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ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS) The current operating environment for the United States military is transitioning from major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan toward smaller, crisis events, and each service is attempting to adapt how it can support the growing demand from Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs). This essay will suggest that disaggregation of Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) is not the solution for supporting increased operational demands. This is because a MEU's strength is its cohesion as a Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) that is built during pre-deployment training, and the MEU is the model of how the Marine Corps provides unique capabilities to support (GCC) demands. The Marine Corps' solution for supporting the increased operational requirements should be to consider alternate MEU task organization, without fracturing the MAGTF, and change the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) structure to maximize limited amphibious assets.					
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Executive Summary

Title: DISAGGREGATION: BREAKING UP THE MAGTF BAND

Author: Major Joseph Barker, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: This essay will suggest that disaggregation of Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) is not the solution for supporting increased operational demands. This is because a MEU's strength is its cohesion as a Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) that is built during pre-deployment training, and the MEU is the model of how the Marine Corps provides unique capabilities to support Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCC) demands. The Marine Corps' solution for supporting the increased operational requirements should be to reduce the MEU in size, without fracturing the MAGTF, and change the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) structure to maximize limited amphibious assets.

Discussion: The current operating environment for the United States military is transitioning from major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The transition is trending toward smaller, crisis events and each service is attempting to adapt how it can support the growing demand for response units. This transition is further exacerbated by a quickly decreasing budget, which has each service developing ways to distinguish their ability to support current and future demands. The Marine Corps, prior to September 2001, depended on multiple MEUs forward deployed to provide sea-based presence capable of crisis response. During operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, MEUs were regularly used to augment combat units or used as a theater reserve. Once Marines started to redeploy from Iraq and Afghanistan, it was logical to think that the MEU would return to its role as the primary forward deployed presence for the Marine Corps, but instead the deployment tempo is declining. Disaggregating deployed MEUs and standing up land-based SPMAGTFs are two approaches the Marine Corps has taken in an attempt to provide GCCs with crisis response units.

Conclusion: The Marine Corps should restructure the task organization of the MEU and ARG in order to maximize the MEU's MAGTF cohesion and maintain an amphibious capability in order to meet the needs of GCCs.

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Introduction

The United States military has been focused on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for more than thirteen years as a part of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)/Overseas Contingency Operations. As both Iraq and Afghanistan have built up government and security capacity, the United States military has largely retrograded to its home bases. With the sustained land campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan ending, each of the services is focused on future threats and missions that will drive changes to force structure and capabilities. The services will be competing for limited funding due to reductions in the defense budget, which demands that each service demonstrate capabilities that are necessary to meet increasing operational demands.

The increasing operational demands are in response to what is being described as ‘the new normal’, which is global instability as a result of extremism, economic imbalances, and shifting political identifications.¹ The ‘new normal’ does not necessarily describe new missions. Rather it explains why there is an increase in operational demands for certain capabilities. Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) are uniquely qualified to provide Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs) with a force capable of responding to a variety of missions. Even though the MEU is arguably the preferred unit for the Marine Corps to posture for supporting the ‘new normal’, the deployment tempo for each MEU is being reduced.²

The Marine Corps prides itself on being adaptive, and focuses the development of Marines and concepts to quickly overcome challenges to mission accomplishment. The challenge for the Marine Corps to keep multiple MEUs persistently forward deployed is a result of many years of being engaged in major land campaigns.³ The availability of sufficient amphibious lift is driving the Marine Corps to find other means to meet the GCC’s demands.

The Marine Corps has begun disaggregating deployed MEUs to offset the reduction in deployments.

This essay will suggest that disaggregation of MEUs is not the solution for supporting increased operational demands by GCCs. This is because a MEU's strength is its cohesion as a MAGTF that is built during pre-deployment training, and the MEU is the model of how the Marine Corps provides unique capabilities to support GCC demands. Instead, the Marine Corps' solution for supporting the increased operational requirements of GCCs should be to reduce the MEU in size, without fracturing the MAGTF, and change the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) structure to maximize limited amphibious assets.

To demonstrate why disaggregation is not an acceptable method of employing MEUs, this essay will proceed in the following manner. First, certain terms and concepts must be defined to ensure a common foundation of understanding. Next, comes an analysis of where the MEU builds its strengths from and why it is a unique MAGTF within the Marine Corps. This essay will suggest different methods of employment of the MEU as well as the advantages and disadvantages for each. Then recommendations on what changes should be made to the MEU to maintain its unique MAGTF organization and amphibious nature will be presented. Finally, after describing a modernized MEU, it must be compared to other units, either Marine Corps or from another service, to determine if it may be the optimal solution to meet the GCC's needs.

Background

The Marine Corps was directed by Congress in the early 1950s to integrate air and ground forces, which eventually led to the Marine Corps writing an order that formalized the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in 1963.⁴ Until the early 1980s, the Marine Corps

focused on the Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) and the Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB). General Kelley, 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps, established permanent MAGTF headquarters, establishing the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) along with the MAF and MAB headquarters.⁵ The Marine Corps reverted the names of these units back to expeditionary units instead of amphibious units in 1988.

The Marine Corps can operate in any of the four configurations of a MAGTF. The largest MAGTF is a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), and it is the principal warfighting organization designed for larger crises or contingencies. MEF MAGTFs were employed during DESERT STORM in 1991 and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003. Marine Expeditionary Brigades (MEBs) exist as command elements only, but when formed as a MAGTF, the MEB is organized around an infantry regiment, an air group, and a logistics regiment. The Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is the smallest permanently maintained MAGTF headquarters (HQ). A MEU is based on a reinforced infantry battalion, a composite squadron, and a logistics battalion along with the command element.

The MEU has normally been embarked aboard an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), which is designed to complement the MEU's size and capabilities. The ARG is based on a three-ship model. The primary ship is an amphibious assault ship (LHD/LHA) accompanied by an amphibious transport dock ship (LPD) and a dock landing ship (LPD). The US Navy had fifty-seven amphibious ships in 1984 to support the four MAUs that existed.⁶ After the Cold War ended, combined with the lack of a near peer enemy to focus on, the US Navy reduced the number of amphibious ships down to thirty-eight in 1994 to support a total of seven MEUs.⁷ Further reductions in amphibious ships have continued down to thirty-one amphibious ships in 2011, which has caused MEUs to reduce the deployment tempo.⁸

Building The Band

The National Security Act of 1947 provided the Marine Corps the right to exist by law as a part of the Department of the Navy. What it did not do was provide the organization or mission for the Marine Corps. With the Douglas-Mansfield Act of 1952, Congress set into law that the Marine Corps would have both ground and aviation units organic to its organization. With the Douglas-Mansfield Act, public law now specifically stated the Marine Corps would be made up of no less than three combat divisions and three air wings.⁹ This law is credited with establishing the MAGTF organization for the Marine Corps. Though not formalized yet, the MAGTF was working through improvements until it was codified in Marine Corps Order 3120.3 in 1963.

Marine Corps Order 3120.3 of 1963 did not establish permanent MAGTF headquarters; instead it referenced the levels of MAGTFs that could be formed based on the mission.¹⁰ The MAGTF size is generally related to the level of command of the units assigned. A MEF is a MAGTF based on a division, an air wing, and a logistics group, the MEB is based on a regiment and an air group, and finally the MEU is based on a battalion and a reinforced squadron. Special MAGTFs vary in size and what units make up its organization since the mission is very specific and limited in duration. The key point of the Marine Corps formalizing MAGTFs as the standard organization for employment is putting the key elements of ground, air, and logistics under a single commander. Although permanent MAGTFs were not created in 1963, the basis for their creation was formalized, and the Marine Corps had a unique organization model to distinguish itself from the other services.

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0, Operations, defines a MAGTF as, “...balanced, air-ground, combined-arms formations under a single commander.”¹¹ This definition meets the basic criteria set forth in MCO 3120.3, which is ground, air, and logistic elements that are task organized under a single commander. This definition separated the Marine Corps’ manner of employment from the other services, at least until the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was passed.

After Operation EAGLE CLAW, the failed mission to rescue hostages in Iran in 1979, highlighted issues when multiple services tried to integrate to accomplish a complex mission, Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.¹² The Goldwater-Nichols Act effectively took the MAGTF concept and applied it to the Department of Defense (DoD). The “joint” environment was created and certain terms were established which can be traced back to the MAGTF. For example, the Joint Forces Land Component Commander (JFLCC) is substituted for the Ground Combat Element (GCE) just as the Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC) is the Air Combat Element (ACE). Both the JFLCC and JFACC are task organized under a single Joint Forces Commander (JFC). The primary difference in the joint model is that each service is still responsible for logistical support, where a MAGTF has a logistics element commander that reports to the MAGTF commander.

The Marine Corps is still unique as a MAGTF, but with a different definition than what is stated in MCDP 1-0. According to *Amphibious Ready Group and Marine Expeditionary Unit Overview*, the definition of a MAGTF is:

...they are task organized, combined-arms force packages containing command, ground, aviation, and logistics elements. A single commander leads and coordinates this combined-arms team through all phases of pre-deployment training, deployment, and employment. MAGTF teams live and train together further increasing their cohesion and fighting power.¹³

The concept of ground, aviation, and logistics elements directly subordinate to a single commander, and training together prior to deployment is the key difference in definitions. The Marine Corps' uniqueness, based on this definition, is cemented in the MEU.

The MEU is a MAGTF, with a formalized Pre-deployment Training Plan (PTP), with Major Subordinate Elements (MSEs) under a single commander. Marine Corps Order 3120.9c is the basis for the MEU and provides policy on such items as mission, characteristics, and capabilities. Five characteristics of the MEU, as defined in MCO 3120.9c, are: sea-based forward presence, expeditionary in nature, crisis action planning and response, combined-arms integration, and interoperability.¹⁴ Although there are military units that have one of these characteristics or a combination of some of them, the MEU is the only unit available to Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs) that provides all of them.

The MEU has twelve mission essential tasks (METs), which are listed below:

Amphibious Operations

1. Conduct Amphibious Raid
2. Conduct Amphibious Assault
3. Conduct Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO)
4. Conduct Advance Force Operations

Expeditionary Support to Other Operations/Crisis Response and Limited Contingency Operations

1. Conduct Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)
2. Conduct Humanitarian Assistance (HA)
3. Conduct Stability Operations (SO)
4. Conduct Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP)
5. Conduct Joint and Combined Operations
6. Conduct Aviation Operations from Expeditionary Shore Based Sites
7. Conduct Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) Activities
8. Conduct Airfield/Port Seizure Operations

When considering the complexity of the above METs, it is understandable why the Marine Corps has established a rigorous training plan that requires all units to complete the training together.

The complexity of these METs must take into consideration the fact that the MEU is an

amphibious MAGTF, which requires closely integrated efforts with the ARG as well. The end state of the intensive PTP, or work-up period, is to ensure the systematic attainment of the operational capabilities required for certification and deployment.¹⁵ Although not directly stated in the MEU PTP order, working through group dynamics and building unit cohesion is what allows the ARG/MEU to deploy capable of performing any of the assigned METs on short notice.

Due to the nature of a crisis, crisis response units generally have little notice of the missions assigned to them, and the ability to plan and execute on short notice requires dedicated training. An accelerated version of the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCP), called the Rapid Response Planning Process or R2P2, is practiced by a MEU throughout the work-up period. The MEU trains to the ability to launch an operation within six hours of being tasked with that mission.¹⁶ The success of a MEU being certified and ready for deployment is based on its ability to conduct the R2P2.

MSE staffs and planners normally come to the MEU with varying abilities to conduct the MCP within their own unit. Infantry battalions generally have a thorough knowledge and ability to conduct the MCP within the battalion. However, a squadron does not composite until it is assigned to a MEU for the work-up period, which means the ACE staff has likely never worked through the MCP together. Regardless of experience level, the MEU work-up period provides the training opportunities for the MSE commanders and staffs to reach a proficient level of planning prior to deployment to execute both the MCP and the R2P2.

Group dynamics play a key role in the MEU command element and the MSEs ability to reach the required R2P2 proficiency level necessary for deployment. Bruce Tuckman, who is currently the Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology at The Ohio State University,

researched group dynamics and published *Stages of Small Group Development Revisited*. Tuckman's describes the five stages that most groups move through as forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.¹⁷ Every MAGTF will go through these stages, but the MEU is distinct in that it will also go through these stages with the ARG.

Forming occurs when the members of the group are oriented toward one another.¹⁸ Many actions occur during forming, but the key action in the case of a MEU is that commanders and staffs have the opportunity to get to know one another and begin learning personalities. Forming for the MEU begins when an embarkation date for deployment is assigned. Normal MEU orders require primary staff for each MSE to be available to the MEU command element no later than embarkation minus 220 days (E-220). Key personnel are the commanding officers, executive officers, Sergeants Major, administrative officers, intelligence officers, operations officers, logistics officers, and company/battery commanders of each MSE. Because the MSEs do not have a change in operational control (CHOP) to the MEU until E-180, this gives the key personnel thirty days to form and begin the next stage of group dynamics, i.e., storming, prior to starting the PTP.

Storming, as the name of the stage alludes to, occurs when members of the group begin to challenge one another's opinions and express discontent.¹⁹ This stage is also when members attempt to establish status or jockey for notice of superiors. Storming allows commanders and staffs to learn how individuals will respond to pressure and identify relationships that are helpful or toxic. This stage also allows insight into what motives individuals have and how those motives can affect the group.

Norming occurs when the members of the group are able to compromise in order to work towards a common goal.²⁰ During this stage, the group begins to establish standards and

structure, which requires individuals to compromise with each other to ensure success of the group. Norming for a MEU happens when commanders and staffs establish standard operating procedures (SOPs), become familiar with each other's nuances or "pet peeves", and manage expectation levels about individual capabilities.

The performing stage occurs when the group can fully function as a unit and meet or exceed established goals.²¹ The group is competent and able to efficiently work towards group goals. The certification process ensures that each MEU is operating at the performing stage prior to deployment. Even though a group, or a MEU in this case, reaches the performing stage, reaching this stage does not preclude the group from reverting to previous stages prior to adjourning. The strength of a group at the performing stage can be measured by how quickly it is able to move from a previous stage back to the performing stage.

The final stage is adjourning, happening when the task is completed and the group is broken apart.²² For the MEU, this takes place once it returns from deployment and eventually each unit CHOPs from the MEU back to their original parent units.

The MEU is not the only unit in the Marine Corps, or military, that trains together prior to going on a deployment. The Marine Corps uses stabilization rosters for individual deploying units such as a battalion participating in the Unit Deployment Program (UDP) or when units are deploying to support operations in Iraq or Afghanistan. The MEU is the only MAGTF that stabilizes specific units six-months prior to deployment, which allows commanders and staffs to work through the first four stages of Tuckman's group dynamics. Because the commanders and staffs are able to work through these stages before deployment, the MEU is able to quickly plan and execute a wide variety of missions.

Only a select few units go through such a defined and rigorous PTP, and the similarity among these units is that they must be ready to execute a variety of complex missions on short notice. For example, Marine special operations forces (MARSOF) conduct a PTP that is a year in length before deploying overseas.²³ Just as MARSOF team members' actions are second nature to each other due to the character of their missions, the units of a MEU must be able to operate in a similar manner. Personal relationships cannot be overlooked as a basic necessity for crisis response units to be successful.

Why Break Up The Band?

Once a band is built and has been playing together for a while, it creates an identity and that identity explains why people buy tickets to see them perform. The ability of the band to perform the songs and put on a show is based on the shared experience and practice that the members have had. If the bass player is no longer in the band, the band is not capable of performing the same show. Likewise, if a new bass player is hired, the band is not immediately capable of the same performance since the new member is not familiar with the music and actions on stage. Disaggregation has the same effect on the MEU and its ability to meet its assigned mission.

Due to the nature and design of the MEU, it is clear why GCCs continue to request for these assets. The inherent flexibility and self-sufficiency of a MEU reduces many limitations that challenge other unit's ability to respond to emerging events. Even though the MEU has been so successful, one can wonder why the Marine Corps in recent years has deployed the MEU less often, and when the MEU is deployed it is more regularly being employed in a

disaggregated manner. A closer look at what disaggregation is and to what extent it affects the future of the MEU and possibly the Marine Corps is necessary.

What is disaggregation and what does it mean to a MEU? According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of disaggregation is to separate into component parts or to break up.²⁴ An ARG/MEU is made up of many parts, so how does this definition apply to the MEU? It is not simply the three different ships breaking apart or a separation of the MEU from the ARG. Disaggregation of a MEU is breaking apart the command relationships.²⁵ When some portion of an ARG/MEU, generally as a single ship or all three ships breaking apart, is not operationally controlled (OPCON) by the ARG/MEU Commanders, then it is disaggregated. If the ARG/MEU commanders retain OPCON of separated assets, then the ARG/MEU is executing split-operations.²⁶

If an ARG/MEU is capable of split-operations why would disaggregation be necessary? The answer to this question boils down to how the GCC or GCCs decide to use the ARG/MEU. According to *Disaggregated ARG/MEU Concept of Employment*, an ARG/MEU may be disaggregated within a single GCC Area of Operation (AOR) or elements of the ARG/MEU may be attached to a different GCC.²⁷ The likelihood of a MEU disaggregating within a single GCC operating area has a low probability. In this scenario, split-operations are more likely to allow the ARG/MEU commanders to maintain command relationships. The MEU is more likely, and required based on current employment models, to be disaggregated because afloat force capabilities are required in different GCCs.²⁸

The issue that disaggregation presents compared to split-operations is that the assets that become disaggregated are no longer available to support the MEU's mission. Split-operations, although separating ARG/MEU assets, occurs for short durations, maintains unity of command,

and allows the ARG/MEU commanders to aggregate back together more quickly if necessary. Disaggregated assets can be detached and OPCON to another GCC indefinitely, leaving the MEU less capable of being able to meet its expected METs. As Colonel Scott Benedict, current 24th MEU CO, states:

To optimize ARG/MEU employment and utilization, a new paradigm must be established to allow rapid force-sharing across CCmd boundaries by the tactical commanders. Retaining unity of command, while simultaneously working for two CCdrs, enables the ARG/MEU commanders to exercise their ability to task organize the force, support planning, and enable operations even when that force spans different CCmds.²⁹

The ARG/MEU commanders are best able to employ all the assets an ARG/MEU brings to the fight through working together and determining what assets need to be on specific ships to reach the full capabilities of an ARG/MEU. When OPCON over certain assets is lost to another commander, the ARG/MEU commanders are not capable of accomplishing the METs that are expected of an ARG/MEU.³⁰

Disaggregating an ARG/MEU also creates personnel challenges that are difficult to overcome. The staffing of each MEU and the MSEs attached is based on the MEU operating as a single MAGTF afloat. When ARG/MEUs deploy, there are many instances when planners and/or liaisons are sent to multiple locations to prepare for training exercises, augment higher-level headquarters, or to conduct operations. Many after actions from recent MEU deployments that were required to operate in a disaggregate manner consistently refer to not being staffed appropriately to support disaggregated operations.

A recent MEU commander had each ship manned with one of the MSE commanders aboard to act as the mission commander.³¹ For example, the Battalion Landing Team (BLT) commander was sent to the LPD, the Combat Logistics Battalion

(CLB) commander was aboard the LSD, and the Air Combat Element (ACE) was aboard the LHD/LHA. This ensured that the MEU commander had an O-5 commander aboard each ship in case disaggregation was required. This presents a couple of problems. First, if this arrangement was not exercised during the MEU work-up period, then much of the purpose of the MEU PTP is lost, such as commanders and staffs going through the stages of group dynamics or command and control challenges. Secondly, when one of those ships is disaggregated from the ARG/MEU, the MEU commander has now lost an O-5 commander and associated staff indefinitely.

The simple answer is to increase the personnel of the MEU to support disaggregation, but one of the primary challenges of being an amphibious based MAGTF is that ships can only support so many people and a certain amount of gear. Additionally, the increased personnel would be necessary to be assigned to the MEU for the work-up period for group dynamics as well as any disaggregated training that would be conducted during the work-up period. It is unlikely that the MEU work-up period would be able to absorb the additional disaggregated training requirement, which would result in an increase of personnel without the opportunity to train, as they would be employed.

The challenges of disaggregation are not only with command relationships. The ACE has two primary limitations in a disaggregated MEU. First, qualifications of the maintenance personnel limit the individual aviation detachments from being split among different ships, which is likely to cause a ship that is disaggregated to operate either with a limited aviation capability or without one entirely. The second limitation for the ACE is that the LHD/LHA is the only ship that typically has the ability to conduct intermediate level (I-level) maintenance. A disaggregated ship

with an aviation detachment, minus the LHD/LHA, has limited ability to maintain its aircraft and would require external support for any I-level maintenance requirements.³² Disaggregation limits the aviation detachment's ability to be self-sustaining, which is a key characteristic of an ARG/MEU, or worse even would be a ship without aviation assets. The ship without an aviation detachment is no longer a MAGTF.

These and many other concerns about disaggregation are detailed in *Disaggregated ARG/MEU Concept of Employment* with the intention of providing planning guidance for disaggregated operations. This document underlines that ARG/MEUs operating in detached formations imposes risk and is not the preferred method of employment.³³ *Expeditionary Force 21* also states that operating in a disaggregated manner is not optimal, but that if operating in a disaggregated manner MEUs would be augmented to mitigate the associated risks.³⁴ There seems to be a significant amount of effort put into establishing disaggregation as a means of employment when many documents clearly state that disaggregation is not optimal, not preferred, and increases risk.

A key question that should be asked before disaggregation occurs is what is the disaggregated forces' ability to meet the METs required for a MEU to accomplish. In the vignettes provided by the *Disaggregated ARG/MEU CoE*, a disaggregated MEU is mission capable for only two of the ten listed METs as depicted below:

Table 1

USCENTCOM	CORE MEU MET	USPACOM
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.2.2 Conduct Amphibious Raid	Partially Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.2.3 Conduct Amphibious Assault	Non-Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.3.3.2 Conduct Maritime Interdiction Operations	Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.10 Conduct Advance Force Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.5.6 Conduct Airfield Seizure Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.6 Conduct Noncombatant Evacuation Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.7 Conduct Humanitarian Assistance	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.9 Conduct Stability Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Mission Capable	MCT 5.5 Conduct Joint and Combined Operations	Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 6.2.1 Conduct Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (Assuming 2 TRAP forces trained)	Partially Mission Capable

Table 2

USAFRICOM	CORE MET	USCENTCOM
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.2.2 Conduct Amphibious Raid	Partially Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.2.3 Conduct Amphibious Assault	Non-Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.3.3.3.2 Conduct Maritime Interdiction Operations	Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.10 Conduct Advance Force Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Non-Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.5.6 Conduct Airfield Seizure Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.6 Conduct Noncombatant Evacuation Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.7 Conduct Humanitarian Assistance	Partially Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 1.6.6.9 Conduct Stability Operations	Partially Mission Capable
Mission Capable	MCT 5.5 Conduct Joint and Combined Operations	Mission Capable
Partially Mission Capable	MCT 6.2.1 Conduct Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (Assuming 2 TRAP forces trained)	Partially Mission Capable

These tables are based on a standard ARG/MEU disaggregating into a 2+1 LPD combination, which assigns the LHD/LHA and LSD together to Pacific Command (PACOM) and the LPD as a single ship element to CENTCOM.³⁵ Moreover, the vignettes include augments not normally assigned to an ARG/MEU such as fleet surgical

teams (FSTs), intermediate level aviation maintenance personnel and equipment, and an LCAC personnel transport module (PTM). These examples demonstrate the extent of degradation affecting an ARG/MEU if it is required to disaggregate.

The list of assumptions in *Disaggregated ARG/MEU CoE* must be questioned as to their validity if disaggregation is clearly not the manner in which a MEU is employed. The assumptions are:

- Disaggregated operations can be conducted with increasing risk in permissive, uncertain and, in some cases, hostile environments.
- Operating in a disaggregated manner requires additional support to provide sustainment of the ARG/MEU assets as well as activity/mission execution.
- The ARG/MEU will optimally re-aggregate upon mission completion or in the event of a crisis or contingency that requires employment of the entire force.
- A MEU embarked in a three-ship ARG will remain the basic formation for the foreseeable future.
- Disaggregated operations will continue in the future.
- Decision to conduct disaggregated ARG/MEU operations is driven by Combatant Commander (CCDR) mission requirements and can be made while forward deployed.
- There will be a persistent lack of Navy ships including amphibious lift capability.

A few of these assumptions relate to what would cause an ARG/MEU to disaggregate. The obvious contributing assumption for disaggregation is the last one, the lack of Navy ships. If the Navy were able to provide the required number of ships to meet the defined Marine Corps requirements, then it is logical to conclude that disaggregation would not be necessary. The two assumptions that are not valid are that the MEU will be embarked on a three-ship ARG and that disaggregated operations will continue in the future. These two assumptions are directly related to the other. It is reasonable to presume that the MEU will continue in the future because the MEU will be embarked on a three-ship ARG. Is it the three-ship ARG that is important or is the MEU as an amphibious MAGTF important?

Ways to Keep the Band Together

The Marine Corps has developed and implemented various methods in an attempt to support the multitude of demands by GCCs. The Special MAGTF-Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) concept and disaggregation of the MEU are the two primary methods the Marine Corps is using to meet the increased force requirements. Although these measures are a testament to the Marine Corps' ability to adapt and overcome, these measures should be considered short-term solutions or discontinued altogether.

The first step in identifying appropriate recommendations is to consider what caused the need for a new way of employing Marine forces. It should be obvious at this point that the GCCs will continue to demand forces capable of responding to crisis events, and that the Marine Corps is unable to meet this increase in demand with the current deployment cycle of MEUs. In essence, why is the Marine Corps using SPMAGTF-CR units and disaggregating the MEU? The simple answer is there are an insufficient number of amphibious ships to support not only the standard MEU deployment cycle much less an increased number of MEUs.

If the answer is the Navy does not have enough ships, one could logically ask the Navy to produce more ships. Due to national debt concerns, the DoD's budget is rapidly decreasing, which makes it difficult to produce more ships. For the Navy, they are not only concerned about their amphibious fleet, but instead must balance multiple ships with capabilities that support the Navy's other missions as well. This can be seen when comparing the number of amphibious ships as a percentage of the Navy's fleet. From 1970 through 2010, the amphibious fleet has fluctuated from as low as nine percent to as high as thirteen percent of the total fleet, with a percentage slightly under eleven percent in

2011.³⁶ The Navy's fleet of ships is getting smaller as a whole, and the amphibious fleet is proportionally decreasing as well.

A change of prioritization of the amphibious fleet and/or its capabilities, either as seen by or directed to the Navy, as a means to ensure national security is likely the only way the percentage of amphibious ships will increase. The increase in demand by GCCs for ARG/MEU capabilities would seem to be the necessary indication for the Navy and the Marine Corps to evaluate acquisition priorities towards amphibious crisis response, but as the Navy looks to increase its fleet from 282 ships to 306, the number of amphibious ships remain at 33.³⁷ The Marine Corps' stated lift requirement is 38 ships, which is based on the ability to employ two Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) assault echelons simultaneously, but the Marine Corps has accepted 33 amphibious ships with the associated risks.³⁸ *Expeditionary Force 21* states:

However, an inventory of fewer than 33 ships causes unacceptable risk in maintaining continuous presence and undermines the ability to generate the necessary capabilities to respond to crisis or conduct forcible entry. As our goal is to increase sea-based forward deployed forces, we are examining how to mitigate that risk through the innovative integration and employment of alternative naval platforms and land basing.³⁹

The Navy's amphibious fleet of 31 ships is the principal reason the Marine Corps is employing forces in a manner that is not optimal.

The Marine Corps has deployed SPMAGTF-CR units overseas in an attempt to fill in a portion of the gap created by reduced MEU deployments. Major Gregory Goober, USMC, provided in-depth analysis detailing why the SPMAGTF-CR is not an optimal employment concept, and that the Marine Corps must focus on remaining an amphibious force.⁴⁰ In addition to his conclusions about the SPMAGTF-CR units, another point should be considered. First, the size of these were initially designed

to be approximately 500 Marines, with the original SPMAGTF-CR unit in Moron, Spain growing to more than 850 Marines.⁴¹ The second SPMAGTF-CR, based in Central Command (CENTCOM), was stood up with more than 2,300 Marines.⁴² What was initially meant for a company reinforced sized unit is already the same size, if not larger, than a MEU. This increase in size paves the way for mission creep for these SPMAGTFs.

At this point it should be clear that the Navy does not have enough amphibious ships and SPMAGTF-CR is not an optimal solution to meet the increased crisis response mission. So how does the Marine Corps meet the increasing demand for crisis response units? If an amphibious MAGTF is what the GCCs are asking for, then that is what the Marine Corps should be providing. With a lack of amphibious ships available, how can the Marine Corps provide enough amphibious MAGTFs? The MEU is still the answer, but the MEU must be adapted to do so.

It is not difficult to find suggestions on how the Marine Corps can provide amphibious crisis response units. The one suggestion that seems to be often cited is a single-ship MEU concept. This concept basically disaggregates the MEU before it is formed and creates three separate MEUs, each MEU embarked aboard the ships that constitute the ARG.⁴³ From the perspective of providing amphibious forces, the single-ship MEU concept does increase the number of units available, but not without certain costs that makes this solution not optimal.

Only the LHD/LHA class ships would still provide the full range of capabilities of a MEU if deployed as a single ship. It is the only ship that is capable of exercising the full range of aviation assets, has a well deck for surface connectors, and full command and

control capabilities, but it is also the most expensive amphibious ship of an ARG, which is likely why increasing the number of this type ship is not an option. The LPD-17 class ship provides a significant leap in capabilities from its predecessor, specifically in its aviation capacity and command and control capabilities, but would only be able to marginally achieve a subset of the current MEU METs.⁴⁴ The third ship of the ARG, the LSD, is far less capable than the LHD/LHA and LPD, and would be very limited in its ability to meet more than just a few of the MEUs METs.

Instead of only considering a single ARG when considering a change to the MEU organization, the Navy and Marine Corps should consider all amphibious ships. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 30-year shipbuilding plan has 30 amphibious ships for FY2015.⁴⁵ This analysis will use the number of ships for FY2015, and according to the 30-year shipbuilding plan, the Navy will have 9 LHD/LHAs, 9 LPDs, and 12 LSDs. Under the current structure, the Marine Corps has 7 active MEUs, which would require 21 ships if all were to sail at the same time. The remaining nine ships would be either under maintenance or otherwise tasked. Table 3 below depicts each MEU with an assigned ARG:

Table 3

11 th MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD		22 nd MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD
13 th MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD		24 th MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD
15 th MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD		26 th MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD
31 st MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD	Ships used: 21		7 LHD	7 LPD	7 LSD
				Ships remaining: 9		2 LHD	2 LPD	5 LSD

Note: Unit names and ship-types are notional.

The Marine Corps should not make the assumption that the MEU will deploy on a three-ship ARG. Instead, it should consider a two-ship concept, which could add up to three additional MEUs. Additionally, the 31st MEU would not be affected by the number of ships

due to the uniqueness of its forward-deployed nature. Table 4 below depicts the two-ship concept with the three additional MEUs:

Table 4

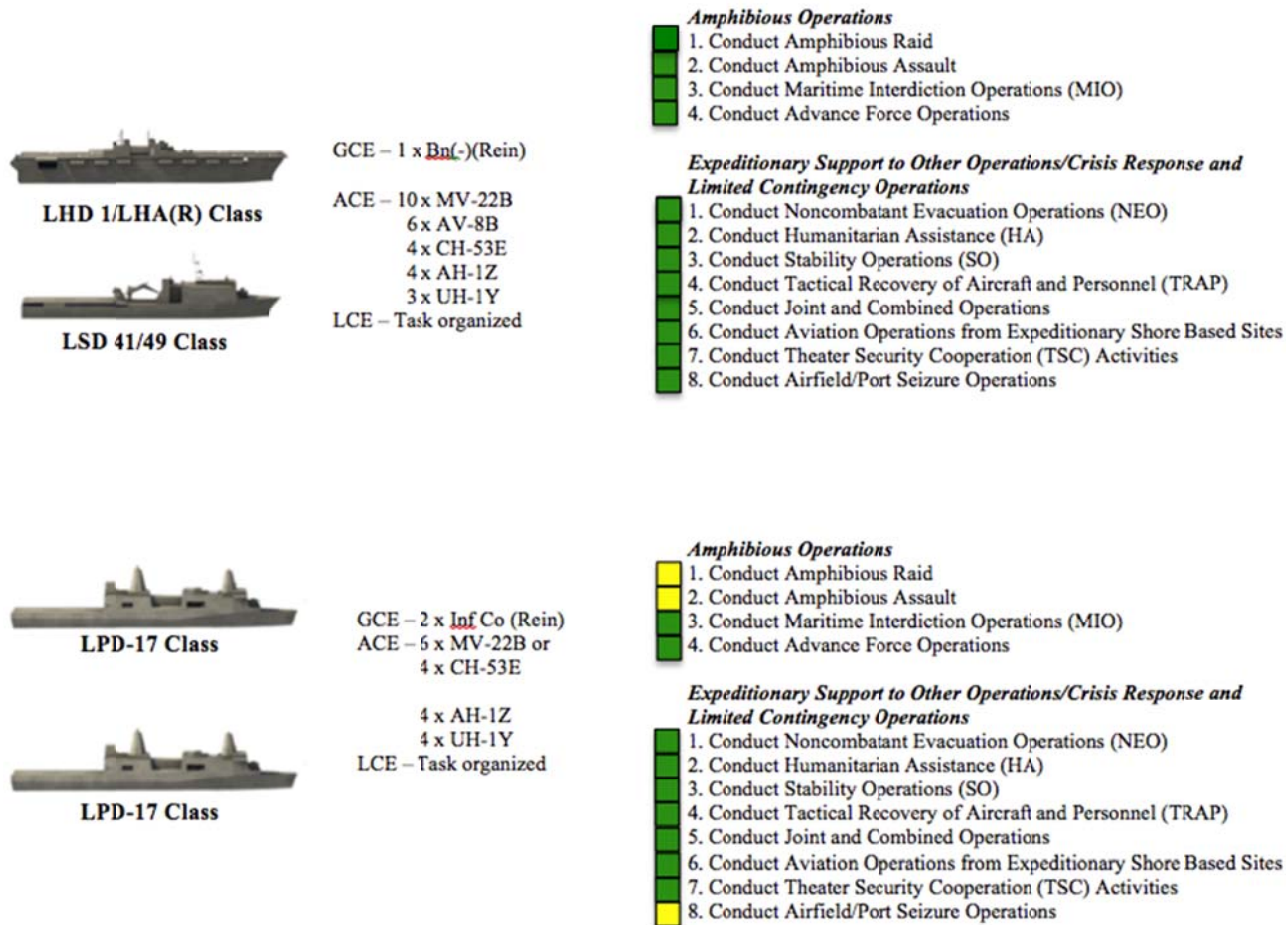
11 th MEU	LHD	LSD			22 nd MEU	LHD	LSD	
13 th MEU	LHD	LSD			24 th MEU	LHD	LSD	
15 th MEU	LHD	LSD			26 th MEU	LHD	LSD	
17 th MEU	LPD	LPD			28 th MEU	LPD	LPD	
19 th MEU	LPD	LPD						
				Ships used: 21		7 LHD	7 LPD	7 LSD
31 st MEU	LHD	LPD	LSD	Ships remaining: 9		2 LHD	2 LPD	5 LSD

Note: Unit names and ship-types are notional.

By using a two-ship concept, the Marine Corps can increase the number of MEUs available without an increase in the number of amphibious ships. With three additional MEUs, the Marine Corps would be capable of having three MEUs deployed, three conducting work-ups, and three in a post-deployment period.

As mentioned with the single-ship MEU concept earlier, a simple increase in MEUs does not necessarily correlate to an equal increase in capability. However, the two-ship MEU concept does not make the same sacrifices in capabilities as the single-ship MEU concept. Examples of assets assigned to each two-ship MEU concept and METs they are capable of accomplishing are described in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1.



Both variants generically list the Logistics Combat Element (LCE) as “task organized”, but it is not to understate the importance of logistics. To accomplish most of the METs, the LCE would still need to be task organized similar to a full strength MEU’s LCE. These are the decisions the MEU commander must make when determining where certain risks will be accepted.

The two-LPD MEU is not as capable as the current MEU, but much of the degradation of capabilities is centered on high intensity conflict or conventional forcible entry. Moreover, this variant does not require the Marine Corps, or specifically the unit commander, to accept nearly the same risk as operating in a disaggregated manner while still providing much the same capabilities as the current ARG/MEU. The Marine Corps has demonstrated the ability to

aggregate for the forcible entry missions, such as the 15th MEU and 26th MEU in 2002 to form a MEB.⁴⁶ Either variant of the two-ship MEU would be capable of operating in this same manner.

Conclusion

The US military is at a complex crossroad after more than a decade of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each service has been focused largely on these operations and has evolved differently to achieve success. As US forces return to the US, the services are refocusing on what the next mission may be and evaluating how they can continue to provide desired capabilities. To add to the complexity, the nation's debt concerns are shaping DoD budget reductions, which in turn are leading each service to fight for every dollar by demonstrating relevant capabilities.

The Marine Corps evolved during the past thirteen years adapting to the environment, threat, and mission. With the end of major operations for the Marine Corps in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps is refocused on returning to its amphibious roots as well as being the nation's force in readiness. In doing so, the Marine Corps has found itself without sufficient amphibious lift capable of supporting the rise in demand from GCCs for forward deployed crisis response units. Being an adaptive service, the Marine Corps is finding other ways to be forward deployed such as disaggregating the MEU and creating land based SPMAGTF-CR units. Disaggregation of the MEU breaks apart the only true MAGTF, one that is formed under a single commander for the duration of pre-deployment, deployment, and employment. The pre-deployment PTP lays the foundation and refines working relationships that are essential to the success of executing crisis response missions. The MEU MAGTF is what truly sets the Marine Corps apart from the other services, and the Marine Corps should maximize this capability by deploying more MEUs.

To deploy more MEUs, the Marine Corps must think creatively about possible ways to take advantage of the MEU MAGTF with limited amphibious lift capacity available from the Navy. In a fiscally unconstrained environment with sufficient amphibious ships, deploying additional MEUs as currently structured would be ideal. Knowing these conditions do not exist, if the Marine Corps is willing to consider two-ship MEU variations, then the Corps is still capable of providing additional MEUs. By using two-ship MEU variants, the Marine Corps can maximize its amphibious nature while capitalizing on the strength of the uniqueness of the MEU MAGTF.

Endnotes

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⁸ Ibid.

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¹⁷ Bruce W. Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups.,” *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965): 384–99, doi:10.1037/h0022100. Quoted by Donelson R Forsyth, *Group Dynamics* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006). 21-22.

¹⁸ Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*. 21-22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 21-22.

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²¹ Ibid. 21-22.

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²³ Christian Pfeffer (MARSOC Special Operations Team Leader), interviewed by Joseph Barker, December 17, 2014.

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- ²⁴ Inc Merriam-Webster, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2005).
- ²⁵ “Disaggregated Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit Concept of Employment,” August 22, 2014. 2-3. Col Benedict assumed command of the 24th MEU in March 2013. Simultaneously, he served as the CO, Special Purpose MAGTF-Crisis Response, from July 2013 to January 2014 in support of U.S. European Command and Africa Command.
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- ²⁷ Ibid. 2-3.
- ²⁸ Scott F Benedict, “A Maritime Warfighting Philosophy,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 98, no. 11 (November 2014): 52–54.
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- ⁴⁰ Gregory Goober, “Maintaining the USMC Amphibious Heritage: The Value of Sea-Based Crisis Response Forces” (Master’s Thesis, Marine Corps University, 2014). 2.
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