

# Operation FROM THE SEA

Where are the advantages?

by Capt Daniel D. Phillips

The Marine Corps is taking a deliberate approach to how it develops the ability to fight peer adversaries in the future. The method by which the Marine Corps is instructing maneuver warfare will lead to an attritionist mindset and a misunderstanding of the proper implementation of maneuver warfare among its future leaders. If it is properly taught and understood throughout the Corps, a new offset could be reached that adversarial peer actors cannot attain. *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, currently defines maneuver warfare as

a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.<sup>1</sup>

This definition only describes what maneuver warfare may look like to entities observing a specific action. The definition of maneuver warfare should read as follows:

Maneuver warfare is a method of warfighting that seeks to analyze an enemy network, identify actionable focal points that are critical to the enemy, then action the focal points through a combination of speed, surprise and violence.

The embracement of *MCDP 1*'s definition has resulted in several second- and third-order effects regarding the Marine Corps' quality of education on maneuver warfare. It is ingrained at all levels that if commanders exercise speed, focus, and surprise against the enemy, they are exercising maneuver warfare. This misunderstanding has led to the conduction of attrition warfare. Cen-

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ters of gravity and critical vulnerabilities are being identified with no analysis or identification of enemy networks.

The subsequent fictional vignette is set in the year 2030, and the consequences of the Marine Corps' shift from maneuver warfare are made evident. It demonstrates the futility of the arms race between the United States and its peer competitors—China, Russia, and Iran. Superior technology and increased force preservation, although helpful, does not necessarily serve as an asymmetric advantage. Without an indomitable national will, an attritionist will never win a war.

## Vignette

*Interviewer:* Col Fullman, in your own words, please describe to me your opinions on how America lost the Pacific. Specifically, touch on your involvement with the failed forced entry operation, Operation FROM THE SEA (Operation FTS), into the South China Sea and the domino effect that it had on the rest of the region.

*Col Fullman:* A large portion of policymakers in Washington and military leadership at the Pentagon believe that the Chinese occupation of Okinawa, Guam, Hawaii, and the Kwajalein Atoll is a direct result of the failure of Operation FTS. It does play a large role in the loss of American dominance in the Pacific Ocean; however, the decline started much earlier.

Look back to 2004 and the emergence of the IED during Operation



**We need to change definitions and reforms on maneuver warfare. (Photo by LCpl Kyle Bunyi.)**

IRAQI FREEDOM. Prior to the proliferation of the IED across the battlefield, America had executed one of the quickest, most effective displays of maneuver warfare during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Through a thorough analysis of the Iraqi Army's network, the Marine Corps was able to conduct a swift and decisive offensive action that struck focal points and bypassed military targets of little significance.

After the Baath Party lost power, the Iraqi Army was dismantled and no effective government structure was left. The Marine Corps no longer had

find focal points that overlap and target them. When the Marine Corps left Iraq, it left with a new mindset: you must be able to kill the most enemies, and you must do it with the most technologically advanced gear while keeping all of your personnel alive.

Take this attritionist attitude and then apply it to America's peer adversaries, who have the money, technology sectors, and willpower to compete with America, and you have an arms race. America would develop a new technology, and a few days, months, or years later, each peer would have a similar, or

MAGTF commanders to integrate and leverage warfighting functions across the domains and target specific critical vulnerabilities.

The *Marine Corps Operating Concept* also served to reinforce the marriage of the Navy and Marine Corps.<sup>2</sup> It emphasized that the Marine Corps would primarily fight from ships—which had always been the case. This bold focus stated, to the enemies of the Marine Corps, that the battlefield had already been chosen. All the enemy had to do was shape that battlefield to its advantage, which is exactly what it ended up doing during Operation FTS.

The final seed of disaster sown by the Marine Corps was an idea originally published in 2012 and fully ingrained into company-level leadership in 2017. It was the idea that the method paragraph in operation orders was not needed. The Marine Corps had determined, because of a lack of understanding about how to identify an enemy's center of gravity and critical vulnerability, it would only define them without explaining how to identify and exploit them.

The Marine Corps' removal of the method paragraph essentially ended the officer corps' entry-level education on maneuver warfare. The method paragraph was the only portion of any units' order where the commander justified his understanding of maneuver warfare. Without the method paragraph, the commander and his subordinate are left with only offensive forms of maneuver to rely on. The lieutenants from The Basic School's classes of 2017 were our company commanders and most essential levels of leadership in 2025 during Operation FTS.

*Interviewer:* Sir, would you please expound upon how this history lesson affected the failure of Operation FTS?

*Col Fullman:* Yes. Since the 2000s, China focused on developing existing reefs and small islands in and around the South China Sea with the intent to influence shipping channels. The Navy and Marine Corps' original plan was to conduct freedom of navigation patrols through the area to demonstrate that they would not be challenged by the Chinese. The freedom of navigation patrols had a limited effect, at first when

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## ***America was no longer the preeminent leader of the world ...***

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a true objective besides a vague tasking to build a nation. This left the Corps with no enemy course of action to focus on and analyze. Because of the lack of focus, the Marine Corps was forced to fight an enemy who was elusive, who had minimal command structure, and who had a purely attritionist mindset. Counterinsurgency operations were conducted, and key players in the insurgent network were neutralized. What was different from past wars was the enemy's ability to replace neutralized leadership, operate with minimal infrastructure, and have limited identifiable tactical goals.

Take an enemy who cannot be analyzed, then add the new dimension of the IED. The Marines were forced into a situation where their best hope was to kill more of the enemy than the enemy could kill of them. To develop superior means of force preservation and hope that the enemy's will faded before their nation's did, all while a new national government in Iraq attempted to get on its feet.

The "kill more enemies and preserve more friendlies" strategy did not work in Iraq; but it did set in motion the idea that the war was lost because of a lack of host-nation will. Not that it didn't succeed; to win a war, you must identify what the enemy wants and then

better, counter development. The Marine Corps believed if it had a superior technology for one day, then during that day, it would have an asymmetric advantage. What it did not factor in was that America was no longer the preeminent leader of the world, and anything that it could produce would almost immediately be replicated. Also, if you have superpowers with similar technology going toe to toe, then the victor will be the participant that has the most firepower, manpower, and national will.

As a result of this warfighting philosophy flaw, in September 2016, the Marine Corps produced guidance that ultimately resulted in the disaster of Operation FTS. The guidance came in the form of a document called the *Marine Corps Operating Concept*. It explained that to win a fight, the Marine Corps must be able to fight in the five domains that had been identified at the time of publication: land, sea, air, cyber, and space. This idea—in itself—is true, but the idea of how to achieve this was flawed. It focused on the technological and doctrinal advancement of each individual domain. This guidance did great things for the Marine Corps on a face-value level; it bought new weapons, better computers, and better ships. What it failed to do was train

the Chinese islands were merely several square acres of sand and concrete. They had no effect once the islands increased by several square miles, the largest of which was Mischief Reef. In the 1990s, it was only dry during low tide; however, by 2025, it was nearly 50 feet above sea level and 10 square kilometers.

In 2024, China moved an entire fleet of ships, to include a force that looked largely similar to a Marine Corps MEF, into the South China Sea. Initial reports were that the Chinese MEF and fleet were conducting a large-scale exercise to serve as a proof of concept for their ability to operate across warfighting domains. Initial reports were wrong. The Chinese did demonstrate their ability to operate across the domains. They did it by shutting down shipping corridors with their ships and submarines. They ceased air traffic with their expeditionary air element. They destroyed orbiting satellites by launching missiles into orbit with tons of metal dust instead of explosives. The dust hit international satellites at such a speed that it destroyed all of them. Yes, every one of them. However, Chinese satellites had magnets that were able to collect the dust prior to impact. Finally, Chinese cyber war elements were able to access publicly-owned shipping companies and international companies, and they Chi-

nese implanted viruses in companies' systems that made simple changes to serial numbers and modified financial tracking algorithms in accounting departments by one thousandth of a percent, which went unnoticed and crashed several companies.

The combination of these attacks across the warfighting domains forced America to answer hostility with lethality. In 2025, the Marine Corps stood up a task force comprised of the 31st

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MEU and the 15th MEU. I served as the GCE commander for the 31st MEU. In basic terms, the task force was to seize Mischief Reef and establish a forward base from which the Marine Corps could conduct future offensive missions. Operation FTS was launched. The 31st MEU loaded onto littoral combat ships—troop transport variant (LCSTV), a new ships with a limited signature on radar, and headed toward the objective.

Years earlier, the National Security Agency embedded sensors into the sea

floor in the South China Sea that, when activated, would rise to the surface and loiter in a certain area. These sensors would launch mini drones that could mark targets for our tomahawk missiles. Unfortunately, most of the sensors did not activate, and those that did had a very limited effect. I believe the mini drones played a part in the Chinese seeing us coming. We launched missiles at the targets we could identify and ones that we had reasonable assumptions about.

The missiles were the only shaping fires that our landing force had. All of our close air support platforms were caught in a battle of attrition with Chinese fighters. The LCSTVs were not able to get close to any landing points because of their captains' reasonable fear of the Chinese's anti-area/access denial rail-gun systems.

We disembarked the LCSTVs in rubber craft and high-speed AAVs at a range that far exceeded what the naval surface fires could provide. We knew something was wrong after about twenty minutes, when we heard several loud explosions. Apparently, the LCSTVs' anti-radar shape worked; unfortunately, the Chinese had mined the waters with mines that would release from the sea floor when they picked up certain frequencies from propellers. In a matter of minutes, all three of our LCSTVs were sunk or sinking.

We continued on, guided in by beacons that recon placed at landing points. At around one kilometer from landing, the Chinese began to fire on our landing party with shore guns. Their initial effect was devastating. We were able to attempt to suppress with the stabilized 25mm cannons on our AAVs. While we moderately silenced the guns on the shore, we failed to notice the Chinese patrol boats that had materialized to our rear. I am certain the only reason that I was not killed with the rest of the landing party was because my AAV had both a weapon and engine malfunction.

Our failed landing and destroyed task force was one of three failed forced entries that day. That was exactly what the Chinese had planned on. They had already maneuvered their fleet to seize



***We may not be the preeminent world provider.*** (Photo by LCpl Scott Jenkins.)

American holdings in the Pacific prior to our failure. America had no forces in the region remaining to counter them.

### Operation FTS After-Action Report

- New technology does not necessarily constitute an offset in warfare.
  - Without technology that rivals that of our enemy, the Marine Corps will be at a disadvantage. The current operating environment consists of numerous peer rivals to the Marine Corps and America. The key word is “peer.” Peer meaning that they have the means to match America regarding economic growth, industry, and development.
  - In an operating environment where each nation has similar capabilities, new developments can expect to be replicated or surpassed by each respective actor immediately or quickly.
  - In prior wars and circumstances throughout history, technological developments created an asymmetric advantage for generations. These advancements include ships, nuclear weapons, and precision guided munitions.
  - America cannot develop weapons quickly enough or advanced enough for technology to set it apart in the future. The only thing that can change is a cultural shift in the Marine Corps from attrition warfare to maneuver warfare.
- Each domain needs to be housed under the umbrella of a universal domain.
  - The issue that the Marine Corps has with its understanding of maneuver warfare is that it looks at warfighting domains in a linear way, meaning that the Corps attempts to isolate each domain—land, air, sea, space and cyber—and to superior in each individually. The Marine Corps needs to look at the enemy holistically and attempt to identify what the enemy’s most likely course of action will be. It then need, to see how the domains are being leveraged to attain that goal. Once this has been completed, the Marine Corps can do a network analysis on each domain.
  - If Marine Corps understands the enemy’s network, we will not only



**We did get troops on the ground—at great expense.** (Photo by LCpl Scott Jenkins.)

have indirect fires to execute combined arms but also understand that attacking a component of cyber may facilitate maneuver in the air.

- We cannot allow the enemy to either choose or know the battlefield on which they will fight.
  - When the Marine Corps re-devoted itself to the Navy for a fighting platform, it announced to the world the battlefield on which it would fight.
  - The Marine Corps is at a critical junction in its history, similar to the 1800s when senior leadership refused to leave guard duty on ships. Had the Marine Corps not shifted from ships’ guards to primarily expeditionary duty, it would have become obsolete.
  - Fighting from only ships is obsolete. The Marine Corps needs to make the tough decision and take action now and leave ships as only one of a litany of options.
  - The answer may not be embracing land, sea, or air for means of forced entry. If the Marine Corps is focused on only being prepared to be expeditionary from one domain, it will fail.
  - Any enemy that wants to protect its coast from the Marine Corps has already developed means to do so.
  - If the Marine Corps continues to attempt to justify the sea-based entry, it will lose its chance to develop other methods for larger forces. This will lead to a strategic failure and thousands of lost lives.

- The Marine Corps needs to cultivate innovation with regard to new means of entry for large-scale units from the land, sea, air, and space.
- A lack of maneuverist, small unit leadership leads to a lack of maneuverist senior leadership.
- The Basic School’s lieutenants of today are the generals of tomorrow. If the Marine Corps fails them at entry-level training, it will start a cycle that may never be reversed. Had the leadership during Operation FTS understood how to write a method paragraph, or expected to see one from their commander, they could have seen what they were doing was pure attrition and the same tactics that had been executed for the previous several decades.
- Without an indomitable national will, an attritionist will never win a war.

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#### Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*. (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *The Marine Corps Operating Concept How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

