsized consequences of activities in the USINDOPACOM Area of Responsibility dictate that not only does the Marine Corps need a new structural design but that it is imperative that with it comes a new mentality—one that expands beyond the warfighter directly executing the mission and includes the installations that will facilitate the fight in a way and manner not comprehensible at the turn of the century.

The future demands a mindset that must overcome generations of listless



MCAS Futenma's 9,000-foot runway and precision approach capability are force-multipliers within the INDO-PACOM Area of Responsibility. (Photo by Cpl Geraldo Canto.)

enthusiasm for installations and bases. Activities in the East China Sea highlight that the front line is no longer just the Marine looking down the sight of a rifle and the pilot with visibility of the target. Currently, the most active and diverse missile development program in the world is in China. U.S. forces located on Japan and Korea are well within the reach of ground-based short range ballistic missiles. This unmitigated reach of Chinese ground based, naval, and air weapons has slowly encroached and eventually enveloped our forward located installations within the weapons engagement zone (WEZ).⁵ This means Marine Corps Installations–Pacific with its two air stations and 10,000 plus family members are living and operating within the WEZ. Truly the game has changed; thus, so too must our strategy regarding these networked power projection platforms (i.e. the installations, bases and air stations in the Pacific).

Because of the precarious location and additional obligations to support the warfighter from these advanced bases, the installations associated with III MEF are very different than similarly titled organizations within the continental United States. These installations within the WEZ are more like advanced naval bases with all the city hall responsibilities of their state-side counterparts.

As such, they should not be viewed from a resourcing perspective as being equal. A critical re-examination of how the United States' focuses on the Pacific to counter China's rise necessitates the urgent reversal of the persistent downward budgetary pressures on installations in the Pacific to better set the posture of the operating forces.

One of the Marine Corps' newest manuals uses the joint definition of an advanced base: a base located in or near an operational area whose primary mission is to support military operations.⁶ These installations/advanced bases will be a lynch pin to securing future victory as they will serve as platforms for both power projection and sustainment. Thus, they must be fully operationalized for the task. Breaking a long-held paradigm, some warfighters will be prosecuting the fight from the same bases they and their families live. This tenuous situation makes it imperative that all support to the warfighter and dependents be expertly handled at the installation. In order to do this effectively, the installation must be manned and funded to train for and execute this expanded mission. We cannot wait for conflict to address the resourcing gaps. It will be too late.

The single most effective innovation regarding the installations is to opera-

tionalize the installations to best support the warfighter. The Marine Corps must ensure these forward based installations are manned, trained, and equipped to conduct necessary advanced naval base tasks independently. At the same time, warfighting units cannot be saddled with installation housekeeping tasks. To most effectively operationalize the installation, III MEF units should look to shed to the installation any capabilities that distract from their operational mission responsibilities, thereby unburdening the warfighter of ancillary responsibilities moving these tasks to the installation makes both the installation and the warfighter more effective. At no time does the Marine Corps want the warfighting commander to be concerned with the management of MILCON, returning power to base housing, or ensuring the child development centers are open at the appropriate hours while they are generating combat sorties against enemy targets. We cannot operationalize the installations at the expense of installationalizing the operational forces. Operationalizing the installations would entail the reevaluation of missions, personnel, and mentality. No longer would installations be an afterthought when taking the fight to the adversary; instead, they would be fully integrated into the winning strategy.

Traditionally, the mission of all installations—regardless of location—was to support the various tenant commands while operating a training base that maintained combat ready units for expeditionary deployment by providing training venues, facilities, services and support that is responsive to the needs of the service members and their families.⁷ In the Pacific, the mission has transitioned to reflect the responsibilities to the warfighter not just in the preparation for conflict but in the execution of that conflict. As such the mission is

to exercise command and control, oversight and budgetary guidance over the Marine Corps' network of Advanced Naval Bases in the Indo-Pacific in order to: secure and protect our capabilities, strengthen our alliances and expand the capabilities of forward deployed naval expeditionary forces.⁸



F-35B awaits refueling at the "hot-refuel" area. (Photo by Cpl Dalton Payne.)

This change reflects a response to the advancement of the adversary's capabilities over time.

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The change in mission is not just a stroke of the pen but serves to refocus and remind those 10,000 plus individuals assigned to these advanced naval bases in the first island chain that they will project and sustain combat power throughout the Indo-Pacific Theater. One mission that will be required of the installation writ large is to run and maintain the air stations to launch and recover combat aircraft and receive, stage, and deploy combat and non-combat aircraft required to move material forward as well as move personnel and equipment back to more protected land masses in theater or out of theater entirely.

Inherent in this air station mission is to ensure the viability of the airfield at all times and to minimize the time that the flight line would be unavail-

able because of damage resulting from incoming air or missile strikes. However, in order to accomplish this implicit mission, the air station would need to have both the manning and the equipment to perform the necessary tasks. Currently, many individual skill sets required in conflict are part of the Fleet Assistance Program (FAP), whereby Marines permanently assigned to the FMF are temporarily assigned to bases and stations for two reasons: to augment the manpower resources of the installation and to provide enhanced training opportunities for Marines whose MOS could be put to better use in a garrison environment.⁹ Examples of these billets include air traffic controllers and firefighters. Under the current model, these individuals will go forward with their parent fleet unit when a contingency arises. However, in crisis and conflict, these Marines would be critical to the proper functioning of the air station and its increased traffic flow. Additionally, the air stations need to be adequately equipped with airfield damage repair kits and permanently assigned the personnel to affect that work. These repair kits cannot be left to resource at the point of need; the investment needs to be made now so that the aggregate and engineering equipment is already in place. Procuring the required equipment once the supply lines are strained will lead to mission failure. In order to properly account for these currently

FAP'd personnel and ensure the proper personnel are assigned for the airfield to operate, a permanently assigned support company should be established and attached to the air station in order to function independently once hostilities begin.

In addition to airfield specific capabilities, the installation must have utilities/power Marines to ensure power is maintained throughout the bases and stations if civilian or contracted workers are not compelled to work during conflict. These engineer Marines assigned to the installation should receive additional training enroute to reporting to the installation. Essential training, such as high voltage maintenance and repair offered by the Navy and more robust installation utilities specific training offered by the Air Force, are crucial to installation operations during conflict. These types of opportunities will encourage some Marines to seek assignment to the installations because it offers career enhancing possibilities while providing the installation with Marines possessing essential skills. Although there may be a desire to include these incentives for all installation assigned engineers, the necessity of the training in Marine Corps Installations Pacific is tantamount to success, and would provide uniformed redundancy as the preponderance of individuals who accomplish work on the power system are Japanese civilians.

Additionally, the current structure of the installation leads to little, if any, developmental growth of base experience for Marines assigned. Statistically, a tiny portion of the Marine Corps serves in the supporting establishment—less than four percent—and the majority of those will only serve in the installation organization one time. Some will serve their one time as commanders, an unheard-of scenario for fleet units. Familiarity is no less important at bases and stations, particularly those that will be crucial to success during an USINDOPACOM contingency. Other individuals will serve there as the last stop before exiting the Marine Corps. This dearth of knowledge has untold consequences that fleet units do not suffer, but fleet units will feel the impact of less-than-optimal support. One way to develop a cadre with experience is to re-structure the camp commander architecture. Currently, each discrete camp on Okinawa has a camp commander except for Camp Foster—which is commanded by the Headquarters and Support Battalion Commanding Officer. The other camp commanders are operational force commanders who are dual hatted to serve as the camp commander of a garrison structure. If III MEF is engaged in crisis or conflict operations, the camps would be left uncovered even though the support mission would not go away, and in some cases would intensify. This

at a time when those family members who remain would crave certainty and consistency. During conflict is not the time to change commanders. Now is the time to build a system that will provide consistency, thus ensuring when service members are engaged in conflict their loved ones are taken care of. This system redesign would assign a subordinate commander to each camp and then align each camp, much like companies under a battalion, under one of the already in place board-selected installation colonel commanders. These subordinate commanders could be chosen via a board process in the same way that recruiting station commanders are selected. This structure would eliminate a shakeup of camp command structures when the operating forces are called to support a contingency, provide up and comers with installation experience, and ensure an O-6 is tied to each camp to develop the strategically important relationships with the local community outside the gates of each camp. Relationships that will be of the utmost importance when we transition to operating our advanced bases in support of distributed operations. For the same reasons, at a minimum the following camp billets should be shifted from FAP billets to permanently assigned personnel: operations officer, operations chief and facilities chief. By making these seemingly small but significant changes within the installation architecture, both the installation and the MEF will be better positioned to support the mission in competition and conflict.

The landscape of warfare is rapidly evolving. While we tinker with the mission and structure of the installation that supports III MEF, the focus of effort—China—is making game changing leaps that warrant real changes across the Pacific. As weapon ranges and adversaries have changed, so too has how we will support that warfare. Rather than continuing to debate marginal changes to the status quo, the Marine Corps must get serious about posturing our advanced bases for future success. The front is no longer a forward edge of battle area that can neatly be traced on a map but more



Enhancing the ability to respond to contingencies and cooperatively address challenges faced by the installation. (Photo by Cpl Ann Bowcut.)

an amorphous concept that ebbs and flows hour by hour and even minute by minute. One thing is certain: even though many bases and stations in the Pacific are in the weapons engagement zone they are still providing direct support to the warfighter. During contingency operations, these same bases and stations will provide the platforms to project power and sustain the warfighter while simultaneously providing services, support, and facilities responsive to the needs of families and those service members that remain. In order to provide the best support, the Marine Corps must change its approach to the problem set with an innovative mindset regarding personnel and task assignment by getting rid of the Fleet Assistance Program and providing an experience tract to build a cadre of Marines knowledgeable about installations

in the Pacific. Such a paradigm shift in resourcing installations will unburden the warfighter from installation management tasks and truly operationalize the installations.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030 Annual Update*, (Washington DC: April 2021).
2. Ibid.
3. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019); and President Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," (remarks Parliament House Canberra, Australia, November 2011).
4. *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*.

5. Staff, "Missile Threat: CSIS Missile Defense Project," *Missile Threat*, (April 2021), available at <https://missilethreat.csis.org>.

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*. (Washington, DC: February 2021).

7. Information available at <https://www.pendleton.marines.mil> and <https://www.lejeune.marines.mil>.

8. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1000.8, Fleet Assistance Program (FAP)*, (Washington, DC: March 2000).



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