The Commandant's Rapid Response Essay Contest: Third Place

Modernizing MEU Capabilities for a Rapid Response Future

Shaping the MEU for tomorrow's battles

by LCpl Caroline Perkins

If the Marine Corps is to remain an agile, adaptive force at the forefront of innovation and operational readiness, it must continuously evolve in response to an ever-changing global environment. The era of trench warfare and muskets is long gone; modern conflict is increasingly fought from a distance, leveraging digital capabilities, precision munitions, and platforms capable of mass destruction. As a Service rooted in tradition, the Marine Corps must balance its heritage with the urgent need for modernization, ensuring it remains equipped, trained, and prepared to fight and win in the battle spaces of today and tomorrow.

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Central to our rapid response capability is the MEU—a scalable, forward-deployed force specialized in conducting operations across land, air, and sea. These units are designed to respond swiftly and effectively to crises worldwide, embodying the flexibility and lethality of the MAGTF. A MAGTF typically consists of approximately 45,000 to 98,000 Marines and is designed to conduct large-scale international operations. However, given the significant manpower necessary, a smaller, more agile unit might prove useful. A MEU can be employed to achieve comparable strategic effects on a smaller scale. The MEUs offer rapid, flexible response options for contingency operations, crisis response, and humanitarian assistance, without the extensive logistical and operational nightmare of a full MAGTF.

USS* Kearsarge *(LHD 3), USS* Gunston Hall *(LSD 44), USS* Arlington *(LPD 24), and the embarked 22nd MEU maneuvering with Swedish Navy ships in the Baltic Sea. *(Photo by Communication Specialist 2nd Class Aaron Lau.)*

Each MEU will comprise Marines drawn from across a MEF and other major subordinate commands. The objective is to establish a balanced and integrated composition of ground, air, logistics, and command elements. This structure ensures each rotation has an equal opportunity to train, deploy, and operate cohesively alongside their Navy counterparts. This cooperation between the Navy and the Marine Corps can be referred to as the "blue-green" team. This partnership enables the MEU to project power from the sea, respond to crises, and conduct a range of missions worldwide.

The Navy's primary contribution is the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), a naval task force comprising three key amphibious vessels. The amphibious assault ship (LHD or LHA), the amphibious transport dock, and the dock landing ship provide the essential amphibious platform that enables Marines to deploy rapidly and sustain operations. The Navy is responsible for navigation, ship operations, flight deck management, medical support, logistics, and providing naval gunfire, and aviation support when necessary. Without the ARG, the MEU would lack the mobility, protection, and sustainment capabilities required for expeditionary operations.

Together, the Navy and Marine Corps form the ARG/MEU team, a force capable of conducting amphibious warfare, crisis response, humanitarian aid, tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, and non-combatant evacuation operations. The Navy ensures that Marines can arrive at the right place, at the right time, and with the necessary equipment and support.

Looking ahead, the aim is to enhance our ability to deploy small units or battalion landing teams rapidly, enabling them to operate independently and tactically—regardless of the supporting ARG. These teams must be capable of executing a range of missions, from force projection and presence operations to high-intensity conflict and enemy engagement. All future MEUs should be designated as MEU (Special Operations Capable) (MEU[SOC]) to ensure they maintain the capabilities required for specialized operations in evolving global threat environments.

The MEUs designated as SOC undergo a rigorous process to expand their operational capabilities beyond traditional amphibious missions. This transformation enables them to conduct specialized, high-risk missions typically associated with special operations forces while retaining the flexibility of a rapid-response Marine unit.

The process begins with intensive specialized training that enhances the skills of the MEU's personnel in areas such as reconnaissance, direct action, urban warfare, close-quarters combat, and intelligence gathering. Marines receive advanced instruction in tactics, techniques, and procedures tailored to unique operations. This training often includes joint exercises with U.S. Special Operations Command and other elite units to ensure interoperability and proficiency.

Marines with Force Reconnaissance Platoon, Maritime Raid Force, 31st MEU, secure the vessel during a visit, board, search and seizure training. *(Photo by Cpl Angel Diaz Montes De Oca.)*

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Additionally, MEU(SOC)s incorporate specialized equipment to support these missions. This may involve advanced communications gear, night vision devices, specialized weapons, and insertion/extraction methods such as fast-roping from helicopters, small-boat operations, and airborne insertions. The aviation combat element of the MEU is equipped and trained to provide the precise close air support and mobility required for special operations.

Before receiving the MEU(SOC) designation, the unit undergoes a comprehensive certification exercise, also referred to as CERTEX. This evaluation tests the MEU's ability to conduct a wide spectrum of special operations missions under realistic combat conditions. Successful completion of the exercise certifies the unit as capable of deploying as a multi-faceted SOC force.

Ultimately, MEU(SOC)s serve as a vital link between conventional Marine forces and U.S. Special Operations Forces, providing commanders with a versatile, forward-deployed option capable of rapid, precise action in complex operational environments.

In addition to maintaining SOC status, future MEUs must demonstrate sustained proficiency in operating across all domains—land, air, and sea. This includes fielding expeditionary capabilities such as the MV-22 Osprey, UH-1Y Venom, and Landing Craft Air Cushion vehicles, enabling hybrid maneuverability. Furthermore, unmanned

aircraft systems drone integration on all platforms will be essential for persistent surveillance, reconnaissance, and long-range deterrence. This is not referring to lightweight, wind-susceptible drones but rather Group 3 UAS drones such as the Jump 20, which offer greater stability, endurance, and operational capability.

These changes are essential to address the challenges Marines and sailors face in the maritime operational environment. Certain vehicles can become logistical burdens or prove ineffective when operating ashore, complicating mission execution. Maintaining an amphibious presence provides critical strategic leverage against adversaries not only at sea but throughout the entire warfighting domain. The Marine Corps is renowned for its ability to operate independently with minimal support from other military branches. To preserve this reputation and remain at the forefront of winning battles, it is imperative to sustain strict training regimens and high-tempo deployment rotations.

A significant portion of the FMF should participate in MEU deployments or operational exercises, ensuring they understand how Marines engage in combat, operate, and respond to crises. Achieving seamless interoperability with both sailors and Marines across different military occupational specialties is vital to the effectiveness and adaptability of our forces.

Unfortunately, we have limited rotational windows to maintain forward presence, especially considering the increasing frequency of MEU deployments. With such a high operational tempo, it can be challenging to consistently assign the same Marines to specific exercises or training events, as circumstances can shift rapidly. Marines who were fully capable upon arriving at their duty stations may later become restricted due to injuries sustained during physical training or difficulty performing on their physical or combat fitness tests.

While the logistical challenges of integrating multiple MOS aboard ship are understandable, it is important to ensure fairness and opportunity across the force. Marines returning from a MEU should not be automatically prioritized for future deployments if new, qualified Marines are available and eager to participate. Every Marine who meets the mission requirements and demonstrates readiness should be given the opportunity to train, deploy, and grow regardless of rank or prior status. Selection should be based on the needs of the mission and the capabilities of the individual, not solely on previous experience or seniority.

Key mission essential tasks should include sustaining presence in contested maritime regions, maintaining a forward-deployed, combat-ready force, and ensuring seamless interoperability between Marines and sailors. This may include training alongside sailors, gaining familiarity with shipboard roles and responsibilities, and developing an understanding of naval terminology and operational language.

In addition to executing mission essential tasks, it is imperative that commanders and leaders remain actively engaged in the training process itself. Leaders must assess whether the training is being conducted correctly, identify if any Marines lack clarity on the mission objectives, and determine whether the training is relevant and applicable in a real-world combat environment. These considerations are essential not only for immediate mission success but also for planning the intent and execution of future deployments.

Experience has shown that when Marines do not understand the purpose behind their training, it can result in diminished motivation, reduced focus, and a lack of meaningful leader mentorship.

Effective leadership requires both honesty and awareness. Leaders must communicate the *why* behind the mission and training, and ensure Marines understand their role within the broader objective. The emphasis should remain on the quality and impact of the training, not so much the command visits or extracurricular port activities. We need to maintain the human aspect of training as well because you are only as strong as the Marines to the left and right of you.

Furthermore, evaluations should not only focus on the performance of the Marines but also on the effectiveness of the leadership involved. Assessing leadership performance is key to ensuring training standards are upheld and the force is prepared for deployment. Comprehensive inspections of ships

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A VXE30 Stalker conducts aerial surveillance during UAS training with Battalion Landing Team 3/6, 22nd MEU(SOC). (Photo by LCpl Kyle Baskin.)

and vehicles should also be conducted before departure, during operations, and upon return to uphold the highest standards of safety and operational readiness for all personnel involved.

A consistent operational model could involve a rotational presence in strategic waters such as the Baltic Sea. For example, one vessel could conduct small-boat operations offshore, another could remain in port supporting ship-to-shore logistics, and a third could conduct continuous flight operations. These distinct but complementary roles would function as a cohesive mini-MAGTF, operating together to support broader regional objectives.

This approach represents only a modest evolution from current practices, with enhanced multi-ship capabilities allowing both aviation and logistics elements to support multi-ship operations, while maintaining their primary ship attachments during a simulated six to ten-month deployment cycle.

Upon completion of a MEU's deployment, a structured reset process would begin. Ships undergo maintenance and refit, aircraft are cycled and serviced, and Landing Craft Air Cushions and other ground vehicles are restored and refurbished for follow-on rotations.

This ensures a seamless transition for the next MEU, maintaining a persistent and capable presence during operation. Maintaining a constant rotation ensures that a trained, equipped, and mission-ready unit is always available to deploy on short notice. Allowing MEUs to maintain a high level of readiness through regular training, integration, and evaluation cycles ensures that Marines remain proficient in their skills and capable of handling diverse missions.

Constantly deploying MEUs sends a visible signal of U.S. military presence and commitment in key regions, which can deter potential adversaries and reassure allies. A rotational force ensures that this flexible capability is always on hand to support evolving strategic needs. In addition, rotations allow forces to cycle between deployment, recovery, and training phases, preventing burnout and preserving the long-term effectiveness of personnel.

In the event of a sudden natural disaster requiring a rapid military response, MEUs on rotation serve as a critical global reaction force capable of immediate deployment. If one MEU is already forward-deployed and two others are in the midst of pre-deployment training, there exists the potential to form a temporary Special Purpose MAGTF by selecting personnel from the available MEUs.

This contingency force would be composed of Marines who have already completed MEU certification, demonstrated exceptional performance during training, and, where applicable, include Marines with special operations experience. The purpose of this temporary unit would be to rapidly respond within 24 hours to emerging crises, whether humanitarian or security-related, without disrupting the primary training and deployment schedules of the parent MEUs.

By leveraging highly trained personnel from multiple units, the Marine Corps can maintain operational tempo, uphold training standards, and still deliver a fast, capable force able to meet global contingencies. This approach ensures readiness while preserving the integrity of ongoing MEU rotations and mission preparedness.

By 2035, the goal is to have fully interoperable, rapid-response forces consistently capable of operating as MAGTFs alongside Navy assets. This sustained integration would lay the groundwork for the immediate formation of special-purpose forces or forward-deployed forces in the event of conflict, with pre-positioned systems and calibrated operational readiness.

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