

AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS

## MEU(SOC): The Jewel in the Crown of Our Corps

by LtCol Thomas W. Williams

*The Nation has no assets that can equal the flexible responsiveness of its forward-deployed, special operations capable Marine expeditionary units. These are capabilities that should be preserved and enhanced. Adaptive force packaging would replace these valuable ARG-MEU(SOC) assets with less capable, jury-rigged forces—a backward and unacceptable approach to the post-Cold War era.*

As every Marine is painfully aware, the ongoing demands for more "peace dividends" continue to reduce budgets and end strengths. The adverse effects are felt in many areas and have begun taking a toll on combat effectiveness and readiness. One important area being adversely impacted is the Corps' forward deployed amphibious forces—its special operations capable Marine expeditionary units, or MEU(SOC)s. Although it is true that we must focus our scarce resources to accomplish the tasks of the future more economically, we cannot knowingly or willingly allow the one force proven capable of reacting in time of crisis around the globe to become incapable of accomplishing the full spectrum of possible missions.

This article is intended to focus on the importance of our MEU(SOC) program, challenge the Adaptive Force Package Concept, provide lessons learned resulting from the recent employment of that concept, and recommend some needed MEU(SOC) enhancements.

Not since our forbears developed America's amphibious doctrine, have Marines been faced with more of a challenge than the one they must now accept in this world of political uncertainty, military instability, and budgetary constraint. It is clear that in crafting " . . . From the Sea" our senior Navy/Marine leadership had the necessary vision to set a true course for us to follow into the next millennium. This "Rosetta stone" bears the modern lan-

guage of "amphibiosity" that today's generation of Marines must continue to perfect.

The fact that our MEU(SOC)s and maritime prepositioning ships (MPS) are the keys for naval forward presence and crisis response cannot be challenged.

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The effectiveness of these concepts can best be seen in the numerous times a MEU has been used in time of crisis and the success of MPS during the Gulf War. Employment of the MEU to establish a lodgment that is immediately followed and reinforced by offloading the MPS, vividly demonstrates the versatility of our rapid deployment concept. If to plagiarize is the ultimate in literary compliment, then the adoption of a similar concept by the Army and the Air Force, i.e., the floating ammo dump concept, is indeed recognition of collective naval wisdom and forethought.

The value of air power and air support in modern warfare is beyond question, and there is no more responsive expeditionary airfield than the U.S. Navy's carriers. Their role in projection of combat power ashore is critical, and there is no better air force in the world for putting iron on target in close proximity to ground forces. Furthermore, as

the United States continues to withdraw from established shore bases throughout the world, our naval forces, in particular aircraft carriers, become that much more important for the protection of American interests abroad and for participation in joint/ combined coalition operations in the event of regional contingencies. Marines have long advocated a much closer marriage of the carrier battle group (CVBG) and amphibious ready group (ARG), not just during employment but also during workup training in order to better ensure interoperability. But carriers are only a part of the naval power projection force, and they are not a substitute for amphibious ships nor the basis for building a viable alternative to forward deployed MEUs. Now is not the time to hamstring or to debilitate our MEUs. CVBGs and ARG/MEUs are the best providers of forward presence that our joint Services have to offer. Adaptive force packaging implies otherwise by proposing alternatives that would weaken the forces and eliminate the forward deployment of full MEUs. A former MEU(SOC) commander recently said that MEUs are the "jewel in the crown of our Corps," a capability of irreplaceable importance to the Nation.

Putting the MEU's utility into an historical perspective may help us appreciate its value as an important vehicle for peacetime forward presence and crisis response. A paper recently pub-

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lished by the Center for Naval Analyses points out that historically "peacetime military effort supports one of three basic tasks—preparing for war, responding to crisis with action, or advancing U.S. interests without the use of force." There is no better military force to fulfill these tasks than a properly task organized MEU(SOC), embarked with its equipment and sustainability aboard a full-size squadron of amphibious ships.

In the past 25 to 30 years, this team has been the most consistently productive of the Nation's force options for rapid reaction in time of crisis or national emergency. A 6-month MEU(SOC) deployment presents to each Marine the best practical education in learning the skills of a combined arms force forward deployed in preparation for war. When the time to respond to crisis with action arises, as it did in Grenada and Somalia, or to advance U.S. interests without the use of force, as in Liberia and Bangladesh, the MEU has never failed us. For five decades it has been a significant contributor to world peace by its global agility and presence.

The formula and method for task organizing the MEU(SOC) for deployment isn't something that just recently happened. On the contrary, it is a concept that has been developed over time, using lessons learned that have been passed down to successive generations of Marines and sailors aspiring to improve their quality and combat readiness.

The concept of adaptive force packaging involves replacing the traditional MEU with a small Marine force aboard carriers or other alternate shipping. Such an approach puts Marines and sailors at great risk when they are forced to deploy on carriers without the requisite personnel and equipment necessary to successfully accomplish the mission. Our carriers are not designed to accommodate embarkation of Marines nor are they capable of rapid employment of embarked Marines as compared with amphibious ships. The only difference between *forward presence* and *crisis* for a MEU when deployed is a firefight. Therefore, once the ARG, with the MEU embarked, sails from either the east or west coast, it must carry with it a preponderance of the resources needed if committed to a crisis. Peacetime service doesn't mean more response time. Without 15 days sustainability and the

requisite mobility and firepower assets, the MEU is no better equipped than a Caribbean cruise ship when faced with a heated crisis. Of paramount importance to the proper preparation and deployment of a combat ready MEU(SOC) is the amphibious ship mix. Recent lessons learned from the deployment of adaptive force packages clearly show how not having the proper mix of amphibious ships can adversely affect ground mobility, firepower, and sustainability. Having the proper amphibious ship mix avoids the potential for catastrophe.

Some valuable lessons learned can be drawn from the recent deployment of the 22d MEU(SOC) as part of Joint Task

age on the amphibious ships meant that mobility ashore was going to be more difficult and more dependent on organic helicopter lift to resupply units in the field. This reduced the flexibility for operational options ashore, overtasked the helos, and drastically restricted mobility. Fourth, the additional reduction of engineer equipment meant that the MEU lacked the capability to provide much assistance in a disaster relief situation without augmentation. This further adversely impacted countermine ground mobility operations. Fifth, employment of Marines from a carrier limits employment options to air only. Not only does it increase dependence on good flying weather for successful operations, it is especially critical when a rapid buildup of combat power ashore is important.

A more recent illogical twist in the Adaptive Force Package Concept, one that is even more difficult to explain, is that although the next east coast MEU will deploy in 4 amphibious ships, it too, is being limited to embarking only 1,790

Marines, the same number as 22d MEU had in 3 ships; far less than the number required to support a battalion-size landing team in its full range of conventional operations. How many lives are we willing to endanger by not having the necessary Marines, firepower, and materiel forward deployed with the MEU? The MEU commander should be responsible for developing the task organization of his MEU in concert with the identified mission requirements of the receiving Unified Commander in Chief (CinC) for his theater of operations. One helicopter short, as in the aborted DESERT ONE Operation, is not how MEUs should deploy. Marines fight as balanced combined arms teams and allowing the balance to be driven by concerns other than Marine combat capability is folly.

More important, the present Department of Defense (DoD) policy regarding force level reductions is flawed. A more appropriate solution is for DoD, the Unified CinCs, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Congress to reevaluate the military needs of the Nation for the future regarding global forward presence and crisis response. They should then prioritize the drawdown so that naval forces are able to absorb the additional

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Group (JTG) *America*. First, this adaptive force packaging concept involved confining the MEU to three amphibious ships and embarking a portion of it on a carrier. This meant that carrier and amphibious groups had to operate in close proximity to each other in order to get the full combat capability of the MEU(SOC). These joint operations are not always possible, as was demonstrated with the separate employment of the ARG/MEU and USS *America* to Somalia. Second, the limitation in organic fire support (only four M198 artillery tubes) meant that if the MEU was committed in either a Bosnia or Somalia scenario, it would have been without adequate fire support until reinforced. In the case of Bosnia, the most immediate support would be close air support (CAS), but the rules of engagement (ROE) may not support the use of CAS. The MEU would thus assume a greater risk if actually committed to combat operations. Its capabilities and the spectrum of conflicts or scenarios to which it was able and ready to respond was reduced. True enough, it could be reinforced given time and proper circumstances, but the advantage of ready forward deployment was diminished. Third, the reduction in the number of trucks due to a shortage of vehicle square stor-

burden without requiring shore-based facilities. Seeking "equitable" force level reductions isn't the answer.

As beneficial as our MEUs have been, there is—as in everything—still room for improvement. In order to increase utility of the MEU(SOC)s, I recommend adoption of the following enhancements:

- First, in order to improve continuity and to lessen turbulence within the MEU command elements, I recommend that in those cases where a MEU commander will only deploy once with his MEU, his executive officer should be a selected colonel who will "fleet-up" and deploy as the commanding officer on the next deployment. This improvement should be relatively easy to implement by Headquarters Marine Corps.

- Second, MEU(SOC)s should have a fifth element added to their table of organization (T/O). This element would be called the reconnaissance, intelligence, and direct action support element (RI&DASE). It would be formed by consolidation of all reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence assets within the MEU, to include the Navy SEALs and such assets in the battalion landing team, into a permanent element under a single commander. The purpose of the RI&DASE is to better focus the ARG/MEU intelligence resources in developing the reconnaissance and surveillance plan and to ensure the proper focus on the enemy or threat. A common thread running through most every contingency plan is the requirement for some level of reconnaissance and surveillance. Therefore, for training, embarkation, and planning purposes, it only makes good sense to consolidate these scarce resources.

- Third, it has long been common knowledge that a MEU lacks staff officer depth for conducting long-range deliberate planning and for providing meaningful liaison teams during crisis or during training operations. An enhancement that will improve this situation and supports "jointness" is to

add an S-5 plans section to the MEU T/O. This section ideally would consist of a Marine officer-in-charge, an Army officer, an Air Force officer, and a clerk.

- Fourth, one of the more significant lessons learned by deployed MEUs is that there are times when the MEU headquarters needs to transition ashore for command and control purposes. This would be especially important during humanitarian or disaster relief operations. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for the MEU to operate during the initial phase of Operation PROVIDE COMFORT considering the distance it was required to deploy inland. The com-

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mand element (CE) isn't equipped with sufficient communications, mobility, or tentage to support that requirement. In the past when a MEU CE did transition ashore, it was a jury-rigged affair. A way to correct this is to conduct a MEU(SOC) mission area analysis to identify the true deficiency and determine what is needed to satisfy this requirement for all our MEUs. For example, what level of the Fleet Mobile Operational Command Center does the MEU require in order to enter the Defense Communications System while operating from ashore. Solving the mobility problem could be more difficult since vehicle storage space in the embarkation plan is always at a premium. I believe this too can be resolved if we employ a rational approach and use MSSG assets to augment the command element and keep the tentage and ancillary equipment to a minimum.

- Finally, one of the best things we did during the Gulf War was media management. This can be a combat multiplier in a strategic sense. I recommend that each MEU T/O include one public affairs officer and two enlisted

clerks to manage the media and educate Marines. There are numerous collateral duties that these Marines can perform when not involved in their primary duties.

In summary, while we must continue to conduct as much routine ground and aviation training as needed to be proficient in our combat skills, all else should be subjugated to the preparation of our MEU(SOC) deployments and their readiness. We must strengthen them in every way we can. We must deploy our best. They are the immediate forward-deployed enabling naval force that will permit the war-fighting MEFs to follow, should a crisis escalate or the need arise. As the jewel in the crown of our Corps, the MEU has demonstrated numerous times that it is the force of choice and a national asset. Although there are some changes and enhancements that can be made to the MEU(SOC) program, the Adaptive Force Package Concept is not a step in the right direction. It neither improves nor enhances but rather debilitates our capabilities.

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