

The MEU(SOC) Without Fixed Wing

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Since the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, we have been at war. Yet this is not like the wars we have known in the past, it is a new kind of war in which all components of the armed forces must work close together against an enemy that is sometimes difficult to identify. This requirement for joint operations between the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines requires new doctrine, doctrine which the Marine Corps pioneered years ago. This doctrine within the Marines is called the Marine Air/Ground Task Force (MAGTF). The MAGTAF concept takes four elements; Command Element, Ground Combat Element (GCE), Air Combat Element (ACE) and Combat Service Support Element (CSSE), and fights them as one joint team. Organized in three different sizes; the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) and the Marine Expeditionary Unit - Special Operations Capable (MEU(SOC)), each MAGTAF has the ability to conduct most aspects of warfare in and of itself.

The MEU is the smallest form of MAGTF and is the one that is deployed in regular intervals. As with any MAGTF, the ACE that is attached to the MEU(SOC) includes an element of fixed wing aircraft. Six AV-8B Harriers are attached to the ACE and deploy with the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), or the newer Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG).

Unfortunately those aircraft are often underutilized and either spend most of the time flying training missions separate of the MEU(SOC), or do not fly at all. The biggest reason for this stems from the size of the MEU(SOC) and the missions that it is capable of. In fact, the current requirement of fixed wing fighter/attack aircraft attached to a MEU(SOC) ACE is wasteful because of the disproportionate relationship between fixed wing firepower/capabilities and the MEU(SOC) missions.

### **MEU(SOC) Missions**

Many within the Marine Corps may feel that a subtraction of fixed wing assets from the MEU(SOC) is an unforgivable violation of the MAGTF concept. However once a closer look is given to the missions for which the MEU(SOC) was designed, and analysis is applied to whether organic fixed wing is essential to those missions, it becomes clear that these valuable assets could be managed much more efficiently. Marine Corps Order 3120.9B lists the MEU(SOC)'s twenty-three-mission essential tasks (METs). They are:

1. Amphibious Assault
2. Amphibious Raid

3. Amphibious Demonstration
4. Amphibious Withdrawal
5. Direct Action Operations
6. Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP)
7. Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)
8. Fire Support Planning, Coordination, and Control  
in a Joint/Combined environment
9. Provide Command, Control, Communications, and  
Computers (C4)
10. Limited Expeditionary Airfield Operations
11. Enhanced Urban Operations
12. Tactical Deception Operations
13. Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR)
14. Security Operations
15. Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR)
16. Peace Operations
17. Terminal Guidance Operations
18. Enabling Operations
19. Airfield / Port Seizure
20. Employ Non-Lethal Weapons
21. Information Operations (IO)
22. Anti-Terrorism
23. Rapid Response Planning Process (R2P2)

Many of these METs can be identified as capabilities rather than actual missions<sup>1</sup>. Examples of these METs are Rapid Response Planning Process (R2P2), Employ Non-lethal Weapons and Limited Expeditionary Airfield Operations. While these simply describe a capability, the other METs are identifiable missions that may or may not require fixed wing firepower.

### **The Fixed Wing Requirement**

The remaining METs can become a point of argument regarding fixed wing requirements. While few would argue that Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief would be a good example of a mission in which fixed wing fighter/attack assets have absolutely no role, the other METs are not so cut and dry. These METs should be studied in light of two questions; Is the role that fixed wing fighter attack can play large enough to warrant the use of the 30 million dollar asset? And, Would a MEU(SOC) sized element realistically undertake this mission as a stand-alone force? To further clarify this second question, would the MEU(SOC) be unable to draw on other U.S. deployed assets, namely large deck aircraft carriers?

Two examples that fall under the first question are Information Operations (IO) and Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR). IO can be further defined as "Actions taken to affect adversary information ...a required sub-task is Electronic Warfare (EW)"<sup>2</sup>. The AV-8B, which because of its Vertical/Short Takeoff and Landing (V/STOL) capability is the only attack aircraft able to deploy aboard the ARG with MEU(SOC), does not have EW capability. Its only IO capability would be the ability to drop leaflets with a PDU-5 leaflet canister. Although it may be important, this mission can easily be accomplished by C-130 aircraft which follow the MEU(SOC) around the globe by forward basing on land. Since these aircraft would always be available, it is questionable policy to retain an expensive attack air aircraft aboard a ship for this role.

ISR is a mission for which the Harrier has been tasked heavily since the incorporation of the Litening II Targeting Pod. However what needs to be remembered is that this Pod is not optimized for reconnaissance. It is a targeting pod that is designed to mark targets and guide weapons to them, and its use by the MEU(SOC) as strictly an ISR asset is flawed. If the Marine Corps determine that the ISR capability of fixed wing is a high priority for a

MEU(SOC) sized force, consideration should be made to purchase a dedicated reconnaissance asset like a Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) and not keep an attack aircraft with a targeting pod to accomplish the ISR mission.

The other METs can be analyzed by asking the second question, based on the size of a MEU (SOC), what tasks can the unit realistically accomplish as a stand-alone force? Doctrine states, " The Marine Expeditionary Unit can be thought of ...as a self-contained operating force capable of missions of limited scope ...[and] has a limited forcible entry capability".<sup>3</sup> Forcible entry can be defined as "Seizing and holding of a military lodgment in the face of armed opposition".<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the MEU (SOC) is going to be limited in the accomplishment of certain tasks if undertaken alone.

While the MEU (SOC) is certainly capable of performing an missions such as amphibious assault, the GCE is only battalion size. Given the size of most potential enemies, a battalion sized, stand-alone, amphibious assault is not a realistic consideration. If the assumption were made that the Marine Corps were going to conduct this assault alone, (i.e. not in a joint environment) then a MEB (Marine Expeditionary Brigade) sized MAGTF, or larger, would most likely be fit for the task. At that point, as in the Gulf

War and OIF, the Marines would draw upon an amphibious "Harrier Carrier", in which 24 or more Harriers would operate from a separate LHA or LHD, to support the MEB.

It should also be noted that the likelihood of the Marine Corps "going it alone" and not operating with-in a joint environment is very low. Virtually any level of amphibious assault would be large enough to warrant a carrier battle group at the very least. This was done in Afghanistan just recently where the MEU(SOC) pushed inland almost 600 miles. This same argument can be made for the Amphibious Raid, Withdrawal, Demonstration, or any one of the other tasks. As capable as MEU(SOC) may be, it is unlikely that an element it's size would be the stand-alone force of choice given our most likely enemies. While fixed wing firepower would be very useful in some of these operations, an engaged MEU(SOC) would very likely have plenty to draw on without having six Harriers aboard the LHD.

A real world example of this can be seen in the recovery of Air Force F-16 pilot Scott O'Grady in June of 1995. This mission, called TRAP, was one of the only missions of its kind that a MEU(SOC) has conducted. Despite the MEU(SOC) forward deployed, self-contained posture, it shared the duty for pilot recovery with the

joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) in Aviano, Italy.<sup>5</sup> The MEU(SOC) and the JSOTF would take turns covering each 24 hour period by splitting 12 hours apiece. Once the TRAP mission was begun, the MEU(SOC) not only had it's four Harriers, but the operation was also "supported by carrier aircraft that deployed to the Med".<sup>6</sup>

### **The Dangers**

There are numerous advantages to removing fixed wing from the MEU(SOC). All MEU(SOC)s except one deploy aboard the small deck helicopter carriers and integrate into the HMM squadron. This combination of fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft on one small deck creates endless problems. The removal of jets would not only facilitate smother helicopter operations, but better training for the fixed wing pilots. Since the Harrier must perform a rolling takeoff when fully loaded with fuel and bombs, the entire deck must be cleared for their launch. This means that helicopters that need to be worked on and tested for flight, need to be removed from spots prior to the Harrier launch. This directly affects the combat readiness of the ACE. Unfortunately, it is the pilots on the Harrier side that suffer. Typically, the solution to the deck space

problem for the Navy is to cancel the Harrier launches. This has resulted in Harrier pilots getting dangerously low flight time throughout their six-month deployments. Considering the difficulty of flying the Harrier, low flight time only compounds the danger to the pilots.

Another issue is the ability of the LHA/LHD to handle and control jet aircraft. It is not uncommon to find controllers who are completely unfamiliar with controlling "fast movers" around the ship. This has resulted in very dangerous situations both in controlled approaches to the ship and erroneous critical information being passed to pilots. There is also an inherent distrust from the pilots to the ships controllers; all information that the controllers pass need to be scrutinized by the pilot. While no pilot should ever put his fate completely into the hands of a controller, in some situations a pilot needs to be able to trust them. This creates a hazardous environment where the Marine Corps limited assets are at stake.

### **Justification**

The AV-8B community is now in a critical phase. With the closing of the Boeing Harrier assembly line, every

aircraft lost is a reduction of the force. Why then would the Marine Corps want to continue to risk it's only V/STOL asset for such small returns? The answer seems to lie with the vision of the future.

In 1998 the plausibility of the Harrier program was questioned due to the perpetual maintenance problems of the aircraft. The Harrier Review Panel or "HARP" had a simple task, decide what needed to be fixed with the aircraft and fix it, or cancel the program entirely. The panel made the decision to fix the problems and with that cemented V/STOL as the future of Marine Corps fixed wing air power. According to retired Col Michael Kelly, once this path was taken, the future of V/STOL had to be ensured. With the decision for the purchase of an all V/STOL fighter attack force in the future, it is up to the Harrier community and Marine Corps as a whole to "ensure the organization of V/STOL remains relevant in the future".<sup>7</sup> What this means is that since the Harrier program still remains expensive, and the funding dollars need to be justified, the only way to assure the continued support for V/STOL is to continue deploying AV-8B aboard forward deployed MEU(SOC). In the end what is important is not really the utilization of the fixed wing in the now, but the promise of an all V/STOL aviation component in the future. In short, the vision of

the future justifies the pain of today. In addition to that, most ground commanders who command the MEU(SOC) feel that the capability that fixed wing brings is nice to have in their "back pocket", regardless of whether or not the asset is ever really used.

### **Conclusion**

The MAGTF is a concept of which the Marine Corps should be proud. The integration of the four different aspects of war, and the extreme success with which these elements work together toward mission accomplishment, exemplify and justify the overwhelming unity felt within the Marines. The limitations of the MEU (SOC) that are explored in no way undermine the value of the forward deployed MAGTF. Removing fixed wing assets would only serve to allow greater flexibility in deck operations, and greatly enhance training opportunities for both fixed wing and rotary wing pilots. If the Marine Corps believes that fixed wing V/STOL aircraft are undeniably necessary to the MEU(SOC), a new plan needs to be incorporated regarding the training and use of these valuable assets. The future may depend on V/STOL, but a poorly trained force with dwindling assets will only create bigger problems in the long run.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Col Christopher Gunther, USMC (Ret), interview by Captain Andrew Diviney, 25 January 2005.

<sup>2</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 3120.9B*, 25 September 2001, 5.

<sup>3</sup> United States Marine Corps, *MCDP 3 Expeditionary Operations*, 1998, 76.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02 DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 2001, 171

<sup>5</sup> Lt Col Christopher Gunther, USMC, "Fortune Favors the Bold", *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Lt Col Christopher Gunther, USMC, "Fortune Favors the Bold", *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Col Michael Kelly, USMC (Ret), interview by Captain Andrew Diviney, 25 January 2005.

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