

# Enhanced MAGTF Operations

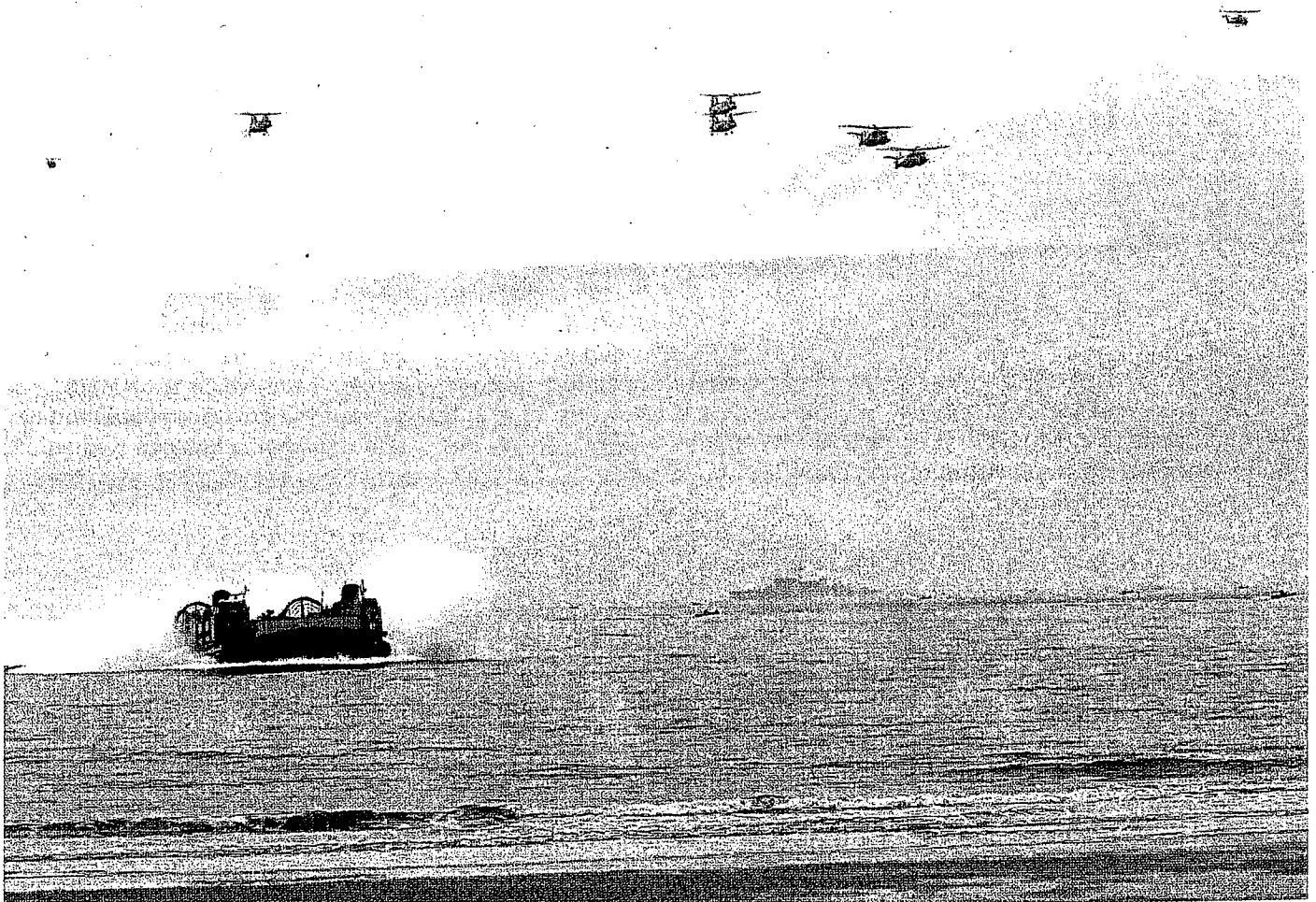
Capitalizing on lessons learned  
by Col Vincent J. Goulding, USMC(Ret)

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have validated the Marine Corps' 6-year focus on training, manning, and equipping tactical formations from squad to company. It began in 2004 with distributed operations and its emphasis on individual Marines and the small units in which they fight. In 2007 priority evolved to the company

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level, and the enhanced company operations (ECO) program was created to reflect and support the operational imperative of company-sized units conducting sustained independent operations. Over the course of 2 years,

ECO led to development of standardized company-level intelligence cell (CLIC) and company-level operations center (CLOC) experimentation and capability development. Both were based on forward operating base



*Send in the Marines. Their operations should be enhanced when the order is given. Aviation is the trump card. (Photo by Cpl Kamran Sadaghiani.)*

(FOB) models, because units participating in the program were scheduled to operate in that environment once deployed. The resultant CLIC/CLOC package is now part of predeployment training; however, Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM have been, and are, sustained land campaigns. While Marine units have excelled, doing so has sometimes occurred at the expense of institutionally training and equipping for expeditionary operations from the sea.

June 2008 saw publication of *Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025* in which the 34th Commandant clearly stated his priorities.<sup>1</sup> The timing was good as combat developers were beginning to look at a non-FOB-centric CLOC (light), which sought to give the dismounted company commander command and control (C<sup>2</sup>) capabilities approaching those of FOB-centric predecessors. It was the first step in developing a package for company commanders operating in austere expeditionary environments. The mantra of CLOC (light) was simple: if it couldn't come off the ramp of an MV-22, it was not part of the package.

ECO has set the conditions for employment of highly capable company-sized formations across large, complex battlefields. Unanswered, however, are questions about the impact of ECO on higher headquarters' ability to C<sup>2</sup>, and otherwise support them, as well as whether other elements of the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) need similar enhancement in order to provide adequate combat support and combat service support (CSS).

Marines are employed as part of a MAGTF. To answer the questions ECO has identified and address the guidance contained in *Vision & Strategy 2025*, an enhanced MAGTF operations (EMO) program is required. The combat development process begins with an operational concept that guides the critical steps of experimentation and assessment, followed by concept of operations and doctrine development. Finally, training regimes and acquisition programs provide tan-

gible tools to turn concept to capability. The MAGTF's reputation as the world's premier expeditionary and self-contained military organization is intact; EMO would only burnish it to a higher luster.

### Setting the Bar High

The term expeditionary is often abused in the defense community. Marines understand that the word entails far more than operating away from home and that it is rooted in the notion of being "first to fight." That does not mean, however, that other forces or agencies are not already on scene before the MAGTF arrives. Being first to fight, however, is a critical planning factor significantly complicated when seabasing is added. Seabased Marines must be prepared to exploit information gleaned by special operators and U.S. and foreign nonmilitary agencies in order to conduct military operations in environments where they cannot expect supply points, established FOBs, medical facilities, or even potable water. The 34th Commandant's admonition of being prepared to "live hard" is no bumper sticker.

EMO is an approach to expeditionary operations that maximizes the flexibility offered by highly capable tactical formations that are commanded and controlled, supported, and sustained by a unitary command element equally capable of providing organic support as it is of leveraging joint and coalition partners. EMO builds on ECO to ensure that improvements at the tactical level are matched by those at the operational level and shared across the MAGTF.

EMO is a unique opportunity to operationalize the 1997 ship-to-objective maneuver (STOM) concept and reexamine seabased expeditionary operations as described in the follow-on *MAGTF in Sustained Operations Ashore*, signed by the 31st Commandant a year later. While the MAGTF can be a joint or coalition enabling force, it will just as likely function as an independent operational maneuver element. When it does so, it will initially be operating

without tangible in-theater support. The MAGTF was designed with this very concept of operations in mind and has proven its utility dozens of times. Battlefields, however, are changing. The MAGTF's preeminence can never be taken for granted.

Putting battalions comprised of highly capable rifle companies ashore is arguably the easiest factor in the equation. Whether maneuvering by air or surface, these formations will exploit littoral penetration points across the breadth of coastal phase lines and conduct a wide variety of missions throughout the battlespace. Unlike time-honored amphibious operations (and current joint doctrine) predicated on a force beachhead line and establishment of a secure rear area, future seabased operations will view seabased platforms as attack positions. Task-organized formations will maneuver from them to positions of advantage in order to accomplish assigned missions. The concomitant C<sup>2</sup>, communications, fires, and logistics implications are significant and will continue to become more and more challenging.

### Challenge to the Combat Development Process

EMO must focus the Navy and Marine Corps combat development processes on delivering capabilities at all levels of the MAGTF and the seabase from which it operates. The concept will drive operational and tactical thinking, technology exploration, experimentation, and assessment. EMO will serve as a critical starting point for joint and naval doctrine development, organizational changes, and training modifications that will enable *Vision & Strategy 2025*.

As stated in the 2008 ECO concept, if the MAGTF is to reap the benefits of enhanced company capability development, it will require modifications to its own training, organization, equipping, and—perhaps most of all—thinking.<sup>2</sup> This does not imply that 3 years of experimentation and analysis of enhanced company training, manning, and equipping have delivered all of the an-

swers at even that level. The company itself still requires serious examination in terms of its table of organization (T/O) and ability to effectively conduct multiple battlefield functions. Continued company enhancement must run concurrently with EMO under the rubric of company landing team, or CoLT; the central idea being that company-sized formations, infantry or otherwise, will need to be task organized with assets from across the MAGTF in order to conduct traditional and non-traditional missions. Infantry small units may well be assigned to company-sized CSS elements, as these units become the MAGTF commander's point of main effort in security cooperation or posthostility activities.

### CoLT

Marines are intimately familiar with battalion landing teams. Built around a standard infantry battalion, the landing team is reinforced with elements from within the MAGTF depending on mission, enemy, and terrain. The landing team has proven itself time and again. Current operations and the demands of future operations point to the necessity of ensuring that company-sized units are equal to the myriad complex tasks on distributed battlefields. Whether conducting "split amphibious ready group operations" or operating hundreds of miles from the MAGTF headquarters off the deck of a littoral combat ship, company-level command has taken on new meaning and must reflect capabilities that run the gamut from security cooperation to kinetic operations. Adding a handful of intelligence analysts to the T/O (already a reality) does not fully address the challenge.

The entire company T/O requires reexamination, as does the training regime that produces its commander and headquarters element. If the rifle company requires reinforcement with nonorganic indirect fire assets, combat support, and CSS detachments, and perhaps even joint and/or coalition representatives, then the fundamental T/O must be an enabling and not limiting

factor. The same is true of the table of equipment (T/E). Standardized "unit operation center capability sets," currently extant only at the battalion level and above, must be available in scalable variants at the company level.

CoLT is not restricted to the ground combat element (GCE). The MAGTF's ability to be effective across the range of military operations also requires nontraditional command arrangements and task organizations, sometimes led by noninfantry commanders. A larger challenge exists in training, manning, and equipping these formations, as they have traditionally enjoyed less combat development and training focus.

### Requirements for the Enhanced MAGTF

The MAGTF staff and its subordinate command element staffs must be evaluated in terms of ability to communicate, exercise C<sup>2</sup>, sustain, and provide fires for tactical formations operating in complex terrain on widely distributed battlefields. (See sidebar.)

The greatest strength of the MAGTF is that it unifies all battlefield functions under one commander. Conversely, it is also what makes ensuring that it remains preeminent a challenge. Our responsibility is less to the joint force commander who employs the MAGTF than to Marines who depend on it to accomplish their mission and return home safely. It is with that in mind that a cursory description of requirements is provided. As research is accomplished, experimentation conducted, and assessment scrutinized, requirements will change or, at least, undergo modification. Combat development is a constantly evolving process and, just as the MAGTF prides itself on its ability to task organize for specific missions, so must combat developers adjust their thinking as they move along the road toward developing an enduring and sustainable MAGTF enhancement program.

While functional labels are a convenient means to describe required operational capabilities, they cannot foster a

myopic approach to capability development. As surely as intelligence drives maneuver and fires, just as surely it can only do so if every element of the MAGTF is a viable node in a robust communications system. EMO signals the beginning of an introspective effort aimed at improving overall MAGTF capability. The concept, however, must also influence joint C<sup>2</sup>. Marines and those who will operate alongside Marines must understand that the MAGTF is greater than the sum of its parts.

*Intelligence* is central to maneuver warfare, whether from the sea or operating ashore. STOM accounts for the requirement to operate from over the horizon with a paucity of naval surface fire support and even surface lift. For these reasons, the fight cannot occur at the high watermark, and traditional notions of advance force operations will likely compromise mission accomplishment. Forcible entry does not imply massing at the point of attack and bludgeoning the force ashore through predictable colored beaches while vertical assault forces secure beach exits or seize vital chokepoints. To truly attack from the sea, the MAGTF must maintain constant linkage to joint and coalition special operations forces, non-governmental actors, and all levels of other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. Company-sized surface maneuver elements cannot afford pitched battles at strongly defended littoral penetration points, and aviation-borne elements cannot afford to fight their way through potentially overwhelming air defenses as they approach the coast or maneuver toward objectives deep inland.

The broader requirement of intelligence does not end with the STOM portion of the MAGTF's mission. Once ashore, CoLTs will continue to generate a detailed picture of the battlespace. The training and technical means must exist to share information internally, as well as over what is likely to be significant distance to higher headquarters and the MAGTF command element. This data transfer will require

robust pipes that currently do not exist in on-the-move tactical systems.<sup>3</sup>

*Tactical C<sup>2</sup> and communications* programs of record do not satisfy enhanced company or MAGTF operations. Long-haul communications are still reliant on limited military satellite linkages, cumbersome equipment, and training-intensive protocols. Viable on-the-move, over-the-horizon tactical communications is a nonnegotiable requirement on distributed expeditionary battlefields. Enhanced companies must be able to talk and share data not only with organic elements but with adjacent, higher, and coalition organizations operating in the joint force commander's area of operations, to include interagency and non-governmental. It is especially critical that they be able to communicate with U.S. and coalition special forces in order to share information in a timely fashion and avoid fratricide.

The company needs a standardized suite of equipment that can be tailored to the mission, whether helicopter-borne or conducted from a more static position, such as a FOB. There is no place for generators and satellite dishes in the MV-22 or expeditionary fighting vehicle, yet the capability these devices offer must be available to all mission profiles. The combined arms potential of the MAGTF cannot be achieved without a viable and expeditionary digital voice and data communications system that starts at the company level. The MAGTF commander must know where his units are, what their assessment of the situation is, and what products they are generating in their areas of responsibility in order to exert his influence over the joint battlespace. Only then can he adjust his planning and provide the full range of combat support and CSS these units will require. Finally, the enhanced MAGTF will require subordinate units (to include CoLTs) to be able to monitor, intercept, and exploit radio, cell phone, and cybertraffic throughout its area of operations. At a minimum, this capability must be the beneficiary of a robust shared information exchange with the MAGTF command element.

August 1942 saw the first meaningful American response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor—the 1st Marine Division's seabased attacks at Tulagi and Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Operation WATCHTOWER denied vital facilities to the enemy while opening them to U.S. forces for what was to become the opening gambit in a 3-year drive to victory in the Pacific War. The Marines called it Operation SHOESTRING, as its success came largely in spite of, not because of, the external support it received. In November 1943 at Tarawa, Marines found that doctrine was lagging as well.

Less than a decade later American forces were fighting for their lives in a small corner of the Korean peninsula. The subsequent amphibious attack is generally, if erroneously, referred to as the port city where the 1st Marine Division landed—Inchon. In reality, the Marines spent little more time there than it took them to secure the Asahi Brewery, moving steadfastly toward their real objectives—Kimp'o Airfield, severance of North Korean lines of communications south to Pusan, and linkup with GEN Johnny Walker's 8th Army. They did so supported by dark blue corsairs flying off the decks of "Marine" aircraft carriers in the Yellow Sea and robust naval gunfire from VADM Dewey Struble's U.S., British, and Canadian surface ships.

Fast forward to 2001. America once again responds to a strategic surprise attack with a seabased attack of its own, this time by a hastily assembled naval force and composite MAGTF. The commander and his tiny staff negotiate with uninvolved countries, coordinate with U.S. and coalition special operations forces, boldly execute, and skillfully support the seizure of a forward base, 400 miles inside landlocked Afghanistan, for the introduction of follow-on forces. Task Force 58 broke the rules of accepted amphibious doctrine and put substance to the then 4-year-old STOM concept. Little has been done since to further refine this new way of conducting expeditionary warfare.

Highly maneuverable task-organized CoLTs will possess minimal organic *fire support* assets. Access to all MAGTF, naval, and joint fires is critical to mission accomplishment—even to survival. Not just a communications issue, everything from organization to training and equipping requires evaluation. Current configuration and employment of surface fires in the MAGTF must be assessed for

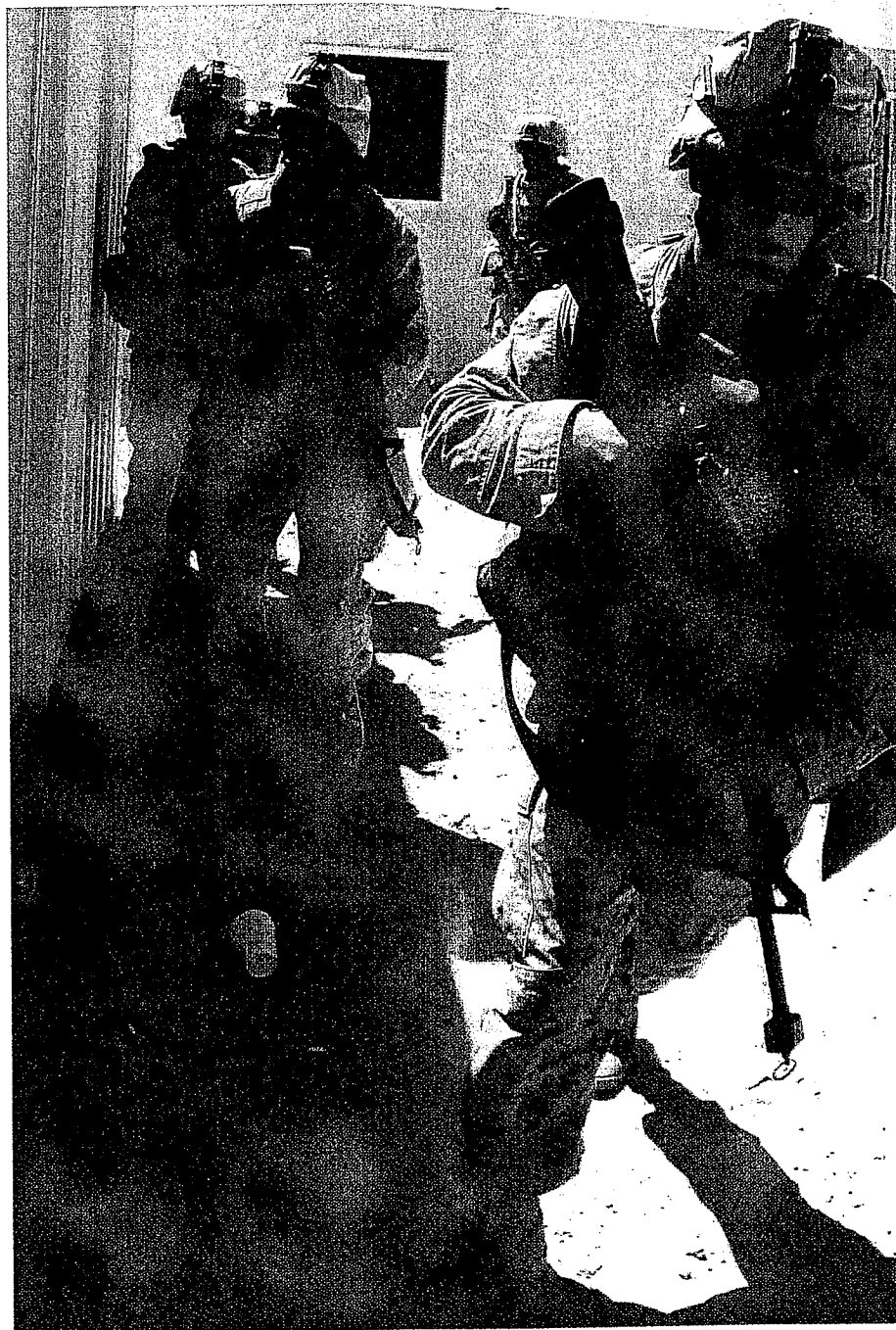
their abilities to provide timely all-weather fires to widely distributed forces, especially during the STOM phase of the operation. Towed systems must be able to operate effectively below the battery level. The implications for T/Os, T/Es, and training within the artillery battalion are potentially huge, as they are for CSS elements. Naval surface fires must be robust and responsive. Air-de-

livered fires cannot be viewed as the only alternative as current joint doctrine suggests.<sup>4</sup> Air-delivered fires are what make the MAGTF unique; however, they only represent part of what the naval, joint, and multinational force brings to the table. CoLTs must have access to it all. Recent combat operations have pointed out issues in all categories. The entire joint terminal attack controller training and certification protocol needs serious evaluation. Lack of standardized terminology and procedures have caused denial of coalition air in critical situations. None of this is acceptable on future battlefields.

Seabased and expeditionary *logistics* must focus on providing CSS to tactical formations operating across large and complex battlespaces. The challenge is not exclusive to the logistics command element. It begins at the infantry company, permeates the entire MAGTF, and requires effective linkages to the joint force commander. In simple terms, the infantry battalion T/O and T/E is designed to support a “two up, one back” fight with logistics support pulled from higher headquarters. The battalion staff is not manned or equipped to do otherwise. Similarly, CSS organizations are not optimized to push tailored resupply packages to distributed and mobile tactical formations, whether from the seabase or even once ashore.

CSS elements must also be viewed as potential maneuver elements themselves, trained to maximize organic direct fire as well as leverage MAGTF supporting fires and ISR assets. In some cases CSS elements will need to be reinforced with combat support and even combat units in order to accomplish their mission. It is not enough that every ground unit on the battlefield is a hard target; it must be a lethal tactical formation.

Casualty treatment and evacuation must be assessed from the bottom up. Current operations describe complex ambushes where enemy forces employ large numbers of rockets and other weapons that could have devastating effect on execution of standard casualty evacuation procedures. Combat devel-



*We must reduce the weight of our Marines' combat load as part of improving the MAGTF. (Photo by LCpl Corey A. Blodgett.)*



*More is not always better. We also need to reduce the MAGTF's overall combat load. (Photo by PFC Jerrick J. Griffin.)*

opers must develop tactics, techniques, and procedures that exploit unmanned systems to extend the “golden hour” and safely move injured Marines from their points of injury to competent medical authorities—without reliance on sophisticated facilities ashore.

#### More Is Not Always Better

MAGTF enhancement cannot automatically begin with adding another piece of equipment; it must also reduce weight. Reducing the MAGTF's load will be accomplished along a number of parallel tracks, none blindly reliant on science and technology developing a lightweight armor “silver bullet” for personnel protective equipment or vehicle armor. Efforts must start with the individual Marine and his immediate commander, but they have implications across the MAGTF.

The first step is development of an accepted and standardized individual armor protection level (APL). Adoption

of a particular level of protection must be delegated to the tactical commander, and tactical commanders must have a viable decisionmaking tool that facilitates an informed decision in order to deliberately adjust the APL in order to create a situation where Marines can avoid the hit through agility vice absorbing it through bulkiness.

The MAGTF must reduce demand across all of its combat elements. Lighter and more fuel efficient tactical vehicles, exploiting nontraditional fuels, must be developed. As with individual Marines, the level of protection afforded to the MAGTF's ground vehicles must be scalable to the mission. Tactical communications must be multifunctional and use standardized chargeable power sources. Tactical formations must be able to produce usable power and potable water. Miniaturized precision munitions at the tactical level offer the promise of better results with fewer bullets.

Ground tactical units must become the beneficiaries of dependable and tailored precision resupply, eliminating the propensity for small unit leaders and individual Marines to carry extra items “just in case.” This resupply capability should include unmanned aircraft and ground systems, reducing time of resupply and the unnecessary risk to manned systems, as well as freeing up manned systems for operational and tactical maneuver. Unmanned and autonomous ground systems should replace the 19th century pack mule, carrying heavy consumable items so that individual Marines do not have to.

#### The MAGTF's Trump Card

The aviation combat element (ACE) makes the MAGTF unique and oftentimes the most desirable of joint forces. In seabased and forward deployed situations, however, the ACE's manned platforms are high demand, low density. Recognizing that Marines pioneered the

critical capabilities of close air and assault support, the ACE's responsibilities cut across all six functions of Marine aviation. The Corps has an opportunity to write a new chapter in aviation history as it enhances the MAGTF, but only if it accepts the fact that traditional approaches may not work.

Assault support and vertical maneuver require manned aircraft. To maximize this critical capability, aviation C<sup>2</sup> and logistics support must be inexorably linked. Unmanned aircraft systems must be developed to free up manned counterparts for assault support and preserve them in mission profiles. Unmanned systems offer challenges and opportunities. As unmanned systems for ISR, fires, and logistics begin to proliferate, issues related to safe employment with manned platforms will become more complex.

Close air support (CAS) is a justifiable source of pride to Marines. A key component of the CAS system is an adequate number of terminal controllers. The MAGTF must be the beneficiary of a scaled training pipeline that puts trained and properly equipped observers and controllers at all levels of the MAGTF—starting at the rifle squad. A finite number of traditionally trained joint terminal attack controllers isn't the answer. Training regimes must reduce reliance on live sorties and adherence to archaic certification standards. Air support must reflect the realities of modern military operations, not the artificial restrictions currently imposed.

Aviation platforms must be part of the MAGTF ISR network—with and without direct intervention by the crew of manned systems. Critical battlefield information must be garnered and quickly passed “down” as well as “up” to ensure it contributes to MAGTF mission success.

### Doctrine Must Reflect Capability

Joint and Service doctrine fails to address current requirements. *Vision & Strategy 2025* describes highly capable MAGTFs operating from the seabase

in austere and expeditionary environments. Assembly areas and attack positions for these operations are naval platforms. The highly choreographed ship-to-shore movement of current doctrine must be replaced by the highly flexible tenets of STOM and tactics demonstrated by Task Force 58. C<sup>2</sup> of any attack or military maneuver cannot wait until the objectives are secured, despite what current joint doctrine would have us believe.<sup>5</sup>

The maneuver space the seas provide is not restricted to the operational level of war. When Marines conduct seabased tactical operations, planning must include all facets of supporting activities. Maneuvering across water does not reduce the MAGTF commander's ability to exercise his command functions and responsibilities any more than operating over land does. Command relationships cannot be driven by the medium over which they occur. They must be driven by the precept of which component requires support and who is in the best position to provide that support.

Marines pride themselves in combined arms operations, but these are not the exclusive province of the GCE or even Marines. Combined arms expertise must be expanded across the MAGTF's combat, combat support, and CSS elements; it must also be embraced by the entire naval and joint force, not as a factor used to justify command relationships but to ensure that all aspects of support are available during the critical maneuver phase of any operation, especially when the MAGTF's organic tactical air support is limited or marginalized by weather.

### Conclusions

The MAGTF has proven itself time and again. Over the past decade, however, it has done so primarily in non-seabased scenarios. While not the time-honored Corps' amphibious stock and trade, these operations have underscored the value the Nation and its combatant commanders accrue for the relatively small percentage of the country's treasure Marine forces represent.

Operating for extended periods ashore—and as part of a joint or coalition force—is something Marines will continue to be asked to do, particularly as security cooperation and stability operations become increasingly prevalent and important to our national strategy. The purpose of EMO is to ensure that we capitalize on lessons learned from current operations and apply them to the inherently more difficult core competencies described in *Vision & Strategy 2025*. By so doing, the Corps will ensure that the rich amphibious heritage earned by generations of “soldiers of the sea” is not only maintained but tangibly enhanced.

### Notes

1. Conway, Gen James T., *Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025*, Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC), Washington, DC, 2006, pp. 9, 10.
2. Conway, Gen James T., *A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations*, HQMC, Washington, DC, 28 August 2008, p. 3.
3. The Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) Experiment File for ECO Limited Objective Experiment 1 (CLIC) is available to authorized personnel on request using the approval process entered via the MCWL nonsecure Internet protocol router network website at <http://www.mcwl.usmc.mil>. It is also available for direct download on the MCWL secure Internet protocol router network website.
4. *Joint Publication 3-02, Amphibious Operations*, Final Coordinating Draft, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC, June, 2008, p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 57.



Read more about enhanced company operations at [www.mca-marines.org/gazette/eco](http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/eco).



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