

FAST: The New Maritime Special Purpose Force
Submitted by Captain PB Young
to
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Major Scott Packard states in his 2004 *Proceedings* article, "Expeditionary Security for Naval Forces," that using a FAST Marine "as a static post stander is akin to using a blowtorch to light a cigarette-it works, but it is inefficient."¹ Akin to Major Packard's sentiment, the FAST Deployment Program (FDP) does not sufficiently capitalize on the training and expeditionary nature of FAST platoons and maximize the combatant commanders' ability to employ them to the extent of their capabilities. Each Marine expeditionary unit should deploy with one FAST platoon embarked to conduct visit, board, search, and seizure and economy of force operations.

FAST Defined

A fleet anti-terrorism security team (FAST) platoon is a fifty Marine unit tasked with providing armed, combat trained Marines in order to provide or restore security for vital naval and national assets. The table of organization calls for two officers and forty-eight enlisted Marines from the infantry occupational field as well as a corpsman and radio operator. Weapons organic to the FAST platoon include small arms, medium and heavy machineguns, and M203 grenade launchers for indirect fire. Additionally, each platoon deploys with a robust non-lethal weapons kit. The site security capabilities of the

¹ Scott E Packard, "Expeditionary Security for Naval Forces," United States Naval Institute. *Proceedings*, no. 130 (2004): 68, <http://proquest.umi.com>.

platoon can be further bolstered by a technology kit comprised of night vision devices, remote surveillance equipment, and explosive detection gear.

FAST Employment

The FAST platoon is the core operational unit of the Marine Corps Security Force Battalion. There are eighteen FAST platoons broken into three FAST companies based in Norfolk and Yorktown, Virginia. FAST platoons remain under the administrative control of MCSF Battalion at all times but fall under the operational control of designated maritime component or numbered fleet commanders when deployed as part of the FAST Deployment Program.

Under the current model, six FAST platoons are deployed via the FDP at all times, two platoons each to Commander Naval Forces, Europe in Rota, Spain, Commander Naval Forces, Central Command in Bahrain, and Commander, Naval Forces, Pacific in Yokosuka, Japan for a period of six months. Current plans call for the establishment of a FAST company headquarters (forward) in Guam to provide responsive command and control and support for the platoons deployed to the pacific region.

The average lifecycle for a FAST platoon is roughly 18 months. Initially, the platoon conducts a sixty to ninety day training block focused on individual, squad, and platoon level infantry skills such as site security, patrolling, and convoy

operations. This training block is followed by assignment to provide security for the refuel/defuel cycle of a nuclear vessel at homeport in the United States for a period of thirty to sixty days. The platoon then deploys to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for a period of roughly ninety days to conduct security operations aboard the naval base. Following the Guantanamo Bay deployment, the platoon attends the Advanced Urban Combat Course and conducts its operational readiness evaluation prior to departure for its FAST deployment program deployment. The final event in the platoon lifecycle is thirty days standing ALPHA-1, Marine Corps Security Force Battalion's dedicated air contingency force.

FAST Platoon Training

In order to appreciate the capabilities of the FAST platoon, it is important to understand the training that the Marines receive at the individual and unit level. All FAST Marines attend the Basic Security Guard Course, a six-week special skills school that produces the 8152 Military occupational specialty (Basic Security Guard). The students receive instruction in unarmed combat, non-lethal weapons, crowd suppression/riot control, site security, combat shooting with both the M4A1 and the M1014 service shotgun, urban movement techniques, use of force/deadly force, and vehicle control point operations.

Each FAST platoon collectively attends three courses tailored to hone specific skill sets prior to their FDP deployment: Non-lethal Weapons, Advanced Urban Combat, and Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure (VBSS). The Non-lethal weapons course is a seven-day training package which focuses on dealing with civil disturbances and conducting crowd suppression/riot control at the platoon level. Advanced urban combat is a fourteen-day course that introduces the Marines to the marksmanship and tactics, techniques, and procedures associated with close quarters battle and recapture operations. The VBSS curriculum focuses the platoon on the planning and execution of compliant and non-compliant Level II VBSS, including a vertical insertion capability.

Additionally, each FAST platoon qualifies no less than three designated marksmen and assault breachers. These Marines' special skills in observation; reporting, delivering accurate, long-range rifle fire; and mechanical, thermal, ballistic, and explosive breaching enhance the platoon's ability to conduct operations to restore security to a compromised facility as well as to conduct VBSS missions.

Marine Expeditionary Unit Capabilities

The mission of the MEU is to provide a forward deployed, flexible, sea based MAGTF capable of rapidly executing Amphibious Operations, designated Maritime Special Operations, MOOTW, and

Supporting Operations to include enabling the introduction of follow-on-forces. Marine Corps Order 3120.9C Policy for MEU & MEU(SOC) (DRAFT) which supersedes Marine Corps Order 3120.9B w/Ch 1 sets forth the following capabilities for a Marine expeditionary unit: conduct amphibious assault, conduct amphibious raid, conduct non-combatant evacuation operation, conduct humanitarian assistance; conduct security, stability, transition and reconstruction operations, conduct tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, conduct joint and coalition operations, conduct aviation operations from expeditionary shore based sites, conduct/support theater security cooperation activities, and conduct airfield/port seizure. In the event that a Marine special operations company has conducted pre-deployment training and certification and is embarked with a Marine expeditionary unit, the MEU gains the special operations capable designation and is required to possess the capability to conduct direct action and special reconnaissance.

Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure

Incorporated in the direct action capability that a Marine special operations company provides is the ability to conduct visit, board, search, and seizure operations. Unfortunately for the MEU commander, the regional special operations component commander holds operational control of the embarked Marine special operations company while the MEU is in that combatant

commander's area of responsibility. As was the case with the 26th MEU on their last deployment, the component commander has the ability to detach the Marine special operations company from the MEU to operate as part of a joint special operations task force. Colonel Gregg Sturdevant, commanding officer of the 26th MEU states:

"As a MEU commander I am concerned over the lack of a Marine Visit Board Search and Seizure (VBSS) capability when the MSOC goes ashore (or is separated from the MEU). I don't believe we need to duplicate the capability MSOC provides but I do think the Marine Corps has a responsibility to provide a Level II VBSS capability to the Navy."²

As of Fiscal Year 08, Level II VBSS is a mission essential task for all FAST platoons. This addition is formal recognition of the institutional knowledge gleaned from several years of conducting VBSS training and operations in the European and Pacific areas of responsibility. If deployed with a MEU, a FAST platoon provides the MEU commander with a trained, dedicated VBSS force in the event that a Marine special operations company is not deployed with the MEU or becomes separated due to operational requirements.

Economy of Force

While a FAST platoon would not prove a significant asset in the execution of all MEU missions, it is clear that in the case of many, the core competencies and mission essential tasks of

²Colonel Gregg Sturdevant, interview Captain Peter Young, February 11, 2008.

the FAST platoon neatly complement those of the MEU. A FAST platoon deployed with the MEU would provide the MEU commander increased economy of force by assuming the following missions: non-combatant evacuation, security for the conduct of aviation operations from expeditionary shore based sites, and tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel, thus freeing up ground combat element and logistics combat element units to their primary roles.

Non-combatant evacuation is a logical extension of the fundamental mission of the FAST platoon: site security. In the event that an embassy required reinforcement and/or evacuation, a FAST platoon deployed with the MEU would provide the MEU Commander with a unit familiar with embassy structure, site security, and Department of State integration with which he could set the conditions for the MEU as a whole to conduct decisive operations.

Given the Commandant's vision of the Long War, sea basing, and ship to objective maneuver, it is a valid assumption to make that many MEU operations of the future will require helicopterborne insert over extended distances as in the case of the introduction of Task Force 58 into Afghanistan in 2001. For missions such as this, the capability of the logistics combat element and the aviation combat element to establish forward arming and refueling points (FARPs) to support the insertion of

the ground combat element will be vital. A FAST platoon assigned to the MEU would be capable of providing increased security for two FARPs for a limited duration of time, thus freeing up limited personnel within the ground combat element and logistics combat element.

Once more, the core competency of expeditionary site security in austere environments makes the FAST platoon ideal for the role the TRAP force within the MEU. Not only is a FAST platoon a capable combat force which could insert to secure a downed aircraft/crew in a hostile environment, the platoon is uniquely suited to provide security for the crash site until recovery of the airframe is possible.

A Proven Quantity

During the first decade of the 21st Century, FAST platoons have deployed to Port-au-Prince, Haiti to provide embassy reinforcement prior to the introduction of follow-on forces from Camp Lejeune. They have provided embassy reinforcement in Beirut and convoy escort of American citizens and friendly nationals to link-up with MEU transportation assets. A multi-platoon task force has provided security for Iraqi oil platforms in the Persian Gulf. Other platoons have conducted embassy reinforcement and security as part of JTF-Liberia, provided security for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, conducted joint security operations in the Horn of Africa, and

served as an attachment to 1st Reconnaissance Battalion during OIF.³ While this appears to be a lengthy and impressive list it accounts for only nine of the more than ninety FAST platoons that have deployed since 2001.

Counterargument

The numbered fleet commanders may be uncomfortable with the idea of FAST platoons deployed with the MEU and may perceive that such a measure will strip them of a capability. This is not the case. With the current eighteen FAST platoons in MCSF Battalion, each interim security force company can still be augmented by one platoon on a continuous basis, essentially maintaining the status quo. Coupled with one FAST platoon per MEU, the numbered fleet and combatant commanders have gained flexibility without sacrificing any capability each time an expeditionary strike group enters their area of responsibility. As Naval Security Forces continue to expand their role in security of naval installations, to include Guantanamo Bay, MCSF Battalion will gain the flexibility required to work towards this proposed shift of focus.

Colonel Sturdevant's position on the issue is positive, however, he maintains one reservation. "Today's L-class ships are larger than ever, however, as we continue to add men and

³ Anonymous, "Sustained Security Operations in the Combat Zone," *Marine Corps Gazette*, no. 89, (2005): 15, <http://proquest.umi.com>.

equipment embark space and "heads and beds" has become an issue. I would welcome having a FAST Plt that could provide a Level II VBSS capability plus a host of other mission sets but am concerned over embark and billeting challenges."⁴ While logistical considerations can never be ignored, the benefits associated with FAST deployed with the MEU outweigh the challenges associated with embark planning. Should the logistical burden of a FAST platoon deployed with each MEU prove insurmountable a compromise should be struck. At the very least, a FAST platoon should occupy some of the roughly 115 "beds" left unoccupied on a MEU with no associated marine special operations company embarked.

Conclusion

Given the advanced training and complementary capabilities of a FAST platoon and the Marine expeditionary unit, the Marine Corps should modify the manner in which FAST platoons are employed. By deploying with each MEU, FAST platoons would more effectively support the numbered fleet and combatant commanders worldwide in their execution of the Long War on terrorism.

Word Count: 1995

⁴Colonel Gregg Sturdevant, interview Captain Peter Young, February 11, 2008.

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