

# Sea Denial in the Desert

How the MAGTF Training Command continues to evolve Service-level training to meet requirements for expeditionary operations

by MajGen Austin Renforth

The MAGTF Training Command (MAGTFTC) recently completed SERVICE-LEVEL TRAINING EXERCISE (SLTE) 2-23, centered around 3D Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) and 7th Mar. SLTE 2-23 provided another opportunity for the 3rd MLR to progress while also providing an opportunity for 7th Mar to be better prepared to meet the future. As the institution continues to implement, develop, and debate core concepts to *Force Design 2030 (FD 2030)* and *Training & Education 2030 (T&E 2030)*, the validity of training amphibious operations at Twentynine Palms has come into question by leaders at multiple levels. For decades the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) served as the foundation for training the Service in collective combined-arms exercises, though planners and leaders alike are examining the relevancy of MCAGCC in the era of *FD 2030* and the re-emergence of the naval campaign. Questions surrounding the ability to train in sea denial, counterlanding, and naval-integrated kill-web operations in the desert lead planners in the FMF to seek alternate training locations that better replicate the conditions and environments of the Indo-Pacific.

Though the allure of creating a perceived irreconcilable chasm between MCAGCC and the realities of combat operations against the pacing threat may invigorate heated debate surrounding *FD 2030*, it is a surface-deep criticism. Service-level training is much more than an exercise on a piece of terrain. It is a comprehensive approach to training and readiness that supports the Commandant of the Marine Corps' Title 10 responsibilities to train and equip combat-credible forces to all geographic combatant commanders.

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Readiness generation is the product of training and readiness repetition of mission essential tasks (MET), regardless of venue. MAGTFTC supports FMF units to achieve readiness through the INTEGRATED TRAINING EXERCISE, ADVERSARY FORCE EXERCISE, and synthetic training events through live, virtual and constructive training environments. The subordinate elements to MAGTFTC are unique capabilities nested within the training and education continuum. Though the live-fire combined-arms training at MCAGCC are exercises that are the options closest to combat, the readiness generation from MAGTFTC-sponsored events is not confined to the Mojave Desert.

## MAGTFTC Trained the FMF Before 9/11

The publication of *FD 2030* redirected the Marine Corps' mission from countering violent extremists in the Middle East to peer-level competition, emphasizing the Indo-Pacific. It called on the Service to transform from traditional models of organization and training to meet a new desired state partnered with the Navy. *FD 2030's* vision created a Service-wide debate that associated institutional components associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as adverse relics, much like the association with attrition warfare during the maneuverist transformation decades ago. This perception partly fuels contemporary criticism of

MCAGCC's role in training the force of the future, believing that training in Twentynine Palms is primarily relegated to exercises centered on the Global War on Terrorism, forgetting that the Mojave Viper series and mission readiness exercises focused on METs required for existing and emerging deployment requirements. It is important to have a perspective on the history of SLTE and its progression over time.

Before the attacks of 11 September 2001, MCAGCC sponsored the COMBINED-ARMS EXERCISE through the Tactical Training and Exercise Control Group (TTECG). From the early 1980s, the COMBINED-ARMS EXERCISE provided FMF units with live-fire maneuver training in core METs against a Soviet-threat template. Exercise events focused on the fundamentals of technical and tactical integration between elements of the MAGTF to prepare units to deploy to Europe, Africa, Asia, and as part of MEU. The terrain at MCAGCC did not necessarily match the deployable theater, though the training environment created combat conditions that the FMF could not replicate at home stations or in theater. Roles and responsibilities between TTECG and the FMF (though a unit-level training program) existed to ensure that the supporting establishment provided opportunities that the FMF could not. Theater/MEU-specific training continued at the home station so that unit-level and Service-level training complemented each other. Those expectations and opportunities still exist today.

As the Marine Corps transitioned into the 21st century, MCAGCC evolved to meet the needs of the Service and the Commandant's Title 10 responsibilities in the new global operating environment. Training and Education



package for 3D MLR to support a naval campaign. The exercise was distributive in nature, establishing the MLR's expeditionary advance bases and command and control (C2) nodes ranging across Southern California from MCAGCC to San Clemente Island, while 3D MarDiv served as a task group headquarters from the Joint Expeditionary Warfighting Laboratory in Coronado, CA. The MLR TRAINING EXERCISE design and execution demonstrated the potential of the live, virtual, and constructive training environment by incorporating physical and synthetic joint/naval capabilities with organic MLR assets to complete resilient kill webs from MCAGCC into the Pacific Ocean. MAGTFTC's Service-Level Training Division designed scenarios for 3D MLR and 3D MarDiv to train in reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance operations, maritime strike support, EABO, and support to sea-denial operations. The resident expertise in exercise design and control across MAGTFTC led to the continued evolution in training envisioned in both *FD 2030* and *T&E 2030*, striking a delicate balance between training in the fundamentals of combat operations and validating emerging employment concepts required to prepare for conflict against the pacing threat.

While MAGTFTC adapted SLTE 2-23 to meet the needs of 3D MLR to train for future employment concepts as part of the SIF, the exercise did not lose sight of training core competencies in MAGTF operations to prepare for expeditionary operations in the current operating environment. To support I MEF global force management readiness, TTECG developed the MAGTF Distributed Maneuver Exercise to train a regimental task force in offensive and defensive METs. The five-day exercise provided 7th Mar and its attachments two days of synthetic training in multi-domain operations across the ground, aviation, and logistics combat elements while culminating in a three-day live-fire combined-arms event in MCAGCC's maneuver corridors. SLTE 2-23 also provided advanced collective urban training to a battalion task force as part of THE ADVERSARY FORCE

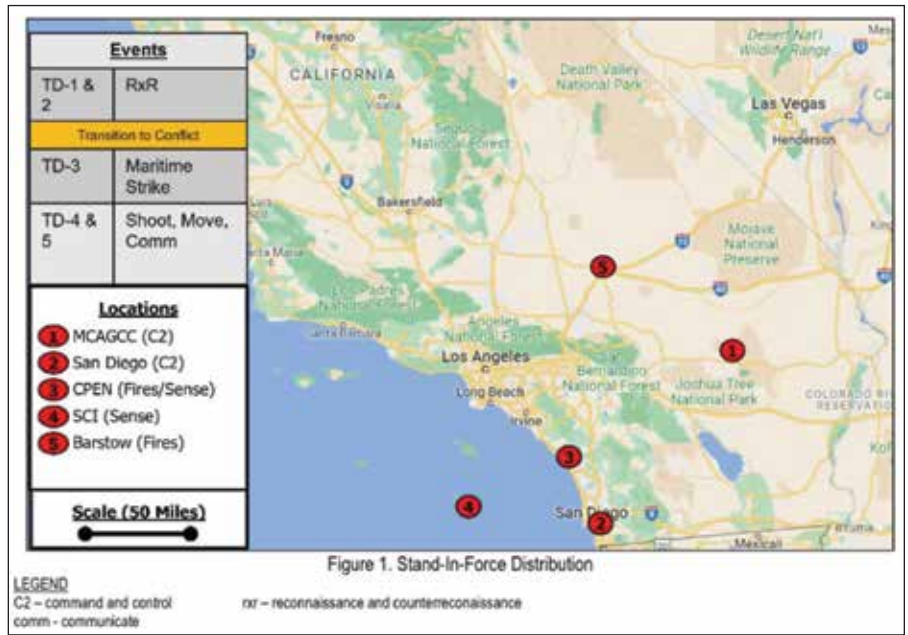


Figure 1. SLTEs do not need to be confined to the Mojave Desert. (Figure provided by author.)

EXERCISE, generating readiness in METs difficult to train for larger formations elsewhere in the Marine Corps. As the Service maintains transformation into 2030, MAGTFTC is prepared to

maximize the training opportunities at MCAGCC that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the Marine Corps while continuing its legacy of evolving exercises to prepare the FMF to

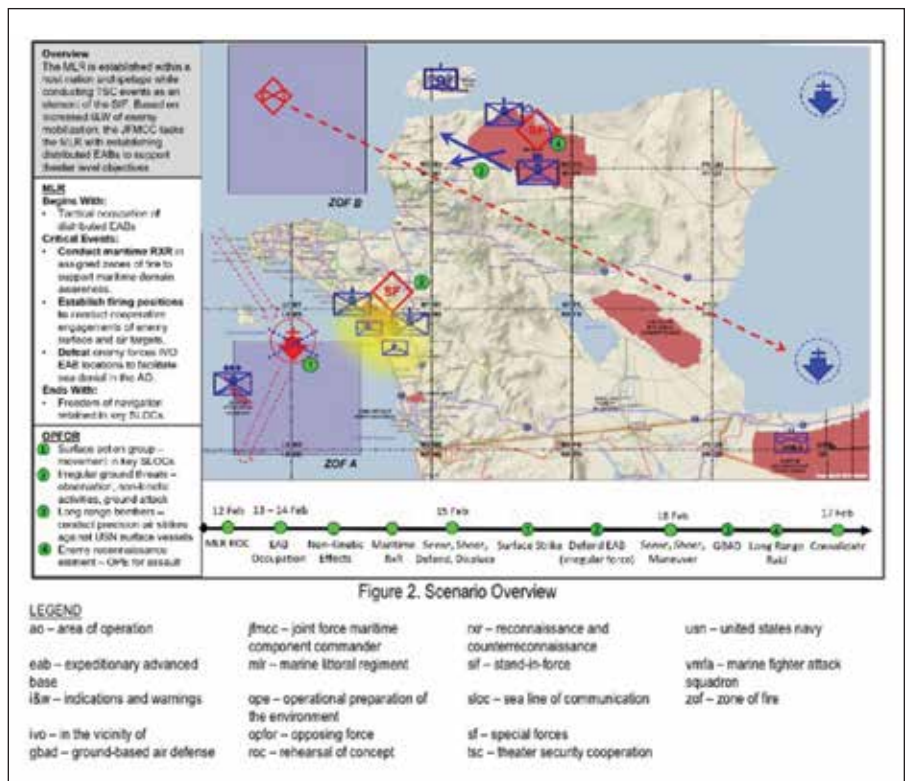


Figure 2. Concept of Operation graphic and narrative for the MLR TRAINING EXERCISE. (Figure provided by author.)

succeed in future conflict regardless of the combat theater.

To validate the more than 30 training days of SLTE 2-23, MAGTFTC facilitated the MWX between 7th Mar and 3D MLR. Casual observers see MWX as a bare-knuckle fight between two commands, which is an oversimplification of what the exercise provides the Service in lessons-learned and technical feedback to FMF units. The exercise design and control of MWX are built on the above-mentioned concepts and other emerging requirements to support a naval campaign. While the 7th Marines employed traditional concepts expected of a MAGTF, it was tasked with seizing key maritime terrain through an amphibious assault on behalf of a naval task force. 3D MLR employed concepts outlined in the *Tentative Manual for EABO* and the *Concept for SIF*, though the regiment supported a forward passage of lines with 3/5 Mar (serving as a battalion landing team) in a counter-landing operation against 7th Mar. The counter-landing operation between the SIF and battalion landing team is critical to providing the commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command with a capability linking the SIF to expeditionary forces in a conflict. Though the terrain at MCAGCC is not the first island chain, the training in fundamentals, exercise design, exercise control, maneuver space for large formations, and exercise observation is a value that cannot be replicated at a home station training venue or theater security cooperation exercise.

### **Exercises at MCAGCC are Much More than Premier Live-Fire Combined-Arms Training**

One of the critiques against SLTEs at MCAGCC is the limitations of realistic training terrain related to the first island chain and the costs associated with mobilizing an exercise force to move to the Mojave Desert. Though both of those points provide some validity to the value proposition for SLTE in its current form, it misses the essence of Service-level training as it fits within *T&E 2030*. SLTE is designed to complement the FMF's unit-level training program by providing fundamental

training in core METs, not to conform to or replace training provided by a commander. Though China is identified as the Nation's pacing threat and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command the priority theater of operation, the Marine Corps continues to deploy and posture worldwide. The Service is still responsible for providing combat-credible forces to all geographic combatant commanders. The perspective of over 40 years of combined-arms training at MCAGCC saw the Marine Corps succeed in operations during the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War. It prepared the FMF for contingency operations in Somalia, the Balkans, and the Middle East. After Task Force 58 returned from operations in Afghanistan and I MEF crossed the line of departure into Iraq, MAGTFTC prepared the FMF for counter-insurgency operations. Training at MCAGCC does not reach the end of history with the termination of the last conflict, it prepares the FMF for the next fight. MAGTFTC is adapting SLTE for the pacing threat while also training deployable units to succeed in expeditionary operations outside of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command theater. This is best demonstrated by the command's capability to create the MLR TRAINING EXERCISE, creating an event that expands the latitude beyond the narrow focus of the traditional perception of training at MCAGCC. The fundamentals in core METs do not change with the terrain. The latter point of the cost to deploy the exercise force for training pales compared to the resource and opportunity cost to mobilize MAGTFTC outside of MCAGCC. Exercises at MCAGCC are more than live-fire training in the Mojave Desert.

SLTE is one component of MAGTFTC's training portfolio. It is an integral learning tool for evolving formal schools, doctrine development, a tailored Fleet Support Program, and the mentorship of the future battalion, regimental, squadron, and group commanders. The instructors at MAGTFTC's centers of excellence and expeditionary warfare training groups support SLTE as observers and exercise controllers. The wealth of experience from the Marines and civilians supporting exer-

cises at MCAGCC pays dividends to a campaign of learning that reaches every corner of the Service. Observations and lessons learned to inform the courses producing the tactics and operations instructors serving across the FMF. Final exercise reports collected from high-end events at the Marine Corps' most permissive training area update and create new doctrine to prepare for future conflict. Assessments of core METs in finely tuned live-fire events refine a fleet support program that reinforces home station training and unit-level training programs. The comprehensive career experience of commanders and staff of MAGTFTC subordinate elements from all corners of the FMF and supporting establishment produces a first-class Facilitated After-Action Report that focuses on individual warfighting functions to prepare the exercise force for their upcoming deployment at every echelon.

SLTE 2-23 proved that MCAGCC can still meet the needs of the service in the era of *FD 2030*. Simultaneous regimental exercises distributed across hundreds of miles between the Mojave Desert and the Pacific Ocean demonstrates the adaptability of MAGTFTC to train the FMF in skills to succeed in conflict against the pacing threat and any other adversary threatening the nation's strategic interests. A single exercise training in future employment concepts and MAGTF operations shows that MCAGCC is the crossroads for force design and force development. The Marines and civilians of MAGTFTC demonstrated that training for sea-denial operations could be facilitated in the desert and that MCAGCC will continue to be the premier training venue for expeditionary operations in the future.

