NAVAL WAR COLLEGE Newport, R.I.

What can the Marine Corps learn about EABO from the Battle of Wake Island?

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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.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Marine Corps is fully committed to its Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept, as the Corps prepares for a potential maritime conflict against a peer adversary. The Marines recently released the *Tentative Manual for EABO (TMEABO)* in February 2021, and implementation of EABO as a capability is a driving factor behind the Marine Corps' current reorganization. EABO enables the Marine Corps to advance current Department of Defense (DOD) strategic objectives through enhanced cooperation and partnerships with the Navy in a post-Global War on Terror (GWOT) landscape. One can ask the question, how can the Marine Corps and the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC) best employ the new EABO concept while applying lessons learned from a historical case study?

On 8 December 1941, the Battle of Wake Island began and lasted fifteen days before an overwhelming Japanese naval, and amphibious force seized control of the atoll on 23 December.³ While not strategically significant to the outcome of the Second World War, Wake Island's defense with a relatively small Marine force is an important case to study, particularly now as the Marine Corps is focusing on increasing naval integration through EABO. The Battle of Wake Island possesses many lessons that link directly to concerns that the JFMCC should study and consider when employing EABO. These concerns are the necessity for mutual support, proper command and control (C2), and ensuring an appropriate force structure for EABO execution.

EXPEDITIONARY ADVANCED BASE OPERATIONS

EABO will be a critical part of the Marine Corps' contribution to the Joint force in a maritime conflict against a peer adversary in an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) environment. The *TMEABO* defines EABO as:

A form of expeditionary warfare that involves the employment of mobile, low signature, persistent, and relatively easy to maintain and sustain naval expeditionary forces from a series of austere, temporary locations ashore or inshore within a contested or potentially contested maritime area in order to conduct sea denial, support sea control, or enable fleet sustainment.⁴

With the advent of EABO, the Marine Corps will prioritize and increase naval integration by supporting the Fleet as it attains sea control or sea denial in a contested littoral environment. The EABO concept will integrate the Marine Corps into a more extensive naval and possibly Joint campaign in a maritime environment through force projection. EABO is unique in that it will occur within an enemy's weapons engagement zone (WEZ), making it paramount that forces executing EABO can prevent the enemy from detecting or engaging them. The objective is to execute EABO without being detected by an enemy, which mitigates the risk of placing small forces within the adversary's WEZ.

EABO is not a singular mission set for the Marine Corps to execute in a littoral environment, but a wide range of capabilities that will ultimately contribute to the completion of maritime objectives. The missions of EABO can range from supporting sea control and sea denial operations to providing forward sustainment or contributing to maritime domain awareness.⁷ Furthermore, EABO can support sea control or sea denial operations in a littoral

environment and deter adversary actions without increasing naval ships in theater, enabling vessels to engage the enemy in deep water vice coastal areas.

During the execution of EABO, Marines and naval forces would most likely operate from Expeditionary Advanced Bases (EABs). Some of the tasks that EABs could theoretically accomplish range from kinetic (aviation strikes, ground-based anti-ship cruise missiles) to non-kinetic (forward arming and refueling point (FARP) operations, deception operations, or information operations). If the JFMCC conducts EABO in contingency operations, the concept envisions that EABs and naval forces will "deny an adversary access to adjacent battlespace or...support a more comprehensive effort to establish sea control." EABs will serve as a node and be a part of a communications infrastructure that aids in preventing potential adversary isolation of the EABs.

EABO is not an entirely new concept or idea, as the Marine Corps has some experience in defending naval basing. The Marine Corps supported naval objectives of force projection by establishing small bases throughout the Pacific during World War II. Wake Island, in particular, was a small base that shares many similarities with the EABO concept. EABO is still conceptual, but lessons learned from Wake Island can better enable leaders to apply EABO successfully to future operations against a peer adversary and better support the accomplishment of maritime objectives.

THE BATTLE OF WAKE ISLAND

Wake Island was part of a concept to garrison key locations throughout the Western Pacific to facilitate American operational reach and deny Japanese freedom of movement and occupation of territory. There were 449 Marines on Wake Island with attachments from the Navy and Army, bringing the total military force to 38 officers and 485 enlisted men.¹⁰ For

defensive capabilities, the Marines had six five-inch coastal defense guns, 12 three-inch anti-aircraft guns, multiple machine-gun emplacements, and 12 F4F-3 Wildcat fighter aircraft (see Figure 1). The Battle began the same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941 (Wake sits across the International Date Line) when Japanese bombers attacked the Island, inflicting catastrophic damage. The attack on 8 December was just the beginning, as Marines and civilian construction workers cared for the wounded and reinforced defenses in preparation for follow-on attacks.

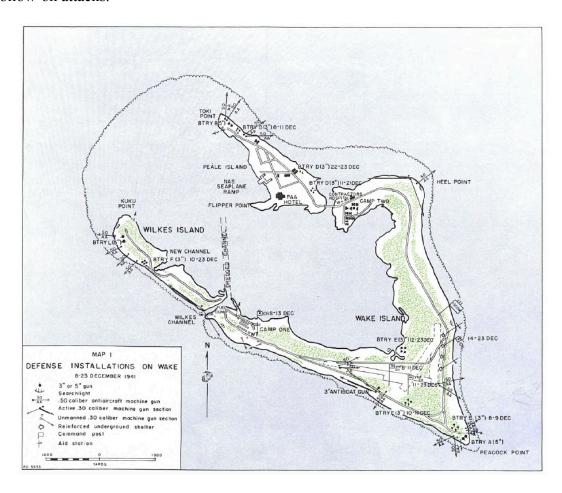


Figure 1: Defense Installation Map of Wake Island¹⁴

On 11 December 1941, the Japanese attempted an amphibious assault, but the Marines repelled them, resulting in over 500 Japanese casualties.¹⁵ Between 11 December and 22 December, Japanese aircraft continued their attacks, and the four remaining Wildcats, combined

with Marine anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), fought valiantly in the skies above Wake. ¹⁶ The Japanese mounted their final amphibious assault on the early morning of 23 December 1941. ¹⁷ After over four hours of intense fighting, low on ammunition and with no naval reinforcements in sight, the Marines had no choice but to surrender to the Japanese. ¹⁸ There are clear differences between Wake Island and EABO, but there are many lessons that leaders can pull from Wake and apply to EABO, particularly the need for the JFMCC to ensure sufficient mutual support assets are in place to support EABs.

THE NECESSITY FOR MUTUAL SUPPORT

Wake Island became susceptible to isolation and destruction because it was not part of a mutually supportive naval or Joint operational construct. Wake Island was essentially a base in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with no supporting assets dedicated to it. Wake Island was so far removed from the Pacific Fleet's operational reach that when reinforcements departed Pearl Harbor on 15 December (four days after the initial Japanese amphibious assault), they would not reach the Island before it fell to Japan.¹⁹ Wake Island is 2,004 nautical miles west of Honolulu, roughly 500 nautical miles north of the Marshall Islands, and 1,334 nautical miles east of Guam.²⁰ The tyranny of distance made it virtually impossible for naval or Joint assets to support the Marines at Wake. Wake Island was wholly isolated, and once they became engaged, the defenders had no options but to remain and fight with the weapons and equipment they had on hand.

EABs must be established in a space within the Fleet's operational reach to enable forces ashore to either defend, reinforce, attack, withdraw or delay (DRAW-D) when engaged by the enemy. One of the primary tenets of EABO is that forces must disperse as widely as possible to complicate the enemy's targeting ability.²¹ For EABO to work above the threshold of violence,

leaders have to balance force distribution with force protection provided by mutually supporting assets. EABs cannot be so geographically dispersed that they become isolated, and incapable of accomplishing objectives once engaged. Integrated mutual support is critical, and it can come in many forms, from adjacent EABs, surface or aviation assets, but it has to occur to enhance lethality and survivability of the forces conducting EABO (see Figure 2). Redundancy in mutual support is also imperative due to possible attrition of assets that could deliver fires, logistics, or other support to EABs.

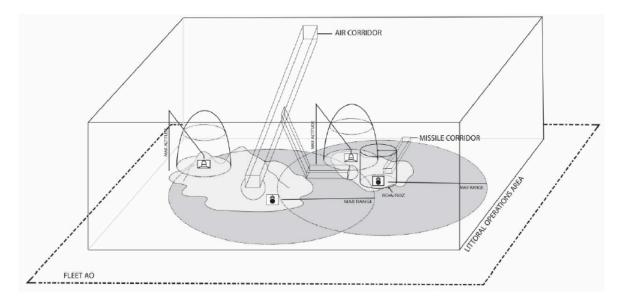


Figure 2: Notional littoral operations area²²

The necessity of integrated, mutually supporting fires, and in particular, air defense capabilities is a lesson that the Battle of Wake Island presents very clearly. The three-inch AAA guns were limited in number, lacked fire control radar systems, and combined with minimal operational Wildcats equated to a minimal air defense capability on Wake Island.²³ Japanese bombers based in the Marshall Islands outranged American Wildcats.²⁴ The Japanese bombers could operate at a distance that provided sanctuary from American forces, and they were able to exploit an air defense infrastructure that lacked the ability to regenerate combat losses. To better

support Wake Island, operational commanders should have provided additional fires assets to extend Wake's operational reach and augment their deficiencies.

Long-range precision and aviation fires to include air defense capabilities will be paramount in EABO execution, particularly if EABs expect enemy contact. The *TMEABO* discusses the importance of conducting air and missile defense operations to protect EABs. To be successful in combat, EABO must incorporate a long-range precision fires (LRPF) capability mixed with aviation fires to extend operational reach while simultaneously providing force protection via air defense for EABs. The Marine Corps is currently deficient in local air defense capabilities. It would be imperative that if employed, EABs would be within integrated, mutually supportive fires infrastructures featuring Joint and naval air defense assets. If EABO is to be employed kinetically, integrated fires will be critical to enabling EAB survivability and enhancing lethality while supporting JFMCC objectives.

Commanders must accept a space disadvantage regarding enemy weapons system ranges and incorporate deception into EABO as a risk mitigation factor, particularly when employing EABs in potential combat situations. During the first Japanese amphibious assault on 11 December, the Marines held their fire from the two five-inch coastal batteries and multiple machine gun emplacements that observed the Japanese naval force moving closer to the beach. The Japanese force outgunned the Marine defenders, and the premature firing of the coastal batteries would only illuminate the American position in the pre-dawn sky. Similarly, the EABO concept addresses the validity of using deception to mitigate the space disadvantages present with enemy sensing and weapons capabilities. Leaders should employ cyber or information operations to deceive enemy actions and provide space for friendly forces to reinforce or withdraw their position, and those capabilities can be utilized in a mutual support-

type role. If engaged while conducting EABO, forces have hopefully minimized their emissions signature and can conceal themselves from the enemy long enough to either be assisted through fire support or removal from the area by mobility assets.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Command and control not only pertains to communications capabilities but to the ability to sense, influence and coordinate operations as they occur. Mission-type orders are an aspect of decentralized command-and-control principles that the leaders at Wake Island were highly proficient in. Leaders at Wake Island issued mission-type orders to their subordinates and trusted they would accomplish objectives while remaining within higher's intent. Major Paul A. Putnam, the commanding officer of VMF-211, stated the following about his orders before deploying to Wake, "I have been told informally by lesser members of staff that I will be given orders only to fly off the ship and go to the land and that there will be nothing in the way of instructions other than to do what seems appropriate at the moment." Putnam's leaders issued mission-type orders and trusted that he would determine the best course of action once he gained situational awareness on the ground. Wake Island survived much longer than expected because its leaders understood their mission's broader, operational purpose and created tempo on the tactical level while remaining within higher's intent.

Commanders employing EABO must create situations that facilitate decentralized command and control while enabling subordinate leaders to seize opportunities that require the delivery and execution of mission-type orders. The *TMEABO* explicitly states that "during planning, commanders aim to create conditions during execution that enable subordinates to operate guided by the essential elements of mission command and control." Based on the operational environment (OE) and distributed nature of EABO, EABs may not have the ability to

communicate to higher headquarters due to concerns of being discovered by enemy sensors. It is imperative that senior leaders who employ EABO understand the importance of issuing mission-type orders, and Marines must train to that capability to ensure success in execution.

The Battle of Wake Island illustrates the necessity for Marines to train and operate in a communications degraded environment while executing EABO. During the final Japanese assault on 23 December, the Marine commander lost the ability to C2 a portion of his forces due to the Japanese severing communications throughout the atoll.³¹ He could not communicate with the majority of his subordinates and never had accurate situational awareness during the final assault.³² Wake's leaders could not translate their combat potential into combat power due to a lack of communications ability. One could argue that if he had maintained situational awareness and maneuvered his forces to the point of friction, then the battle's outcome could have been different, and Wake Island's defense prolonged.

Communications capabilities are imperative to the conduct of EABO, and Commanders must have robust communications to complete JFMCC objectives and C2 forces while simultaneously being prepared to operate autonomously. A primary aspect of EABO is to provide information and capabilities to higher through C2 networks to enhance battlespace awareness.³³ EABO commanders must balance the C2 of EABs while simultaneously serving as nodes to enhance situational awareness across the battlespace. The JFMCC, when employing EABO, must prioritize issuing mission-type orders so EAB leadership can operate in an electromagnetically degraded environment while remaining within higher's intent. Much like Wake Island, where the defenders lost communications, EABO will be subject to communications jamming and adversaries' electronic interference. Leaders conducting EABO must rehearse operations in a degraded electromagnetic environment. Rehearsals and standard

operating procedures (SOPs) will help enhance effective C2 despite the enemy's actions in the electromagnetic spectrum. Furthermore, the implementation of adequate sensor capabilities provides the Commander with the necessary tools to C2 effectively.

Sensors are critical to the effective C2 of an Advanced Naval Base, and the defenders at Wake Island had no early warning radar and minimal scouting or anti-scouting capabilities. An early warning radar capability would have prevented the destruction of eight out of twelve Wildcats on the ground on 8 December, which was a critical blow to the Island's ability to project combat power. If early warning radar or scouting capabilities were present, incoming Japanese bombers would have been detected, and Marine aviators would have had time to man their aircraft and engage the enemy. The aviators' mobilization and subsequent interdiction of Japanese aircraft would have reduced the negative impacts of the initial bombing attack, thus preserving combat potential for follow-on engagements. The lack of organic sensor capabilities was a contributing causal factor resulting in the atoll's fall on 23 December. With no early warning radar, the Marines at Wake could not effectively scout for Japanese forces or determine their disposition. The information provided by scouting would have fed the Commander's observe, orient, decide and act (OODA) cycle and directly contributed to the Island's defense.

The EABO concept must continually reinforce the need for robust and capable sensors which provide the Commander with time to execute his OODA cycle if engaged by enemy forces. The *TMEABO* discusses the need for Tactical Air Operations Center (TAOC) information to be integrated with sea-based radars to form a singular air picture in the battlespace, contributing to the JFMCC's understanding of the OE.³⁵ Furthermore, EABO will have the capability to tie in with other Joint air C2 infrastructures, notably the Sea Combat Air Operations Center (SCAOC).³⁶ Sensor and early warning capabilities allow commanders to

execute their OODA cycle faster than the adversary. The EABO concept focuses on incorporating robust sensor capabilities; however, the Commander will have to maintain a balance between using those sensors and maintaining a small electromagnetic footprint. Another critical lesson that Wake Island teaches is the need for the appropriate force structure at an Advanced Naval Base or, in this case, in the execution of EABO.

APPROPRIATE FORCE STRUCTURE

An excellent Wake Island lesson to apply to EABO is the importance of employing the appropriate force structure in planning and execution. The table of organization for a defense battalion in 1941 was almost 1,000 Marines, and the defenders at Wake Island had half those numbers.³⁷ The Marines were so undermanned that most troops were tied to their crew-served weapons systems and could not mount a counterattack during the final Japanese assault on 23 December.³⁸ Furthermore, there was a lack of trained infantry Marines at Wake Island, and this was so pivotal that one trained infantry company reinforced with tanks could have repelled the second Japanese landing.³⁹ If leaders in 1941 had balanced the operational factor of force against Wake Island's objectives, the Marines could have retained the atoll. Additionally, Wake Island required some type of persistent naval or Joint force augmentation to ensure the island remained in American hands. The bottom line is that the Marines at Wake did not have the proper force structure to achieve their objectives, which could occur in EABO if not planned for accordingly.

Force structure is a crucial aspect of ensuring EABO aligns with the appropriate objectives to support the JFMCC. In the *TMEABO*, the Marine Corps repeatedly discusses the need for EABO to structure its forces appropriately to enable objective accomplishment.⁴⁰ Leaders must ensure that when assigning missions to EABO that they staff them with the

appropriate forces. If there is a possibility of enemy interdiction, then EABs must feature robust force protection capabilities. Conversely, if the EAB's mission is to complete FARPs, then they must have trained Marines on hand to accomplish that specific mission set. A corollary to force structure is the necessity for leaders to tailor capabilities to the objectives to be accomplished.

Leaders must provide naval forces conducting EABO with the correct capabilities, as this was a hard-learned lesson at Wake Island. The Marines at Wake could refuel B-17s, however lacked the appropriate refueling equipment and had to pump over 3,000 gallons per plane by hand. The time dedicated to refueling B-17s by hand could have been dedicated to defensive position improvements on Wake. Furthermore, the Marines did not have any construction equipment to create their defensive positions; they all had to be dug by hand, which drastically increased the time it took to complete the defenses at Wake. Forces conducting EABO must have the resources and equipment to accomplish their missions, and leaders must structure forces and capabilities to achieve JFMCC objectives. Forces and capabilities must be aligned to objectives as this provides efficiency and ensures that EABs can maintain a small size based on the efficient usage of personnel and equipment in execution.

COUNTERARGUMENT

Some would argue the Battle of Wake Island and the EABO concept are too different from each other, making the lessons difficult to apply. Wake Island was a large, built-up Advanced Naval Base, and its location was known to the enemy, which is contrary to how EABO should and will be employed. The budget for Wake Island's construction was \$7,500,000 over three years, beginning in early 1941. Additionally, in 1941 the current strategy for Advanced Naval Bases in the Pacific was to reinforce them to a level that made them able to withstand small landing forces and air raids. The Japanese knew there was some type of

American presence on Wake Island as early as 1935.⁴⁵ Furthermore, based on previous overflights, the Japanese naval Commander Admiral Inouye was close in his estimation of total American military strength before his amphibious assault on 11 December.⁴⁶ The fact that the enemy knew there were forces on Wake and that the base was not expeditionary makes it challenging to apply its lessons to the EABO concept.

The EABO concept emphasizes the need to employ light, tailored forces which enable freedom of maneuver while facilitating enemy detection avoidance within the contact layer. One of the primary tenets of EABO is to maintain a minimal signature across the electromagnetic spectrum, accomplished through employment of small, easily mobile forces. EABO centers on temporary small-scale formations, while Wake Island had over one thousand civilian contractors in addition to hundreds of troops. Avoiding detection is a core principle of EABO and the reason small forces can survive within the WEZ of an adversary. The whole point of conducting EABO is deny the enemy access in the contact layer and to do that, naval forces must remain undetected to avoid engagement by LRPF. EABO's core movement and maneuver concepts are completely opposite of how Wake Island was employed, making Wake's lessons irrelevant to EABO.

REBUTTAL

The previous points are valid; however, the principles of the lessons in mutual support, C2, and force structure are all applicable to the EABO concept regardless of Wake's size or lack of concealment. To complete the mission, Marines conducting EABO must possess the right assets or capabilities to do so. At Wake Island, they did not have the appropriate assets or capabilities to retain the Island. The Marines had half of the forces they were supposed to for the table of organization of a coastal defense battalion.⁴⁹ For EABO to be successful, it must be

organized with the appropriate forces to achieve its objectives. An EAB could encounter the same issues regarding mutual support, C2 and lack of fires or scouting capabilities that Wake Island encountered in 1941. An EAB is a "locality within a potential adversary's WEZ that provides sufficient maneuver room to accomplish assigned missions seaward." The definition discusses EABOs' temporary nature, and Wake Island was not temporary, but the same lessons regarding operational functions can be applied regardless of the base's size.

Leaders cannot assume that forces conducting EABO will avoid detection from a potential adversary. Peer adversaries have robust sensor and electromagnetic capabilities that can detect forces within the maritime environment. Wake Island's known, fixed location does not negate its lessons' applicability to a concept that prioritizes detection avoidance. Leaders who employ EABO should have plans for and frankly expect that their adversary will discover their forces. Upon discovery by an adversary, a future EAB could be in a very similar situation to the Marines on Wake Island. The Marines executing EABO in the future should have the ability to DRAW-D due to the application of the lessons learned in mutual support, C2, and force structure provided by Wake.

The enemy could theoretically discover EABs at any time during their execution. Upon discovery, leaders will have to leverage existing command and control capabilities and mutual support to provide the Marines with options besides remaining in a possibly untenable defensive position. Furthermore, senior leaders must ensure they structure their EABO forces appropriately to provide subordinate leaders with options upon enemy discovery and engagement. The bottom line is leaders who plan and execute EABO must have a plan for when the enemy eventually detects EABs. The majority of the operational lessons pulled from the Wake Island case study are already present in the EABO concept. The fact that these lessons are

already incorporated into the concept proves that their applicability is valid, no matter the base's size or if the location is known or not.

CONCLUSION

There are some differences between EABO and Wake Island, but the bottom line is if naval forces become isolated during EABO by a capable, peer enemy, then those Marines will potentially be destroyed. The JFMCC must ensure naval and Joint forces support the naval forces conducting EABO across all operational functions. Wake Island illustrates the importance of mutual support, command, and control, and having the appropriate force structure in personnel and capability, and their lessons apply directly to the EABO concept. Wake Island and EABO do not have to be exactly the same to validate the application of these important historical lessons. It is essential for EABO commanders to balance the operational factors of time, space, and force by ensuring mutual support, C2, and force structure are planned for and executed appropriately. To ensure success, the JFMCC must consider the previously listed factors before and during the conduct of EABO against a peer threat.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three primary recommendations regarding the application of Wake Island lessons learned to EABO employment against a peer enemy. First, leaders must prioritize mutual support for EABO and ensure that there are integrated, redundant forces ready with the appropriate operational reach to assist if an EAB is engaged. Leaders must ensure that EABs are within the operational reach of friendly forces during combat operations, and the Commander must balance the operational factors of time, space, and force to facilitate integrated mutual support. If enemy maritime forces attack an EAB, the Marines must be within reach of adjacent friendly forces, and the JFMCC must traverse space quickly to enable the forces at the EAB to

DRAW-D. This means that before executing EABO, adjacent units with the operational reach and appropriate fires capabilities must be identified, and they must be in an "on-call" role to support geographically distant EABs.

Additionally, before employing EABO, the JFMCC must ensure redundancy is a part of the operational plan for mutual support. Leaders must consider contingency planning focused on the loss or lack of mutual support in execution. In other words, what does an EAB do if they lose mutual support or if a supporting EAB is destroyed or neutralized? EABO planners must conduct accurate net assessments and plan for a worst-case scenario regarding redundancy. Planners and commanders must answer these difficult questions if EABO is to be successful within the contact layer and above the threshold of violence.

Second, when employing EABO, leaders must augment deficiencies in operational functions such as fires, movement and maneuver, or C2 capabilities with Joint force support and not focus on the Navy. The current *TMEABO* primarily focuses on naval integration; however, some capabilities requirements needed in EABO are currently lacking in the Navy. For example, air defense capabilities resident in the Army, such as the Patriot missile system, should be baked into the EABO concept, which would enhance force protection capabilities while enabling naval ballistic missile defense (BMD) vessels to focus on other areas of the maritime environment. Mobility in the littorals or lack thereof is also a problem that can be addressed with a Joint solution. The current concept discusses the need for Joint integration; however, EABO must prioritize the Joint force as highly as the Navy to be successful against a peer enemy. If executing EABO, the JFMCC should focus on gaining and maintaining Joint force support which would be beneficial to the Marine Corps, balance the operational factors, and enhance Joint force integration simultaneously.

Lastly, if EABO is to be conducted during contingency operations, EABs must have the appropriate force structure and capabilities to accomplish their objectives while simultaneously being able to protect themselves. EABs should be established and maintained undetected by the enemy, but once combat operations begin, the JFMCC must be able to surge forces to the EAB or use mobility assets to retrograde forces, not allowing them to "die on the vine." Despite Wake Island occurring 80 years ago, its hard-fought lessons will make the Marine Corps a more capable and lethal fighting force as it implements the EABO concept in a conflict against a peer adversary.

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- ⁵¹ *Tentative Manual*. 6–6.

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