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*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**Marine Expeditionary Unit – Crisis Response:
Tomorrow’s MAGTF for Tomorrow’s Threats**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Major E. Saúl Manzanet

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Douglas E. Streusand

Approved: 

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Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Paul D. Goups

Approved: 

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Executive Summary

Title: Marine Expeditionary Unit (Crisis Response): Tomorrow's MAGTF for Tomorrow's Threats

Author: Major E. Saúl Manzanet, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: In order to address the future operating environment and rising demand for crisis response, the Marine Corps should establish permanent MAGTF structures, not merely standing headquarters, below the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) level. This reorganization would eliminate the problems that experiences with SPMAGTFs have revealed and prepare the Marine Corps to respond to the most likely threats more efficiently and effectively.

Discussion: The continued increase in small-scale conflicts around the world requires the Marine Corps to provide responsive and versatile units trained for regional crises. Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) units are currently ad-hoc organizations drawn from infantry regiments, Marine Aircraft Groups (MAGs), and Combat Logistics Regiments (CLRs). The task organizations are temporary but the requirements for them are continuous. Continuous improvisation is costly, inefficient, and threatens unit cohesion. The Marine Corps cannot continue to risk valuable cohesion by forming "pick-up teams." Therefore, it should establish smaller standing MAGTFs that resemble the Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) but without the connection to an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). This reorganization would decentralize infantry battalions from infantry regiments, flying squadrons from MAGs, and logistics battalions from logistics groups to provide a single commander force structure that forms a contingency response MAGTF with organic capability.

Conclusion: The Marine Corps needs to adapt the 20th century MAGTF structure to meet the threats of the future or else it will jeopardize USMC relevancy in a time of fiscal constraint. The Marine Corps has multiple lessons learned from previous MAGTF deployments. The lessons provide context for the creation of permanent MAGTF structure at brigade and regimental levels in order to have the right unit at the right place at the right time. The current use of SPMAGTF for crisis response and the forecasted operating environment indicate that MAGTF (other-than MEF) deployments are the Marine Corps' new normal. Reorganization positions the Marine Corps' resources and focuses readiness on supporting the middleweight force of the future.

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Preface

I chose this topic as a result of my experience as a battalion operations officer at Combat Logistics Battalion 4 in Japan. While stationed in Okinawa, I deployed to support numerous MAGTF exercises and operations. The amount of time and energy spent assembling and dismantling the MAGTFs negatively affected quality and efficiency to unit training. Every participating unit had loyalties divided between the MAGTF and its parent command. This repeated scenario inspired me to consider the rationale of the constant rebuilding of temporary units for recurring missions. My focus was not to standardize all MAGTFs, but to design smaller permanent MAGTFs that spend more time together maintaining unit cohesion.

My research included reviewing Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), and Special Purpose MAGTF after-action reports (AAR) to understand the challenges of constantly rotating subordinate commands in support of continuous global missions. There are volumes of lessons documented; however, few focus on reorganization for the manning and equipping of MAGTFs.

I would like to acknowledge the stewardship of Brigadier General J. Dale Alford, USMC; Colonel John Armellino, USMC; Colonel Timothy Bryant, USMC; Mr. Jay Hatton, Colonel USMC (Ret.); Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Pirrotta, USMC; and Lieutenant Colonel Michael McMellon, USAF. My gratitude to the Leadership Communications Skills Center team (Linda, Andrea, and Stase) who assisted me in getting my thoughts on paper properly. Special thanks to Dr. Douglas E. Streusand for encouraging me to be bold in my writing and research skills. Finally, I want to thank my patient wife, Madeline, and children, Raquel and Alex, for their love and support.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Marine Corps needs to be an adaptive and nimble organization in constant preparation for the next major threat. Currently, the Marine Corps is in a situation similar to that of the interwar years of 1919 through 1939, and after the Vietnam War: seeking to redefine itself for future threats in an effort to remain relevant as defense budgets decrease. In 1980, the Congressional Budget Office described the post-Vietnam War Marine Corps in search of the next mission: “The U.S. Marine Corps now stands at a crossroads. Its future roles could differ significantly from one another and from the Corps’[s] recent orientation.”¹ The Marine Corps stands at a similar juncture at the conclusion of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). After 15 years of serving in large scale land operations far from the maritime environment, the Marine Corps is adjusting its focus to reinvest in equipment readiness, executing a major downsize, and seeking the next chapter of relevancy.

The smaller-scale security threats to US diplomatic missions in the Middle East were the catalyst for transformation. On September 11, 2012, the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, was the site of an attack that resulted in the death of US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans.² This incident highlighted the need to be able to intervene in volatile regions more rapidly than in the past. Quick response forces were not available to respond to the consulate breach and the bureaucratic processes of re-tasking the regionally assigned ARG/MEU contributed to the delay in sending reinforcements. As it has done in the past, the Marine Corps recognized that limited scale, crisis response, fits its expeditionary nature. In April 2013, the Marine Corps created the Special-Purpose (or mission dependent) Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) similar to a Marine Expeditionary Unit, consisting of command, aviation, ground,

and logistics elements. Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies and Operations announced the establishment of a SPMAGTF focused on theater crisis response (initially for North Africa) – as Special Purpose MAGTF – Crisis Response – Africa (SPMAGTF-CR-AF).³ The recent increases in non-state group attacks, such as Benghazi, and the growing violence in Syria and Iraq led the Marine Corps to design ongoing rotational units for operations in volatile regions. The new rotational MAGTF initiative assigns units for small-scale engagement and theater security cooperation in US Central Command (CENTCOM) and US Africa Command (AFRICOM) as well as regionally dedicated security cooperation in Australia, the Black Sea, and South America. The establishment of flexible, scalable, units trained to respond for crises with little notice is the Marine Corps’ “new normal.”⁴ In order to address the rising demand for crisis response, the Marine Corps should establish permanent MAGTF structures below the level of Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEF). This recommendation reflects the study of after action reports from the temporary MAGTFs and the desire to reduce the adverse effects. This change would position the Marine Corps to focus on the probable threats in the next decade.

The *Expeditionary Force 21 (EF 21)* concept document predicts the future threats faced by the United States and forecasts the US Marine Corps’ solutions to address the threats. In *EF21*, the SPMAGTF is described as a Marine Corps line of effort for the future:

SPMAGTFs will assume a greater role in crisis response and generate greater capacity for forward presence in more locations. Based on GCC [Geographic Combatant Commander] requirements, these organizations are tailored appropriately to conduct security cooperation activities with partner nations in order to develop interoperability, facilitate access, build defense and security relationships, gain regional understanding, and position for immediate response to episodic crises.⁵

Currently, the SPMAGTF-CR units are ad hoc organizations sourced from infantry regiments, MAGs, and CLRAs that do not have habitual relationships with each other. Establishing tempo-

rary units for continuing Marine Corps missions is costly and inefficient. The Marine Corps cannot continue to risk timely response by combining a group of disassociated units rather than establishing standing MAGTFs that train as a unit. The Marine Corps should reorganize the Marine Expeditionary Forces and establish permanent standing MAGTFs within each major subordinate command (Division, Aircraft Wing and Logistics Group). The creation of other MEU-like MAGTFs within the division, aircraft wing and logistics group would provide more options for MEF Commanders to address the expanding missions highlighted in *EF21*. The establishment of permanent MAGTFs within the MEFs would follow the basic principles of Marine Corps organizations. This reform would be undertaken by some (not all) of the active component MEFs, to maintain a portion of the Marine Corps poised to respond to large-scale MAGTF employment.

A NEED FOR A MAGTF

The establishment of standing MAGTFs within the existing MEFs would not contravene either the legal requirements for Marine Corps force structure or the Marine Corps' own internal regulations. The two documents that most significantly affect the Marine Corps structure are *US Code Title 10* and *Marine Corps Order 3120.13*.⁶ Before considering restructure, it is important to distinguish the Marine Corps' legally obligated actions from its institutionally chosen actions. *US Code Title 10* establishes the Marine Corps: "The Marine Corps, within the Department of the Navy, shall be so organized as to include not less than three combat divisions and three air wings, and such other land combat, aviation, and other services as may be organic therein."⁷ The law does not dictate the organization of divisions or aircraft wings. The law also does not mandate how infantry battalions are configured in divisions or how the aircraft are assigned in the aircraft wings. The law further explains, "The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and

equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.”⁸ Thus, the Marine Corps is only required to maintain three divisions, three air (aircraft) wings, and support for integration with the Navy. There is no mention of MAGTF structure in the law, so the Marine Corps has the flexibility necessary to organize lower level standing MAGTFs. The component units assigned to the proposed future MAGTFs would still retain regiment/group division/wing affiliations and would reintegrate into the larger units for scenarios requiring MEF or MEB deployment. The Marine Corps directive establishing the Amphibious Ready Group/ Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG/MEU) offers the best model for the establishment of new standing MAGTFs.

Marine Corps Order (MCO) 3120.13 is the principal document that spells out how a MEF will man, train, and equip ARG/MEUs. The order outlines specific details on the establishment and employment of the Marine Corps’ premier task-organized forward deployed MAGTFs – the 11th MEU, 13th MEU, 15th MEU, 22nd MEU, 24th MEU, 26th MEU, and 31st MEU. The order provides the MEF Commander, “... policy guidance for the manning, training, equipping and organization of MEUs, when employed with an ARG.”⁹ The MEF Commander constructs the ARG/MEU for Navy fleet assignment from its organic division, aircraft wing, and logistics group. The order defines the MEF Commander’s role in meeting *USC Title 10* requirement of providing forces for Naval fleet deployment. The policy specifies generation, employment, and disestablishment for ARG/MEU operations. However, the policy allows the MEF Commander to choose what units to draw from to achieve the requirements. Similar to *USC Title 10*, the ARG/MEU policy provides generous design space for reorganizing future MAGTFs

based on the forces not assigned to ARG/MEUs. In summary, the Marine Corps has no constraints on establishing MAGTFs not assigned to an amphibious mission. Within the law, there is opportunity to establish MAGTFs that are shore-based and designed for the primary purpose of crisis response against future threats.

PROBLEM FRAMING: CRISIS RESPONSE AND FUTURE OPERATING

ENVIRONMENT

The Marine Corps needs to adapt to meet the continuing requirement for rapid, small-scale intervention forces. Significant material has been written regarding the variety of tomorrow's threats against the United States and her citizens, but the Marine Corps has barely begun to adapt to meet the threats. Action is the next logical step at the conclusion of all of the predictions. Some of the estimates that follow are directed by or for the Marine Corps' future. In the *36th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, General Joseph Dunford defined the future scope of Marine Corps operations, "The current operating environment is volatile and complex. It is marked by a growing demand for Marine capabilities ranging from Amphibious Ready Groups/Marine Expeditionary Units (ARG/MEUs) and Special Purpose MAGTFs to Marines at embassies. There are no indications that the future will be any less challenging or that the demand for Marines will decrease."¹⁰ The dynamic nature of the forecasted operating environment will require US military services to think creatively about emerging threats from state and non-state actors. Transnational terror networks like DAISH and affiliates will likely threaten US national interests for several years.¹¹ *EF 21* provides the following forecast,

While the need to conduct sustained operations ashore should never be ruled out, it is more likely that the next 10 years will be largely characterized by the need to address small-scale crises and limited contingencies in and around the littorals.

Should major operations and campaigns occur, they are increasingly certain to involve significant combat in the maritime domain and the littorals.¹²

EF 21 predicts that future threats will require new solutions focused on quick reaction units followed by the arrival of a larger follow-on force.

The Benghazi attack demonstrated to military leaders that the United States needed a small, rapidly available response force. The challenge for the Marine Corps is the inverse relationship between the growing demand for more air-ground units and shrinking defense dollars. Organizations such as DAISH, which are an existential threat to the United States, exploited the large exodus of the US troops from the Middle East. The subsequent re-emergence of violence now requires a return of US forces, but with a smaller footprint. The forecasted future appears to be a return to the past Marine Corps “small wars.” The Marine Corps’ lessons of the interwar small wars are reflected in FMF 12-15, *Small Wars Manual*. The manual defines small wars in a broad sense; the definition encompasses limited scale war, counter insurgency (COIN), and irregular war (IW).

Small War’ is often a vague name for any one of a great variety of military operations. As applied to the United States, small wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation.¹³

During the interwar years, the Marine Corps became proficient at small wars but also prepared for the coming struggle in the Pacific. Today, the Marine Corps must reorient itself to low-level regional threats without losing the ability to contribute to high intensity interstate conflicts. As in the interwar years, the Marine Corps seeks to answer the future needs of the nation by addressing smaller regional threats. SPMAGTF-CR has all the tools necessary for crisis response missions but suffers from its improvisational nature. If a problem occurs, a MAGTF would respond

first to set the conditions for follow-on forces, if required. D. Robert Worley describes the Marine Corps crisis response culture in *Shaping U.S. Military Forces*,

The Marine Corps had a role to play in the big war plans, but its day-to-day existence is better characterized as a small force prepared to enter any number of countries to execute any number of missions and to do it with only six hours warning. The end of the Cold War changed little in this orientation. The Marine culture is to plan quickly, put the force ashore, and expect the young officers and non-commissioned officers to improvise. It is a crisis planning culture, not a deliberate planning culture.¹⁴

Although the MEF is the ideal organization for the most dangerous high intensity conflict, it lacks the nimble footprint required for the most likely threats that will be needed. In the article “Custom-Built Corps” Major Scott Kinner (USMC, retired), writes:

When reevaluating MAGTF building blocks one realizes that the Marine Corps is attempting to employ a force designed for use in large units against traditional warfare threats—in every other way but traditional warfare. It is inherently inefficient to continually employ forces in ways for which they are not designed, such as throwing battalions at company-sized problems and maintaining active-duty “break in case of worst-case scenario” units while firewalling their employment options. These are not inherently wrong per se, but given the size of the force, the demands on the force, and the available resources, they are unaffordable inefficiencies.¹⁵

Kinner highlights the inefficiency of establishing SPMAGTFs through the sourcing from infantry, aviation, and logistics units whose principal mission is to fight as a part of a MEF not as a brigade, regiment, or SPMAGTF. In order to prepare for tomorrow’s threats, the Marine Corps should modify its structure to build flexible combined arms regiments to reflect the current and anticipated role, rather than maintain a “just-in-case-of-war” MEF structure.

PROBLEM: LESSONS REVIEWED NOT LESSONS LEARNED

The establishment of new standing MAGTFs would answer the deficiencies identified in the SPMAGTF-CR after action reports (AARs). The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned

(MCCLL) reports on recent MAGTF exercises and operations, including the SPMAGTF-CR deployments, reveal consistent problems with both manpower and equipment. Earlier MAGTF operations reported similar weaknesses. The recent experience of the SPMAGTF-CR CENTCOM (SPMAGTF-CR-CC) offers, the best reorganization needed for the future.

In 2014, to meet US Central Command requirements, the Marine Corps established the SPMAGTF-CR-CC, consisting of an infantry regiment headquarters with an assigned infantry battalion, combat logistics battalion, and composite squadron to support Operation Inherent Resolve with air strikes, tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, and training and advising the Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁶ The unit (SPMAGTF-CR-CC) continues to fulfill many roles while remaining poised to respond to any potential crisis in the U.S. Central Command Area of Operations.¹⁷ Similar to the first SPMAGTF-CR-AF, SPMAGTF-CR-CC remains a persistently deployed MAGTF with ground, air, and logistics units cycling through as subcomponents of the MAGTF. Both MAGTFs are the ideal unit size for conducting crisis response and embassy reinforcement. Regardless of the terms used to describe these operations—new norm, small wars, or phase zero actions--assigned units will continue to deploy for the near future to these high risk areas to support the United States and her allies. The Marine Corps' ability to deploy SPMAGTFs, within weeks, to fulfill emerging needs has been impressive and demonstrated the service's responsible planning and execution cycle; however, the weakness of this plan is in the forming of the SPMAGTF.

SPMAGTFs suffer, in comparison, to the ARG/MEUs because they do not train together as often nor assemble around a permanent headquarters. The ARG/MEU life cycle consists of compositing multiple units to make a regiment sized MAGTF. During the early months of existence, the MEU rehearses on all of the potential missions expected in its area of responsibility.

The commander, and staff of the command element, are trained and versed in naval integration, aviation procedures in multiple regions and amphibious planning. The recent SPMAGTFs are less integrated and less cohesive to their amphibious counterparts. The shorter life-span of SPMAGTFs (less than 18 months), compared to ARG/MEUs, limits readiness and forces the unit to invest valuable time preparing for its deconstruction, just as it is assembled. Dismembering a finely tuned MAGTF and depriving future iterations of valuable experience is wasteful and negligent based on the important mission SPMAGTFs provide to the US and its regional partners. There is greater value in keeping the unit together after a deployment to harvest the experiences and collective learning of the organization. Much like a MEU, which establishes milestones for unit training and culminating to several MAGTF-wide certifications, the SPMAGTF-CR units have followed an objectives-based training program in accordance with the MCO 3120.13.

In the case of SPMAGTF-CR-CC 15.1, the Fifth Marine (infantry) Regiment served as the command element of the MAGTF. The MAGTF was task organized from its regimental headquarters staff, a reinforced infantry battalion, a composited squadron and a logistics battalion. The staff of SPMAGTF-CR-CC preferred the same 180-day preparation period allotted to ARG/MEU creation, but had only four months to form the MAGTF.¹⁸ The SPMAGTF had to draw equipment from other MEF units, reducing the combat readiness of those units. The MCCLL report on the SPMAGTF-CR-CC summarizes the remarks of Colonel Mathew Jones (I MEF, Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations) pre-deployment difficulties: “From the I MEF perspective, a MEU model for aggregating, training and preparation for specific METS [mission essential tasks] was utilized, fully recognizing that the SPMAGTF would be constrained by available time and resources. The reality of the time line for forming and deploying the SPMAGTF on a compressed schedule is that the organization came together in the last month

prior to deployment and was still joining individual members after deployment.”¹⁹ At the conclusion of a deployment, the MAGTF is still growing and learning from the experiences of its collective knowledge. Post-deployment time is just as important to the life-cycle of a MAGTF and is normally used to capitalize on past observations. The ARG/MEU retains continuity through its Command Element; however, the SPMAGTFs do not retain the institutional memory because the units are dismantled shortly upon redeployment. The Marine Corps captures some of the lessons learned, but loses a cadre of experienced Marines that can see to the implementation of improvements based the last iterations of the MAGTF.

Another example of unnecessary friction was the establishment of SPMAGTF-Southern Command (SPMAGTF-SC). SPMAGTF-SC’s (2015) primary mission was to engage in theater security cooperation in the South American continent. The challenges in attempting to build the “ad hoc” SPMAGTF resulted in a lack of personnel serving in platoon commander and other critical leader positions. Major Brandon E. Cooley describes the end-strength problem: “Even though minor changes were made to the manning document, many key billets remained unchanged, however, and could have been sourced earlier. An example is the [Officers in Charge] OICs of the Security Cooperation Teams.”²⁰ The organizational problems in the example will continue as more SPMAGTFs are assembled or until the Marine Corps addresses manpower sourcing to meet the increased demand for MAGTFs smaller than a MEF. The above after-action report supports keeping MAGTF “life-cycles” that keep the MAGTF together rather than dealing with the additional burden of dismantling and rebuilding for each deployment. These outlined problems are not new and have been documented in previous MAGTFs. Failure to adapt threatens future relevance and readiness while missing an opportunity to transform.

Marine Corps doctrine describes the value of task organizing for missions. The practice of assigning different units to rotate into the subordinate elements of a MAGTF appears reasonable until one takes into consideration the loss of MAGTF subject matter experts after every MAGTF iteration. With smaller budgets and increased fiscal scrutiny, the Marine Corps must reevaluate its mission when not engaged in major wars. Task organizing at a MEF level is not cost-effective, especially when considering the opportunity costs of losing every subordinate leader of the MAGTF after a deployment. The effects of this loss are especially detrimental to the aviation community where the majority of pilots do not train with other models of aircraft until they are a part of a MAGTF.

In 1995, Captains Joseph Guadagno and William A. Tosick, USMC, describe the negative impacts of continuously disassembling the Aviation Combat Element at the conclusion of the ARG/MEU deployment life cycle,

Some inefficiencies with the current system are obvious and warrant consideration. Efficiency is not maximized due to the time required, 4 to 6 months, to properly train the squadron and integrate it as a cohesive unit both internally and in relation to the ground combat element (GCE) of the MEU. The level of integration is usually proportional to the amount of time given for the workup. The repeated disbanding of these squadrons means the Corps is not able to benefit from the time and effort spent training for deployment (unless the MEU participated in a contingency) nor from the training conducted while deployed.²¹

Past problems continue to exist today with the Marine Corps' MAGTF strategy. If the sanctity of the MAGTF is so important, then the Marine Corps should establish more MAGTFs at lower levels to take advantage of the continuity. In *Breaking the Phalanx*, Douglas Macgregor writes about the value of having subordinate units with greater warfighting power, "...organizing of the arms of combat at increasingly lower levels in the form of combat commands or regimental combat teams and relying on a subordinate battalion commander's understanding of the division commander's operational intent."²² Smaller MAGTFs allow units to remain better trained at

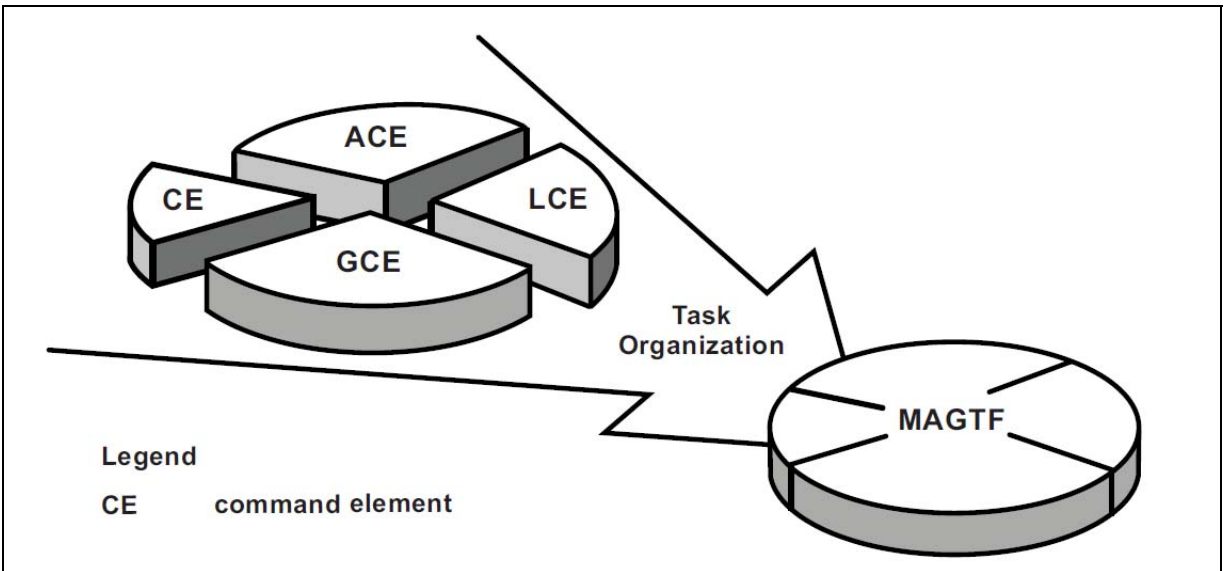
small-scale crisis response, non-combatant evacuation, foreign humanitarian assistance, tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel and other non-amphibious missions. The result of moving permanent MAGTF structure to lower levels provides better unit cohesion and adaptability for a unit that is constantly working together. Retired US Army General Stanley McChrystal describes this phenomenal status of synergy as not building great teams, but rather creating “awesome organisms.”²³ Smaller MAGTFs that remain together for longer periods would become inherently better at fighting together.

In reviewing the MCCLL reports of previous MAGTFs, the consensus is that for all the gain that a MAGTF garners in firepower upon assembly, it loses a proportion of intellectual firepower upon its disintegration. The lessons recorded are not transforming the future of MAGTF employment. The future MAGTF requires a new supporting foundation best suited for the future operating environment.

PROBLEM: BREAKING UP THE MAGTFs

The MAGTF is one of the topics that the Marine Corps holds as unique and instrumental in its warfighting. Although the term, “Don’t break up the MAGTF” is often the answer at any joint planning session, the Marine Corps violates this mantra as a matter of routine. The only permanently structured MAGTF construct is the Marine Expeditionary Force, led by a Lieutenant General. The MEF staffs are well versed in the intricacies of air-ground missions as well as the planning required to effectively integrate and train MAGTFs. As figure one illustrates, the strength of the MAGTF is its integrated maneuver (ground combat), aviation, logistics, and command and control units assigned as sub-elements. Regardless of the size of the MAGTF (MEF, MEB or MEU) the command has inherent self-contained capabilities. The current MEF construct ensures that the force (over 30,000 Marines and sailors) is prepared to respond to a the-

ater-level war; however, the deployment of an entire MEF is not the right sized unit for regional conflicts of the future. In order to reduce the friction of customizing MAGTFs for every mission, the Marine Corps should change the unit manning and equipping to support the deployments of the next decade. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 *Warfighting* describes the ideal MAGTF organization as, “Operating forces should be organized for warfighting and then adapted for peacetime rather than vice versa. Tables of organization should reflect the two central requirements of deployability and the ability to task-organize according to specific situations. Units should be organized according to type only to the extent dictated by training, administrative, and logistic requirements.”²⁴ Most units in the active force remain organized for less-likely large scale battle rather than the most-likely crisis response warfighting. The 37th Commandant, General Robert Neller, affirms, “In order to ensure that deploying units are ready, we will review our assignment policies to ensure leaders and Marines arrive with adequate time to participate in their unit’s pre-deployment training.”²⁵ In other words, the best prepared MAGTF trains and lives like it is prepared to fight and is ready for the next fight.



Source: Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operations*, MCDP 1-0, Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, August 9, 2011.

Current unit tables of organization require personnel to constantly switch between units to meet the unplanned demand of a MAGTF manning document. The manning document is simply a wish list that specifies personnel without associated equipment and training. The personnel model for the MEF is structured and based on a training continuum that continuously produces newly trained Marines. Marines join battalion or squadron sized units that contain a density of their military specialty. There is benefit to having like specialties train together to refine expertise and share knowledge. The described staffing model works well for a MEF-sized mission that requires a battalion of combat engineers to construct outposts and repair roads. This is not the case for the typical ARG/MEU or recent SPMAGTF-CR unit.

For an ARG/MEU, some Marines and sailors meet only a month before they depart on their contingency or exercise because of the high demand for low-density skills. For instance, satellite communication operators, explosive ordnance technicians or vehicle recovery specialists are low-density examples for MAGTF support. If subordinate units assigned to the ARG/MEU

identify a shortfall in this expertise they depend on an augment from their parent major command (led by general officer). A common practice today is the temporary assignment of a Marine from unit A to unit B in order for the entire unit to be assigned to MAGTF unit C. *Warfighting* highlights the unnecessary self-induced friction that results because of complex task organization or command relationships.²⁶ This is a very complex solution to a simpler problem. The solution is to design tables of organizations that support the most commonly used MAGTFs to reduce transferring Marines between units.

The constant transfer manipulates the true personnel readiness of the providing commander and the gaining commander. During the time a Marine is absent from the traditional MEF (assigned temporarily to a MAGTF), there is no replacement. The providing commander continues to train with partial staffing to meet the ongoing MEF-level training requirements. In this example, both assignments remain partially staffed because two units share one Marine. Additionally, the time used to build cohesion is lost upfront and delays trust in partnerships among units that make the MAGTF. Reducing self-inflicted stress is a priority in the 36th Commandant's Planning Guidance: "The practice of moving Marines between units to meet manning goals for deployments creates personnel turbulence, inhibits cohesion, and is not visible in our current readiness assessment tools. This personnel turbulence affects our combat readiness and our ability to take care of Marines."²⁷ Upon completion of the MAGTF deployment, all units disassociate (ground, aviation, and logistics elements) and return to a functionally-aligned regiment or group. In the case of the ARG/MEU, the command element remains intact only to reintroduce MAGTF operations to the next infantry battalion and composite squadron to reestablish a new MAGTF cycle. In contrast, all temporary MAGTFs restart this process continuously to satisfy enduring mission (as is the case of the SPMAGTF-CR [Africa and Central Command]).

The experiences acquired as a part of a MAGTF are not used to train other future MAGTF members; instead, Marines are returned to functionally-aligned commands to prepare for large scale MEF operations.

An added shortfall of the staffing model is the scope of the MAGTF Commander. The principal fighting MAGTF Commander is Major General or Lieutenant General. Due to the limited number of permanent MAGTF Commanders, it is plausible that a MEF Commander has never served as a MEB or ARG/MEU commander. There are seven permanent ARG/MEU Command elements, but those commanders have no habitual relationship with an aviation unit or infantry battalion in garrison. The command environment loses its identity and corporate knowledge the moment the ARG/MEU arrives into port and refocuses on returning personnel and equipment back to the MEF force providers. Every 18 months, a MEU Commander breaks up the MAGTF.

Another problem associated with temporary MAGTFs rests in the concept that one piece of equipment can serve two different units for two different missions at one time. Although policy exists on how and what an ARG/MEU looks like, there is still customization to enrich the mixture of needed fighting capability for a particular rotation. Also, experimentation requires each MAGTF to baseline test certain technologies or procedures to understand the impacts of new concepts; in this case, a MAGTF commander may ask for a capability that is not organic to the command. The new shortfall identified as a gap in the “equipment density list” requires another unit to support. The equipment density list, like a manning document, is not associated with a table of equipment and does not consider the operator and maintenance costs that are part of the owning unit. Instead, the providing unit would reluctantly comply with the MAGTF shortfall to its own decrease in unit readiness. For example, an infantry regiment is dependent on

the certain-types of light-weight radios to maneuver with a battalion and regiment. If a battalion commander provides radios temporarily to a MAGTF, the battalion cannot achieve satisfactory training. Similar to the example of personnel, this equipment sourcing diminishes the readiness of both providing commander and gaining MAGTF commander.

The result of continuously transferring equipment and personnel from one unit to create a MAGTF results in readiness reductions. As MAGTFs continue to increase operations for forecasted SPMAGTF-CR missions, the Marine Corps will require a long term solution or accept diminished readiness. Constant shuffling of personnel and equipment is difficult and expensive to the service work force, and contrary to the guidance of Marine Corps leaders. This construct also misrepresents overall readiness as both units report personnel and equipment status. Readiness report submissions often reflect the status of a unit under the guise that it can readily reconstitute absent personnel and equipment as opposed to the unit's actual readiness state. Phrases like "task organization" and "scalable MAGTF construct" do not minimize the artificial impacts on units constantly attempting to juggle organic missions while providing capability to a temporary MAGTF. A change in paradigm would prioritize the personnel and equipment for the mission and make adjustments as they emerge, rather than keep building and deconstructing the MAGTF.

SOLUTION: A NEW MEU FOR CRISIS RESPONSE

The current and forecasted operating environments of the next decade provide the opportunity to rearrange the functional infantry regiments, MAGs, and CLRAs and establish the mid-weight MAGTFs in the MEU (CR). This change would require rearranging current tables of organization and equipment. The current MEU is an ideal construct; and based on the latest re-

port of SPMAGTF-CR, the regiment is the right size and level of command to truly exercise flexible and nimble MAGTF operations for the dynamic requirements of the future small wars. The creation of the MEU (CR) concept is similar to the MEU, except without amphibious war ships. The current and forecasted fiscal constraints limit the number of amphibious ships available to meet the growing global demand by the combatant commanders. Now is the right time to transfer the MEF capability, from General Officer to Colonel, to best develop MAGTF expertise. The restructuring of infantry regiments, MAGs, and CLRAs is not a loss of capability, but rather an investment in MAGTF operations. The Marine Corps should not only advertise MAGTF operations, but reorganize into more MAGTFs of varying sizes to increase future agility and relevance.

The MEU (CR) would be similar to an ARG/MEU as a regimental sized MAGTF, consisting of a reinforced infantry battalion, logistics battalion (include aviation ground support), and an integrated squadron with multiple type/model/series (T/M/S) aircraft. A Colonel would command the proposed regiment. The strength in the MEU (CR) is the permanent garrison command structure absent from today's MAGTFs (below the MEF-level). As illustrated in figure two, the MEU (CR) design is for lower-scale combat capable of scaling up to composite a MEB or MEF. The MAGTF would consist of the typical baseline elements, ground combat (GCE), aviation (ACE), logistics (LCE), and command elements (CE). To minimize the impact of personnel turnover, the MEU (CR) would have assigned personnel for several years. Continuity would improve the knowledge at the unit level. The other benefit of keeping Marines assigned to the MEU (CR) for three or four years is the opportunity to hone their mission skills. The Marine Corps would regionally focus its MAGTFs for the future; therefore, an intelligence

analyst would have multiple years of study of the same Area of Operations improving the overall intelligence picture for the MAGTF.²⁸

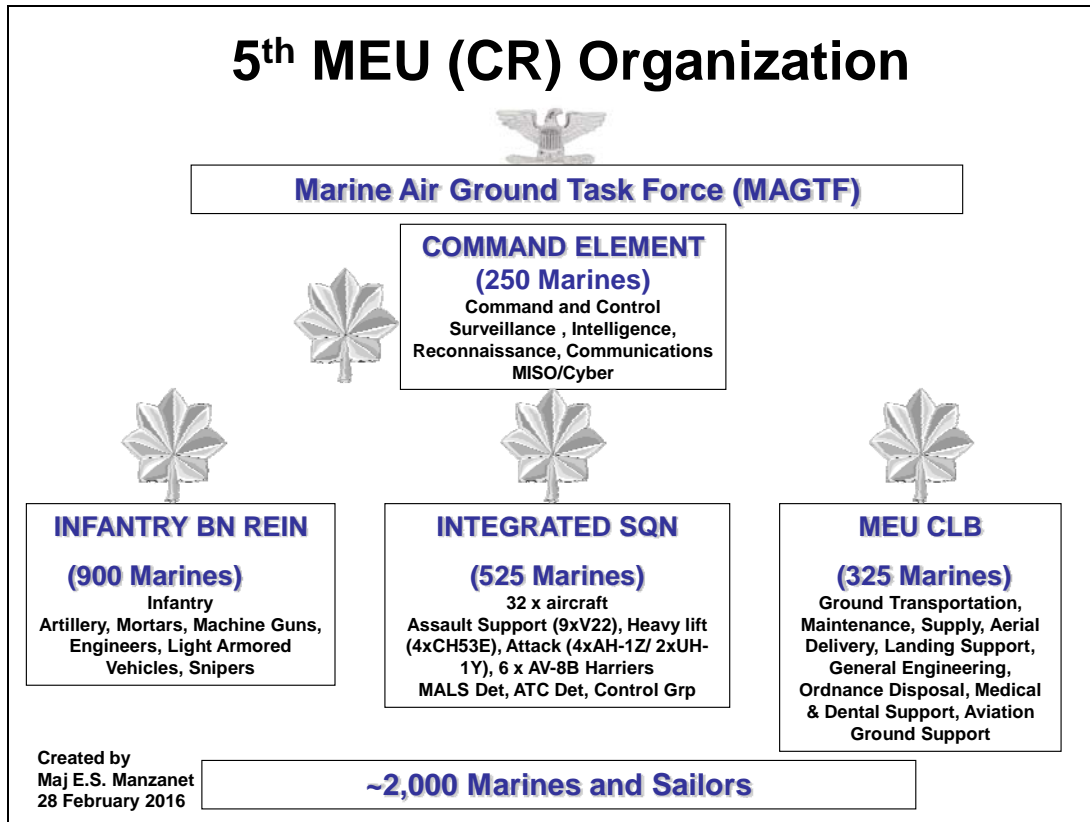


Figure 1- Proposed MEU (CR) Structure

The ground combat element would be similar to an ARG/MEU revolving around a light infantry battalion. The battalion would include artillery, mortars, crew-served (medium) weapons, light armored vehicles, and scout-sniper teams. This keeps the force nimble and deployable on alternative shipping platforms (i.e. container, cargo, maritime support ships). The greatest difference in the MEU (CR) and the ARG/MEU is that this light infantry battalion is always assigned to the MAGTF. All equipment and training is for the benefit of the MEU (CR).

The aviation element would be a rearrangement of the current alignment of aviation assets in the Marine Aircraft Wings, but there would be some functional limitations. A new form of integrated squadron designed for MEU (CR)s would consist of medium and heavy-lift rotary aircraft rather than a traditional squadron that only consists of the same T/M/S. The readiness and training of the crews and equipment flow from squadron commander up to the MEU (CR) commander. Marine Aircraft Wings would be an extension of the MEF to ensure manning, training, and equipping take place through the use of advocacy, not command. The commander of the integrated MEU (CR) squadron would report to the MEU (CR) Commander for the entire tour.

The logistics element would be very similar to the current MEU LCE with additional aviation ground support detachment/platoon to provide the Combat Logistics Battalion with the additional aviation peculiar support. The command of this battalion would remain under authority of the MEU (CR). Akin to the integrated squadron, the Marine Logistics Groups would provide advocacy by manning, training, and equipping; but would not command this MAGTF element.

The MEU (CR) command element (CE) would be led by a board-selected commander (ARG/MEUs Commander oversees CE functions) Lieutenant Colonel. This command would function similar to MEF Headquarters group and would be the single fusion for surveillance, reconnaissance and intelligence for the entire MAGTF. The future enhanced CE of the MEU (CR) would contain niche skill-sets like, MISO (military information support operations), cyber, naval gunfire, and linguists.

The equipment assignment for MAGTFs is mostly organic; however, a good portion of the equipment resides outside the assembled MAGTF, and shortfalls reside in other units in the

MEF. The future model of MEU (CR) equipment is to designate dedicated principal end-items (PEI) for each gaining unit. The owner of the equipment is typically more attentive to maintenance than the temporary custodian. The MEU (CR) could have dedicated equipment that would be pre-positioned with its naval ships (if assigned) or land-based as in the case of SPMAGTF-CR. In 1994, during SPMAGTF Unitas 35-94, the MAGTF Executive Officer summarized the difficulty of equipment loaning: “Because SPMAGTF Unitas has been unable to establish a permanent table of equipment, all weapons systems, communications gear, and support equipment must be temporarily loaned from units throughout II MEF (Second Marine Expeditionary Force). Upon completion of the deployment, this temporarily loaned equipment must be returned to its owning unit and arrangements made to repeat the process for the next Unitas exercise.”²⁹ MEU (CR) permanent equipment would alleviate the costly and time-consuming endeavor allotting time to focus on future missions.

In *EF 21*, then-Commandant General James Amos challenged leaders for tomorrow with, “While meeting current commitments and preserving readiness, the Marine Corps must reconfigure and refit to meet coming challenges. The future evolving and complex security environment will only increase the demands on the Marine Corps.”³⁰ In order for the Marine Corps to meet the current demand of deployed crisis response MAGTFs, the Marine Corps will have to consider revolutionary changes in the manning, training, and, equipping of ground, aviation, logistics and command elements. Crisis response is a mission that requires persistent presence; therefore, the Marine Corps should embrace its small wars traditions and reorganize into smaller, enhanced MAGTFs.

SOLUTION: EVOLUTION FROM SPMAGTF TO MEU (CR)

The constant review of roles and missions keeps the Marine Corps relevant and current within the operating environment of the day. The SPMAGTF-CR unit is the Marine Corps' newest evolution of utility between large-scale wars to adapt to the current threats. The SPMAGTF-CR model has been successful in maintaining a constant presence of available combined arms teams in Central Command and Africa. SPMAGTF-CR model is meeting the demand for the Combatant Command (CCMD) requirements; it also serves as the starting point to improve on the latest variation of the MAGTF. According to the 36th Commandant's Planning Guidance: "We have taken steps to mitigate the shortfall in amphibious shipping such as the shore basing of Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces – Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR); however, shore basing does not substitute for MAGTFs coming from the sea."³¹ The future MEU (CR) would have to be cost effective and responsive while seeking new ways to soften the impact of continuous deployments. Marine Corps Forces Reserve (MARFORRRES) integration and modifications to the MAGTF leadership assignment would make the SPMAGTF-CR more adaptable and relevant for the next ten years.

The Marine Corps Reserves has been a resource that would be instrumental in the readiness of the personnel strength of the Marine Corps and continues to be a variable to improve on the work started with SPMAGTF-CR. The mobilization of certain reserve units would satisfy deployment requirements to provide dwell time for active forces continuously deployed for the foreseeable future. The combination of engineer units, law enforcement companies and aviation logistics squadrons integrated with MEU (CR) would provide the right relief valve for dwell of active duty units and maintain proficiency of reserve units. For example, SPMAGTF-SC aligned to II MEF focuses primarily on theater security cooperation, civil assistance and subject matter

expert exchanges (SMEE) in support of US military partners in South America.³² This particular SPMAGTF does not have a designation of crisis response, and is organized with the personnel and equipment for the relatively low-threat environment it would operate within.

SPMAGTF-SC should be re-designated MEU-SC as the ideal unit to coincide with annual reserve training to maximize Marine reserve civilian expertise with this unique mission. Reserve Marines and sailors bring a depth of knowledge to enhance typical MAGTF operations by operationalizing the reserve force. Additionally, it provides a cadre of Marines that would serve as area experts in case the MAGTF needs to scale up to Brigade or MEF size. Relief for an increased deployment model is important, but the more important review of MAGTF evolution is in how the Marine Corps chooses MAGTF Commanders.

In the future MEU (CR), all ground and aviation colonels (with few exceptions i.e. lawyers, acquisition officers) would be eligible for MEU (CR) command. The broader pool of MAGTF Commanders ensures a field grade training curriculum that prepares future general officers for Brigade and MEF command. Regardless of specialty, officers that have demonstrated the capacity to command and understand MAGTF operations would be eligible. Logisticians and engineer officers who have MEU or other MAGTF history would have a chance at commands that have been historically isolated to infantry officers and aviators. In assigning executive (XO) and operations (S-3) officers, the MEF commanders should balance background to ensure MEU (CR)s would always have leaders from differing disciplines to optimize risk analysis. For instance, an aviator MEU (CR) commander assigned a logistician as an executive officer would require a ground combat Marine (infantry, artillery, or tank officer) as operations officer to spread the MAGTF expertise among the leadership. The mixture of warfighting skills is worth the investment in MAGTF leadership if the Marine Corps truly values what it portrays to

be. The best and most qualified MAGTF commander surrounded by the most talented future MAGTF commanders on the staff would be the best command of a MEU (CR). Revised leadership selection with reserve integration would be recommendations to improve the talent mix for the MAGTF of tomorrow.

The current SPMAGTF-CR deployments provide the basis for the next evolution of MAGTF development. By instituting better reserve integration and redefining the leadership slating of Commanding Officer (coupled with key staff assignments), the MEU (CR) would be the MAGTF best to operate in tomorrow's operating environment.

SUMMARY

The proposals presented should not diminish the value of currently engaged MAGTFs deployed across the world supporting missions, countering terrorism, and providing humanitarian relief to countries that are less stable than the United States. However, the Marine Corps needs to adapt to what it aspires to become rather than operating an inflexible MAGTF construct. In his book *Transformation Under Fire: Revolutionizing How America Fights*, Douglas MacGregor asserts that it is not enough to just experiment, change is the answer to be affordable and ready for the future. America cannot afford an obsolete Marine Corps that is organized and structured to fight mid-20th century wars rather than the regional, trans-regional, and counterterrorism campaigns of the 21st century.³³

The current model of building specialized MAGTFs for regional missions is useful as each mission is distinct and unique. MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray remind leaders that, "Revolutions in military affairs have emerged from evolutionary solutions that are directed at specific operational and tactical issues in a specific theater of war."³⁴ For the next ten years, the United States will need military organizations that can adapt and fit in small areas of the

world to protect US interests. The future crisis unit of choice will require very little to deploy and be responsive for a GCC or Ambassador's emerging support. The Marine Corps has captured enough lessons from previous MAGTF deployments to confidently establish permanent MAGTF structure at brigade-level and regimental-level to be the right unit at the right place at the right time. Adapting does not disregard the past, but rather it highlights the maturity of leaders to consider objectives of the future. McChrystal et al. define the importance of adaptation in *Team of Teams* as, "Whether in business or in war, the ability to react quickly and adapt is critical, and it's becoming even more so as technology and disruptive forces increase the pace of change. That requires new ways to communicate and work together. In today's world, creativity is a collaborative endeavor. Innovation is a team effort."³⁵ The Marine Corps should strive to transform and embrace its new normal.

NOTES

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- ¹ US Congressional Budget Office and Dov S. Zakheim, *The Marine Corps in the 1980s: Prestocking Proposals, the Rapid Deployment Force, and Other Issues. Budget Issue Paper for Fiscal Year 1981.* (Washington, D.C.: Congress of the United States, Congressional Budget Office, 1980), 63.
- ² Center for Naval Analysis. *Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces in Africa: Development, Performance, and Challenges.* November 2014. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/>.
- ³ In September 2014, the naming convention for SPMAGTF-CRs was standardized by Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies and Operations (DC, PP&O) to include regional designation, e.g., SPMAGTF-CR-AF (message dated September 29, 2014).
- ⁴ “The New Normal,” 2nd Marine Division Combat Camera, Defense Video & Imagery Distribution Systems, Sept 24, 2014, <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/364775/new-normal>.
- ⁵ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, March 4, 2014), 14.
- ⁶ *US Marine Corps; Composition; Functions*, U.S. Code Title 10, chapter 507, sec 5063 (2011); Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Policy for Marine Expeditionary Units*, MCO 3120.13, October 29, 2015, <http://www.marines.mil/Portals/59/MCO%203120.13.pdf>.
- ⁷ *US Marine Corps; Composition; Functions*, U.S. Code Title 10, Chapter 507, Sec 5063 (2011).
- ⁸ *US Marine Corps; Composition; Functions*, U.S. Code Title 10, Chapter 507, Sec 5063 (2011).
- ⁹ Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Policy for Marine Expeditionary Units*, MCO 3120.13, October 29, 2015, <http://www.marines.mil/Portals/59/MCO%203120.13.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *36th Commandant's Planning Guidance, Innovate, Adapt, Win*, (January 23, 2015), 5. The current guidance of the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Robert B. Neller, the planning guidance remains unchanged.
- ¹¹ DAISH is derived Arabic acronym for ISIS or ISIL.
- ¹² Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, March 4, 2014), 8.
- ¹³ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, FMFRP 12-15 (Washington, D.C.: US Marine Corps, 1990), 1.
- ¹⁴ D. Robert Worley, *Shaping U.S. Military Forces: Revolution or Relevance in a Post-Cold War World*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2006), 193.
- ¹⁵ Scott Kinner, "A 'Custom-Built' Corps.", *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 140, no. 11, (2014), 18-23.
- ¹⁶ The [US] president has authorized U.S. Central Command to work with partner nations to conduct targeted air-strikes of Iraq and Syria as part of the comprehensive strategy to degrade and defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL.
- ¹⁷ I Marine Expeditionary Force. Special Purpose MAGTF Crisis Response website, accessed January 14, 2016, <http://www.imef.marines.mil/Units/SPMAGTFCRCC.aspx>.
- ¹⁸ US Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) Crisis Response in U.S. Central Command 15.1*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, May 28, 2015), 4.
- ¹⁹ US Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) Crisis Response in U.S. Central Command 15.1*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, May 28, 2015), 13.
- ²⁰ US Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, *Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-South Pre-deployment Training Program After Action Report*. (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, August 5, 2015), 2.
- ²¹ Joseph Guadagno, and William A. Tosick, "The Future of Marine Rotary-Wing Aviation and the 'Integrated' Air-Ground Team," *Marine Corps Gazette*, 79, no. 8 (Aug 1995): 16.
- ²² Douglas A. Macgregor and Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 34.
- ²³ Stanley A. McChrystal, Tatum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, (New York, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), 120.

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- ²⁴ Headquarters US Marine Corps. *Warfighting*, MCDP 1, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1997) 55.
- ²⁵ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *37th Commandant's FRAGO 01/2016: Advance to Contact*, (January 19, 2016), 5.
- ²⁶ Headquarters US Marine Corps. *Warfighting*, MCDP 1, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1997) 6.
- ²⁷ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *36th Commandant's Planning Guidance, Innovate, Adapt, Win*, (January 23, 2015), 7
- ²⁸ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, March 4, 2014), 7.
- ²⁹ John T. Gamboa, "SPMAGTF UNITAS: The Marine Corps' Obscure MAGTF," *Marine Corps Gazette*, 79, no. 6 (Jun 1995): 26.
- ³⁰ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Expeditionary Force 21*, (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, March 4, 2014), 2.
- ³¹ Headquarters US Marine Corps, *36th Commandant's Planning Guidance, Innovate, Adapt, Win*, (January 23, 2015), 12.
- ³² "Marines set to deploy to Central America," US Southern Command New Release, US Southern Command website May 26, 2015, <http://www.southcom.mil/newsroom/Pages/NEWS-RELEASE-Marines-set-to-deploy-to-Central-America.aspx>
- ³³ Douglas A. Macgregor, *Transformation Under Fire: Revolutionizing How America Fights*, (West-port, CT: Praeger, 2003), 24.
- ³⁴ MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192.
- ³⁵ Walter Isaacson, foreword to *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, Stanley A. McChrystal, Tatum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell (New York, New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015), v.

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