

DO NOT SACRIFICE THE MARINE CORPS FOR MARSOC TO SUCCEED

The MARSOC Closed Loop Personnel Policy Proposal

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The United State Marine Corps has always stood as the nation's force in readiness, prepared to respond to any crisis that may arise. In the modern era, multiple worldwide crises have arisen, and the nation has relied on its Marines again to resolve these crises. The Marine Corps, through the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC), is working to be more than crisis response, but is trying to prevent crises before they arise. As a major subordinate command of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), MARSOC Marines deploy to partner nation countries in order to assist them in the Global War on Terror. Despite belonging to USSOCOM, the Marines and Sailors of MARSOC must not lose their identity or become a replica of the United States Army Special Forces Command, yet the closed-loop policy proposed for MARSOC Marines and Sailors will lead to that end. MARSOC must avoid creating a closed-loop personnel system because this practice will not increase SOF interoperability within the Marine Corps and will deprive junior Marines of SOF trained mentors and trainers.

BACKGROUND

Since 2005, with the activation of the Foreign Military Training Unit, the Marine Corps, under the direction of then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, began integrating with USSOCOM. As the combatant command tasked with synchronizing the GWOT, USSOCOM has the responsibility to fight terrorist

organizations around the globe regardless of which geographic combatant command they are in and the Marine Corps is prepared to contribute in this arena as it has done for the nation throughout its history. USSOCOM directed that the Marine Corps not contribute in the way that most Americans associate with Marines, through direct action; instead, Marines and Sailors are tasked with utilizing the indirect approach, through foreign internal defense (FID) and unconventional warfare (UW), so that partner nations will fight with U.S. support, leaving no safe haven for our enemies.¹

USSOCOM, unique among the combatant commands as both a force provider and an operational command, has developed policies in personnel assignment for many of its special operations forces (SOF) operators that have allowed it to capitalize on the training its personnel has received; however, these policies will not serve the Marine Corps well. These policies, which create a closed-loop system that allows SOF personnel to remain in USSOCOM in some capacity, were created in order to retain the knowledge and experience base of SOF operators. Additionally, the closed-loop is intended to protect SOF operators from perceived threats from their parent services. These threats include minimizing the relevance of the respective SOF communities for budgeting purposes and stifling advancement so that future leaders will be unable to serve their respective

community on par with other branches. It is for these reasons that in 2006 the Navy distinguished the Special Warfare Operator (SO) and Special Warfare Boat Operator (SB) ratings, "by allowing sailors to focus on rating specific technology and training systems, the Navy will reduce training infrastructure costs, while broadening the professional development, career opportunities and quality of service for our sailors."² The Army had established a separate Special Forces branch as the example that the other services follow.

MARSOC is attempting to create a similar system for Sailors and Marines serving in its ranks, known as SOF for life, which would allow Marine special operations forces (MARSOF) to remain within USSOCOM for their entire career once they have passed the Recruiting, Screening, Assessment, and Selection (RSAS) process. After serving with the initial unit to which the Marine or Sailor is assigned, that individual would then serve either in the MARSOC headquarters or in a joint capacity; the possibilities for joint billets include serving with the USSOCOM headquarters, with a sister service, or abroad with the Special Operations Component of the Geographic Combatant Commands (GCC). Despite wearing a similar uniform, these Marines would never return to the Corps, and would have little connection to the parent service anymore.

SOF INTEROPERABILITY

While this policy has served the other services well, protecting Army Special Operations Forces Soldiers or Navy SEALs, MARSOC must avoid implementing the closed-loop personnel system because it will not enhance SOF interoperability for the Marine Corps as a whole. Part of the strength of the Marine Corps is its ethos and history, it is the most selective service, an elite unit in which every member can rise to service: "every Marine a rifleman." Should MARSOC achieve its closed-loop goal, this policy would serve only to cause divisions in the Marine Corps, rather than increasing SOF interoperability. The Marine Corps tries to achieve a quality spread in its ranks, but those individuals who pass the RSAS will consist of some of the highest quality warfighters the Marine Corps has to offer, effectively removing them from the operating forces and weakening the foundation of excellence on which the Marine Corps rests. Paraphrasing General Victor H. Krulak, "our success in the counterinsurgency conflict would depend on a complete and intimate understanding by all ranks from top to bottom" of the principles of foreign internal defense and counterinsurgency operations.³

These outstanding Marines and Sailors should be allowed the opportunity to join MARSOC and increase their experiences in the joint environment because it would both enhance their personal

skills and in turn improve the Marine Corps as a whole. After garnering these experiences, they should then rejoin the operating forces so that they can share their experiences with younger generations of warriors. As a part of USSOCOM, MARSOC receives more funding for training than conventional Marine units, and also has access to schools that conventional forces do not. Gaining access to these schools would provide Marines and Sailors with experience that they could then share with their subordinates and seniors alike, extending the value of training throughout the operating forces. Additionally, as more Marines attend these schools both the students and instructors will develop relationships improving interoperability with SOF operators throughout the services, which will only increase interoperability within the joint community and with the Marine Corps as well.

MENTORS AND TRAINERS

Should MARSOC implement a closed-loop personnel system, this would remove a vital aspect of the Marine Corps, removing skilled and mature mentors from the Corps. The current experts on FID/UW are the Army's Special Forces Groups and MARSOC Marine Special Operations Advisor Group (MSOAG, formerly FMTU). However, conventional forces are conducting FID as a part of the counterinsurgency (COIN) operations taking place in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Conventional forces are denied access to the

training that the Special Operations Forces troops undergo in order to prepare for these missions, despite the fact that winning in both of these countries is critical to success in the GWOT. If Marines serve as members of MSOAG, they can take their experiences and improve the ability of conventional Marines to serve as combat advisors with fewer of the problems that have been experienced to date. While the Marine Corps has been very successful in Anbar province in Iraq, that success could have been achieved sooner if the Marines tasked with the mission had more education and guidance on how to be combat advisors, or how to train indigenous forces.

Marines pride themselves on adaptability and willingness to take on and succeed in any mission; the successes in the Banana Republic wars are well documented, but even in the modern era, conventional Marines have conducted FID in numerous countries in Africa, Colombia, and El Salvador, alongside or independent of Special Forces Soldiers. The Marines' success in these countries demonstrates how the Marine Corps is prepared to undertake these unique missions and the addition of competently trained MARSOF will only improve the situation, particularly with their knowledge of language and culture for various regions of the world.

Allowing Marines to serve in both MARSOC and conventional forces will facilitate a return by the Marine Corps to its roots

as the organization that created *Small Wars Manual*, which is still a preeminent document for FID, UW, and COIN operations.⁴ History provides ample evidence of Marine success in FID/UW operations. From the Marine Corps' earliest days, the legacy of Lt Presley O'Bannon and his Marines part in furthering the United States' goals in Tripoli. In Vietnam, the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) program is widely known and espoused as one of the few success stories of that conflict.⁵ The men who planned it may not have taken part in the Banana Republic wars, but they were still heavily influenced by the experiences of the Marine Corps' forebears, having Marines as teachers and mentors who had served in those conflicts.⁶ Even the training teams to places like El Salvador in the 1980s were influenced by the Marines who had taken part in the CAP program.

This unique relationship, senior to subordinate, is the hallmark that has helped distinguish Marines amongst the other services. Throughout the history of the Marine Corps, Marines who have deployed have taken their experiences and shared them with younger generations, creating units that operate more effectively as a result. Having Marines and Sailors who have deployed as MARSOF will only continue this tradition, making Marine battalions better suited for operating in the current operating environment and in future conflicts. Further, the networking that will occur between conventional and SOF units

will improve, allowing dissimilar units "to communicate laterally" helping the Marine Corps as a whole become a more "flexible, networked organization."⁷

RECOMMENDATION

In USSOCOM, there is an organization that reflects the best method for MARSOC to rotate its personnel, the 75th Ranger Regiment. This storied unit has maintained its connection to the big Army while operating as subordinate element of USSOCOM as well. These Soldiers are elite light infantry whose interoperability with SOF has demonstrated their utility in places like Somalia during the Battle of Mogadishu and the direct action raids prior to the battle or throughout the world in the GWOT. The members of the 75th Ranger Regiment are volunteers who must undergo either a Ranger Orientation Program or a Ranger Indoctrination Program prior to gaining entrance into one of the Ranger Battalions.⁸ Although it is conducted differently, the concept is similar to the RSAS that every Marine and Sailor must undergo prior to joining one of MARSOC's major subordinate elements (MSE). More importantly, though, is that these Rangers return to conventional battalions and share their knowledge and experiences, which has strengthened the regard for Rangers throughout the Army.

The author, Sean Naylor, documents how officers' ability to serve in the Rangers and return to conventional forces served

the Army well during Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. An ad hoc command structure was created from disparate units in Afghanistan, and, despite the rapidity with which the differing units were brought together, the experiences that many of the senior leaders had within the Ranger Regiment assisted them by knowing what to expect from one another.⁹

Marines who serve together within MARSOC will have a similarly high expectation for the men and women they know have been through similar training. Having MARSOF experienced Marines and Sailors would also serve MARSOC well for recruiting purposes, for, instead of relying on just the Marine Special Operations School (MSOS), recruiters would be seeded throughout the Marine Corps raising awareness of MARSOF and increasing interoperability with it as well.

CONCLUSION

MARSOC is critical to the future of the Marine Corps, for the mission it has is the most important for all services in the GWOT. Success in this mission cannot be to the detriment of the Marine Corps, for the closed-loop personnel system proposed will weaken the Corps, and the Marines serving within MARSOC will become detached from the identity that makes Marines unique amongst the services. In large scale conflicts, such as Operation Iraqi Freedom, when the value of SOF skills such as FID and COIN are evident, the nation cannot afford to separate

its Special Operations and conventional forces. The words of Field Marshall Viscount William Slim should be remembered:

the result of these methods was undoubtedly to lower the quality of the rest of the Army, especially of the infantry, not only by skimming the cream off it, but by encouraging the idea that certain of the normal operations of war were so difficult that only specially equipped corps d'elite could be expected to undertake them. Armies do not win wars by means of a few bodies of super-soldiers but by the average quality of their standard units.¹⁰

Not only will Marines and Sailors retain their identity by returning to conventional battalions, they will be better prepared to serve with SOF units from the other services in future conflicts, making the Department of Defense more effective as a result.

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ENDNOTES

1. MajGen Dennis J. Hejlik, Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command.
2. NAVADMIN 132/06: Establishment of the Special Warfare Operator (SO) Rating
3. Victor H. Krulak, *First To Fight* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 180.
4. Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground* (New York: Random House, 2005), 269.
5. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Countersinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 157.
6. Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 304.
7. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and The Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St Paul: Zenith Press, 2006), 275.
8. 75th Ranger Regiment Homepage.
<http://www.soc.mil/75thrr/75thrrfs.html>
9. Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2006), 63.
10. William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (Cooper Square Press, 1956), 547.

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