

Assault Amphibian Units and The Security Cooperation Marine Air-
Ground Task Force

Captain DF Commander

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Major AJ Floyd, CG 2
20 February 2009

Introduction

The security cooperation Marine air-ground task force (SC MAGTF) represents the Marine Corps' operational employment concept, which seeks to balance the Corps across the spectrum of conflict from low intensity, irregular warfare (IW) to major combat operations.¹ However, the SC MAGTF, by organization, may lack the same balance which is sought for the Marine Corps. Furthermore, the SC MAGTF lacks the economy of force to enable full spectrum operations as intended. The SC MAGTF's proposed composition does not completely optimize the Corps' general purpose forces, which have hard-earned experience conducting IW.² Therefore, assault amphibian units should support the SC MAGTF because of their economy of force, training, and experience.

Background

The SC MAGTF's proposed structure suggests a lean MAGTF composed of a regionally focused infantry battalion at its core, supported by a tailored logistics combat element (LCE), and an aviation combat element (ACE). The SC MAGTF will have additional reinforcing capability as required.³ However, the

ground combat element (GCE), a pure infantry battalion, fails to integrate the additional build partner capacity (BPC) capabilities of the Marine division, specifically assault amphibian units. Therefore, from the out-set of Phase III operations (dominate the enemy) in Iraq, assault amphibian (AA) companies have been complementing Marine regimental combat teams (RCTs) in their BPC activities. Today, AA companies possess a wide range of provisional skills from kinetic through non-kinetic. AA units possess perishable IW skills that should be used to supplement the SC MAGTF.

Economy of force

AA units represent an economy of force for the SC MAGTF. While the SC MAGTF may be optimally balanced to support BPC, it lacks mobility and firepower beyond its LCE and ACE to support missions on the high-end of the war-fighting spectrum. Although not its primary function, the SC MAGTF will be capable of supporting a combatant commander's requirement for forcible entry and other major combat operations.⁴ According to Marine Corps publication *Send in the Marines*, the SC MAGTF will redesignate its GCE to a battalion landing team (BLT). The SC MAGTF will aggregate its dispersed elements and re-equip the force with prepositioned equipment from either a maritime preposition squadron or from Marine Corps Preposition-Norway.⁵

Presumably, additional units from the Marine division could be sourced to complement the SC MAGTF's BLT transformation, although this technique would lack the responsiveness normally associated with a sea-based MAGTF. Yet the SC MAGTF could gain responsive, high-end conflict capability from AA units acting in a provisional IW capacity. AA units would provide the same mobility and firepower capability that is provided to the Marine expeditionary unit (MEU), given access to prepositioned assault amphibian vehicles (AAVs).

Additionally, units sourcing the SC MAGTF will be regionally focused, and AA battalions can implement regionalization in the same way that is suggested for the infantry regiments, combat logistics battalions, and Marine air groups.⁶ Major Edward W. Novack of the Marine Corps' Strategy and Plans Division suggests that regionalization begins by sourcing the SC MAGTF with units that have country or region-specific operational experience, and by augmenting SC MAGTF sourcing units with Marines who possess an in-depth understanding of the environment. Operational experience will not be gained until an SC MAGTF persistently deploys within a geographic combatant command; however, to develop this experience, AA battalions, like all other sourcing units can habitually support an SC MAGTF on a rotational basis.

To gain regional expertise, AA battalions can be assigned non-commissioned officers (NCOs), staff non-commissioned officers (SNCOs), and officers who have an applicable Career Marine Regional Studies Program (CMRSP) micro-region assignment. Personnel assignment based on CMSRP is universal considering all Marines are assigned to the program while at the Sergeants Course and The Basic School.⁷ Major Novack indicates that regional experience can be retained by enabling assignment priority for Marines to return to their previous SC MAGTF sourcing unit, and this too is a universal opportunity, which AA units can capitalize upon.⁸

Training

AA units will be prepared to support the SC MAGTF once it is fully operationally capable (FOC). FOC is anticipated following force reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹ Considering that AA units are still training and deploying to Iraq, these units will be at their peak proficiency as provisional combined arms units following a draw down in Iraq. Indicating the type of training required for units participating with the SC MAGTF, Major Novack states that "combined arms remains the best way to defeat an opponent and will be a cornerstone of any instruction that our Marines provide [foreign militaries]."¹⁰ AA companies currently train to the same basic, combined arms training

standards as their infantry counterparts, and are thus similarly prepared to support the SC MAGTF.

Specifically, in accordance with Marine Corps Training and Education Command requirements, AA companies complete three out of four OIF PTP training blocks. These training blocks consist of basic combat skills as well as skills for security and stability environments: they also possess skills which lend themselves well to training foreign partners: pre-combat actions, combat marksmanship, threat weapons training, first aid and combat lifesaver. All AA Marines are trained to conduct vehicle checkpoints, entry control points, cordon and search, and cordon and knock. At the company level, AA companies have qualified medium machinegun teams, basic urban skills training instructors, trained intelligence cells, and are able to conduct COC operations as well as relief in place.¹¹

In light of contemporary training requirements, core competency proficiency is a matter of concern for AA units who have had a two-company responsibility to OIF since 2003. However, military occupational specialty (MOS) training within AA battalions has been and continues to be concurrent with OIF deployments. AA support to the MEUs has been uninterrupted during OIF, so the AA battalions' MEU support companies remain a constant source of Marines with traditional AA training.

Additionally, a current AA company commander has observed that as an AA battalion experiencing a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio is focusing on conventional AA training standards while companies are in pre-deployment or post-deployment dwell. If a battalion is not able to achieve a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio, then its companies train to traditional standards as a part of their OIF PTP.¹² Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025 reminds readers that “though enduring, [core competencies] they are not static; as necessary, new competencies must be developed and honed to meet emerging challenges”.¹³ AA units are meeting the current IW challenge and will be primed to meet emerging challenges.

Experience

AA units have gained extraordinary provisional IW experience by persistently supporting BPC activities during OIF. General James T. Conway, Commandant of the Marine Corps, in his forward to *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025* states, “we must be a two fisted fighter – able to destroy enemy formations with our scalable air-ground-logistics teams in major contingencies, but equally able to employ our hard earned irregular warfare skills honed over decades of conflict.”¹⁴ AA units, like their supported infantry units, have hard-earned IW experience.

In fact, OIF after-action reports from 2004 through 2008 highlight AA companies IW experience. AA companies have been reinforced and assigned independent areas of operation in which they have conducted IW across all war-fighting functions. High end missions conducted by AA companies have included ambush, counter-ambush, and cordon and search operations while tasked with main supply route security. Additionally, AA companies have conducted the following security and stability operations: dismounted patrolling, census operations, weapons cache sweeps, cordon and knock operations, and vehicle checkpoint operations.¹⁵ AA units have also advised and assisted the Iraqi Police (IP) following more recent stability in the country. An AA platoon commander reported that from April to October 2008, his company commander advised the Ramadi police chief with traffic pattern analysis and barrier planning, while the AA company assisted the IP with city entry control point operations.¹⁶ The same mission continues with one of the two currently deployed AA companies.¹⁷

AA company commanders and battalion-level staff have also gained unique experience as a result of individual augmentation (IA) deployments to Iraq. In this capacity, officers have served as members of RCT staffs, military transition teams, and police transition teams. AA captains and majors, as special staff officers within the SC MAGTF, would bring relevancy and

currency to theater security cooperation. These officers, applying their experience could assist in both the planning and conduct of BPC activities.

In addition to personal experience, AA units have also gained experience with modern equipment. AA companies are equipped with contemporary weapons and optics. The table of equipment within the AA battalions reflects their current provisional IW character. All Marines are equipped with an M4 with rifleman combat optic, PEQ-15 infrared sight, and PVS-14 night vision device. Additionally, AA Marines are experienced in operating current optics to include PAS-13, PAS-22, PVS-17B, PSQ-18, and Night Hunter thermal binoculars.¹⁸ Furthermore, AA Marines are operating and maintaining mine protected vehicles and up-armored HMMWVs presently in Iraq, in lieu of AAVs. As a result of OIF, AA battalions have a near complementary personnel equipment array as the infantry battalion, which will allow the AA unit a more seamless integration into the SC MAGTF GCE in support of internal training and training foreign militaries.

Conclusion

Irregular warfare characterizes the current and predominate style of future warfare.¹⁹ Maj Novack states, "The irregular opponent is here today, and we need to organize, train, and equip at least part of our Corps to face what will invariably be

a very long war.”²⁰ AA units have garnered unique, but likely perishable IW skills, which can be further applied to the Long War, specifically as a component of the SC MAGTF. General Conway has indicated that the Corps must be “able to draw upon contributions from our Total Force, in order to address the full range of contingencies the future will undoubtedly present.”²¹ AA units represent a viable element of the Total Force, which should be utilized to conduct security cooperation and BPC. AA battalions have the ability to balance themselves across the war-fighting spectrum, and add balance to the Corps as the “two-fisted fighter.” Active duty AA battalions represent two large, division subordinate commands, which are scheduled to gain an additional company during fiscal year 2010 as a result of Marine Corps’ end strength increase.²² AA units are too large and too capable to be committed exclusively to conventional combat operations. [Word count: 1706]

Notes

1. *Send in the Marines: A Marine Corps Operational Employment Concept to Meet an Uncertain Security Environment*, January 2008, Forward.

2. *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025: Executive Summary*, (18 June 2007), 2.

3. *Send in the Marines*, 16-17.

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5. *Send in the Marines*, 22-23.

6. Major Edward W. Novack, "The Security Cooperation MAGTF: Optimizing the regionalization of Marine forces for building partner capacity," *Marine Corps Gazette* 92, No. 8 (August 2008): 11-12.

7. Novack, 12-14.

8. Novack, 14.

9. Major Edward W. Novack, "The Long War Concept," *The Officer* 84, Iss. 7 (September 2008): 32, ProQuest (30 November 2008).

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11. *OIF PTP Toolkit*,
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17. Capt Jacob Q. Robinson, "Clarification," 15 December 2008, personal email (15 December 2008).

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19. *Send in the Marines*, 6.

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