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JOINT OPERATIONS: The Marine Perspective

By THOMAS C. LINN

No other nation can match our ability to combine forces on the battlefield and fight jointly.

—John M. Shalikashvili

Orchestrating land, sea, and air operations in joint warfare is demanding and contentious at times. Nobody knows this better than the Marines—a joint land-sea-air team. Many contemporary issues regarding the relationship of military arms have been hotly debated within the Marine Corps, in some cases for over half a century. The lessons learned remain relevant today.

Who's in Charge?

Technology in this century provided the tools for joint operations. As Rudolph Winnacker observed, "During the 19th century... Army and Navy missions seldom overlapped and... such problems as arose in the field had to be resolved in the field..." But after World War I, technological advances, particularly in aviation, expanded service capabilities. Forces in one medium could influence events in another. It was seldom clear whether one service should claim a monopoly in technology. Rancorous debates erupted over which military arm dominated. Today, technology is expanding capabilities faster, and many of the same debates are recurring.

The necessity for unity was recognized in 1935 by the Joint Board, forerunner to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It published *Joint Action of the Army and Navy* (JAAN) which mandated that one commander would be responsible for joining forces from the services into a joint task force (JTF). Command would be given to an officer from the service with paramount interest in the mission who would assign missions and objectives to component commanders and exercise coordinating control in a given operation. But this joint command would not infringe on the administrative and disciplinary authority of subordinate component commanders. JAAN recognized the separation of joint and service duties and stated

that the JTF commander would not interfere with a subordinate commander's conduct of the mission.

The *Marine Tentative Landing Operations Manual* paralleled JAAN. Issued in 1934, it was the foundation of amphibious doctrine—the oldest interservice doctrine. After studying Gallipoli, its authors recognized that such operations could readily founder on jurisdictional authority. Land, sea, and air involvement would inevitably lead to a question of "who's in charge." This situation would be further aggravated by interservice rivalry. Accordingly, it vested command of these arms in one individual—the naval attack force commander—largely because overseas expeditions were seen as extensions of naval campaigns. However, this approach turned out to be an oversimplified solution. The Navy commander did not always have the expertise or interest in operations ashore to perform this role. Still, it was a start in joint operations.

Achieving unity of command is an evolutionary process. Initially, dual-hatted commanders orchestrated military arms. It worked, though not always well. On Guadalcanal, all forces ashore came under the commander of 1st Marine Division, Major General Alexander Vandegrift. Not only did he control 1st Division's subordinate units, but another Marine and two Army divisions, and a collection of aviation units. This entailed integrating air and

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ground operations ashore as well as linking them with those at sea, a major challenge for one commander.

An overarching command structure was developed for operations after Guadalcanal. The Marine amphibious corps presided over ground, air, and logistics units and connected the fleet to operations ashore. The structure was used again by the 1st Marine Brigade (Provisional) early in the Korean War.

achieving unity of command is an evolutionary process

Despite its success, marines argued over the effectiveness of this arrangement. Many believed a division headquarters could do the job. However, air-ground operations became more complex with the advent of the helicopter and also increased lethality of fixed wing aviation. In 1983, the Marine Corps formed permanent command elements for Marine air-ground task forces consisting of ground combat, air combat, and combat service support elements. This recognized that the optimum coordination of military arms is not done on an ad hoc or additional duty basis.

The leading lesson for those who advocate dual-hatting JTF commanders is that joint and service duties are too demanding to be assumed by one headquarters. They must be separated to prevent operational and logistics bottlenecks. JTF command must bridge the strategic and tactical levels. Moreover, orchestrating military arms requires the complete attention of one conductor, an overarching command. In this regard consider the incorporation of sophisticated systems such as JSTARS, AWACS, and AEGIS into operations. In humanitarian assistance military actions must be integrated with the actions of government and non-government organizations. Ironically, these lessons were relearned the hard way in Somalia when the Marine expeditionary force commander was assigned as JTF commander. This made the division commander the overall Marine forces commander: Guadalcanal revisited. As a result, the commandant directed on July 1, 1995 the establishment of a deployable JTF

headquarters, to be collocated with II MEF at Camp Lejeune.

How Do We Fight?

The coming of amphibious operations was a milestone for joint warfare. It was the first time in history that all three military arms converged on a common point—the shoreline. They readily interacted and mutually supported each other on the tactical level.

Naval gunfire and air assisted ground forces in getting to the beach. Once ashore, ground forces secured land bases for aircraft which supported land, sea, and air operations. As Richard Franks wrote of Guadalcanal, “No other campaign in World War II saw such sustained violence in all three dimensions—sea, land, and air.” This was largely possible because of technology. It expanded the capabilities of each military arm. While the resulting overlaps cause contention, they are vital to joint operations. They enable the operation’s emphasis to transition from one medium to another.

By contrast, consider deep strike proposals that would prevent overlaps and interaction: land forces would fight up to the fire support coordination line, naval forces would stay at sea, and air forces would control everything beyond. This is segregation, not joint operations.

The blueprint for this integration was amphibious doctrine. Initially, the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual* laid out how the military arms would be organized and employed. Moreover, it recognized one constant in joint operations: not only does each operation vary, but each may vary from phase to phase. Mission therefore determines task organization, which also must be flexible to accommodate operational changes indicative of amphibious warfare. Initially, these operations were more naval in character while moving to objective areas. The emphasis shifted as they came ashore. The manual saw the need for task forces comprised of at least two components, a naval support group and a landing force. Within the Marine Corps the fleet marine force was established in 1933 and made up of ground, air, and logistics units from which task organized landing forces were provided to the fleet.

Combining arms at the tactical level is never easy. Components within the amphibious task force were organized functionally. But integrating these functions requires practice and established procedures, especially between ground and air arms, as marines learned on Guadalcanal. Close air support was impeded largely by inadequate command and control. The



Bougainville, 1943.

ground side lacked control measures that were eventually resolved on Bougainville. The air side lacked overall direction—or a joint force air component commander. The air component was a loose collection of squadrons from each service until a marine, Brigadier General Roy Geiger, assumed responsibility for the “Cactus Air Force” September 3, 1942. Yet optimum air-ground operations did not really happen until Marine Air Group 12 supported 1st Cavalry Division’s famed dash for Manila in 1945.

Combining arms also means overcoming conceptual differences. Marines have often found themselves in a tug of war over air—sometimes with the Navy but more often with the

The other side of this tug of war believed that the air function should be centralized on the operational level. Throughout much of World War II, the Navy dominated Marine aviation units. But the more the Navy and Marines op-

joint attempts to replicate tactical organizations could be disastrous

erated together, the more control of this function shifted to the landing force, as it did on Okinawa. But between 1951 and 1953 in the Korean War, Marine aviation was centralized under Fifth Air Force. Response times for air support requests took as long as 80 minutes. Only a third of air support sorties were dedi-

initial adaptive joint force packaging deployments could be disastrous.

On the operational level, JTFs have shown that they can organize functionally, which was arguably the case on Okinawa. The commander of X Army was overall landing force commander (or joint force land component commander) with the marines of III Amphibious Corps reporting to him. This worked because tactical aviation was integral to the organization, and tactical measures for its integration remained in place. But in Korea, functional organization did not work and this tactical integrity was denied.

Operations will vary, which makes joint organization situation-dependent. General Dwight Eisenhower used a functional organization in North Africa after January 1943 which consisted of Allied Naval Forces, Allied Air Forces, and Allied Ground Forces. In Europe, he discarded strict trilateral organization for functional or area organizations: army groups (south, center, and north); tactical air forces (1st, 2^d, and 9th); naval, airborne, and logistics components; and two strategic air components. Finally, functional organization requires experienced participants. Sometimes for the sake of expediency it is easier to organize JTFs by service component.

Joint operations are never easy. However, we have learned many lessons. Interestingly enough, very few rules apply. First and foremost, one person must be in charge and this should be a primary duty. Second, tactical organizations are inviolate; they must serve as building blocks. Third, the one constant is that each operation is different, and so is its organization. Flexibility, not rigidity, is a virtue. If we ignore these lessons, we make joint operations much harder. **JFQ**

Mogadishu, 1992.



Joint Combat Camera Center

Air Force. Essentially, the Marines believe that air plays a critical role at the tactical level (and other levels) and should thus be part of a tactical team which enables them to more readily integrate air with other functions. Air and ground marines plan and even execute shoulder-to-shoulder, all playing by the same rules. They also rely upon well-established integration systems, the fire support coordination center system and the air command and control system. At Pusan this teamwork was epitomized by the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade. Often with a 15-minute response time, Marine air strikes devastated North Korean defenses and mobile formations near the critical Naktong River line.

cated to ground forces. So bad was this centralized control that the Army X Corps commander, Major General Edward Almond, repeatedly complained and the 1st Marine Division commander, Major General Gerald Thomas, refused air support unless it was provided by the Marines.

The lesson for JTFs is that organizing by functions is easy while integrating functions is hard. It requires more than doctrine. It takes practice and time-tested procedures, especially on the tactical level—the foundation for higher level operations. The services have already created tactical organizations for this purpose. Their integrity should be preserved when incorporated into JTFs, each of which, after all, is a system of systems—an operational level organization. Joint attempts to replicate tactical organizations such as