

What the Air Force Can Learn From the MAGTF

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After interservice rivalry led to joint force inefficiencies in the invasion of Grenada and the hostage rescue attempt in Iran, Congress enacted the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act.¹ This law provided the proper chain of command, structure, and civilian control believed to be the best way to organize military forces. While proper structure now exists, problems employing joint forces traced to factors such as training, interoperability, and culture remain. Until these problems are solved, joint force employment will remain difficult, hindering prosecution of the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

While a proven model for joint efficiency may not exist outside US forces, an internal model is available to work from. The USMC successfully fights with the doctrine of combined arms, defined in *Marine Corps Doctrine Publication (MCDP) 1* as "...the full integration of arms in such a way that to counteract one, the enemy must become more vulnerable to another." *MCDP-1* also states, "The MAGTF [Marine air-ground task force] provides a single commander a combined arms force that can be tailored to the situation faced."² Similarly, *Joint Publication (JP) 1* describes joint matters as "...integrated employment of military

¹ Noonan, Michael P., and Mark R. Lewis, "Conquering the Elements: Thoughts on Joint Force (Re)Organization," *Parameters: US Army War College Autumn* (2003): 34.

² Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 20 June 1997), 55.

forces in joint operations", and identifies that "The joint force commander (JFC) has the authority and responsibility to tailor forces for the mission at hand..."³ In short, the USMC's combined arms doctrine uses several disciplines to fight and win, exactly what the joint force strives for with multiple services. Even with *JP-1's* definition, joint forces continually struggle to work together efficiently. To operate efficiently and effectively support the Army in the contemporary operating environment (COE), the Air Force should transform its organizational, training, and cultural paradigms based on the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) model.

ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The MAGTF is the USMC's basis for force organization, and each MAGTF is comprised of four parts: the command element (CE), ground combat element (GCE), aviation combat element (ACE), and logistics combat element (LCE). MAGTFs are organized for specific situations, with no specific structure.⁴ This concept, along with the combined arms doctrine, gives the USMC the ability to structure forces for success in any given area of operations (AO). The only capability shortfall is strategic movement to the AO, provided by the Air Force or Navy.

³ Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007), I-2.

⁴ Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 20 June 1997), 55.

Traditionally, outside the MAGTF's AO, the Air Force shapes the deep fight while the Army focuses on the close battle, enabling good battlefield delineation. In the COE, however, the conventional deep fight is not as delineated, leaving few targets for strategic attack, and the Air Force with close air support (CAS) as its primary way of affecting the battlespace with kinetic fires.

Consistent with combined arms doctrine, the MAGTF supports its GCE infantry with rotary or fixed-wing CAS from the ACE, an integrated MAGTF component. The Army has more troops on the ground, and organic helicopters, but does not perform CAS.⁵ Consequently, Army CAS requests are forced to outside agencies, resulting in Army/Air Force joint interaction. Unfortunately, bickering has occurred, as Air Force CAS often has not met Army satisfaction.⁶

A General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation in 2003 examined air support of ground forces, resulting in several findings. One finding drew a comparison between MAGTF and joint CAS, stating "...the Marine Corps uses its own aviators...to control aircraft. The Marine Corps' attack aircraft squadrons are attached to Marine expeditionary forces, and their primary mission is to support ground forces...this means that Marine Corps

⁵ Clark III, Colonel Julius E. "CAS Myths, Realities, and Planning Principles." *Field Artillery* July-August (2005): 22.

⁶ Grant, Rebecca. "The Clash About CAS." *Air Force Magazine* January (2003): 55.

ground commanders have attack aircraft at their disposal, allowing them to more easily incorporate [CAS] into their training events.”⁷ In contrast to the Army/Air Force relationship, the MAGTF’s integrated organizational concept has clearly resulted in more effective support for ground forces.

To improve Air Force support to Army ground units, Air Force leadership (with Army buy-in) should commit to an integrated concept of support to Army ground forces, modeled after the ACE's support of the GCE and MAGTF commander. Some would argue that the structure is already there with the existing joint task force (JTF) concept. The JFC already owns the ground and air arms of a campaign and can direct their actions to accomplish the mission. In effect, the joint force structure already mirrors the MAGTF in that the joint force organizes for, and aims to achieve the effects of a combined arms attack. The problem is these combined arms players are not truly on the same team. In the MAGTF, the commander issues an operations order with commander's intent, communicated to the lowest level. In joint Army/Air Force operations, the forces are focused on the same objective, but they are not a truly joint team. To the individuals, the organization that links them, the JTF, is not their driving force; each Soldier or

⁷ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Readiness: Lingering Training And Equipment Issues Hamper Air Support of Ground Forces*. GAO-03-505. (Washington, D.C.: May 2003), 6.

Airman is obliged to his respective service component, thus losing the synergistic combined arms effect. The joint force must aim to ensure Airmen and Soldiers receive the same higher commander's intent and lead forces based on that intent. All components must share the same goals mandated by the JTF commander, as all Marines support the endstate outlined by their MAGTF commander.

In the end, organizational transformation must achieve the effect of placing Airmen and Soldiers on the same team. To operate efficiently in the COE and effectively support Army units on the ground, the Air Force should transform its organizational paradigm based on the MAGTF's integrated organizational structure.

TRAINING TRANSFORMATION

Goldwater-Nichols established the ability to create a joint organization, but did not mandate joint training. To truly come together as a joint team, the Air Force must consistently train with the Army, similar to the way the MAGTF's ACE trains with the GCE. As discussed previously, CAS is one of the most contentious subjects between the Army and Air Force. The Army needs CAS to be effective on the ground, but historical USAF leadership did not view it as a core competency. However, CAS is needed in today's COE, and the Air Force needs to be in

position to support ground forces. Operations IRAQI and ENDURING FREEDOM have both shown that joint CAS is critical and becoming more complex in the COE.⁸ Referring to the GAO investigation, the DOD acknowledged that there have been joint CAS deficiencies dating back to the mid-1990's, and that many personnel felt unprepared for the mission. Further, the Army Center for Lessons Learned determined in 1998 that Army/Air Force integration issues impede CAS missions and could lead to fratricide.⁹

In contrast to the void sometimes felt in the Army/Air Force world, the Marines have an excellent reputation with combined arms training. The same GAO report that criticized Army/Air Force training praised the USMC's implementation. The report noted, "...Marines are widely considered to be proficient at integrated [CAS] training...Marine Corps ground controllers figure prominently in the development of offensive and defensive operational plans and that the mission was generally well planned and executed."¹⁰ The Air Force, in coordination with the Army, should implement training similar to the ACE/GCE MAGTF program.

⁸ Bohn, Lt Col Richard. "Joint Close Air Support Transformed." *Air and Space Power Journal* Spring (2007): 57.

⁹ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Readiness: Lingering Training And Equipment Issues Hamper Air Support of Ground Forces*. GAO-03-505. (Washington, D.C.: May 2003), 7-8.

¹⁰ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Readiness: Lingering Training And Equipment Issues Hamper Air Support of Ground Forces*. GAO-03-505. (Washington, D.C.: May 2003), 10.

In lieu of organizational transformation leading directly to combined arms integration, joint CAS can only be improved through focused training. The Army National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, is currently working toward making some of these changes. Marine Col Lawrence Roberts is integrating Air Force joint terminal attack controllers (JTAC) into realistic training supporting ground forces through air fires.¹¹ This JTAC training is a great example of filling training blanks left by Goldwater-Nichols. The Air Force must pursue these training opportunities, and work with Army leadership to ensure that its ground combat personnel feel comfortable with Air Force pilots providing CAS, just as the USMC GCE inherently trusts the ACE. To operate efficiently in the COE, the Air Force must transform its training paradigms based on the integrated MAGTF model.

CULTURE TRANSFORMATION

Every Marine that completes enlisted or officer basic training is considered a "rifleman." While the "rifleman" status is directly associated with learned skill, it is also a cultural beacon all Marines identify with. Of the remaining services, the Army probably identifies most closely with the

¹¹ Jean, Grace. "Army, Air Force Should Combine Combat Training." *National Defense* July (2007): 29.

USMC culture. Frequent trips to the field, long deployments, and a Soldier's life all help make Army personnel identify with each other. The Air Force, on the other hand, does not have one thing that brings the entire Airman community together. Army officers and NCOs alike may refer to themselves as "old Soldiers", while an older Air Force NCO would never refer to himself as a "crusty old Airman". In the Air Force, only pilots participate in aerial combat.¹² NCOs and non-flying officers generally see themselves through the lens of their occupational specialty, and pay lip service to the "air power enabler" company line. To operate effectively in the COE, the Air Force needs to grow a culture similar to the one in the USMC/MAGTF that ties all Airmen together with a common warrior's ethos.

In the COE, the Airman's role has moved from purely air power support to the undefined stage. Of course, there are thousands of Airmen directly supporting air power, but many now fill roles historically performed by the Army. The Army is hard pressed to perform the amount of work requested, and its deployments have stretched from six, to 12, to 15-month standard lengths. Over the past six-plus years of GWOT, some Soldiers have deployed more than three times, for over 12 months each time. The DOD has coped through "in-lieu-of" taskings to Airmen,

¹² Mastroianni, George R. "Occupations, Culture, and Leadership in the Army and Air Force." *Parameters* Winter (2005-2006): 80.

including convoy operations, engineering, and security. USAF leadership continues to argue against these assignments, citing that Airmen should be used as Airmen.¹³ The problem is, US forces are in the greatest battle of their time, one they were not completely prepared for. In the midst of an Army manpower crisis, the Air Force is a logical place to turn to fill assignments where the Army has dried up.

The above argument speaks mostly to the Air Force's ground support community, which through combat skills familiarization, is positioned to support Army shortfalls. However, an equally important consideration is the aviator's view of the support of ground forces. As previously discussed, historical Air Force leadership was not keen on providing "airborne artillery" for the support of Army units, after fighting so hard to gain independence as a separate service through strategic attack arguments.¹⁴ While this view has softened over the years, it is important that the Air Force operations community continually focuses on the needs on the ground, where the GWOT will ultimately be won.

If the Air Force is to remain a relevant force in winning the GWOT, the support of its aviation and ground support

¹³ Goodfellow, Lt. Col Gerald. 10 Jan 2007. <
<http://www.acc.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123037176>> (15 February 2007).

¹⁴ John Darrell Sherwood, *Officers in Flight Suits: The Story of American Air Force Fighter Pilots in the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 169.

organizations willing to work outside traditional roles to complete the mission is needed. This cultural transformation is currently underway, with toughening physical standards, increased joint training, and longer deployments. To complete this shift, two things are needed: time, and leadership focus that says the USAF is there to support the nation, no matter who the main effort is. Leadership also has to ensure that its training focus is aimed where Airmen can support winning the GWOT. This message will be a departure from what established the Air Force as a separate service, but this war is a departure from wars in the past.

CONCLUSION

While it's impossible to tell what type of warfare will prevail in the future, all indicators point to the GWOT being a "Long War", with significant roles for all services. Since the end of WWII, the US has seen warfare evolve from compartmented air, land, and sea-specific battles¹⁵, into a continuous flow of complementary disciplines. Of the four services, only the Marines have consistently used all forms of warfare, using the combined arms doctrine to achieve victory. Many lessons can be derived from the USMC's years of successful combined arms

¹⁵ Noonan, Michael P., and Mark R. Lewis, "Conquering the Elements: Thoughts on Joint Force (Re)Organization," *Parameters: US Army War College Autumn* (2003): 33.

experience. Focused functional support of the organizational commander's endstate, inter-disciplinary joint training, and a cooperative warrior culture are all aspects of the MAGTF that should be used by the Air Force for success in the COE and for further success in the long GWOT.

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