

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

Not an Infantry Battalion

Rebuilding the LCT

by Maj Roger S. Kerstetter

The Littoral combat team (LCT) should not be structured as an infantry battalion. It should be reconstructed and manned as a sensor-sensor-shooter battalion: an intelligence and Naval Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) centric unit that is designed to build target quality tracks for the prosecution of adversary vessels. The 3d LCT formation is not currently optimized to sense, feed, and employ surface-to-surface capabilities in the INDOPACOM theater. Much of the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and fires structure currently exists; however, these should be expanded upon with a reduction in infantry personnel and equipment to make it possible. Organic track creation and management will simplify the kill web and avoid track degradation that is certain over time. Having the ability to provide a rapidly developed and complete picture to the appropriate targeting authority is vital.

This is not an argument against the relevance of the infantry, as the infantry still maintains the most important role in the Marine Corps. Rather, it is an institutional prescription to stop forcing a square peg into a round hole to placate an infantry-first culture. The 3d LCT was a smart addition to the force; forcing it into the structure of a conventional infantry battalion was not. I understand the original proposal for doing so, which seemed to reduce the shock value of a risky and, to some, unpopular decision. We have matured past this. The initial phase included a lot of push-back, which threatened its

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3d LCT Intelligence Officer, Maj Kerstetter, briefs Nomad scout team leaders before their air infiltration onto Mavulis Island for reconnaissance in the maritime domain operations in support of Exercise BALIKATAN. (Photo by Capt Tyler Ammen.)

formation from the start. I imagine a decision to create a non-infantry INDOPACOM main effort could have led to its complete undoing before the idea even got off the ground.

Change is necessary to take the Reconnaissance in the Maritime Domain and Attack of Enemy Maritime Targets Concepts the 3d LCT was built on to the next level. My argument will be well received by many infantry Marines as well, who see their role in the battalion minimized from a focus at odds with

their core mission essential tasks. If the 3d LCT is to deliver on the naval and joint demand signal for littoral sensing and over-the-horizon prosecution, it must be rebuilt as a sensor-shooter battalion: a fires and intelligence-centric formation optimized to produce the target quality tracks that NMESIS and naval fleet shooters require for prosecuting targets.

The problem is structural and cultural. Organizing the LCT as an infantry battalion consumes man-hours,

training cycles, limited resources, and unit identity in activities peripheral to its core mission. The existing battery must be completed directly for ranges, parts, and maintainers. Time devoted to platoon attacks, company defense drills, and legacy infantry training and readiness (T&R) tasks crowds out the tradecraft that matters for sea denial in the maritime domain. The aforementioned skills are those the infantry should be working on, but serve as a distraction during the incredibly high-tempo deployment work-up the 3d LCT faces every year. The infantry T&R takes away from high-tech intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and fires skills that must be honed to achieve the 3d LCT's unique mission set. Skills like electronic intelligence (ELINT) and emitter characterization, maritime radar employment, long-range small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) operations, maintenance of cross-domain data links, and all-source fusion that produces positive identification (PID) and NMESIS quality target tracks. Instead of wasting valuable deployment preparation time on fire team rushes and platoon attacks, we should be laser-focused on advanced, LCT-relevant mission essential tasks (METs) like:

- *MCT 1.12.8.1, Conduct Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO)*
- *MCT 2.2.15, Conduct Reconnaissance in the Maritime Domain*
- *MCT 3.2.7.5, Attack Enemy Maritime Targets*

The consequence of focusing too much on infantry skills is capability dilution. Tables of organization and equipment built for rifle companies are poorly suited to house, sustain, and deploy the NMESIS, maritime surveillance radar teams, signals intelligence/electronic warfare, advanced sUAS platforms, embedded geospatial intelligence, scouts, and the advanced comms architecture required to move time-sensitive targeting data into naval shooters.

The formation should be restructured to sense, fuse, and prosecute. A sensor-shooter battalion centers on three interdependent pillars: persistent, layered collection and fusion; a targeting and prosecution cell capable of serial-



A 3d LCT Nomad team leader performs a leader's reconnaissance to set conditions for LCT sensor emplacement on Mavulis Island. (Photo by LT Joseph Dodd.)

izing targets for NMESIS and other fleet shooters; and a lean protection and sustainment element tailored to supporting fires, sensors, and communications.

Practically, the battalion's center of gravity is the NMESIS, supported by an enlarged intelligence section/intelligence operations center that embeds geospatial, electronic, and human intelligence enablers, Minotaur edge nodes, and direct reach back to joint and national assets. The battalion should employ dozens of littoral reconnaissance teams organized around a Marine surveillance team's (MST) radar, signals intelligence/electronic warfare detachments focused on ELINT, and long-range sUAS detachments with artificial intelligence/machine learning-assisted visual PID. A maritime targeting cell will translate fused sensor products into engagement timelines and coordinate strikes with fleet command and control.

Force protection should be a deliberately small, highly trained security company with larger security requirements requested from task-organized adjacent infantry line units across the force. Logistics and sustainment should be optimized for firing batteries, fuel, and heavy ammo resupply, comms mesh nodes, and the unique spare parts and maintenance needs of sensors and maritime connectors—not for routine

rifle company resupply. Surface connectors and insertion options deserve explicit investment—medium and small boats, launch systems, and maritime connectors expand operational flexibility and are better returns than duplicative infantry logistics. The terrain of INDOPACOM does not support traditional mechanized or motorized maneuver, which could be the subject of a separate article. This requires a concerted focus on moving and emplacing the assets vital to conducting the LCT's core mission set.

The NMESIS and similar stand-in littoral shooters are precision dependent. Poor geolocation, weak PID, or incomplete ELINT characterization increases the risk of fratricide, legal exposure, and operational failure. In the INDOPACOM littorals, the key measure of effectiveness is not how fast a rifle company can seize ground, but how reliably a battalion can produce high-confidence, low-latency target tracks that satisfy tactical joint targeting standards. A sensor-shooter battalion, organized and trained to fuse multispectral detections, includes satellite-fed cues and a redundancy of ground-anchored MST radar, ELINT signatures, automated information system anomaly detection, and artificial intelligence-assisted optical confirmation. These sensors

will produce the hardened tracks that the NMESIS needs to be decisive. The sensor-shooter battalion places sensing and target production, not infantry tempo, at the center of the battalion's purpose. This is a quantum shift from legacy ground-centric thinking.

We should preserve the infantry's identity and decouple its structure from a unit antithetical to its purpose to close with and destroy the enemy. Institutional realities and morale matter. The infantry's T&R, identity, and career progression are sacrosanct and operationally necessary. The 3d LCT does not align with what the infantry is designed to do, and that is ok. The proposed change is not to dismiss the infantry riflemen but to unmoor the infantry from the LCT's organic baseline. When close security or forcible entry is required, infantry companies or battalions can be task organized to the sensor-shooter battalion under established orders, preserving lines of effort and unit pride. Decoupling allows the infantry to maintain T&R fidelity, and the sensor-shooter battalion gains time and billets to develop specialist tradecraft without competing for infantry tasks. Additionally, command relationships become clearer. The battalion becomes an enabler and a shooter for the fleet, not simply another rifle battalion for general purpose ground combat that happens to have a NMESIS capability and some unique sensors.

Doctrine, training, personnel, and acquisition changes are required. The transition must be codified across METs, T&R, military occupational specialty designations, acquisition priorities, and command relationships. Littoral reconnaissance and maritime targeting METs must be elevated and made the established baseline for the unit. A future possibility is a merger between radio battalions and LCTs. This would enable signals operational tasking authority where it is needed. A reweight of emphasis from communications intelligence voice intercepts toward ELINT for primarily surface vessel emitter characterization; electronic notation codes and emitter signatures are decisive in the maritime domain. This would give radio battalions

a direct tactical mission to sense and characterize for fleet shooters. A radio battalion and LCT merger, or at least a stronger habitual relationship, could be an excellent step forward. That said, the immediate priority should be to enhance LCT's organic sensor capabilities and joint fires command and control integration while reducing its infantry footprint. Reallocate infantry company resources to enable several more NMESIS batteries and the necessary support that comes with them.

With a shift away from infantry tactics, formal T&R lanes need to codify skills for MST employment, sUAS over-water operations with artificial intelligence/machine learning payloads, Minotaur edge node operations, and NMESIS target building and serialization. The personnel model must carve out billets for all-source analysts and targeting non-commissioned officers embedded at the battalion and littoral reconnaissance team level. Perhaps some of this structure can come from MEF information groups to serve in a more tactically relevant role. Training realism is nonnegotiable: workups must include real vessels, emitters, denied comms, and realistic sea states. Dryland emitterless lanes on "the big island" during work-up provide no meaningful rehearsal for sea denial. During the work-up in 2024, a live vessel was used to simulate the adversary, which was highly successful, but this training was abandoned in 2025 due to a renewed focus on infantry company T&Rs—not because realistic training was purposefully ignored but because competing infantry resources and training took priority.

Practically, the new battalion will not look like three rifle companies. Instead, a headquarters and service company built around several NMESIS batteries, a littoral reconnaissance company, and a maritime targeting and intelligence company is the appropriate baseline. A small force protection company provides immediate security, with larger security packages requested from adjacent line battalions. Command rotations that alternate between recon, artillery, and intelligence officers for battalion command with those same MOSs staggered through key staff positions

will help to preserve the Marine Corps' identity and interoperability with its requested infantry support while ensuring fires and sensor-centric decision making.

Instead of stroking egos, we need units designed to deter. Let us build a capability so credible that adversaries choose not to act. There is a cost of inaction, however. If the battalion remains in infantry wings and doctrine, collection capability will atrophy as reconnaissance, fires, signals intelligence/electronic warfare, sUAS, and MST training is ceded to line infantry tasks. Target quality will degrade, and NMESIS employment will be constrained by poor targeting inputs. Indo-Pacific Command will be deprived of a cost-effective sensor-shooter battalion that is very close to being achieved. The opportunity cost is operational and strategic; a promising concept turned into another example of organizational comfort defeating necessity. Instead, redefine the 3d LCT's METs to center on Reconnaissance in the Maritime Domain and NMESIS-oriented Attacks on Maritime Targets.

Honor the infantry and let the LCT be the LCT. The infantry is the Corps' soul and must remain central to its character and core capabilities. However, honor is not served by grafting infantry structure onto a unit whose survival and relevance depend on being something different. Reconstructing the 3d LCT as a sensor-shooter battalion is not doctrinal heresy; it is practical stewardship of personnel, technology, and mission. It preserves the infantry's identity while providing INDOPACOM a purpose-built formation that senses better, fuses smarter, and enables precision prosecution at range with NMESIS and naval fires. Anything less is a missed opportunity and a dangerous one. The LCT proved what it could do during several iterations of deployments to the Philippines; now the Corps must let it do it without the handcuffs of structural and training misalignments that hinder accomplishment of the unit's core mission.



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