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14. ABSTRACT Over the past two decades, while the United States and its allies have been engaged in counter-insurgency operations, China has developed a sophisticated anti-access/area denial capability that presents a threat to once uncontested freedom of movement and access to the global commons. To combat this new challenge will require a fundamental change in how all elements of the joint force are employed. While Marine infantry alone will not solve the problem, they will be a crucial supporting effort to both the Navy and the larger joint force. However, for Marine infantry to be successful in this future environment, will require them to reduce their signature by operating in smaller, more distributed formations, often great distances from their higher headquarters and adjacent units. Current Marine infantry is neither manned, trained, or equipped for this new method of employment and must adjust course rapidly or risk irrelevancy in the future fight. In light of these new challenges Marine Corps infantry must transition from conventional line infantry designed for heavy amphibious forcible entry operations and sustained ground combat operations to an elite light infantry force, optimized for low-signature distributed operations.						
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Marine Corps Light Infantry

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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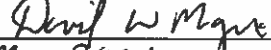
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Executive Summary

Title: Marine Corps Light Infantry

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Thesis: In light of advances in enemy anti-access/area denial capabilities, Marine Corps infantry must transition from conventional line infantry designed for heavy amphibious forcible entry operations and sustained ground combat operations to an elite light infantry force, optimized for low-signature distributed operations.

Discussion: Since taking office as the thirty eighth Commandant, General Berger has set in motion a complete transformation of the Marine Corps. The driving forces behind his new initiatives are to better prepare the force for great power competition and to better align the force to fulfill its Title 10 responsibilities to the United States Navy. Given that the People's Republic of China has risen to become the United States' pacing threat, most of the focus has been geared towards developing ways to compete with and if necessary, defeat them. Over the past two decades, while the United States and its allies have been engaged in counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, China has developed a sophisticated anti-access/area denial capability that presents a threat to once uncontested freedom of movement and access to the global commons. Large naval vessels, as well as large permanent bases, are now vulnerable to Chinese influence and susceptible to their long-range fires capabilities. To combat this new challenge will require a fundamental change in how all elements of the joint force man, train, equip, and employ their forces in order to effectively operate, given this new reality.

One of the side effects of the Marine Corps conducting counter-insurgency operations is that its infantry forces have gotten heavier, more accustomed to readily available logistics nodes, and less reliant on traditional light infantry tactics and field craft. While infantry alone will not solve the problem in a fight with China, they will be a crucial supporting effort to both the Navy and the larger joint force. New technologies are being developed that will enhance the fire-power and situational awareness of small infantry units, allowing them to provide greater relevancy to the Navy and the larger joint force. However, as currently structured, Marine infantry is not prepared to handle these new operational realities. For Marine infantry to be successful in this future environment, particularly operations within China's weapons engagement zone will require them to reduce their signature by operating in smaller, more distributed formations, often great distances from their higher headquarters or adjacent units. Current Marine infantry is neither manned, trained, or equipped for this new operational environment and must adjust course rapidly or risk irrelevancy in the future fight.

Conclusion: The Marine Corps must transition its infantry force from a conventional line infantry designed for sustained ground combat operations to an elite light infantry force, optimized for low-signature distributed operations.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

This research project initially started out as a way to assess the new Marine Littoral Regiment concept and the envisioned employment methodology for it. However, I quickly realized that because of how fast General Berger was moving to implement changes, anything I wrote was in danger of being irrelevant within a short period of putting pen to paper. I was still interested in the subject of how the Marine Corps contributes to the Navy while balancing its 9-1-1 force requirements, but I did not want to necessarily bind myself to any particular project that the Marine Corps was directly working on. As an Infantry Officer, I kept searching for what the future might hold when I return to the operating forces but heard little about how the infantry was actually going to contribute to the future fight. There has been a lot of discussion about emerging technologies, but I was more interested in how Marines were going to pair with that technology to win future conflicts.

My hope is that the charges I make against the current composition or employment methodology of Marine infantry units is not taken offensively. I understand that the infantry community exists in its current form for a number of sound reasons, including tremendous success on the battlefield. I have had the privilege of serving alongside our Nation's finest warriors and am indebted to their daily sacrifices. My intent as always is to find a way to make those Marines even more lethal. I understand that great power competition, if it turns to conflict will test this Nation to its core. Because of that, I want to ensure the Marines I fight alongside in the future have every chance of being successful. I truly believe that a well-led, well-trained, properly equipped light infantry force that is optimized for low-signature distributed operations will make a difference in the future fight.

Introduction

The publication of General Berger's 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* reinvigorated a hotly contested and longstanding discussion about the role of the United States Marine Corps within the joint force. While all previous Commandants have had to deal with this topic to one extent or another, none in recent history have gone to the lengths that General Berger has to aggressively implement changes that match their intended vision. In the short period of time that General Berger has been in office, he has rapidly instituted bold changes to the structure and direction of the Marine Corps that cannot be easily undone. While his vision is clear, the question that the Corps and the rest of the joint force are left to wrestle with is, is his vision the right one?

Prior to General Berger assuming the role as the 38th Commandant, an article was published in *War on the Rocks* asking a simple question, "Who am I?"¹ The article echoed what many service members and military scholars alike have asked for many years: "Is the Marine Corps Naval in character or purpose?"² More specifically, is the Marine Corps going to focus on fulfilling its main Title 10 mandate of supporting naval fleet operations, or will it continue to spend the majority of its resources and attention on the lesser mandate of "performing such other duties as the President may direct?"³ While Title 10 makes clear, the Marine Corps's primary mission, the 82nd Congress in 1952 also mandated that the Marine Corps be the Nation's force-in-readiness. While these mandates are not by their nature, mutually exclusive, in practice, they have often been at odds with each other in terms of prioritizing manning, training, and equipping of forces. General Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance* places a heavy emphasis on the Marine Corps's responsibility to fulfill its Title 10 mandate, but also acknowledges that while the Marine Corps is not a second land army, it must remain the Nation's force in readiness.⁴ The

purpose of this paper is not to resolve the debate about which of these two vital roles the Marine Corps should settle on, because in reality the Marine Corps must continue to do both. The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge the myriad roles that the Marine Corps will likely be tasked with in the near future and then focus the discussion in on the basic building block of the Marine Corps, its infantry units, and how they should change in order to support these mission requirements.

The argument to overhaul Marine Corps infantry is not borne out of an indictment that the Marine Corps has gotten it wrong in the past but rather an acknowledgement of the usefulness and effectiveness of Marine infantry when correctly aligned with the operating environment. Marines have proven to be highly adaptable to a variety of situations however, due to requirements of fighting a counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marine infantry units have gotten heavier, more accustomed to a readily available logistics network, and less reliant and therefore less proficient in basic field craft. The future operating environment, when interpreted as a revival of peer and near-peer competition, will levy an entirely new set of demands on the infantry community. To meet those demands will once again require the Marine Corps to re-evaluate how it mans, trains, and equips its infantry forces.

Serving as both the Nation's force in readiness as well as fulfilling its Title 10 requirements to the Navy will require Marine infantry to fundamentally change, particularly in preparation for potential conflict with the United States' pacing threat, China. China has spent the last few decades optimizing its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and developing technology that is designed to defeat the United States in every domain. If Marine infantry does not adjust its manning, training, and equipping to account for this new reality, it will quickly find itself irrelevant to the Navy and the larger joint force. In light of these changes, Marine Corps

infantry must transition from conventional line infantry designed for heavy amphibious forcible entry operations and sustained ground combat operations to an elite light infantry force, optimized for low-signature distributed operations. To understand why changes to Marine Corps infantry are required, it is necessary to describe the current conversations and tension that exists regarding the perceived role of the Marine Corps in the future operating environment and why changes are needed at all.

Commandant's Planning Guidance and Future Force 2030

The tension that currently exists within the Marine Corps is not new. Since its inception, the Marine Corps has fulfilled a variety of roles to fit the current operating environment or preferences of key leadership. The mentality that has long existed in the Marine Corps is that they do windows. The phrase has some historical and cultural significance outside the Marine Corps but essentially equates to the fact that the Marine Corps will do whatever job is asked of it. This mentality, if true, requires a force that is a true Swiss Army Knife when it comes to capability. The reality is that any tool that can do a little of everything will do nothing perfectly. As the nation's 9-1-1 force, the Marine Corps, like the Swiss Army Knife, might not be the best tool for every job, but it should be the tool that is readily available to apply to the task at hand until the rest of the toolbox, (i.e. the joint force) can be accessed. The caveat however, is that the commander must understand the tool's limitations and ensure it is employed within its capabilities. While it would certainly simplify things if the Marine Corps could designate either its Title 10 role or its 9-1-1 force role as its sole focus, the reality is that it must continue to do both because that is what the Nation has asked of it. Given that reality, the question then is, how does the Marine Corps build a force that is capable of operating in a variety of roles ranging from

rapid deployment crisis response missions to limited duration island hopping, sea control missions in support of naval fleet commanders?

Since publishing his Planning Guidance, General Berger has taken action to align the force to support fleet operations by beginning the divestment of all tank battalions, one infantry regimental headquarters, three infantry battalions, sixteen cannon artillery batteries, two assault amphibian companies, three tiltrotor squadrons, two light attack helicopter squadrons, and all law enforcement battalions.⁵ These changes represent the beginning of a major overhaul for the Marine Corps as it aligns itself with guidance set forth in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which identifies, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, as the primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁶ More specifically, the strategic document identifies China as the U.S.’s pacing threat and acknowledges the reality that the United States no longer enjoys “uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain.”⁷ This shift in priority has created the impetus for the Marine Corps to look at how it can contribute to the Navy’s execution of the five essential functions of sea power (i.e. operational access, sea control, deterrence, power projection, and maritime security) with a specific emphasis on operational access and sea control. Operational access, or now more commonly referred to as all domain access is “the ability to project military force in contested areas with sufficient freedom of action to accomplish the mission.”⁸ Sea control operations are, “those operations designed to secure use of the maritime domain by one’s own forces and to prevent its use by the enemy.”⁹ These essential functions are what gives the Navy “a unique comparative advantage for the joint force”¹⁰ and is what the Commandant, as an extension of the larger Naval Service is focused on helping to support.

In December of 2020, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Commandant of the Coast Guard, and the Chief of Naval Operations released a tri-service strategy outlining the vision for the unified Naval Service. The strategy stated that the central problem that the Naval Service and the larger joint force is facing is that “China’s and Russia’s revisionist approaches in the maritime environment threaten U.S. interests, undermine alliances and partnerships, and degrade the free and open international order. Moreover, China’s and Russia’s aggressive naval growth and modernization are eroding U.S. military advantages. Unchecked, these trends will leave the Naval Service unprepared to ensure our advantage at sea and protect national interests within the next decade.”¹¹ With respect to China, an argument can be made that the United States has already lost some of its military advantage, particularly with respect to all domain access. The authoritarian nature of China allows it to focus its people and resources in a manner that the United States cannot. This “Military-Civil Fusion”¹² as it has been termed has enabled the People’s Republic of China to outpace the United States military in some regards. Of particular interest to the Navy and Marine Corps is that China has developed such a sophisticated anti-access/area-denial system that should conflict arise, it is doubtful whether the United States currently has the capability to penetrate that system without sustaining heavy casualties. To deal with this rapidly evolving problem set, the Commandant has focused all elements of the force on finding and implementing solutions. These rapid changes to force design have raised concerns among some military scholars who argue that the changes are too focused on conflict in the Pacific and will compromise the Marine Corps’s ability to respond to other threats.

One of the most outspoken opponents of the Marine Corps’s proposed changes is former Navy Secretary Jim Webb, who published a scathing op-ed highlighting the potentially irreversible content of the new force design that would eliminate many of the Marine Corps’s

key capabilities.¹³ In the article, Jim Webb asserts that the new changes “could permanently reduce the long-standing mission of global readiness that for more than a century has been the essential reason for its existence as a separate service. Its long-term impact would undo the value of the Marine Corps as the on-stop guarantor of a homogenous tactical readiness that can go anywhere, fight anybody, and win... and could reduce its present role by making it again subordinate to the funding and operational requirements of the Navy.”¹⁴ Jim Webb’s main argument centers on the Marine Corps’s role as the force-in readiness that can’t afford to have such a narrow assumption of what future conflict will require. In his argument he draws on lessons from the Korean War where the Marine Corps was called upon to rapidly build a force and deploy to combat. Out of this scenario came the 82nd Congress mandate for the Marine Corps to remain the force-in-readiness. Jim Webb is not alone in his criticism of General Berger; in fact, many other military scholars have expressed concern that the Marine Corps’s vision is too narrowly focused.

On the other side of the argument, there are some who have expressed their concern that the Marine Corps has become a second land army. With that, they believe that the Marine Corps must get back to its Title 10 responsibilities to the Navy and divest of anything that does not contribute to that mission. Former Marine and Senior Research Fellow for the Heritage Foundation, Dakota Wood is one of the more outspoken proponents for the Marine Corps to get back to its naval roots and divest of capabilities that do not contribute to that mission. Prior to General Berger publishing his Commandant’s Planning Guidance, Mr. Wood published an article for the Heritage Foundation asserting that the Marine Corps has neglected its primary mission to support the Navy, which he claims has “created a dangerous shortfall in America’s ability to respond effectively to China’s emergence as the major power to be reckoned with in

the Indo-Pacific region.”¹⁵ In this article he notes several shortfalls in the structure, manning, and equipping of the Marine Corps that would limit its ability to support a naval campaign. Among the concerns he highlights are: “The Marines have few options for inserting and sustaining forces; the Corps does not yet possess sufficient weapons or surveillance systems that would help a naval force to gain and exercise sea control in littoral/archipelago waters; the Corps has only one small boat company; and non-material elements—tactics, doctrine, organizational designs, training protocols, and institutional knowledge—are effectively non-existent.”¹⁶ Additionally, he argues that the Marine Corps should strongly reconsider its investment in Marine Corps Special Operations Command, Marine Corps Cyber Command, Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces, and other commitments that detract from the Marine Corps’ primary mission of supporting fleet operations.¹⁷

In order to deal with the threat imposed by peer actors such as China and to better provide support to the fleet, General Berger, in his *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* and subsequent *Force Design 2030* has outlined the mission of what he calls, the “Stand-in Force.” He describes this new capability as, “Forces that can continue to operate inside an adversary’s long-range precision fire weapons engagement zone (WEZ)...and can attrite adversary forces, enable joint force access requirements, complicate targeting and consume adversary ISR resources, and prevent fait accompli scenarios.”¹⁸ Ideally, these low-signature forces would already be in place before conflict begins, thus negating the necessity to penetrate the enemy WEZ. While the logic is sound, the reality is that the United States doesn’t have enough forces to position inside every potential adversary’s WEZ, nor does it necessarily have the partner nation support to position those forces where they will provide a distinct advantage. While China and the larger Indo-Pacific region is the current focus across all of the DOD, it is certainly not the

only threat that the United States faces. Both the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* acknowledge that Russia, Iran, North Korea, and trans-regional violent extremist organizations still pose a major threat. The implication is that the Marine Corps, if it is to remain the expeditionary force in readiness, cannot optimize to fight one particular adversary at the expense of all others. This reality provides some credence to the concerns that Jim Webb have raised over the Marine Corps's divestment of certain capabilities and a narrow focus on support to the fleet.

Until recently, one voice that was largely absent from the conversation in the terms of official guidance about how the Marine Corps should design the force is the United States Navy. Other than a few mentions of "building capability with our most natural partner,"¹⁹ the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) made little official mention of exactly what he wanted from the Marine Corps. In lieu of specific direction, it appears that General Berger took the initiative to make assumptions about what the Navy might want from the Marine Corps. It was surprising that the CNO's FRAGO 01/2019, released after the Commandant's Planning Guidance made no mention of this drastic paradigm shift within the Naval Service. In May of 2020, at a joint press conference, both the CNO and the Commandant were pressed to respond to Jim Webb's criticisms and provide understanding of the way forward. Both service chiefs acknowledged that they don't have all the answers for what the Naval Service needs to look like, only that they were working together to find the solution. One of the remarks that the Commandant did reiterate was that the Marine Corps's mission as the nation's 9-1-1 force "will not change...and remains our bread and butter."²⁰ While the newly released tri-service strategy does not provide the specifics for how the Marine Corps will support the Navy, it did finally convey a united front for the

Naval Service and confirmed a lot of the assumptions that General Berger made in his planning guidance.

To deal with the fleet support mission, General Berger directed numerous force design and employment initiatives to include the creation of a Marine Littoral Regiment which is the Corps's initial experiment into building a force that is capable of operating inside China's threat WEZ to provide support to the Navy fleet commanders. While the exact composition of these units is still under experimentation, a spokesman from Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC) told US Naval Institute News that currently it consists of:

Three main elements: a Littoral Combat Team, a Littoral Anti-Air Battalion, and a Littoral Logistics Battalion. The Littoral Combat Team is task-organized around an infantry battalion along with a long-range anti ship missile battery. The LCT is designed to provide the basis for employing multiple platoon-reinforced-size expeditionary advance base sites that can host and enable a variety of missions such as long-range anti-ship fires, forward arming and refueling of aircraft, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance of key maritime terrain, and air-defense and early warning.²¹

Unfortunately, based on the initial employment methodology of the Marine Littoral Regiment, it is still unclear as to exactly what the infantry will be doing to support these largely, non-infantry roles.

Separate but not necessarily distinct from the Marine Littoral Regiment, the Commandant also directed the creation of an integrated planning team to focus specifically on infantry battalion reorganization with the goal of creating a force optimized for conducting Distributed Operations that the Marines will likely find themselves conducting in the near future.²² The Commanding General of Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Lieutenant General Smith in a comment to the US Naval Institute News stated that he was confident that the infantry battalion must get smaller and more powerful in order to operate in a disaggregated manner under the watchful eye of a pacing threat.²³ An additional change to the infantry that the Marine

Corps is considering is increasing the initial training investment for Marines to ensure that the fleet is receiving Marines with the “quality, maturity, and capabilities envisioned” for the future fight.²⁴ The demands of the future operating environment will require small units to operate further and further away from their higher headquarters and support networks than they are typically accustomed to. To be successful in that environment will require a focus on building better trained, better equipped, and more mature infantry units. To achieve these results will transform current conventional infantry units into light infantry units more akin to current Marine Corps Reconnaissance, Marine Corps Special Operations Command, or even the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment.

In a relatively short period of time, General Berger has directed changes to get after many of the identified issues for the anticipated future operating environment. As this paper is being written, the Marine Corps is already implementing a change in which entry level infantry training will be increased from the current eight-week period of instruction to a fourteen-week curriculum. Within the next few years, that curriculum will increase an additional four weeks to an eighteen-week period of instruction. The Marine Corps has realized that the future operational demands will require junior Marines to arrive to their first unit with a larger skill set than has been required in the past. Additionally, the Marine Corps is experimenting with restructuring the infantry battalion in a manner that will provide greater capability and experience level at a lower echelon. Some of the proposed changes include dissolving Weapon Company which currently houses 81mm mortars, heavy machine guns, and anti-tank weapon systems such as the Javelin and Tube-Launched Optically Tracked Wire-guided (TOW) missile systems. Some of these weapon systems will be distributed to the line companies in addition to newer weapon systems that are currently in development. Additional changes that are being socialized include

increasing the ranks of key billet holders in order to provide a greater level of experience and expertise at a lower level. All of the new changes that the Commandant has proposed will undoubtedly enable infantry companies, platoons, and squads to operate more independently. These changes could also be a huge step in the right direction towards building an elite light infantry force that is optimized for low-signature distributed operations.

To better understand how a light infantry force would benefit the Marine Corps it would be useful to look at three case studies involving both historical and current examples of elite light infantry forces. The Marine Raiders and Chindits from World War II as well as the modern 75th Ranger Regiment will provide a glimpse into the benefits that a lightweight and well trained force can provide against a peer adversary. Unencumbered by heavy logistical footprints and optimized to operate in austere and challenging environments enabled these units to be employed in some unique, non-conventional roles. Their goal was not to replace the role of the conventional forces but rather fulfill mission requirements that were ill suited to conventional forces; however, when required, they were able to rapidly transition back to conventional type missions, providing great flexibility for the theater commander. A similar utility force that is capable of rapidly mobilizing, trained in multiple insertion methods, and equipped with the latest lightweight equipment would fit in well with what it appears the Marine Corps is trying to build. The first example is from World War II when the Marine Corps briefly experimented with the idea of employing low-signature elite units with the creation of the Raider Battalions. While the Raiders were rather quickly dissolved, they proved their usefulness in a variety of capacities and can serve as a historical model for rebuilding this sort of capability again.

The Raiders of WWII

The Marine Raiders were developed in 1942 after significant pressure from the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt as well as other notable leaders such as World War I Army officer, William Donovan, Marine Corps General Holland M. Smith, as well as the President's own son, Captain James Roosevelt. The idea was to create a commando type unit that was capable of conducting guerrilla warfare and quick raids to help turn the tide against the Axis powers who were at the time much stronger than the Allies.²⁵ It took approximately a year to operationalize the new units, a process that underwent numerous iterations to refine the manning and equipping. Once stood-up, this new force comprised the Marine Corps's first foray into special operations.

One of the beliefs that the Marine Corps has always prided itself on is that it comprises an elite fighting unit within the joint force. It is the reason why Commandant Holcomb was initially hesitant to stand-up the Raider Battalions during World War II and one of the reasons why the Marine Corps was the last service to contribute forces to United States Special Operations Command. Marines are capable of and even to a certain extent, trained to similar mission sets that these special forces units were created to conduct. However, as the Marine Corps looks toward force design, and in particular its infantry units, Carlson's Raiders during World War II can serve as a prime example of how a highly trained, physically fit, incredibly self-reliant light infantry unit can be employed in a complex environment.

During one of their more well know missions, these Marines were tasked with conducting a raid on a Japanese outpost on Makin Island where the Marines would be inserted and extracted via submarine. The purpose of their mission was to destroy installations, gather intelligence, and divert Japanese attention and reinforcements away from actions taking place on Guadalcanal and

Tulagi.²⁶ While not without flaws, the mission did serve as the Raiders' first proof of concept for the utility of a highly trained, well equipped, light infantry force. In a battle of signatures with near-peer competitors such as China, these sorts of tactics would provide the Navy and the joint force with a unique capability. Evans Carlson's and Merritt Edson's 1st and 2nd Raider Battalions were a true light infantry that were optimized for operations in the Pacific theatre but could have been just as successful in the Europe given the right circumstances.

While both 1st and 2nd Raider Battalions did have priority for selecting personnel and equipment,²⁷ what truly set these Marines apart from their conventional brethren was the extensive, tough realistic training that they received prior to deploying. The training these Marines received "focused heavily on weapons practice, hand-to-hand fighting, demolitions, and physical conditioning, to include an emphasis on long hikes. As the men grew tougher and acquired field skills, the focus shifted to more night work."²⁸ 1st Raider Battalion placed such a heavy emphasis on physical fitness that they were often able to "reach a pace of seven miles per hour on hikes, more than twice the normal speed of infantry."²⁹ To move at that pace, both Carlson and Edson adopted non-standard weapons and equipment and placed a heavy emphasis on "the acquisition of light weapons with a lot of firepower."³⁰

Both battalions rejected the heavy machine guns and heavy mortars that the rest of the infantry used and instead adopted weapons such as the Reising and Thompson sub-machine guns, the Browning automatic rifle, and even the .55-caliber Boys antitank rifle.³¹ Additionally, these units trained extensively on rubber boat work since that would likely be a common method of insertion and extraction amongst the Pacific islands. Other unique equipment that the Raiders experimented with were collapsible bicycles, individual field stoves, and a hunting jacket that could double as a pack.³² Much of the Raiders success can be attributed to their ability to bypass

the conventional military's bureaucracy, which allowed them to experiment with new equipment and techniques that were optimized for the sort of missions they would be tasked to accomplish. While there is a lot of value in standardizing equipment across the force, the Marine Corps today could benefit greatly from adopting a more creative and less directive approach toward equipping the force for particular mission sets.

During the approximately two years of service, the Marine Raiders continually evolved, learning from their mistakes and successes, and adapting to the situation. During that time the Marines conducted numerous raids, helping to neutralize enemy outposts, destroy command and control nodes, and collect intelligence. In addition to their commando type employment, they also proved useful in more conventional roles such as their reinforcement of Henderson Airfield and the securing of beachheads for follow-on forces. While the Raiders were ultimately dissolved prior to the end of the war, they provide a unique historical example of the utility of a highly adaptable, well trained, and well-equipped light infantry unit. As the the Marine Corps looks at force design, the Raiders would serve as a valuable example for how to develop its infantry units.

The Chindits

Another historical example of the effectiveness of light infantry contributing to a fight against a near peer competitor is Operation Chindit II in 1944. The Chindits were a group of British, Gurkha, African, and American forces who were developed to “conduct large-scale, guerrilla-style interdiction against Japanese lines of communication in the jungles and mountains of northern Burma.”³³ “The area where the Chindits operated was a mosaic of rugged hills, saw-toothed ridges, high mountains, and noxious valleys, traversed by many small and large rivers bordered by thick tropical jungle...Operating in this terrain required the highest levels of

physical endurance and mental toughness.”³⁴ While the Chindits were referred to as the Special Force, they were actually “ordinary soldiers from perfectly ordinary battalions assigned to be prepared for extraordinary tasks.”³⁵ What set these troops apart from conventional units, much like the Raiders, was the intensive specialized training that they received, specifically focused on the types of operations they would conduct. During their training they focused on “map reading, jungle navigation, scouting, patrolling, marksmanship river crossings, column marching, infiltration, night operations, terrain appreciation, squad, platoon, and company tactics, covering of tracks, evasion, defensive operations... and individual decision making and initiative.”³⁶ Additionally, the Chindits cross-trained extensively, so much so that if any one soldier were to become a casualty, there would always be another there to take his place.³⁷ To maximize their effectiveness, all Chindit units remained extremely light in terms of equipment however, once the units went static or established some sort of a stronghold, heavier weapons were sometimes flown in for support.³⁸

The Chindits used their light footprint to their advantage in the thick jungles of Burma, often maneuvering through terrain that the Japanese deemed impassable.³⁹ Their ability to navigate this sort of terrain enabled the Chindits to outmaneuver the Japanese and capture numerous objectives by taking the Japanese by surprise. The Chindits’ long-range penetrations, continuous raids, and their hit-and-run mentality enabled them to maintain relative superiority against the numerically superior and better armed Japanese forces. The Chindits conducted numerous harassing and interdiction missions against the Japanese’s lines of communication, which helped to enable the success of other missions of conventional units operating in Burma. One of the reasons for the Chindits’ success was their willingness to take on high risks.⁴⁰ While their use of terrain and superior field skills provided a level of force protection, these light

infantry troops were operating miles from their nearest friendly units, with little support available to them. Additionally, “the Chindits demonstrated that a properly trained unit in the rear of an enemy can have an effect far out of proportion to the actual numbers of men involved. Furthermore, a small force can defeat a larger force if it achieves surprise and attacks the enemy where it least expects an attack.”⁴¹ The Chindits, like the Raiders of World War II provide yet another example of how light infantry forces can be employed in a highly contested area of operations against a superior force. Their lightweight, low-signature footprint, coupled with superior training, physical conditioning, and expert leadership provide a level of relative superiority that cannot be achieved by heavy conventional units.

75th Ranger Regiment

A modern day example of a highly capable light infantry unit is the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment. The Rangers “specialize in unconventional infantry tactics and missions, including air assault; raiding; infiltration by air, sea, and land; airfield seizure; prisoner rescues; and support of conventional line infantry. In sum, rangers function as highly capable light infantry specialists, and at least one of their four battalions is kept as the Ranger Ready Force and capable of deploying anywhere in the world within 18 hours.”⁴² Like the Raiders and Chindits, the Rangers travel light and use the terrain to their advantage to achieve tactical surprise against numerically superior forces. They are trained to operate behind enemy lines without detection and with limited, if any support. According to FM 3-05, *Army Special Operations*, the 75th Ranger Regiment is the “infantry force of the Army special operations forces...however, its missions differ from conventional infantry forces’ missions in the degree of risk and the requirement for precise, discriminate use of force. It uses specialized equipment, operational techniques, and several modes of infiltration and employment.”⁴³ FM 3-05 states that the Rangers are specifically

trained to operate “in politically sensitive environments, under restrictive rules of engagement.”⁴⁴ Additionally, the Rangers, unlike their Special Forces brethren, are not regionally aligned which requires that they train and prepare for missions that span a wide range of operational environments.

While the Rangers’ history dates back to the Revolutionary War, the modern 75th Ranger Regiment came into being shortly after the Vietnam War. These elite light infantry forces have been employed in nearly every conflict since their inception and provide a unique link between Special Operations Forces and conventional forces. Since 2006, the Rangers have focused their training on five key disciplines: mobility, marksmanship, physical training, medical training, and small unit tactics.⁴⁵ It is these critical training disciplines, similar to those of the Chindits and Raiders, which enable the Rangers to thrive in highly contested battle space. On October 19, 2001, 199 Rangers from 3rd Battalion, 75th Rangers jumped out of four MC-130s under the cover of darkness to secure the now famous, Objective Rhino in southwest Kandahar, Afghanistan. The lightly equipped Rangers quickly secured the objective and then established a FARP with the help of the MC-130s to re-arm and refuel rotary-wing attack helicopters that were operating nearby. Their mission paved the way for Marines from the Marine Expeditionary Unit to later occupy the objective and continue ground combat operations against the Taliban.⁴⁶ With little imagination, one could envision the same sort of operation taking place in the second or third island chain, where Marines jump or swim to shore on a remote island to secure an objective and establish a FARP or a temporary firing position for an anti-ship missile system. The utility of a highly trained, well equipped, light infantry force are glaringly evident when one looks at the combat history of the 75th Ranger Regiment. As the Marine Corps looks toward future force design, the Rangers would serve as yet another ideal model for the role of infantry.

Light Infantry

The Marine Corps is in the midst of a major and much needed overhaul in terms of composition and employment methodology. By divesting of all tank assets and a preponderance of conventional artillery, the Marine Corps has signaled that it no longer sees the usefulness or need in being employed as a conventional second land army like it has for decades. The true utility of a joint force is proven not in redundant capabilities but in complementary capabilities. The Department of Defense has a solution for sustained ground combat operations and does not need the Marine Corps to fulfill that role. Arguably, given the current advancements in enemy weapon systems and highly capable anti-access/area denial technology, the Department of Defense no longer needs a force training towards opposed amphibious landings either. While this method of Joint Forcible Entry Operations have served the nation well over its history, it is becoming less and less a viable option, particularly against peer and near peer nations. What the joint force is lacking is a light infantry force that can support fleet operations and when needed, rapidly deploy to respond to emergent land based crisis missions until the Army can arrive and take over. In order to accomplish this, Marine Corps infantry should be transformed from its current state into a more mature, highly trained, and well equipped true light infantry force.

To understand the benefits of light infantry vs the Marine Corps' current composition of line infantry, we must first understand the difference between the two models. Military scholar, William Lind described some of the differences between the two in a 1990 *Marine Corps Gazette* article titled, "Light Infantry Tactics." One distinguishing characteristic is the type of terrain that the two are designed to fight on. In his article Lind stated that, "Light infantry is specialized for close terrain. Line infantry is trained and equipped primarily for fighting in open areas...and must be armored or mechanized."⁴⁷ Additionally, he states that, "On the offense,

light infantry attacks by infiltration,” and uses the ambush as a “major element of the attack.”⁴⁸ Because of the composition of light infantry forces, Lind asserts that light infantry “tactics require infantrymen who can think and act on their own...and are not simply a cog in a larger machine, a unit that fights in formations.”⁴⁹ A further distinguishing characteristic of a light infantry force that Lind points out is that it possesses an exceptional understanding of field craft and can live off the land. Given the fights in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, this is not something that the Marine Corps has practiced in quite some time.

Another scholar that attempts to describe the distinguishing characteristics of light infantry vs conventional or line infantry is Major Scott McMichael in his 1987 study titled, “A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry.” In it he described one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of light infantry forces as having, “an attitude of self-reliance.”⁵⁰ He goes on to describe this attitude as forces that are “undaunted by unfavorable conditions... exhibiting resourcefulness that permits them to devise schemes to accomplish their mission, no matter how difficult the tasks...accustomed to austerity...not psychologically tied to a logistic lifeline... unpredictable, invisible to view, employing methods not anticipated by their enemies.”⁵¹ This attitude allows light infantry forces to adapt to “abrupt changes in plans...holding a jungle base one day, they may be ordered to conduct a deep raid, mount a long-term reconnaissance patrol, participate in a riverine operation, or attack a fortified position on the next.”⁵² When looking at future, distributed warfare as described in the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, this self-reliant attitude will be crucial to the success of the infantry. No longer will small units have the ability to easily reach back to their higher headquarters for immediate support, but instead be required to make decisions and adapt to the situation on the ground based off commander's intent and mission type orders.

Another characteristic of light infantry forces that McMichael points out is that “because they understand and accept the terrain and climate as their natural environment, light infantry forces possess an unmatched tactical mobility on difficult ground. Moving with speed and ease that astounds, light infantrymen routinely use routes and traverse areas deemed impassable by regular troops.”⁵³ In order to accomplish this, light infantry forces would need diverse training and maintain a high level of physical fitness. Additionally, McMichael describes light infantry forces as “not needing to conform to a standard organization. Light infantry units may even organize internally in different ways...because organizers seek forces with tactical flexibility.”⁵⁴ The stark reality of being the Nation’s 9-1-1 force is that there is no guarantee as to what the mission will require or what terrain it will be executed on so Marines must be able to adapt to the situation in both tactics and organization. One of the advantages of organizing, training, and fighting as light infantry is the ability to achieve relative speed, particularly in restrictive terrain, and the advantage of possessing a short logistical tail. Light infantry forces don’t require exorbitant amounts of fuel, repair parts, and all the other burdens that come with heavy units. As McMichael states, “light infantry forces recognize the importance of logistics, but they refuse to be tied—either physically or mentally—to lines of communication.”⁵⁵

The lighter footprint that light infantry forces have also creates more options for insertion, movement, and extraction. Given the resources to train for special insertion methods such as military free-fall, closed-circuit combat diving, helocast, or small boat operations which are all currently trained to by Marine Reconnaissance Battalions, light infantry units will be able to provide a menu of options for a commander to employ. Because they are not burdened by the weight and need to transport large equipment that has become commonplace in an infantry battalion such as Combat Operations Center tents, generators, and excess computers, light

infantry forces can adapt to nearly any means of transportation to get to or from the fight. This mobility will be all the more important in an island hopping mission in the Pacific where the landscape and geography does not lend itself to freedom of movement via heavy tactical vehicles like it does in the Middle East.

In this sort of environment, light infantry forces might need to be transported via assault support helicopter to an alternative shipping platform where they then take rubber boats to an austere island to set conditions for the emplacement of an anti-ship cruise missile, all while carrying everything they need in their ruck sacks. This mentality does not mean that light infantry should never utilize tactical vehicles, but it should be the exception rather than the rule. The new Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) is an extremely capable vehicle but it is of limited use in the jungles of the South Pacific. However, the Utility Task Vehicle (UTV), which is essentially a lightweight dune buggy is an ideal platform for this type of environment. The Marine Corps already has a limited number of these vehicles and is contemplating increasing the number provided to each battalion. UTVs fit in well with a light infantry concept because they are maneuverable, can be transported easily by assault support platforms and surface connectors, are much more cost effective than JLTVs, and require a much smaller logistical footprint to maintain. All of these attributes further contribute to a light infantry force's ability to maintain a low signature.

In conflict with China, the key to force protection will be signature management and the ability to rapidly displace. If Marines are to operate within the WEZ they will be required to avoid detection, which will be a difficult task given China's advanced sensor capabilities. To add to that complexity, China also employs low-tech human intelligence assets such as the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, who are essentially an armed civilian reserve force who often

operate in state owned or commercial fishing vessels to support China's naval forces in a variety of tasks to include surveillance and reconnaissance.⁵⁶ China has been carefully studying the United States for the last few decades and have optimized their military to offset the the U.S. Military's capabilities, thereby diluting its effectiveness. Large signature Forward Operating Bases, Combat Operations Centers, and large amphibious platforms are no longer a viable option during conflict. Those assets will be quickly identified and targeted, especially while operating within the WEZ.

To help mitigate these threats, the Department of Defense as a whole has picked up on is the need for dispersion and investment in lower signature risk worthy platforms. In a 2019 *Marine Corps Gazette* article, retired Marine Infantry Officer and former concept developer for the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, the late Art Corbett wrote about the benefits of a stand-in force with respect to signature management. In the article he stated, "The comparative ease of hiding their signature and masking their disposition leads to uncertainty and compounds the variables when calculating correlation of force, perhaps the greatest deterrent when facing an adversary who regards war as a scientific endeavor with computable results."⁵⁷ One of the benefits of light infantry is that they are designed to maintain a low signature and require little support. In the same article Mr. Corbett compared the stand-in force to the tactics that the Vietnamese used against the United States stating that they, "focused on avoiding detection and giving battle on their own terms by grabbing the Americans by their belts to render stand-off weapons irrelevant."⁵⁸ Essentially, the Vietnamese were successful because they negated the United States' technological superiority. Similar low-tech strategies were employed by Afghans during the Soviet Union's invasion as well as by the Taliban against Coalition Forces during OPERATION Enduring Freedom. Boxers use this tactic as well when facing an opponent with a

longer reach. Light infantry forces are ideal for this sort of tactic, particularly when employed in support of more high tech killing assets.

The natural question is, how can such a light force contribute to the fight against a competitor such as China? The logical answer is that alone, a light infantry force will do very little, but the good news is that they will not be fighting alone. Marine infantry's major contribution will come in the form of a supporting effort to the larger joint force and armed with the latest high tech weaponry, the infantry will be able to provide them with a relative advantage. Relative advantage is what allows a single combatant armed with a shoulder-fired rocket in restrictive terrain to destroy a multi-million dollar main battle tank. The combatant, like the boxer with shorter reach, defeats his opponent by making his strengths irrelevant. The Marine Corps is currently developing technology that will provide the infantry with an even greater relative advantage such as man-portable precision fires assets that can range out to twenty kilometers and systems that could be mounted on a UTV that would range out to beyond 100 kilometers. Never before has a regiment, much less a company or platoon had the ability to employ organic fires that would come close to that distance. Coupling these organic capabilities with other longer range anti-ship weapon systems that small units could potentially help to emplace and the relative advantage becomes less relative and quite simply, an advantage.

In addition to infantry organic fires, the Naval Service is also experimenting with a number of unmanned vehicles and water-borne vessels that will enable the expeditionary force to provide even greater capability in the fight for sea control. Many of these platforms are being developed to deliver long-range precision fires that overshadow anything the Marine Corps currently has in its arsenal. Marine infantry operating from expeditionary advanced bases can help emplace and secure these assets. Using their organic unmanned aerial surveillance platforms

these light infantry units can help feed the overall common operational picture while also providing security for the unmanned platform and a real-time on the ground assessment for higher headquarters. Light infantry along with Special Forces units will also be the most likely link between indigenous partner forces in the area of operations and the overall joint force. Coupling advanced sensors and fires assets with lightweight, highly maneuverable infantry forces will provide the joint force with an endless number of employment opportunities and will contribute to success in both competition and conflict.

One of the major family of weapon systems that is currently in development and discussed in a recent *Marine Corps Times* article is a system called Organic Precision Fires (OPF).⁵⁹ The Navy and Marine Corps are currently developing multiple variations of the platform that range from small man-portable variants up to truck and vessel mounted variants. The system is designed to launch small suicide style drones that will employ themselves in a swarming manner in order to overwhelm enemy defensive counter-measures and destroy the intended target.⁶⁰ These weapon systems can be employed by themselves or as part of a coordinated attack with larger payload weapon systems. The drone swarm tactic is a concept that has been in development for years as a way to overwhelm and defeat sophisticated close-in defensive weapon systems. The idea is that the multiple drones will clutter the enemy's radar systems, allowing them to be more difficult to target. Additionally, by increasing the sheer number of projectiles, even if the swarm is located, the enemy's close-in defensive weapon system will either not be able to engage all of the drones in time or will deplete its magazine prior to neutralizing the threat.

Another key component for the success of small distributed forces is their ability to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) with both organic and non-organic

systems. While the Marine Corps is still experimenting with larger group five unmanned aerial surveillance systems (UAS) such as the Marine Air-Ground Task Force Unmanned Aerial System Expeditionary (MUX), there is a renewed focus on developing highly capable group two and group three UAS. These smaller platforms can be launched from either smaller waterborne vessels or on land from a small expeditionary advanced base.⁶¹ These new smaller systems will give the infantry the ability to have persistent ISR, that will help build their own internal situational awareness as well as tying into the larger common operational picture.

In addition to the smaller weapon systems being developed for small, distributed infantry units, the Marine Corps and Navy are also developing various long-range weapon systems that will significantly contribute to the sea control fight. In November of 2020, the Marine Corps successfully tested the new Naval Strike Missile (NSM) which is a long-range anti-ship missile system. While much of the specifications are currently classified, there are indications that the new weapon can be mounted on an unmanned variant of the JLTV.⁶² The new unmanned JLTV variant is known as the Remotely Operated Ground Unit Expeditionary-Fires (ROGUE-Fires) and can also be fitted with a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS)⁶³ which have proven to be extremely effective over the last two decades of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the development of all these new highly lethal systems designed to be employed at lower echelons, the future is looking bright for the Commandant's envisioned fight in the Pacific. Combining this new technology with a better trained and more capable light infantry force will provide the joint force with relative advantage needed to be successful in a highly contested, distributed operating environment.

The Way Forward

While much of the conversation with respect to the future operating environment centers on technological innovations to counter China's growing military capability, technology alone will not be enough to win. Now more than ever, the Marine Corps must embrace its maneuver warfare doctrine and apply it to the problem at hand. A recent series of *Marine Corps Gazette* articles entitled, "The Maneuverist Papers," attempts to unpack Marine Corps maneuver warfare doctrine. In the first article, the authors discuss the importance of the defeat mechanism when comparing attrition warfare to maneuver warfare. In that article they state, "we now understand that the defeat mechanism of maneuver warfare is systemic disruption—eliminating the enemy's ability to operate as a coherent and cohesive whole...Where attrition warfare attacks the components of the enemy system to degrade them, maneuver warfare attacks the relationships between those components to break the coherent functioning of the system."⁶⁴ To further complicate matters, these enemy systems are best categorized as non-linear, meaning that outputs are not necessarily proportionate to inputs and as "The Maneuverist Papers" author notes, "Minor efforts, made at the right time and place, can have outsized effects...Conversely, massive expenditures in men and materiel can produce little."⁶⁵

Unfortunately, linear thinking is pervasive in the United States Military. Planners often draw on their past successes to develop solutions to new problem sets. The belief that if it worked before, it will probably work again can lead to frustration when the results do not come out the same way they did before. The threat imposed by China's increasing growth in military lethality could lead the United States into an arms race in order to maintain a perceived advantage, and yet still result in failure. Pitting strength against strength is an attritionist approach. Systemic disruption is not always achieved by the superior force in terms of weapons

and manpower. Systemic disruption does not necessitate the Marine Corps continuing to invest in tanks just because the enemy is investing in tanks. The Spartans were successful against the Persians not because they matched them in strength, but because they denied them the ability to mass their forces. Success in the future will require a renewed focus on the Marine Corps's maneuver warfare doctrine, and more specifically, systemic disruption.

Systemic disruption, or as *MCDP-1 Warfighting* describes, “to render the enemy incapable of resisting effectively by shattering his moral, mental, and physical cohesion—his ability to fight as an effective, coordinated whole—rather than to destroy him physically through the incremental attrition of each of his components,”⁶⁶ is the way the most effective way to fight against a peer competitor such as China. This will likely manifest itself as limited systemic disruption rather than total system destruction. They are too powerful to fight head-on in an attritionist manner given their A2/AD technology as well as the reality that they are fighting from a prepared defensive position (i.e. their homeland). Additionally, the most likely conflict scenario involving China is not an all-out attack of the mainland but more likely something along the lines of a limited objective attack to re-establish the sovereignty of a country that China has invaded or to re-establish freedom of navigation or access to a given region. While much of the disruption capabilities reside with other instruments of national power such as economic or diplomatic means, the military instrument must focus its efforts on creative ways to create and exploit gaps in the adversary's warfighting system, and this is where a light infantry force as an extension of the Navy will find its usefulness.

In nearly every attack, the basic sequence follows a four-step RIGS process: (1) Recon the objective; (2) Isolate the objective; (3) Gain a foothold; and finally, (4) Seize the objective. This basic sequence is a continuous process that happens over and over again until the entire

objective is secure, starting from a tiny toe-hold and expanding outward until the objective is secure. One example of systemic disruption might be a scenario where the United States must regain control of an island in the Pacific. In this scenario a light infantry force will be more capable of gaining the initial foothold because they will carry a smaller signature and have the flexibility of exploiting smaller gaps within the enemy's defense. Once ashore, these forces begin the RIGS process over again by employing their own organic ISR and fires capabilities to further isolate and expand the foothold in order to allow a larger force to come in. This larger force may be additional ground troops to continue the assault, or it could be to create space for the fleet to close in closer or even air assets to continue the attack deeper in the battlespace. By penetrating the enemy's defense and employing organic anti-air or anti-ship weapon systems, the infantry is able to temporarily isolate portions of the battlefield whereby creating space for the Navy or joint force to then deliver more decisive blows. Again, the aim is not systemic destruction but rather temporary disruption in order to achieve a particular objective. While these sorts of tactics will inevitably require advances in technology, the approach will be significantly enhanced by the employment of an elite, light infantry force who when equipped, trained, and employed appropriately will help to negate the enemy's strengths through relative superiority (i.e. creating gaps).

To further determine the suitability of transforming current Marine Corps infantry into a more elite light infantry force, it is necessary to envision to the greatest extent possible, what Marine Corps infantry will likely be called upon to do in the future. In the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* General Berger stated that, "I do not believe joint forcible entry operations (JFEO) are irrelevant or an operational anachronism; however, we must acknowledge that different approaches are required given the proliferation of anti-access/area denial (A2/D2) threat

capabilities in mutually contested spaces. Visions of a massed naval armada nine nautical miles off-shore in the South China Sea preparing to launch the landing force in swarms of ACVs, LCUs, and LCACs are impractical and unreasonable.”⁶⁷ Given this reality, Marine infantry should no longer train or organize for large-scale amphibious landings, nor should they invest in equipment designed for these sorts of operations. While an argument could be made that amphibious landings are still a viable option for a lesser capable threat, that is not the current focus for the Marine Corps. If the Marine Corps is no longer focused on fighting as large line units, then there is limited usefulness in continuing to optimize the force to fight in that manner.

Current experimentation for the employment of the Marine Littoral Regiment centers mostly around support to the Navy’s Sea Control mission. Their mission will likely involve the employment of long-range anti-ship, anti-submarine, and anti-air sensors and weapon systems in vicinity of key maritime terrain such as straits and other similar choke points. While these weapon systems will likely be controlled by non-infantry Marines, the infantry will still have a vital role to play. A likely scenario could involve a platoon or company of light infantry, deploying from a submarine under the cover of darkness via rubber boats to temporarily seize a piece of terrain in order to fly in a long-range anti-ship missile system to provide support for the movement of a Navy high value unit. Another likely scenario could involve light infantry forces parachuting onto an austere island to provide security for a temporary Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) that would be enabled by an autonomous refueling vessel. While both of these scenarios envision the use of advanced technology, they both require low-signature boots on the ground to be successful. Technology alone will not meet the demands of the future operating environment. In late 2020, III Marine Expeditionary Force and U.S. 7th Fleet conducted one of the initial tests for the Marine Corps’s new EABO concept. During Exercise

Noble Fury, Marines from 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines temporarily seized an airfield where MC-130Js then dropped off a HIMARS launcher to prosecute a notional target before loading back up and departing the airfield.⁶⁸ While relatively small in scale, the exercise served as a useful proof of concept for how small units of Marines can have a disproportionately positive effect.

Another potential mission set that the recent tri-service strategy explores is the merits of combining Coast Guard, Navy, and Marine Forces to conduct Maritime Security Operations. Maritime Security Operations as mentioned previously are one of the five essential functions of seapower and according to JP 3-32, Joint Maritime Operations, “are conducted to establish the conditions for security and protection of sovereignty in the maritime domain. Additionally, MSOs protect maritime resources and counter maritime-related terrorism, weapons proliferation, transnational crime, piracy, environmental destruction, and illegal seaborne migration.”⁶⁹ When employed together, the Marine Corps light infantry can provide a power projection capability to combine with the Coast Guard’s unique law enforcement authorities. These capabilities could be a powerful combination against China’s Maritime Militia during both conflict and competition. During competition, this duo of Marines and Coast Guardsmen could help enforce international laws on behalf of partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific region, helping to build relationships and partner interoperability. Additionally, a light infantry force trained in Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS) could augment the Coast Guard and serve as a readily available rapid interdiction force during conflict. This sort of maritime security capability would provide an additional option for persistent presence within China’s threat WEZ, further complicating their decision-making process and contributing to systemic disruption.

While the majority of this paper has highlighted the merits of a light infantry force’s ability to operate in a distributed and low signature manner, that same force is also capable of

massing when necessary. As the Nation's 9-1-1 force, the infantry must maintain the ability to operate together as a larger force, in a more conventional manner. Whether for Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief, an Embassy Reinforcement, or any other type of crisis scenario that could arise around the globe, the Marine Corps must maintain the ability to respond with the appropriate force. The beauty of developing a light infantry force is that it can be extremely utilitarian. By lightening the infantry's footprint, they become more rapidly deployable, similar to the 75th Ranger Regiment. And like the Rangers, just because they are optimized to operate in smaller, more distributed formations, doesn't mean they cannot operate all the way up to a regimental or larger size formation.

Additionally, the Marine Corps already maintains ad hoc units on rotational deployment tethers, but to actually deploy these units on short notice (i.e. 18 hours like the Rangers) is currently impractical due to a number of reasons, but is not out of the realm of possibility for a future force. A Marine infantry with a rapidly deployable, fight tonight capability, would provide the joint force with a tremendous advantage. To make this a reality will require the Marine Corps to get lighter. Expeditionary must become something the Marine Corps truly embraces following decades of heavy logistics tail operations. Readiness for these types of operations will require a new outlook on training. Service Level Training Exercises like Integrated Training Exercise cannot culminate in a Regimental Assault Course where everyone is mounted in armored vehicles and conducting a combined arms breach. Those sort of mission requirements should be left to the Army. Training at Mountain Warfare Training Center will still be relevant to a light infantry force but there must also be a considerable push to train in an operational environment that is similar to the challenge of the Indo-Pacific Region. Marines must get comfortable with operating in a distributed manner, without the luxury of a higher headquarters or logistics that are

always there when you need them. No matter what the operational future holds, an elite light infantry Marine force is essential for the way forward.

Conclusion

While Marine Corps history is important, it should not be the determining factor in its direction. Wars of the past provide an example of what the Marine Corps is capable of but are not prescriptive for how it should prepare for future fights. The current operational environment is wrought with complex problems that do not lend themselves to traditional solutions.

Revisionist actors such as China and Russia are attempting to change the international order, not through naked aggression like Hitler and the Third Reich, but through subversion and influence.

Even a casual follower of international politics can decipher that the United States no longer enjoys the uncontested norm setting power that it has in the past. In order to remain a dominant world power and avoid losing further influence, it must change the way it engages in world affairs. Additionally, the United States must prepare for the potential of conflict with a nation that over the last few decades has slowly positioned itself as a formidable threat. China has developed a military and the weapons technology that can defeat the United States and its allies. There is no denying that the United States is now playing catch-up and must move quickly if it wants to retain its dominance on the world stage. While this problem is not solely a military one, without a military that can stand up to actors such as China, the other instruments of national power mean very little.

As the smallest of the military services, the Marine Corps has become accustomed to trying to find relevance within the Department of Defense. Throughout the years, the Marine Corps has had to reinvent itself based on the ever-changing needs of the security environment. While World War II needed a Marine Corps capable of forcible entry operations from the sea,

the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq needed a Marine Corps who could conduct sustained counter-insurgency operations against a non-state actor—and both times the Marine Corps reinvented itself to answer the Nation’s call. Inevitably, the threat has evolved and now the Nation needs a Marine Corps who can support the Navy through sea control and be ready to rapidly respond to emerging crisis situations around the world. To meet these new demands will require a refocusing on maneuver warfare doctrine and a fundamental change to the manning, training, and equipping of the Nation’s sea services. The Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard are already underway experimenting with new technologies and employment methodologies to counter China’s revisionist intentions but what must not be overlooked is the role of the Marine Corps’s base unit, the infantry.

Marine Corps infantry has through necessity gotten heavier and less accustomed to expeditionary operations in austere environments. The luxury of operating from the large Forward Operating Bases of Afghanistan and Iraq and the threat of improvised explosive devices has transformed the infantry into a largely conventional heavy force. Since September 11, 2001, that is what the nation needed, and the Marine Corps delivered. The threat and the operational environment have now changed and so too must the infantry. Future operations will require an infantry force that is capable of operating with a reduced signature and widely distributed across the battlefield. Though they will likely not be the main effort in the Navy’s sea control mission, the infantry is a crucial supporting effort. Platoon and company size elements will be required to move undetected to seize small pieces of terrain to facilitate the emplacement of long-range missile and sensor systems. These Marines won’t have the luxury of bringing their armored vehicles and large logistical footprints because it will present too large a target and give up the element of surprise. Infantry Marines, supported by the Navy and Coast Guard will need to

employ advanced insertion methods that are not currently trained to by conventional infantry forces in order to out maneuver the enemy. Once inserted, these Marines will likely need to make long overland movements in difficult terrain, inside the adversary's sensor and weapons range, with little outside support. While these sorts of missions have largely been reserved for special operations units, they are not the only solution, nor would Special Operations Command have the capacity to cover all the requirements. The Marine Corps is the ideal solution for operating in this sort of environment. To be successful however, will require the Marine Corps infantry to transition from conventional line infantry designed for heavy amphibious forcible entry operations and sustained ground combat operations to an elite light infantry force, optimized for low-signature distributed operations.

¹ Leo Spaeder, "Sir, Who am I? An Open Letter to the Incoming Commandant of the Marine Corps." War on the Rocks (March 28, 2019), <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/sir-who-am-i-an-open-letter-to-the-incoming-commandant-of-the-marine-corps/>.

² Spaeder, Who Am I?

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