

The Dangers of Overselling Insufficient Fire Support in the Active Force

The importance of MAGTF fires

by BGen Jerry C. McAbee (Ret), Col Stephen W. Baird (Ret) & Col Michael P. Marletto (Ret)

“Along with the seven High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) batteries, these 14 combined batteries [seven cannon batteries and seven HIMARS batteries] are sufficient to satisfy traditional requirements of a MEF [Marine Expeditionary Force] engaged in sustained operations ashore.” Force Design 2030 Annual Update May 2022

This misleading statement, now an official talking point of the Marine Corps, lacks any historical or operational justification and is unsupported by analysis, simulation, or wargaming. It blindly assumes that every cannon and rocket battery in the active force can be sourced from separate locations for a single contingency and that organizations optimally organized and equipped for distributed operations in the Western Pacific are flexible enough to meet contingencies in other geographical areas or theaters. It also assumes that a second or even third MAGTF are not needed to reinforce a committed MAGTF or support other contingencies simultaneously or near simultaneously. These are dangerous assumptions, neither of which will likely survive first contact with volatile global situations. They pose unacceptable risks to global crisis response by Marine Corps forces and to national security.

The sole question is not if seven cannon batteries and seven HIMARS batteries are sufficient to support a single MEF “engaged in sustained operations

>BGen McAbee is a career Artillery Officer. He has extensive artillery experience, including command of 11th Mar. His operational level experience includes Chief of the Ground Operations Branch, Operations Directorate U.S. Central Command during Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM; Chief of Staff, I MEF; and Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

>>Col Baird is a career Artillery Officer. He has extensive artillery and operational level experience including command of a direct support artillery battalion, Assistant Chief of Staff G-5 Plans for I MEF, Chief of Staff 1st MarDiv, and Chief of Staff for U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

>>>Col Marletto is a career Artillery Officer. He has extensive artillery and operational level experience, including command of a direct support artillery battalion, command of 11th Mar during the attack to Baghdad, and Assistant Chief of Staff G-3 Operations for I MEF(Forward) in Iraq.

ashore.” The more pressing question, and the one not being asked nor answered by advocates of *Force Design 2030* (FD 2030), is if seven cannon batteries and seven HIMARS batteries in the active force are sufficient to support a Marine Corps of three divisions, three wings, and necessary logistics with global warfighting commitments. The answer to both questions is a resounding NO!

FD 2030 and FD 2030 Annual Update (May 2022) misrepresent Marine Corps artillery requirements by drawing attention away from the whole (all the operating forces) and instead focusing on only a part of Marine Corps warfighting capabilities (a single MEF in a specific geographical area). The assumption

that seven cannon and seven HIMARS batteries can be globally sourced for a single MEF briefs well but, as history informs us, “Murphy” and the enemy always have a vote. Some of the cannon or rocket batteries will be deployed with the MEU. These MEUs may or may not get to the MEF fight, given other in-theater or out-of-theater requirements, such as noncombatant evacuation operations or other traditional MEU missions. Other contingencies or emerging concerns could necessitate the simultaneous or near simultaneous alert, deployment, or employment of a second or even a third MAGTF to another location or locations. Wars are not neat, set-piece affairs. We know from history that fighting often erupts in multiple locations if



Battery M, 3/11 Mar fires an M777 howitzer during a training exercise aboard Camp Fallujah, Iraq. (Photo by Sgt Nathaniel C. LeBlanc.)

an enemy or enemies perceive weakness or want to gain an advantage.

History also teaches us that the allure of a silver bullet is more often an illusion that comes back to haunt us, often with dire and unfortunate consequences. The *McNamara Line* in Vietnam and *Shock and Awe* in Iraq are just two recent examples. The almost exclusive reliance on long-range, precision rocket and missile fires in future wars will be another example when the Marine Corps fails to balance long-range precision fires with close-in fires. We agree that rockets and missiles have an increased role on the modern battlefield for shaping and interdiction, but rockets and missiles cannot replace cannon artillery's traditional role in the close and rear battles.

Seven cannon batteries, the sum of cannon artillery in the active force envisioned in the *FD 2030 Annual Update*, are insufficient to support the five infantry regiments in the 1st and 2nd MarDiv. The long-standing requirement for cannon artillery is one battalion (three batteries) in direct support of an infantry regiment. A minimum of five battalions (fifteen cannon batteries) are needed to support the 1st, 2d, 5th, 6th, and 7th Mar. This direct support requirement was repeatedly validated during World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Operation DESERT STORM, and dur-

ing the march to Baghdad in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. The Army has the same requirement and continues to maintain its close support cannon inventory while enhancing its long-range capabilities with rockets and missiles. Simply put, only cannon artillery can provide the close, continuous, and accurate all-weather and immediately responsive fire support Marine infantry must have to accomplish its mission. Mortars, close air support, and even rockets can certainly

We believe a minimum of two HIMARS battalions (six rocket batteries) are necessary to support a traditional MEF.

assist but nothing replaces the combination of capabilities that cannon artillery provides. Marine infantry and cannon artillery enjoy a deep and unshakeable bond that transcends any other relationship on the battlefield, past or present.

The habitual day-to-day relationship between an active-duty artillery battalion and its supported infantry regiment engenders a special trust and confidence, which is the foundation of Marine Corps combat effectiveness. Relationships matter. The direct support

artillery battalion provides the forward observers to supported infantry companies. Under the *FD 2030 Annual Update* construct, most infantry companies will not have a trained artillery officer to plan and call for artillery fires. The artillery battalion also provides the infantry regiment with the essential fire planning and fires coordination expertise needed to quickly and safely attack targets and to effectively deconflict fires with maneuver. Just as important, the battalion provides the tactical networks, architecture, and equipment to make it happen. Once again, history teaches us that an ad hoc, pick-up team approach to direct fire support does not work efficiently or effectively. Missteps will cost lives and jeopardize the mission.

Long-range precision fires are increasingly force multipliers on future battlefields. We were spoiled by peerless air superiority during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. A peer competitor will not afford us the same luxury in the future. The Marine Corps' reliance on tactical air to attack close and deep targets will be diminished or possibly extinguished for short or even long durations. The Marine Corps needs more rockets and missiles, not to replace cannon artillery but to interdict and shape the deep battle and, when necessary, to reinforce the fires of cannons. We believe a minimum

of two HIMARS battalions (six rocket batteries) are necessary to support a traditional MEF. One battalion is needed to provide reinforcing, general support-reinforcing, and general support fires to the division's direct support artillery, a necessary function traditionally performed by the 4th (and sometimes 5th) battalion(s) of division artillery, and a second battalion to support the MEF's deep battle. The modern battlefield will not lessen the requirement for direct support, reinforcing, general support-

reinforcing, and general support fires, but it does increase the requirement for long-range fires. Cannons and rockets are two sides of the same coin. One cannot replace the other. They are complementary.

The evolving role of Medium-Range Missile (MMSL) and Long-Range Missile batteries in the Marine Corps is admittedly a work in progress. The high cost and limited availability of Naval Strike Missiles and Tomahawk Long-Range Anti-Ship and Strike Missiles will necessarily limit employment to a narrowly defined mission, such as supporting a naval anti-ship campaign.

such as range and cost. We also argue that each direct support cannon battalion be configured as 3 x 8-gun batteries, as was previously the case before manpower considerations, not real requirements, reduced batteries to a 3 x 6-gun structure. Eight-gun batteries increase the massed effects of artillery and permit the battery to employ 2 x 4-guns platoons for split battery operations. Split battery operations increase survivability, facilitate the simultaneous firing of conventional munitions and emerging enhanced range munitions (which are currently incompatible with the M777 howitzer) against multiple targets, and

Unlike the unvalidated requirements mandated in *FD 2030* and *FD 2030 Annual Update*, the requirements we proposed are based on historical data and current doctrine. These are the warfighting requirements. Speaking at a recent Center of Strategic and International Studies and U.S. Naval Institute webinar, Gen Eric Smith, Assistant CMC, was unambiguous about requirements. When discussing the Navy and Marine Corps amphibious ships requirement, he stated that thirty-one ships are the requirement and that fiscal considerations to meet the requirement were a separate issue. The same is true for cannon and rocket artillery. Do not confuse the requirements with the fiscal considerations to meet the requirements.

FD 2030 and the *FD 2030 Annual Update* emptied essential tools from the Marine Corps toolbox of capabilities to self-fund Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, Stand-in Forces, and Marine Littoral Regiments—concepts lacking rigorous experimentation and validation. In particular, cannon artillery was gutted as a partial bill payer for anti-ship missile batteries. A better approach, and one with historical precedent, is to seek Congressional support for the additional funds required to obtain new capabilities. Instead, the Marine Corps, borrowing a line from the English philosopher John Wycliffe, “robbed Peter to pay Paul.” This approach, while popular in the budgetary world, needlessly and unacceptably risks the MEF’s global warfighting capabilities and ability to respond to the full spectrum of conflict, which adversely impacts national security. It also puts our Marines at greater risk.



A better approach ... is to seek Congressional support for the additional funds required to obtain new capabilities.

While Tomahawk missiles can attack land targets, shaping and interdiction by other means will almost certainly be better options in most scenarios. Until the Marine Littoral Regiments and Stand-in Forces concepts are operationally mature, any attempt to quantify the number of MMSL and Long-Range Missile batteries required is an educated guess at best.

To summarize, the Marine Corps needs to retain an active-duty artillery structure of not fewer than five battalions (fifteen batteries) of cannon artillery and three to four battalions (nine-twelve batteries) of HIMARS to support I MEF and II MEF warfighting requirements. As currently envisioned by the Marine Corps, III MEF will not have a division capable of conducting combined-arms or fire-and-maneuver operations in the traditional and well-understood sense. The third division will not have cannon artillery, a regimental artillery headquarters, or maneuver regiments. The specific type of cannon artillery in the Marine Corps inventory, towed or truck mounted, should be driven by real considerations, such as survivability, tactical mobility (surface versus rotary lift), and munitions mix. Likewise, rocket munitions should be driven by considerations

help absorb inevitable combat losses when facing a peer competitor.

The conversion of the 3d MarDiv’s two infantry regiments (3d and 4th Mar) and one artillery regiment (12th Mar) to Marine Littoral Regiments will destroy III MEF’s capability for conventional ground operations, as previously noted. III MEF is being reconfigured for the narrowly focused mission of supporting a naval campaign. Still, some cannon or rocket artillery will almost certainly be required to support the 31st MEU, three Marine Littoral Regiments, and an unknown number of Stand-in Forces. It is impossible to quantify the numbers until the mission and operating concepts and procedures are better defined.

Given the absence of current doctrine, full-scale unit experimentation, or relevant historical data for the employment of a groundbased anti-ship missile, we believe it is also too early to quantify the necessary number of MMSL batteries. Fourteen may or may not be the correct number, but these batteries should have been separately funded by Congressional appropriations to reduce the risk associated with shifting structure and personnel from existing cannon batteries to form the MMSLs.