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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

**The Marine Expeditionary Element – A Modular Crisis Response Force
Package...We'll Call It...Mini-MEE**

by

Thomas M. Bedell

Major / USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Thomas M. Bedell

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Paper Abstract

The Marine Expeditionary Element – A Modular Crisis Response Force Package... We'll Call It...Mini-MEE

Reinforce deploying Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) with a crisis response force package (a Marine Expeditionary Element or MEE) composed of a Marine Weapons Platoon and a four ship detachment of V-22 Ospreys. This force package significantly improves the Navy's existing Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP), Special Operations Forces (SOF) support, Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HA/DR), Security Cooperation and Forward Engagement capability, and adds Raid, Vertical Board Search and Seizure (VBSS) and Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) capability. The MEE could operate independently or form the foundation for an expanded SOF unit. SOF personnel could be already embarked or sent to rendezvous with the MEE on short notice to accomplish a specific mission. The force packages pre-deployment workup training would be balanced between shipboard operations and training with designated USSOCOM units in order to establish a baseline capability of mission essential tasks. The end state is a modular expeditionary unit in support of a CSG, providing SOF mobility and supporting fire power tailored to the operational commander's needs.

Introduction

Change within the military is prompted by either proactive innovation or as a reaction to crisis. Historically our nation and our military have been poorly represented in the proactive category, and have continually shown impressive creativity and innovation when reacting to crisis. By following our leader's strategic direction to "out innovate" our potential adversaries, and applying a proactive experience based approach to force structure and composition we can create new options to address looming military problems across the range of military operations. The addition of a Marine Detachment comprised of a Marine weapons platoon and four CV/MV-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft to a carrier air wing applies strategic direction from Naval leadership and experience gained during the past ten years of combat to increase the expeditionary capability of the carrier strike group, and the associated options available to operational commanders.

What is a Marine Expeditionary Element? - Proposal of Concept

Reinforce deploying Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) with a crisis response force package (a Marine Expeditionary Element or MEE) comprised of a Marine Weapons Platoon and a four ship detachment of V-22 Ospreys. This force package significantly improves the Navy's existing Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP), Special Operations Forces (SOF) support, Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HA/DR), Security Cooperation and Forward Engagement capability, and adds Raid, Vertical Board Search and Seizure (VBSS) and Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) capability.¹ The MEE could operate independently or form the foundation for an expanded SOF unit. SOF personnel could be already embarked or sent to rendezvous with the MEE on short notice to

accomplish a specific mission. The force packages pre-deployment workup training would be balanced between shipboard operations and training with designated USSOCOM units in order to establish a baseline capability of mission essential tasks. The end state is a modular expeditionary unit in support of a CSG, also capable of providing SOF mobility and supporting fire power tailored to the operational commander's needs.

**What stimulated consideration of a new force package?
- Review of Strategic Guidance**

Our strategic leadership, including the President, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Commandants of the Marine Corps and Coast Guard, as well as the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments have provided clear and compelling conceptual frameworks within which operational thinkers can consider future force structure and composition decisions. A review of these nested and overlapping directives reveals a common thread that should both challenge and inspire current military leaders at all levels. We will be successful in maintaining the initiative and protecting our national interests at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of conflict by constantly striving to innovate in a way that creates options for commanders in the field. The proposed Marine Expeditionary Element is a very small tactical force which does just that. A consideration of the options it creates begins with initial strategic guidance.

From the National Security Strategy:

We will continue to rebalance our military capabilities to excel at counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, stability operations, and meeting increasingly sophisticated security threats, while ensuring our force is ready to address the full range of military operations.²

At the highest level there is an awareness that our military structure is in a state of transition in which the threats we face are not the same as the one's we are currently addressing, or have addressed in the past. Our structure must shift from being a primarily conventional force capable of dealing with similarly postured adversaries to a much more agile and flexible force capable of operating more effectively across the full range of military operations. More troops with better weapons are not the only tools required.

From A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower

The speed, flexibility, agility and scalability of maritime forces provide joint our combined force commanders a range of options for responding to crises.³

Our maritime forces will be tailored to meet the unique and evolving requirements particular to each geographic region, often in conjunction with special operations forces and other agency partners.⁴

Marines will continue to be employed as air-ground task forces operating from amphibious ships to conduct a variety of missions, such as power projection, but they will also be employed as detachments aboard a wider variety of ships and cutters for maritime security missions.⁵

The chiefs of the three Naval Services (USN, USMC, USCG) recognize that within their combined maritime forces there exist a myriad of options, and that more options become available relative to our ability to forward deploy and scale those forces. The increasing relevance of Special Operations Forces in the current and future maritime environment is highlighted. SOF requires mobility and support, and maritime forces are uniquely positioned to provide those exact functions. Additionally, they make the specific observation that Marines can be more effectively used if deployed in detachments aboard a wider variety of ships. It is important to note that smaller detachments provide a capability commensurate with the size, training, and equipment of the force. The proposed MEE is not

going to be able to or expected to function as a mini-Marine Expeditionary Unit. It provides a small scale, small footprint expeditionary capability.

From the **Capstone Concept for Joint Operations**

Common Operation Precepts

- combine joint capabilities to maximize complementary rather than merely additive effects⁶

- maintain operational and organizational flexibility⁷

Implications of Adopting this Concept

- Maintain the capability to project and sustain military power over global distances⁸

- Improve capabilities and capacities for covert and clandestine operations⁹

The Chief of Naval Operations accurately identifies continued emphasis on “jointness” as needing to have a complimentary effect, and not simply be for its own sake. The difficulties of crossing service and cultural boundaries have proven to be worth the effort. A central challenge confronting operational commanders is how best to project power over global distances. The answer continues to be forward deployed forces capable of accomplishing multiple mission sets. Again, support and improvement of Special Operations Forces identified as a desired capability.

From **AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept**

Recommendations from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments for preparation and force requirements in a notional conflict with China:

The Air Force and Navy should routinely conduct joint maritime strike mission planning, training and exercises.¹⁰

Legacy bombers with precision-guided standoff munitions would strike known fixed missile emplacements, while long-endurance manned and unmanned stealthy penetrators, supported by on-board and off-board target cueing (perhaps including SOF), would locate and attack mobile missile launchers.¹¹

The AirSea Battle concept also points to joint action and SOF as a requirement to address emerging threats. Deploying a MEE would give not just improved capabilities now, but would function as a test bed to explore how best to support SOF in a larger conventional conflict.

From the **Naval Operations Concept 2010**

Adaptive force packaging generates the globally distributed, mission-tailored forces required to resource the demands of the combatant commanders. Beyond innovatively employing every class of ship operated by the Naval Service, adaptive force packaging also includes tailoring the crew composition and adding mission specific equipment to enhance effectiveness. For example, Marine detachments can be placed aboard large surface combatants, littoral combatants, and cutters to provide enhanced force protection; boarding and raiding capability; and mobile training teams.¹²

In addition to reiterating the theme of Marine detachments aboard a wider variety of ships and the associated increase in mission capability, the NOC addressed adaptive force packaging. Using a Marine weapons platoon as a base unit is a starting point from which to deviate. The addition of mission specialists to the unit creates the desired mission-tailored force, and should not be seen as being limited to just military missions.

From the **Marine Corps Operating Concepts 2010**

The Marine Corps will examine initiatives to increase employability and availability of Marines aboard Navy and Coast Guard platforms beyond amphibious ships.¹³

By embarking Marines aboard a wider variety of naval vessels, we can expand the capability and capacity to conduct discrete, sea-based engagement with a greater number of partner nations. Doing so will have the additional advantage of increasing the flexibility and utility of these vessels for the range of military operations. When crises or natural disasters occur, these Marines could go ashore to provide site reconnaissance, liaison, terminal guidance, or other enabling tasks to facilitate the introduction of additional naval, joint, other agency, or non-governmental organization resources.¹⁴

Speed of response is accelerated by deploying force posture that places Marines in areas where crisis is likely to occur in order to reduce the “tyranny of distance” associated with deploying from the United States to many crisis areas.¹⁵

In a discussion of Crisis Response Force Packages the MOC recommends developing crisis response force modules afloat and ashore, to include the development of a more responsive Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and high yield Explosives (CBRNE) capability, and options for increasing the number of forward deployed MEUs.¹⁶

The guidance in the MOC is harmonious with the detailed central themes: think about both the most likely and most dangerous threats, innovate in forming force packages to help the operational commander address these threats, and deploy them forward to reduce response time.

**Has this capability ever been needed or used before?
- Review of Historical Examples**

In 2001 the Kitty Hawk left Japan and took up station off Pakistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom with less than half its carrier air wing embarked. In place of its full complement of fixed wing aircraft the Kitty Hawk carried Special Operations Forces, helicopters, and other government agency personnel.¹⁷ This is a perfect example of the Navy providing an innovative solution to the overall military effort by expanding and adapting the traditional role of its carrier force. Sea-basing a force package tailored to the mission requirement created sanctuary, standoff, and allowed SOF assets access to the battlefield.

From October 2007 to April 2009 Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadrons (VMMs) supported more than 6,000 sorties, moved over 45,000 passengers and more than 2.2 million pounds of cargo. During this period these squadrons performed every available assault support mission including Raids, assaults, MEDEVAC, and Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP). Brigadier General Alles, CG ACE MNF-W noted that the Osprey “Turns Texas into Rhode Island.” Major General Kelly, CG MNF-W observed “I could

dominate Al Anbar Province, because I had V-22s...I couldn't do what I did with just helicopters.”¹⁸

In July 2009 six CV-22s from the AF 8th Special Operations Squadron self-deployed 7,000 miles behind aerial refueling aircraft from Florida to Iraq. Over the next four months they executed 45 direct action assault force INFIL/EXFIL missions and 123 combat service support missions, including several missions in support of Iraqi Special Operations Forces.¹⁹

In January 2010, the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit with the Nassau Amphibious Ready Group supported Operation Unified Response, a Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster relief effort following an earthquake in Haiti. Capt. Robert Shuford with the 24th MEU noted that the V-22 “allows us to land multiple teams in areas throughout northern Haiti, leave them there with enough time to get a good assessment and retrieve all these teams before nightfall – only using two Ospreys.”²⁰

On March 22nd 2011 the 26th MEU was embarked aboard the USS Kearsarge off the coast of Libya in support of Operation Odyssey Dawn. An F-15E crashed ashore and the MEU was ready to launch a TRAP mission in less than two hours. Two MV-22s supported by two AV8B Harriers and two CH-53E helicopters carrying a Quick Reaction Force launched and recovered the pilot. The second aircrew was rescued by friendly local nationals. The speed with which the TRAP force was able to close the distance between ship and objective was instrumental in being able to successfully recover the pilot.²¹

From March to October 2010 five CV-22s, again from the 8th Special Operations Squadron deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. During their six month deployment they supported 68 direct action assault force INFIL/EXFIL missions resulting in the capture of 231 suspected terrorists. The range, speed, and altitude capability

of the aircraft combined with appropriate SOF units created efficiencies not possible with helicopters.²²

On March 12th 2012 an MV-22 completed its first day and night carrier qualification landings aboard the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush off the coast of North Carolina.²³ (Whittle article) This was not, however, the first time an MV-22 had landed on an aircraft carrier. On May 2nd 2011 the body of Osama bin Laden was flown by MV-22 from Bagram Air Base in Northeastern Afghanistan over 850nm to the USS Carl Vinson operating in the Northern Arabian Sea.²⁴

These examples showcase the potential options created by the proposed MEE construct. Mission tailored forces, based on carriers, combined with the speed and range of the Osprey redefine the battle space. The operational factors of time, space, and force are all adjusted in favor of the operational commander as he or she is able to create effects in ways and at distances not previously possible.

What options does a MEE create for an operational commander? - Proposal Applied to Notional Scenarios

The proposed Marine Expeditionary Element takes existing and demonstrated capability and applies it to the requirements detailed by our nation's political and military leaders. The goal of the numerous conceptual directives is to provide operational commanders with the tools to accomplish assigned operational tasks. An operational commander is faced with a daunting challenge, be prepared to execute missions across the full range of military operations as quickly as possible with forces available. Time is the central variable, because responding quickly to a crisis can often keep the crisis from escalating. Forward deployed forces reduce the response timeline. The proposed crisis

response force package provides an operational commander a capability applicable to both low and high threat scenarios.

The TRAP mission is an excellent example of a small scale tactical mission with potential strategic implications. If a pilot is captured by an enemy force, that becomes a very problematic public relations issue for our nation's leaders which can sway public opinion and resolve. During Operation Odyssey Dawn off Libya the 26th MEU was the only forward deployed force naval force available to provide support, the deployed carrier strike groups being engaged elsewhere. Consider the implications of the opposite being true. Current capability on a CSG is limited to helicopter supported Combat Search and Rescue. A TRAP force capable of hostile action against a determined enemy would have to have been assembled at greater distance using slower assets. If the H-60 helicopter assets aboard the carrier had been used they certainly would have been escorted by TACAIR overhead, but would have had to enter contested airspace at a slower airspeed, at a lower altitude, and would have arrived later with minimal capability to defend against any ground forces in the area. The response time of the MV-22 ingressing at 260 knots can be the difference between a successful recovery or a capture when compared to the 150 knots cruise speed of an H-60 helicopter. It makes sense that CSGs should have a TRAP/CSAR capability as good as that available to an Amphibious Ready Group considering the larger number of fixed wing aircraft flying in harm's way relative to the six Harriers attached to the MEU.

A RAID capability resident on Carriers increases operational solutions to fleeting Time Sensitive Targets and High Value Assets. The deployment of the Kitty Hawk in support of the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom when considered in the context of the success of the Marine MV and Air Force CV-22s in later deployments provides a

compelling case for deploying the proposed Marine Expeditionary Element. Inherent to the concept of a forward deployed modular crisis response force package is the ability to project power immediately or on a vastly shortened timeline. The composition and training of the Marine force would be tailored to the anticipated mission set. It would be used within its capabilities, training and limitations. These capabilities could be expanded with the addition of SOF serving to “combine joint capabilities to maximize complementary rather than merely additive effects.”²⁵

Similar to a RAID, being able to execute a Vertical Board Search and Seizure of ships out to the 325nm combat radius of the V-22 vastly increases the maritime domain within which a CSG is able to project power. In accordance with the Naval Operating Concept 2010 having the MEE aboard a carrier allows the Navy another way in which to establish forward presence in international waters and wield soft power.

This force proposal has the potential to be a shining example of Joint capabilities combining to produce a sum much greater than the parts. Air Force CV-22s have terrain following and weather radars which could compliment MV-22 on-board self-protection weapons systems if the Osprey detachment included two CV-22s and two MV-22s. Deploying together would allow cross training and the sharing of tactics, techniques, and procedures while building a cadre of carrier qualified Air Force pilots capable of operating from naval ships. The Marine Expeditionary Element could be led by a MarSOC captain or major, and augmented with Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs or Air Force Combat Controllers depending on the expected missions or theater engagement / security cooperation requirements of USSOCOM. Further training and experience opportunities exist with the

integration of the MEE and its resident JTAC / SOF expertise into the carrier air wing and the command and control structure of the carrier strike group.

Forward engagement and security cooperation opportunities for the CSG would be significantly expanded. The presence of a US aircraft carrier is the ultimate example of power projection to potential adversaries, our partners, and potential allies. It is congruous that aboard a carrier the Navy would have one of the most advanced aircraft in our inventory and a Marine Detachment capable of security cooperation missions. The MEE augmented with Marine and SOF training teams could be used throughout a deployment to fly into friendly countries and conduct small training exercises. Showcasing not just the quality of our ground forces, but the revolutionary aircraft we have at our disposal would be powerful evidence of our amphibious capabilities with a potential deterrent effect.

The proposed force package gives a greater expeditionary role to the Carrier Strike Group, and allows it to operate across a broader range of more likely areas in the operations spectrum. If all you can do is drop bombs, and that is not the solution to the problem, you are not part of the solution. In an age of constrained resources, it is important to maximize the number of roles that available assets can fill. As showcased with the expeditionary deployment of the USS Kitty Hawk in 2001, having a platform with such a broad range of capabilities can be a huge advantage in a sea-basing expeditionary environment.

Weapons of mass destruction in the hands of non-state actors is a high risk emerging threat which will require very timely and decisive military capability. The tyranny of distance once again presents a barrier. A forward deployed MEE, augmented by SOF and perhaps CBRNE specialists, presents options. Given the stakes, being able to execute a RAID or Strike mission out to the V-22's maximum self-deploy range of over 2000 nautical miles

could be the only way to achieve the desired effects. The “Doolittle Raid” mission profile would obviously require a target of strategic importance, but if required the capability could be used.

A final possible high risk mission set involves tactical application of the emerging AirSea Battle concept. Briefly, the concept considers the force requirements of a notional conflict with China in a robust anti-access area denied environment. Discussion of the role a MEE/SOF crisis response force package nests within a much larger strategic paradigm shift in which the Navy and Air Force operate for the first time since World War II in contested sea and airspace. Central to the concept is the initial inability to apply our carrier forces as designed due to denied access in the face of long range Anti-Ship Cruise Missile and Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile launchers capable of ranging 2000 nautical miles and beyond. Dismantling command and control structure, and launch site capabilities will take months. Being able to execute probing attacks at the margins of threat weapons system ranges, and take out peripheral radar, command and control, and communications nodes would be crucial to this effort. Being able to strike targets using SOF units would require extremely long range INFIL and EXFIL transport. The Air Force operates the CV-22 almost exclusively in a SOF support role, capable of operating across the range of proposed MEE mission sets, and in support of a strike and terminal attack role envisioned in the Air Sea Battle concept.

**Would adjusting the composition of a carrier air wing reduce its effectiveness?
-Counter-argument / Rebuttal**

Some would argue that an aircraft carrier is a strike platform, and that any adjustment to the composition of the embarked carrier air wing reduces a CSG’s ability to accomplish its primary mission. The lack of a robust TRAP force and the associated increased risk to

downed pilots is balanced by the increased number of strike aircraft aboard, and the increased number of strike sorties the CSG is able to generate. For the past ten years in both Iraq and Afghanistan carrier based aircraft have contributed significantly to the number of sorties available to ground forces engaged in combat with the enemy. The demand for carrier aircraft continues to be as high as it has ever been. Aircraft usage rates and the length of deployments are also at an all-time high. Reducing the number of available sorties by adding a Marine Expeditionary Element to the carrier air wing would be a mistake given the current demand and operational tempo being demanded of these assets.

Per Naval Operating Concept 2010, “Adaptive force packaging generates the globally distributed, mission-tailored forces required to resource the demands of the combatant commanders. Beyond innovatively employing every class of ship operated by the Naval Service, adaptive force packaging also includes tailoring the crew composition and adding mission specific equipment to enhance effectiveness.”²⁶ At no point would a single strike aircraft be pulled from a carrier air wing if that is the force package desired by the combatant commander. The proposal augments a carrier air wing with a MEE if there was space available, if the TRAP mission set was requested by the CSG commander, and if the combatant commander requested an expeditionary capability in addition to his or her aircraft based strike capability. Just as the Kitty Hawk offloaded and eventually re-embarked a portion of its air wing, so to could future carrier deployments adjust real time to emerging mission requirements. Unlike helicopter borne force packages, an Osprey based MEE could simply redeploy from the carrier to be replaced by strike aircraft if that is what the situation required. The CV carrier Navy could take some lessons out of the Gator Navy’s playbook. During both Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom amphibious assault ships were used

as “Harrier Carriers” supporting fixed wing assets exclusively after the helicopter and ground combat elements went ashore. If the operational requirement allows it, big deck CV carriers could and have performed in an amphibious role in support of expeditionary sea-based operations.

Conclusion

Being directed to begin “innovatively employing every class of ship”²⁷ should translate into how best to provide the capability most needed and most likely to be used by a supported combatant commander during a deployment. Carriers are powerful weapons platforms with immense strike capability, forward presence, and a significant deterrent effect. They are able to operate across the full range of military operations and have effectively supported Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief and Special Operations Forces. The proposed MEE force package provides a way to vastly expand the mission sets available to a CSG with a very small tactical force package. It also provides the backbone for a modular, scalable force that could be quickly augmented to provide SOF based solutions across the full range of military operations. The MEE uses Joint structure from each of the five services, and creates opportunities to exercise tactical application of potential solution sets to emerging low and high threat scenarios. Historically the large bureaucratic nature of our military has been extremely reluctant to change. As a nation we prepare our military to fight the last war, reinforce the status quo, and react slowly but eventually are successful after being surprised by unexpected crises. The leaders of the Naval services have together and individually given broad direction to adapt our force structure in a way that anticipates emerging threats rather than reacts to them. The proposed Marine Expeditionary Element is a small application of their conceptual direction. It significantly expands the role of the carrier, and could be used

as a test bed for how best to forward deploy forces in a way that increases the options available to operational commanders. Visionary leaders will see the implications of drastically altering the range rings around a carrier, and expanding what friendly forces are capable of influencing within those rings. Reducing time to respond within a larger battle space using forces previously unavailable is the exact kind of innovation required in the emerging chaotic littoral operating environment.

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