

Marine Special Operations Companies Need Marine Air

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20 February 2009

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 20 FEB 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Marine Special Operations Companies Need Marine Air				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Let's be honest, Marines fight as a MAGTF and we've always fought as a MAGTF... and that's why I believe that someday you'll see MarSOC as a MAGTF.¹

-MajGen Dennis Hejlik, USMC
Marine Special Operations Command's
First Commanding General

Juice Boxes and Animal Crackers

Letterman style "Top Ten" lists were always popular with the pilots and crews of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron-261. During 22D Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) workups at Fort AP Hill, Virginia, HMM-261 aircrews poked fun at the Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC) Marines for wearing fanny packs. On the Air Combat Element (ACE) "Top Ten Things MSOC Marines carry in their Fanny Packs" listed as #1 was "Juice boxes and animal crackers". The MSOC responded in-kind with their own humorous list of items they carried in their "nut-rucks." The most stinging item to the ACE on the MSOC list: "The phone number for Task Force-160," Also known as the Army's Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). This was a thinly veiled stab at the ACE. The listing of this item was funny, however it reveals the relationship the ACE had with MSOC, especially once deployed with the MEU.²

MSOC = M_GTF

Marines fight as a Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). MSOCs are composed of 3 of the 4 elements of a MAGTF. Though small, MSOCs still have a Command Element (CE), Ground Combat Element (GCE) and Logistics Combat Element (LCE). However, MSOCs lack an Air Combat Element (ACE). Failing to incorporate an ACE marginalizes the MSOC's effectiveness by robbing the MSOC of key functions of the six warfighting functions, specifically fires and maneuver. An MSOC should incorporate an air combat element (ACE) so it can provide more firepower and better maneuverability as well as the synergistic "whole is greater than the sum of its parts" combined arms effect of a MAGTF.

The Six Functions of Marine Aviation

MSOC's current organization covers the 6 warfighting functions: Command and control, Maneuver, Fires, Intelligence, Logistics and Force Protection; however, the warfighting functions can be significantly enhanced through integration of the six functions of Marine aviation (see table 1). Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0 Marine Corps Operations states, "the warfighting functions should not be viewed independently but as inseparable parts of a whole. Warfighting functions help

the commander achieve unity of effort and build and sustain combat power.”³

Table 1.

6 Functions of Marine Aviation applied to the 6 Warfighting Functions (P=Primary Function, S=Supporting Function).

Warfighting Function → Marine Air Function↓	C ²	Maneuver	Fires	Intelligence	Logistics	Force Protection
C ² Aircraft & Missiles	P	S	S	S	S	S
Assault Support	S	P	S	S	P	S
Offensive Air Support	S	S	P	S	S	S
Aerial Reconnaissance	S	S	S	P	S	S
Electronic Warfare	S	S	P	P	S	P
Anti-Air Warfare	S	S	P	S	S	P

Source: LtCol Luis Mercado USMC and Maj Jay Lynn USMC, Helicopterborne Assault Planning E(M)3248, Expeditionary Warfare School 24 November 2008.

Marine aviation functions are especially applicable to the MSOC’s missions (Table 2). Assault Support (maneuverability) and Offensive Air Support (firepower) are highly applicable to MSOC missions. Clearly, Marine aviation support for an MSOC can only add to the synergistic effects of the six warfighting functions.

Table 2.

6 Functions of Marine Aviation applied to MSOC Missions (P=Primary Function, S=Support Function).

MSOC Mission → Marine Air Function↓	Direct Action (DA)	Special Reconnaissance (SR)	Foreign Internal Defense (FID)	Counter Terrorism (CT)	Unconventional Warfare (UW)
C ² Aircraft & Missiles	S	S	S	S	S
Assault Support	P	P	P	P	P
Offensive Air Support	P	P	S	P	P
Aerial Reconnaissance	P	P	S	S	P
Electronic Warfare	S	S	S	S	P
Anti-Air Warfare	S	S	S	S	S

MSOC Aviation Support and Workups

MSOCs train with both the MEU ACE and Special Operations Command (SOCOM) aviation during workups. However, the preponderance of training is conducted with the MEU ACE throughout the six month MEU pre-deployment training program. Combined MSOC/ACE training varies in scope from planning exercises to direct action raids (DA) and maritime visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) missions. These training evolutions establish a strong working relationship, a high degree of mutual confidence and a common standard operating procedure (SOP) between the MSOC and the ACE. A common Marine background only facilitates and reinforces these special working relationships. The MSOC conducts minimal training with SOCOM aviation during

MEU/MSOC workups.⁴ While SOCOM aviation may not have the same working relationship with the MSOC as the ACE does, SOCOM aviation has a tremendous reputation within military aviation circles. SOCOM aviation's reputation may overcome any lack of previous working relationships or SOPs with the supported MSOC. In the end however, the MSOC trains more with the MEU ACE than with SOCOM aviation. Ultimately, pre-deployment training creates and enhances MSOC and MEU ACE synergy in preparation for their eventual deployment overseas.

The Thing That Should Not Be⁵

During deployments, the majority of MSOCs do not remain with their respective MEUs. Instead, TSOCs exercise their authority to employ the MSOC where they are needed in theater. TSOCs leave the MEU without a special operations capability and the MSOC without aviation support in its familiar MEU ACE flavor, forcing the MSOC to pursue its aviation support through the TSOC. The MSOC will receive aviation support of some kind: it may be SOCOM aviation, it may be from a conventional coalition or joint aviation unit, it may even be Marine aviation, but it will most certainly not be MEU air.⁶ Without MEU air support during deployment the MSOC will labor to effectively achieve combined arms synergy when it may be most

needed. So, how can the MSOC incorporate an ACE from workups all the way through deployment? The answer may lie with the MSOC's parent organization the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC).

MARSOC Aviation

Before its inception MARSOC was to include an aviation component. However, inclusion of Marine aviation in MARSOC was deemed too difficult and it was dropped.⁷ LtCol Joseph E. George's paper "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command" discusses MARSOC's lack of Marine aviation. LtCol George suggests that four courses of action (COA) exist for Marine aviation to support MARSOC: COA 1, the "status quo" is when both the Marine Corps and SOCOM provide aviation to support MSOC training during MEU workups. During a deployment, if the MSOC remains with the MEU, the MEU ACE would provide aviation support. If the MSOC is removed from the MEU by the Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) than the TSOC is responsible to source the MSOC's aviation support. The TSOC could source that support from the MEU or from other service aviation.⁸ LtCol George states that "COA 2 would increase USMC integration with USSOCOM forces and specifically aviation units. COA 3 would develop specialized squadrons within the Marine

Corps for SOCOM support. COA 4 would establish an ACE for MARSOC.”⁹ LtCol George’s four COAs establish a framework which can be applied to MSOC’s lack of an ACE.

The COAs

COA 1 has been the “work around” until now. COA 1, though doctrinally sound is not ideal in that the MSOC inevitably has unfamiliar air support to work with while on deployment. Through the Marine Corps personnel exchange program (PEP), COA 2 is a viable path for Marine Corps integration with other services’ Special Operations Aviation Units. However, PEP has not been given the visibility it deserves. The Marine Corps aviation community should be seeking more exchange/observation tours with the Army and Air Force SOCOM aviation communities. Additionally, the Marine aviation community should be seeking out those opportunities to cross-train with its SOCOM peers in order to increase interoperability.¹⁰ Most applicable to achieving an ACE for an MSOC, COAs 3 and 4 as promoted by LtCol George must be seriously considered by the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps should establish task organized aviation units to train and deploy with MSOCs when they inevitably are separated from their respective MEUs.¹¹ There is potential for entire MSOCs to deploy without any MEU workups. MSOCs will not be

effective warfighting units if they have never worked on combined arms effects with Marine Aviation before deploying. Most Marine Corps units task organize for combat, so should an ACE supporting MSOC, no matter whether that ACE comes from the MEU ACE or potentially from a MARSOC ACE.

Task Organization 101

The Marine Corps cannot claim it is flexible on one hand and then refuse to arrange for a deployable aviation task organization to support its MARSOC commitment to SOCOM. Marine Aviation task organizes all the time. Marine Aviation plans for the Special Purpose MAGTF (SPMAGTF) continuously, but only rarely executes a SPMAGTF operation. Yet MSOCs have frequently been separated from their MEUs since the first MSOC/MEU deployment.¹² The Marine Corps regularly reinforces a MEU ACE with attack, heavy or medium assault helicopters to match anticipated or known theater requirements. Marines have continuously provided dedicated rotary wing heavy lift support to Horn of Africa (HOA) operations for the past few years. Marine Heavy Helicopter squadron detachments supporting HOA are a clear example of the Marine Corps providing a task organized aviation unit to accomplish a specific mission. Marines can task-organize aviation detachments or units to train and deploy

with MSOCs. MEUs should plan for variously sized and equipped ACE packages to support an MSOC separated from the MEU or the Marine Corps should establish an ACE for MARSOC.

Marine Aviation versus Special Operations Aviation

Critics of a potential Marine Corps special operations aviation element argue that the Marine Corps cannot afford to support MSOC with dedicated aviation due to Marine aviation's limited and already over worked units. Critics argue that Army and Air Force SOCOM aviation can support the MSOC. However, placing the burden of aviation support on the Army and Air Force is irresponsible. For example, LTG Robert Wagner, Commander of US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), forecasts USASOC personnel growth of 43% by 2013, specifically within the Army Special Forces groups and Army Ranger battalions. The Army Special Forces are adding new battalions while the Rangers are adding new companies. With this significant increase in USASOC personnel, USASOC aviation increases as well. Currently at 147 airframes, the Army plans to grow to only 184 airframes by 2013.¹³ That is only a 25% increase in airframes matched to a 43% growth in personnel. USASOC aircraft not only support Army Special Operations Forces (SOF); they also support all the services' SOF elements and coalition partners too. As the

Marine Corps grows to 202,000 personnel, so too does it's number of aircraft; although the Marine Corps' aircraft fleet will not grow on the same scale as USASOC aviation growth. It seems that despite USASOC aviation growth, without Marine Corps Aviation support of MARSOC, SOF aviation will be just as strained in the future as it is now.

Special Aircraft or Special People?

As Marine aviation grows the Marine Corps is acquiring newer and higher performance aircraft. Inevitably, a discussion of Marine aviation supporting MARSOC often turns to contrasts between the capabilities of Marine aircraft (current and future), and the capabilities of the aircraft within the other services' special operations communities. The disparities aren't significant enough to make a difference most of the time. Rather, they are significantly *similar*. More important however, is the operator: the man. This is number one of the four so-called "SOF truths."¹⁴ The man is made through challenging, realistic training and empowering him through mission type orders. Special equipment or aircraft do not make a special operator. Aircraft do not achieve success; Marine aircrews help their ground brothers achieve success. That is why the MAGTF combined arms concept is so successful.

3, 2, 1 Rotor Brake...

The Marine Corps' commitment to SOCOM needs to include Marine aviation. The Marine Corps must go beyond the lip service of "the MEU ACE will support the MSOC". In practice, MEUs and MSOCs are being separated, making the MSOC unsupportable by the MEU, particularly the ACE. With no ACE in support, the MSOC's warfighting ability is severely diminished. The Marine Corps should not levy the burden of aviation support of an MSOC on the Army and Navy. The Marine Corps should commit Marine aviation to MARSOC not only for MSOC training and workups but also for the MSOC's deployment. At the very least the Marine Corps should use MEU ACE detachments to support MSOCs so those strong Marine Corps bonds are there to tie the ACE and the MSOC together: a common terminology and background, shared hardship, SOPs, and the intangible capability to get a little more out of one another when they're all in a gunfight because they're all Marines.

1922 Words

Notes

¹ Then MajGen Hejlik USMC, "MARSOC: a work in progress," interviewed by Trista Talton, in *Navy Times*, September 4, 2007, http://www.navytimes.com/news/2007/09/marine_hejlik_marsoc_070901/.

² Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is based on the author's personal experience as a CH46E pilot and a squadron weapons and tactics instructor for HMM-261(Rein), the ACE for the 22DMEU (SOC) from January 2007 through February 2008. Cited hereafter as Author's recollection.

³ Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, 27 September 2001, A-1.

⁴ Author's recollection.

⁵ James Hetfield, Lars Ulrich and Kirk Hammet, *Master of Puppets/The Thing That Should Not Be*, Elektra Records.

⁶ This situation occurred with the MSOC of the 22D MEU in 2007. Once separated from the MEU and sent "in-country" the MSOC was literally screaming for a rotary wing detachment from the MEU ACE in order to provide assault support and offensive air support. The request was denied. Sourced through the TSOC and JFACC the MEU ACE was able to provide the MSOC 5 days of offensive air support and aerial reconnaissance with the ACE's AV-8 Harriers launching from amphibious shipping. That was a total of 5 days during a 6 month deployment. The MSOC was in-country for approximately 5 of 6 months while the MEU largely remained afloat (except for a month in Kuwait, a few weeks supporting HA/DR in Bangladesh) and conducted split ESG operations.

⁷ LtCol Joseph E. George USMC, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command" (Research Report, Air War College, Air University, 2007), 22. George, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command", 13.

⁸ George, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command", 18-20.

⁹ George, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command", 18-20.

¹⁰ George, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command", 23-25.

¹¹ George, "Aviation Support To U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command", 25.

¹² Author's recollection.

¹³ LTG Robert W. Wagner USA, "Warrior Leader Q&A", interviewed by Jeff McKaughan, in *Special Operations Tech*, 6, no. 8 (2008): 29-30, 32.

¹⁴ United States Army Special Operations Forces Truths, United States Army Special Operations Command, <http://www.soc.mil/sofinfo/truths.html>.

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