

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188	
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1. AGENCY USE ONLY (<i>LEAVE BLANK</i>)	2. REPORT DATE APRIL 30, 2013	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED <i>STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER</i>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE DISAGGREGATION OF THE MARINE EXPEDITIONARY UNIT: FUTURE OR FAILURE FOR THE MAGTF?		5. FUNDING NUMBERS <i>N/A</i>	
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJOR CHRISTOPHER J. FROUDE			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068</i>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER <i>NONE</i>	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>SAME AS #7.</i>		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER: <i>NONE</i>	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <i>NONE</i>			
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <i>NO RESTRICTIONS</i>		12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE <i>N/A</i>	
ABSTRACT (<i>MAXIMUM 200 WORDS</i>) THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT IS TO REVIEW RECRUITING, RETENTION, AND PROMOTION AS THEY ARE RELATED TO THE MARINE CORPS' LACK OF SUSTAINING A DIVERSE FORCE, AND PROVIDE AN UNDERSTANDING ON HOW EACH ELEMENT IMPACTS DIVERSITY INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY. EXAMINING THE PROBLEM WITH A HOLISTIC VIEW OF PAST AND PRESENT ISSUES PROVIDES LEADERSHIP A CLEARER VISION ON HOW TO APPROACH THE ISSUES IN SUSTAINING DIVERSITY THAT THE CORPS FACES ODAY.			
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH) DIVERSITY CHALLENGES, 2012 DIVERSITY CAMPAIGN PLAN, RETENTION, RECRUITING, ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, PATH DEPENDENCE		15. NUMBER OF PAGES: 28	
		16. PRICE CODE: <i>N/A</i>	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE: <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

Disaggregation of the Marine Expeditionary Unit:
Future or failure for the MAGTF?

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Disaggregation of the Marine Expeditionary Unit:
Future or failure for the MAGTF?

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Oral Defense

12 April 2013

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Preface

The Marine Corps once again finds itself in a time of fiscal austerity and self-reflection. After spending the last two years at Special Operations Training Group, I observed first hand the limited experience individual Marines and units collectively had with expeditionary and amphibious operations. Most of the experience base Marines referenced was based on “expeditionary” operations supporting the cyclical Iraq or Afghanistan deployments; effectively limiting their knowledge of expeditionary and almost completely removing amphibious discussion. Many Marines participated in an informal discussion and debate on the merits of disaggregation for the future of the MEU. Rather than focus on familiar subjects within my occupational field I endeavored to determine what disaggregation really meant for the Marine Corps in the 21st century.

I would like to thank the many Marines who participated in discussions in wardrooms and field training areas exploring the future of the Corps on this subject and other key areas. Their dedication to the future of the Marine Corps sustained me when motivation waned and set the standard for the research needed to cover this subject. Finally, no simple sentence can fully thank my family for the support and patience while completing this project. Once again I have been able to succeed based on their sacrifices and I can only hope to one day repay this.

Executive Summary

Title: Disaggregation of the Marine Expeditionary Unit: Future or failure of the MAGTF

Author: Major Christopher J. Froude, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The current and future operating environment requires a flexible, capable expeditionary force and the Marine Corps must plan for disaggregation as an operational requirement to meet national missions.

Discussion: Current operational requirements are taxing the MEU structure further and further. Whether this is a violation of the principles that founded the MAGTF or the next step in distributed operations is examined. To accomplish this review the historical foundations of the MEU starting with the establishment of the MAGTF concept are reviewed. This provides a common understanding of the background of what a MEU is designed to accomplish. Next the paper reviews the concept of disaggregation and weighs this employment concept against the principles of warfighting. Following this review the paper explores the utility of amphibious/expeditionary forces to accomplish specific national goals before moving onto a discussion of some improvements necessary to successfully support disaggregated operations.

Conclusion: Disaggregation is a natural extension of Marine Corps doctrine and current operating concepts. The nation's strategic requirements necessitate the MEU prepare to support disaggregated operations.

Over the last decade the Marine Corps moved from the traditional core focus on maritime expeditionary operations to more concentration on supporting Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM (OIF/OEF) at the expense of maritime primacy. This allocation of forces decreased the emphasis on traditional Marine Expeditionary Units as the premier capability providing support to maritime expeditionary operations. As the Marine Corps reduces the support requirements for OIF/OEF the professional discussion within the Marine Corps returns to the employment of its expeditionary forces. One significant area of discussion is the employment of the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in a disaggregated role where one defined unit is broken down into multiple smaller components to support disparate mission requirements. While disaggregation has become the norm because of limited troop rotations available, the Marine Corps must examine whether this employment model is beneficial to their concept of warfighting before moving forward. This paper seeks to determine if the Marine Corps operating model will compel the use of disaggregation to meet the needs of the nation.

The discussion over disaggregation centers on the fundamental notions of the MEU as the smallest Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). The question is at what point does the tasking of the finite assets on the MEU fundamentally alter the make up from a small MAGTF to a collection of forces provided to the Geographic Component Commander? This paper will focus on the evolution of the MEU concept to a standing headquarters with specific assigned missions. While the Marine Corps historically provides task organized expeditionary forces, the construct prior to the standing MEU is

so fundamentally different from the current construct that little is gained discussing expeditionary support before the establishment of the MAGTF concept.

Instead the discussion of this paper will first examine the establishment of standing MEU's and the evolution of the assigned missions. This framework provides the basis for what the nation wants in an expeditionary force and how the Marine Corps designs the MEU to answer this requirement. Once there is a common understanding of the MEU history and current state of MEU employment, then the discussion will examine the concept of disaggregation in relation to the principles of warfighting and compare these concepts against the operational requirements of expeditionary forces. This operational framework of the MEU and doctrinal foundation of the employment concepts properly structure the discussion over disaggregation. At this point, the paper will provide suggestions on employment in a disaggregated model while sustaining principles of Marine Corps operations.

FRAMEWORK OF THE MEU

The current MEU construct is a fascinating evolution from the expeditionary footprint that Marines historically provide aboard U.S. Navy ships. Since the founding of the Marine Corps and Navy there has existed an expeditionary footprint on Navy ships. The evolution of this expeditionary capability is interesting on the whole but for the purpose of this paper the focus will remain on the modern era of maritime expeditionary operations. This modern era begins with the official designation of standing Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). The publication of Marine Corps Order (MCO) 3120.3 *Organization of Marine Air-Ground Task Forces* formally defined the three levels of the MAGTF as the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), Marine Expeditionary Brigade

(MEB), and Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU).¹ This order, published in 1962, established the baseline framework of all MAGTF's with a command element, a ground combat element, an air combat element, and logistics combat element employed under a single commander leveraging the synergy of inherent capabilities. The MEU is smallest standing MAGTF with approximately 2,200 personnel built around a Battalion Landing Team (BLT), composite aviation squadron, Combat Logistics Battalion (CLB), and standing command element. Together these elements embark on a three-ship Amphibious Ready Groups to provide the forward deployed presence.² This core framework of the MEU remains constant since inception although there have been name changes and an evolution of missions.

Over time, the MEU evolved the capabilities and missions based on the changing security goals of the nation. The first period of reflection on the roles of the MEU occurred after the Vietnam Conflict where the nation examined the roles for forward deployed amphibious assault in the Cold War operating construct. As historians Joseph Alexander and Merrill Bartlett noted, "Each American war in the twentieth century has been followed by a period of critical examination of the roles and missions of its armed forces by the nation's political leadership. In particular, those US Navy and Fleet Marine Force units compromising the amphibious force...were singled out for an intense review."³ The prevailing threat of a large land war against the Soviet Union on the plains of Europe seemed to indicate that the Marine Corps lacked the utility the nation required. General Louis H. Wilson, Jr., the 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps, shifted this discussion from the concept of amphibious assault against a prepared foe on a beachhead back to a focus on readiness to complete any expeditionary requirement as the core

capability for the Marine Corps.⁴ Utilizing real world examples requiring expeditionary forces to support national requirements (like defending against the 1973-74 OPEC oil embargo) and future operational considerations based on coastal population densities, General Wilson shifted the focus from the limitations of amphibious forces in the modern operating environment to discussions on the importance of an expeditionary footprint. He summarized the contributions of expeditionary forces in 1978 as “presence, power projection, and sea control.”⁵ These concepts contributed to the role of the MEU as a force projection tool throughout the Cold War period. While the Soviet Union built up their amphibious capability, the U.S increased their presence operations in order to demonstrate the national interests globally.

Throughout the Cold War, the presence capability was maintained while strengthening the operational flexibility of the expeditionary force. To enhance the operational flexibility the Marine Corps and Navy developed the concept of a triad of capabilities to project power “over-the-horizon.” This triad of next generation weapons systems included a high-speed ship to shore connector, long-range vertical lift, and a high-speed amphibious vehicle. The trinity of systems includes the Landing Craft Air Cushioned – a high-speed hovercraft, the tilt-rotor MV-22 *Osprey* aircraft, and the now defunct Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle. The focus on these capabilities was to increase the range of power projection while decreasing the threat from shore based attacks. While only the high-speed connector and long-range lift are currently fielded the concept of “over-the-horizon” employment is important since it drove the next evolution on employing expeditionary forces.

An increase in the doctrinal foundations of maritime expeditionary operations and the establishment of standing MEU headquarters demonstrate this evolution. Starting in the early 1980's the discussion of MAGTF deficiencies focused on the lack of a coherent headquarters. General Paul X. Kelley, the 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps, rectified this with the establishment of standing MAF, MAB, and MAU headquarters.⁶ Major Michael West in his essay on the evolution of the MEB noted, "Out of an end strength of 198,025 Marines, the Corps was to have 13 permanently established MAGTF headquarters, 3 MAFs, 6 MABs, and 4 MAUs. This initiative was advertised to be in direct response to the old problem of relying too much on hastily constituted, temporary command elements formed at a time of crisis."⁷

The standing headquarters were seen as an additive measure to improve the performance of the MAGTF by ensuring unit integrity in the command element. As the Director of Marine Corps Plans, Policies, and Operations Lieutenant General Bernard E. Trainor noted in 1983, "To *ad hoc* the headquarters of a MAGTF at any of these levels, if combat is imminent, is sloppy at best and disastrous at worst."⁸ At the time the MAU headquarters was a subordinate standing headquarters integrated into the MAB structure. Each deployment would then designate MAU headquarters personnel from the assigned personnel in the MAB structure. This establishment of the headquarters did not fundamentally change the idea of the MEU that was consistent with the original Marine Corps orders from 1962; it simply evolved the headquarters to a standing organization. The standing headquarters with permanent personnel assigned could now focus on the requirements for MEU. This concept ensured the stability for the planning and execution of dynamic operations in an expeditionary environment. The Headquarters Marine Corps

publication of the MAGTF Master Plan (1990-2000) in 1989 formalized the MEU specifically on low-intensity conflict and dissolved the standing MEB headquarters.⁹

The formalization of the MAU command element was the first step to enhance the expeditionary capabilities. The employment model was improved with the institution of the Special Operations Capable (SOC) qualification. The SOC qualification established another step in the evolution that began with formalization of the MAGTF, creation of standing MAU headquarters, and then in 1988 a refined mission set. This refined mission set included a set of Maritime Special Operations missions in addition to traditional conventional expeditionary support missions.¹⁰ More importantly, this formalized certification led to the establishment of a more defined training standards to meet the requirements of SOC qualification. These standards ensured that the units supporting Geographic Combatant Commands were uniform in capabilities regardless of source. Standards were also consolidated with the Navy Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) training resulting in a formalized six-month training package to integrate all subordinate elements into a unified MEU/ARG team.¹¹ In addition to creating an integrated command structure, the training program also allowed the development of the rapid response planning process (R2P2) with the ability to plan and execute complex operations in a compressed timeframe required in the expeditionary setting. The overall MEU/ARG training package was formalized into three phases focused on the individual skills of assigned personnel, integration of major subordinate elements into the command, and finally the integration of Navy-Marine Corps partners into a unified MEU/ARG team. This approach to consolidated preparation remains the core framework for training and certification of the MEU/ARG today.

The evolution of the MEU to a standing headquarters and formalization of a SOC training package demonstrate the significant investment the Marine Corps and Navy made to the MEU/ARG team. Even with this investment the closing days of the Cold War brought another review of the utility of amphibious forces and role of expeditionary capabilities in the new global environment. The utility and future of these roles was shaped by the use of MEU forces in Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM as part of the amphibious demonstration and limited support outside the main battle areas. The discussion of the strategic value at the conclusion of DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM might signal a lack of utility for amphibious forces or the lack of a near peer enemy with the collapse of the Soviet Union could indicate the lack of utility for expeditionary forces. Instead, the Joint Staff “concluded in 1991 that a valid requirement for amphibious capability will persist,” since it “directly supports national military strategy of force projection and forward presence throughout the foreseeable future.”¹²

This concept was formalized with the publication of *From the Sea: A New Direction for the Naval Services*, a joint Navy-Marine Corps doctrinal publication.¹³ This publication fundamentally altered the focus of the Naval services from open ocean missions to expeditionary support for “joint operations conducted *from* the sea.”¹⁴ The shift to the littorals changed the Cold War Navy from a posture focused on a single enemy to a more globally responsive force focused on crisis actions. This reinvigorated the discussion on forward deployed presence. *From the Sea* highlighted the use of “Naval Expeditionary Forces” as rapidly deploying elements of a joint force package and increasing role for the traditionally less influential “Gator” Navy. The change required

that the Naval forces maintain the operational capabilities of forward deployment, crisis response, strategic deterrence, and sealift while developing the capabilities of command, control, and surveillance, battlespace dominance, power projection, and force sustainment.¹⁵ The doctrinal foundation was updated in 1994 with the publication of *Forward...From the Sea*, which reaffirmed the role of the naval forces requirement to be “engaged in forward areas, with the objectives of preventing conflicts and controlling crises.”¹⁶ Throughout *Forward*, the document highlights the contributions of forward deployed forces to deterrence and stability in a chaotic operating environment. This refined joint doctrine highlights the use “Amphibious Ready Groups – with special operations capable Marine Expeditionary Units” as building blocks for the joint force commander.¹⁷

Evolution of the doctrinal publication and formalization of training sustained the MEU through the last fifteen years especially as maritime expeditionary operations decreased in visibility against the OIF/OEF background. The use of the MEU training order provides stability to the training package of MEU’s to the point where each MEU is “capable” of executing the same 15 assigned missions within the six-hour timeline.¹⁸ The structure of the MEU remains consistent with the framework of a standing command element, battalion landing team, combat logistics battalion, and composite aviation squadron. Commanders, based on mission analysis, may adjust some capabilities but are limited to minor changes while the overall construct remains constant regardless of the source of the MEU.

The last part of the framework that needed to be defined are the physical limitations of Naval shipping assets that drive many of the employment factors discussed

with disaggregation. Similar to the standard structure of the MEU there is a standard structure of the Amphibious Ready Group that constrains the employment model somewhat. Traditionally the naval shipping components are built on three ship formations with the flagship being the Amphibious Assault Ship (LHA/LHD), the Dock Landing Ship (LSD), and an Amphibious Transportation Dock (LPD). These ships each bring important individual characteristics to form the ARG but there are physical limitations to their employment characteristics and capabilities to hold personnel and equipment. Usually most of the command element, a portion of the BLT, the majority of the composite aviation squadron, and some logistical support would be embarked on the LHA/LHD. The LSD and LPD consistently include a larger allocation of support equipment with the remaining balance of the ground and air combat power sets. The allocation and evolution of these ships is only referenced indirectly but requires examination from a Navy perspective to arrive at any combined solution.

DISAGGREGATION AND THE PRINCIPLES OF WARFARE

Over the last decade the nation, and by extension the Marine Corps, primarily concentrated on the large counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was a decrease in the primacy of maritime expeditionary operations as the Marine Corps shifted focus to support counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism operations. During the last decade the on-station time for individual MEU's lessened while the workload remained constant or increased. Over the last 20 years the forward deployed MEU/ARG has responded to more than 75 crises.¹⁹ This increase in actual operations is also mirrored in the request for forces submitted by Geographic Combatant Commanders who frequently solicit the support of these forward deployed units. The

bipartisan foreign policy think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) noted that even though there were significant troop contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq “amphibious forces more than doubled their support for strategic-shaping activities between 2006 and 2010.”²⁰

The Congressional Budget Office noted, “the stated demand for amphibious ships on routine peacetime deployments by major overseas commands of the U.S. military has increased by more than 80 percent.”²¹ This demand reflects an evolution to the U.S. security policy requiring not only success in winning wars but preventing conflict through the use of engagement. The MEU possesses unique capabilities to remain forward deployed conducting this type of engagement but are limited by the shipping available. To overcome this limitation new employment models are used to cover greater geographic ranges than are normally be assigned.

Given the history of the MEU and doctrinal growth of the Marine Corps this is to be expected. *Operational Maneuver from the Sea* highlights this growth to “expand the operational reach and flexibility of amphibious forces to conduct the range of military operations.”²² To accomplish, this commanders have incorporated three distinct models to utilize forces in a geographically dispersed model: Split-ARG, distributed operations, and disaggregated operations. Each of these terms can be interpreted slightly different since there is not an established joint doctrinal definition. The common understanding of the difference derives from the reporting and tasking relationship with the MEU/ARG and their higher headquarters. Split-ARG is an allocation of ships in some fashion less than the combined three-ship formation but still operating under the command of the Amphibious Task Force commander. Distributed operations are generally used to

describe ashore operations where the forces are outside of supporting range but remain under the assigned commander. Split-ARG and distributed operations are similar terms because forces are employed afloat or ashore are in support of the original MEU commander. Disaggregated differs in that MEU/ARG elements are operating in support of more than one joint force or combatant commander. This operational distinction is important since Split-ARG/distributed operations retain the operational control, planning, and direction under a single MAGTF commander with a trained and dedicated staff. Disaggregated operations fundamentally alter this employment model since one MAGTF commander and staff is no longer responsible for planning and executing the operations of forces.

Recent operations demonstrate the difference between distributed and disaggregated operations. In September 2010, 15th MEU supported combat operations in Afghanistan with their AV-8B's, humanitarian operations in Pakistan, and conducted an *in-extremis* anti-piracy raid in the Gulf of Aden. Each of these operations requires significant planning and control from the MAGTF commander but were all executed within the same Central Command Area of Operation. The staff executed their functions across a large area but was responsible to one commander. The MEU/ARG staff is trained and equipped to deal with this type of stress and could accomplish the mission requirements with minimal assistance as is the design for expeditionary forces.

Contrasting this was the subsequent deployment of 26th MEU, which also began their deployment in the Central Command Area of Operation. Originally deployed a month early in August 2010 to reinforce the humanitarian efforts being carried out by 15th MEU in Pakistan, the MEU distributed forces to support other operations through

early 2011. The BLT was forward deployed into Afghanistan with a large contingent of MEU enablers working outside of the MEU command structure.²³ Events in the region further taxed the MEU structure during the events of the “Arab Spring.” These events required the MEU to move to the Mediterranean Sea and prepare to support operations in Northern Africa. After embarking additional forces, the MEU supported NATO operations in support of Operation ODYSSEY DAWN in Libya executed under the command of AFRICOM. Concurrently, the MEU supported operations in Djibouti throughout the majority of the deployment cycle.²⁴ This disaggregated employment model required the MEU to hastily integrate forces not trained to the standards established for MEU and assimilate staff officers who were unfamiliar with the standard operating procedures.

In each of these two cases, the finite assets of the MEU were utilized across multiple missions to meet the requirements of the Geographic Combatant Commander. The defining characteristics between the two types of operations are the overall commander responsible for employment of forces and tasking of the MEU/ARG staff structure to support these operations. The current MAGTF model of personnel, equipment, and training does not account for employment to multiple higher headquarters commanders as mini-MAGTFs and it is questionable whether the MEU should. These cases studies could be attributed to extreme situations and not likely to repeat given the reductions in OIF/OEF tasking. On the other hand, this type of employment may be the natural extension of expeditionary maneuver warfare and the next step for the evolution of the MEU/ARG. The discussion of which model is more relevant should not be based

on the anecdotal case studies but should be rooted in the fundamental doctrine of warfighting that guide the employment of forces.

The Marine Corps doctrinal publication MCDP-1 *Warfighting* lists nine principles of warfighting to guide the thinking of war.²⁵ The MEU is ideally suited to examine these characteristics since the independent nature of the operations provide a unique view to these principles. The fluidity required executing the operations in the dynamic operational environment highlights the principles for a MAGTF. To construct this discussion, one must examine a MEU as currently designed and compare the result with a MEU employed distributed or disaggregated operations. A limitation of this analysis is that the ideal state will largely focus on the training environment where there is known outcome and distributed/disaggregated operations occur against theoretical real world operations with less defined outcomes. The paper will focus on three specific principles: Mass, Maneuver, and Unity of Command. These specific principles were chosen to highlight the differences in application between distributed and disaggregated operations as an employment model. The other principles of warfighting are important but largely have similar considerations whether the MAGTF is employed in a disaggregated or distributed manner. No one principle is expected to definitively answer the question of disaggregated operations as an extension of expeditionary maneuver warfare but will provide a doctrinal approach for further discussion.

The first principle to examine, Mass, described by Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0 as the ability to “Concentrate the effects of combat power at a decisive place and time to achieve decisive results.”²⁶ The MEU practices this principle throughout the predeployment training program executing a combined arms training

package requiring the commander and staff to determine the correct amount of combat power required to achieve a specific result and then employ those forces. In a distributed environment operational challenges may exist but the commander has this same ability to mass power since he retains control of the forces. The result for the distributed MEU Commander is the capability to make adjustments based on operational requirements and meet requirements for a specific amount of mass to achieve the desired outcome. Disaggregated operations differ since the commander does not retain ownership of all forces and makes a decision on how to mass combat power from a more limited capability than originally designed.

Next, the principle of Maneuver requires that forces, “Place the enemy in a disadvantageous position through the application of combat power.”²⁷ The principle requires force to display multiple threats to the enemy either in time or place to leave the enemy “on the horns of a dilemma.” The model MEU does this through a task organization that possesses all the capabilities of the MAGTF with the capability to apply both indirect and direct combat power through multiple operating domains. Distributed operations retain this capability depending on the specific organizations involved and distances between supporting elements. Disaggregated operations may incur a risk depending on the actual forces disaggregated. In the example of 26th MEU mentioned earlier, the MEU essentially lost their ground maneuver capability with the loss of the BLT to operations in Afghanistan. This risk was mitigated by the deployment of an on-call element but there was still residual risk from a utilizing a unit not trained to same standards and integrated into the MEU.

Finally, the principle of unity of command, “For every objective, ensure unity of effort under one responsible commander.”²⁸ In the ideal state the missions are divided into finite areas with a mission commander assigned to each mission reporting to the MEU commander. The distributed and disaggregated operations do retain this principle of a mission commander charged with the execution of the operation, but it is arguable whether they possess the staff to carry out the command responsibilities in the disaggregated construct. Since the MEU is such a focused staff the focus is on a synergy with the staff as designed. This leaves very little excess capacity to absorb the loss of personnel when disaggregating. The finite number of staff and synergy required to support and control each mission assigned assumes significant risk to mission accomplishment if this staff is fractured.

A comprehensive examination of the training environment would reinforce the idea that the MEU is designed to execute dynamic operations in an expeditionary environment while adhering to the principles of warfighting. Arguably conducting distributed operations still allows the MEU to accomplish missions while adhering to these principles without excessive risk. The entire focus of the triad of capabilities and supporting doctrine developed in the 1980’s highlights the concept of distribution as a design choice by the Navy and Marine Corps. The nature of disaggregation requires a MEU to mitigate or accept significant risk to adhere to the same principles with their current structure. This is due to the MEU being purposely built to operate as a MAGTF with the sum of the parts greater than each independent element. At some point, the breaking apart of the MAGTF to smaller elements exceeds the risk balance and the supporting principles of warfighting by making the elements of the MEU simply troop

contributions to a commander, not a MAGTF employments against a defined mission. This troop contribution function simply reduces the MEU to “the floating K-Mart” of capabilities for the Geographic Component Commander not the MAGTF.

GOING FORWARD

The question remains as to the way ahead when disaggregation challenges some of the core principles of warfare and threatens the employment model for the MAGTF. Tasking and overemployment cannot simply be left to commanders making the best of a bad situation. Rather the employment of the MEU in a disaggregated construct is the next logical step from distributed operations and increases the utility of maritime expeditionary forces in the 21st century. Just as the triad of capabilities and doctrine matured Navy/Marine Corps thinking to distributed operations, disaggregation is the future not an aberration. Maritime expeditionary operations remain a core requirement for the nation and Geographic Combatant Commanders will cover divergent mission sets with limited forces. These national mission requirements are inherent to maritime expeditionary operations with benefits that cannot be replicated by other capabilities.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) categorized the qualities of maritime expeditionary operations into eight direct and two indirect attributes: Direct – breadth, variable visibility, responsiveness, scalability, lethality, autonomy, mobility, and persistence; Indirect – flexibility and versatility.²⁹ These attributes “represent the key features those amphibious capabilities that were identified by U.S. and/or foreign partners as particularly relevant to one or more strategic shaping activities.”³⁰ Examining these attributes and the flexibility of the MEU in Split-ARG/distributed and disaggregated operations will demonstrate that these operations are needed for the future employment of

the MEU. Based on the analysis by CSIS the attributes and ability to distribute assets or disaggregate the MEU will enhance the ability to meet complex operational requirements for the future. In their analysis, CSIS breaks down the historical missions from 2006-2010 indicating three main missions for the MEU: humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, partnership activities, and regional assurance/deterrence missions.³¹ Of note, the core function of direct combat is not addressed specifically since this essential mission set receives the bulk of consideration regardless of actual missions performed.

Beginning with humanitarian relief/disaster relief missions, CSIS lists six of the direct attributes as important to the accomplishment of these missions.³² While the CSIC study reviews many attributes, the importance of breadth and responsiveness are of key importance. The ability of the MEU to distribute their capabilities over large areas and potentially disaggregate to another command structure allows the dispersion of capability to meet the needs of diverse humanitarian missions. The training environment continues to stress this capability by including specific MEU/ARG events that focus on the ability of staff and assigned subordinate units to work through this mission set.

While humanitarian activities may increase, there is little doubt that partnership activities, which are the largest portion of amphibious requirements, will remain of key importance. These missions span an expanse of mission types from medical/dental support to combined arms exercises. This mission set is important since it specifically tasks the scalability and breadth of the expeditionary forces. The wide variety of capabilities embarked on the MEU/ARG allows the accomplishment of almost any mission requirement on this spectrum of partnership. The inherent task organization of the MAGTF and size of the MEU allow scalability to support all but the largest exercises.

Additionally, since the majority of these engagements are preplanned, the MEU/ARG suffers from very little confusion in distributed or disaggregated support.

Similar to the partnership activities are the regional assurance and deterrence missions carried out by the MEU/ARG team. In fact, partnership activities are one way the nation demonstrates regional alliances and interests of the nation. The two specific attributes that CSIS lists as important to this mission set are visibility and lethality. It is a common perception that the presence of amphibious shipping off the coast of a region can signal US intent without taking any further action. Arguably, this could be carried out by almost any US ship, although amphibious ships signal not just the ability to cause harm, but to impose a specific order with the use of ground troops. Additionally, the use of Marines signals a special kind of lethality that is controlled and directed to achieve a desired offensive effect. Achieving this through distributed or disaggregated operations will largely depend on the perception of the enemy. Limited engagements can signal a “line in the sand” or demonstrate a lack of will depending on the enemy’s assessment. Disaggregation of assets is potentially troubling since dividing the MAGTF degrades the actual amount of combat power available.

All three of these mission areas highlight the utility of maritime expeditionary forces, specifically the MEU/ARG, to contribute to national missions. However, the ability the still meet these missions while dividing the force is questionable and cannot be an assumed capability. Disaggregation presents challenges to the ability to mass and maneuver forces as designed since it fundamentally alters the structure of the MEU presenting a challenge for the commander to effectively use these principles with remaining combat power. Likewise, the ability of the MEU to command and control

these operations once implemented is questionable in the disaggregated concept. This statement largely comes from the fact that the MEU as a mission based MAGTF brings a finite amount of capability to plan and execute operations. The ability to plan for multiple missions is already taxed by traditional MEU operations; separating these missions into multiple areas of operations or commanders imposes excessive risk.

The risk to unity of command is the principle of warfighting with the largest risk to violation with minimal chance of mitigation. Effective staff planning and appropriate allocation of forces to specific missions can mitigate most risks but the ability to do this with a limited staff presents physical limitations. *Amphibious Operations in the 21st Century* notes that although disaggregation will be possible with thorough pre-deployment planning and organization the “capability set may not change substantially beyond some increased redundancy with respect to command and control and intelligence functions.”³³ Increasing the primary staff and key support functions (intelligence, communications, etc.) are essential to success in the expanding operating construct of disaggregated operations.

CONCLUSIONS

The next step in the evolution of the MEU is disaggregated operations as a normal mode of employment that the Marine Corps must plan to employ coherent forces consistent with the MAGTF concept operating in this construct. The development of technological solutions and doctrine supported the movement to the distributed operations construct. The triad of capabilities increased operational reach that is only being realized today with the fielding and employment of the MV-22 Osprey. An exponential growth in command and control systems improved the ability of the

commander to execute leadership over greater distances. There needs to be a comprehensive review from Navy and Marine Corps leadership to move into this new area.

This new extension of expeditionary maneuver warfare can begin with recent improvements already being fielded. One of the largest technological improvements to the MEU/ARG team is the delivery of the LPD-17 *San Antonio* class ship. This newest amphibious ship in the inventory provides a “unique capability improvement over older amphibious ships.”³⁴ With appropriate staffing the *San Antonio* class offers the ability to form a sustained MAGTF in a distributed or disaggregated concept. Part of this increased ability is due to an increased logistical capability but the main area of improvement is in the C2 facilities. The *San Antonio* class provides the embarked staff a “full landing force operations center (LFOC), tactical logistics (TacLog) center, and joint mission planning room.”³⁵ The only factor limiting the full utilization of this capability is the staffing of the MEU. Current staff structure is established to support one MAGTF commander and during limited periods surge to cover distributed operations. An increase to the command element staff capable of employing the capabilities in the command spaces of the new LPD will provide an enhanced capability to employ the MEU when aggregated or disaggregated.

Next the MEU/ARG will need to review the allocation of all forces assigned to determine whether they can support multiple smaller MAGTF-like deployments. Early in the case of 26th MEU’s disaggregation the requirement for additional forces is demonstrated by the requirement to send many enablers forward with the BLT to conduct operations in Afghanistan. This action resulted in the remaining portion of the MEU with

a limited capability to support full spectrum operations. If the Marine Corps is committed to supporting the ability to disaggregate the MEU then the capability sets provided by enablers must be reinforced. This will improve the capabilities of the command element to command and control the force and provide a force multiplication to the forces on the ground.

Assigning additional forces to the MEU/ARG team cannot solve the problems of disaggregation since Naval shipping has finite space available to embark personnel and equipment. This limitation requires the development of on-call packages that are trained to MEU standards and equipped with all mission essential equipment to quickly integrate into MEU operations. The ability to accomplish this requires that designated forces be identified before training commences and complete some type of training evolution to integrate into operations with the standing MEU structure. This capability provides increased flexibility since the commander can quickly reconstitute forces otherwise tasked. The decreasing requirements of OIF/OEF should present a unique opportunity to build this package before other operational requirements are levied.

Just as preceding periods of peace following protracted conflicts drove a discussion on the utility of expeditionary forces, the Marine Corps must anticipate this occurring once more. However, this time the discussion will not focus on the requirement for expeditionary forces but their structure and employment models. If the Marine Corps desires to keep the proven MAGTF construct then planning for disaggregated operations is wise. The future operational environment will necessitate disaggregation to support the varied mission required over an ever-increasing geographic operating area. This is clear from the history and foundations of the MEU as a

expeditionary force multiplier when embarked on Navy ships. This is because the MEU/ARG team contributes a unique capability grounded in the principles of war and ready to support a wide range of mission requirements. For these reasons, the recommendations must be instituted to effectively employ a MEU operating in a disaggregated construct.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Organization of the Marine Air-Ground Task Forces*, MCO 3120.3, December 27, 1962.
- ² The Amphibious Ready Group is normally built around a three-ship Naval formation (LHD/LHA, LPD, and LSD), which are discussed briefly in later portions of the paper.
- ³ Joseph Alexander and Merrill Bartlett. *Sea Soldiers in the Cold War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 62.
- ⁴ Alexander, 70-71.
- ⁵ Alexander, 70.
- ⁶ The naming convention for MAGTFs was changed to Marine Amphibious Force/Brigade/Unit in the mid-1960's because of the perception of expeditionary forces in Vietnam. This terminology changed back to expeditionary in the late 1980's. Both terms are used interchangeably based on the timeframe discussed.
- ⁷ Michael B. West, "Evolution of the Marine Expeditionary Brigade," (research paper, Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting, 2000), 8, <http://www.dtic.mil/>.
- ⁸ John C. Scharfen, "Views from PP&O: An Interview with LtGen Bernard E. Trainor." *Marine Corps Gazette*, September 1983: 39.
- ⁹ US Marine Corps, *Marine Air-Ground Task Force Master Plan 1990-2000*, Service Plan, July 7, 1989.
- ¹⁰ The range of special operations included: Maritime Interdiction Operations, Visit Board Search Seizure operations, Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel, *In Extremis* hostage rescue, and other specialized support activities like reconnaissance and surveillance necessary to support these mission.
- ¹¹ Harry Murdock, "MAU(SOC) A Powerful Maritime Force." *Marine Corps Gazette*, August, 1987, 70.
- ¹² Alexander, 175.
- ¹³ Department of the Navy. *...From the Sea*. Washington, DC: US Government, 1992.
- ¹⁴ Alexander, 176. Italics from original text.
- ¹⁵ *From the Sea*.
- ¹⁶ Department of the Navy. *Forward...From the Sea*. (Washington, DC: US Government, 1994), 4.
- ¹⁷ *Forward...From the Sea*, 4.
- ¹⁸ Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and MEU (Special Operations Capable) (SOC) Pre-deployment Training Program (PTP)*, MCO 3502.3B, April 30, 2012.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Amphibious Operations in the 21st Century*, (Quantico: US Marine Corps, 2009), 6.
- ²⁰ Marin Leed and Benjamin Moody. *Tough Choices: Sustaining Amphibious Capabilities' Contributions to Strategic Shaping* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), 2.
- ²¹ Congressional Budget Office. *An Analysis of the Navy's Amphibious Warfare Ships for Deploying Marines Overseas* (Budget Report, Washington: CBO, 2011), 9.
- ²² *Amphibious Operations in the 21st Century*, 9.

²³ Enablers generally refer to intelligence, communications, and other support personnel whose skills enable the execution of operations. Ray Gerber (26th MEU Intelligence Officer), in discussion with the author, January 2013.

²⁴ Mark Desens and Pete Pagano, KEARSARGE Amphibious Ready Group 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit Post Deployment Brief (PowerPoint presentation, 16th Annual Expeditionary Warfare Conference, Panama City, FL, 25 October, 2011).

²⁵ Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. *Marine Corps Operations*, MCDP 1-0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Marine Corps, 2001) Annex B. Appendix B of MCDP 1-0 lists nine principles: Mass, Objective, Offensive, Economy of Force, Maneuver, Unity of Command, Security, Surprise, and Simplicity.

²⁶ MCDP 1-0, B-1.

²⁷ MCDP 1-0, B-3.

²⁸ MCDP 1-0, B-4.

²⁹ Leed, 7-9.

³⁰ Leed, 9.

³¹ Leed, 3 and 10-25.

³² Leed, 11.

³³ *Amphibious Operations in the 21st Century*, 12.

³⁴ Tye Wallace, "The 21st Century MEU." *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 2011: 72.

³⁵ Wallace, 73.