

Long-Range Extended Duration Operations

An overview

by LtCol Christopher Carolan, USMC(Ret)

Long-range extended duration (L-RED) operations is a tactical employment concept that seeks to further develop the capability and capacity of the MAGTF to employ ground forces at greater range, for longer periods of time, and with the necessary assets to operate as an independent maneuver element. While the forward employed ground force will usually be the main effort in this construct, those MAGTF elements providing support will be critical to the success of this type of operation.

Any discussion of amphibious capabilities development needs to address the antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) issue. This challenge includes not only physical obstacles and weapons, but political and moral impediments not previous part of the equation. While this may appear to be somewhat daunting it needs to be remembered that guarding

>LtCol Carolan is a retired infantry officer. Currently, he is a government service employee working in the Experiment Division of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory.

an entire littoral area is an enormous undertaking for any nation or belligerent entity. Any A2/AD defensive system will consist of surfaces and gaps. The doctrine that outlines the Marine Corps approach to A2/AD already exists and is found in *MCDP 1*:

Put simply, surfaces are hard spots—enemy strengths—and gaps are soft spots enemy weaknesses. We avoid enemy strength and focus our efforts against enemy weakness with the object of penetrating the enemy system since pitting strength against weakness reduces casualties and is more likely to

yield decisive results. Whenever possible, we exploit existing gaps. Failing that, we create gaps.¹

Finding or creating gaps in a defensive system is no small feat. It is not done without a very good idea of what needs to go through that gap and what is expected on the other side. The *in order to* portion of the mission statement given to unit(s) finding or creating the gap is vital to the entire process. The A2/AD issue will require the joint force to develop complementary capabilities to a level of sophistication not previously required. While every component in the solution is important, that phase which determines overall success must be the first developed. Just as in planning a raid where “actions at the objective form the basis for all other planning;”² a well-defined idea of what needs to be done once the A2/AD system is breached is vital to making sure the overall sets of solutions accomplish the desired end state. This is by no means an easy task or exact science. Without a specific mission, it is difficult to develop an idea of what will need to be done, but it still must be done to move capabilities forward in the hope that the not completely right solution at least moves the institution closer to hitting the target.

The primary role of the Marine Corps in the A2/AD fight is to establish a presence on contested ground that fundamentally changes the dynamic of the engagement. This presence cannot be fleeting or transitory, something an adversary can simply wait out. It must be versatile, cunning, and that most challenging of virtues, patient. At times, it will need to be somewhat irregular in composition and capabilities while at other times fairly conventional. This



They have been inserted forward and will be resupplied from a seabase. (Photo by Cpl Jesse Johnson.)

presence will need to last as long as is needed to accomplish the mission. In other words, it needs to be more than a raid.

One factor that has emerged as a constant in almost all combat capability development efforts over the past few decades is the need to be able to operate at longer ranges. Regardless of the threat to shipping, launching operations from over-the-horizon provides a significant tactical advantage. The Marine Corps has experience with and is capable of conducting long-range operations—primarily short duration, vertical raids. This expertise, developed by the ARG/MEU teams over the last 20 years, has laid the foundation for the next step in sea-based operations. While amphibious raid operations can be very effective and significantly alter certain situations, a form of maneuver that provides for a greater depth and breadth of capabilities, flexibility, and operational resolve is needed. L-RED operations is an initiative intended to refine current capabilities and develop new ones to better operate in this manner.

The first step in developing a greater L-RED operations capability is to insure there is a common understanding of the terms used in the development of the idea. This is a challenge as the practical meanings of many words vary depending on the situation, terrain, and even the unit using the term; long-range means something very different to a rifle company than to an F/A-18 squadron. Accepting that phrases like *long-range* and *extended duration* cannot be defined in absolute terms, there is still a need to establish some basic parameters to facilitate concept development. To establish a common understanding, the terms used are based on the capabilities of the MAGTF and more specifically a notional MEU³ embarked on a three ship ARG.

Range is, of course, understood to be associated with distance. In this case, the term long-range is used, so this requires that short and medium-range first be defined. As a starting point, *short range* is defined as being between zero and 24 kilometers. Within this area, units can be supported by both GCE and ACE assets⁴ (without the need to

use special ammunition). Medium-range is from 25 kilometers to 200 kilometers (108 nautical miles). Out to the extent of medium-range current ACE aircraft can be employed without the need to establish forward arming and refueling points. Therefore, MAGTF operations taking place beyond 200 kilometers from the supporting unit are considered to be long-range.

The term extended duration is more difficult to define in specific terms. Duration is related to time, so it would be logical to assume an operation lasting past a certain point would be of extended duration, but this is too broad. The term extended duration is used to distinguish the operation from a long-range raid. An L-RED operation will have a unit being resupplied from a seabase and executing

thorough planning, well-coordinated maneuver, and detailed target development associated with a raid are required to infiltrate the adversary's defenses and establish a viable force on the other side. Another key similarity is exercising at least initial command and control of the force through a designated mission commander who is supported by all elements of the MAGTF. Additionally, there is a reinforcing QRF and TRAP requirement at least during the initial phase of the operation and again at different times throughout the employment of the force. While the unit is intended to remain for an extended period, it will eventually withdraw and return to ship. An amphibious raid is defined as "a type of amphibious operation involving swift incursion into or

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missions developed and planned after it has already been inserted forward. These conditions are, in fact, ordinary to formations engaged in many types of military operations. What is different is the range at which the unit is employed and supported. How long a MAGTF can or should sustain an L-RED operation has yet to be established. This will take wargaming, experimentation, and pushing units during exercises. This is more than a question of how long a reinforced company can operate in an isolated area of responsibility; this is a MAGTF capability and it needs to be analyzed in the context of overall naval and joint force requirements. This includes factors such as maintaining a standing tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel (TRAP) capability and/or a quick reaction force (QRF) in support of a larger joint mission.

An L-RED operation has many similarities to an amphibious raid, specifically a helicopter-borne/vertical raid. The

temporary occupation of an objective followed by a planned withdrawal."⁵ In strictly literal terms one could classify an L-RED operation as simply a very long raid, but in practical terms, this would fail to address the significant differences between the two types of operations.

Most of what L-RED requires is not new to the Marine Corps. Units commonly operate for extended periods of time, often at considerable distances from their headquarters, and manage logistics as a normal unit function. Operations in Central Command demonstrated on a regular basis how conventional Marine units could operate with a wide range of different capabilities. In addition, the ACE routinely delivers ground forces to objectives hundreds of miles from the pickup point. What is different is that L-RED operations combine these capabilities into force packages to be employed in an immature theater with a credible A2/AD



We will need to operate from more distant ranges for longer periods. (Photo by SSgt Edward Guevara.)

threat and supported from a seabase. In essence, the L-RED operations concept combines certain established capabilities with emerging ideas to create a form of maneuver that can only be done by the United States Marine Corps.

L-RED operations will require the development of capabilities specifically focused on functioning in an immature theater. While the Service has experienced a significant broadening of military capabilities since 2003, progress in the development of amphibious warfare has been slow and in some areas completely absent. While Iraq and Afghanistan presented the U.S. military with many challenges, supporting and sustaining a force from a seabase was not one of them. Operations in the latter half of both Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom took place in very mature theaters. This manifested itself in established digital communications networks, the most effective casualty evacuation umbrella ever created, and a logistics effort that made the U.S. forces the most well supported in the entire history of warfare. In an immature theater, there will be none of these things. These and other framework functions will need to come and be sustained from the sea.

The biggest hurdle to establishing a viable L-RED capability is logistics.

This has been made even more difficult, in a good way, by the high standards of medical care, availability of supplies, and the performance of logistics units in Iraq and Afghanistan. Delivering units to a landing zone 200 nautical miles from a ship cannot be classified as easy, but it is done on a regular basis; closing with and destroying the enemy is the Marine Corps' *raison d'être*. It is what happens next that will test the institution. Casualties will need to be evacuated and many treated in flight. Supplies will need to be delivered, not in bulk, but in usable packages. The unit will need electrical power and a lot of water—a lot of water. Without the ability to maintain a forward employed unit in a high state of combat readiness, a unit conducting an L-RED operation goes from “being a tactical asset to a strategic liability.”⁶ Few question the Marine Corps capability to plan and conduct a long-range operation. While there is always room for innovation and improvement, the basics are covered. It is the capacity of the MAGTF to sustain an extended duration operation, supported almost exclusively by the ACE, which requires additional study, development, and experimentation.

While logistics may be the most challenging, L-RED operations will require innovation and development in

every function of warfighting. Having a requirement for innovation is a good thing for a military Service. Some may contend the Corps should not focus a great deal of resources on a niche capability with a low probability of being used. But this argument can be made for almost any type of operation. More importantly, working toward an L-RED capability will establish a higher standard of military aptitude and serve to develop the resiliency and sophistication needed by the MAGTF to operate in complex and austere environments. The skills needed to conduct these types are very demanding. They require units to train with a higher degree of sophistication while at the same time demanding a greater level of individual and small unit proficiency. Additionally, staffs will need to develop support plans in greater detail, with more flexibility, and be more responsive to the needs of the forward units. All of this is good for the Marine Corps regardless of the specific situation being addressed.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1 (MCDP 1), Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 20 June 1997), Chapter 4, 92.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-43.1, Raid Operations*, (Washington, DC: 23 December 2002), Chapter 3, 3-1.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Orders 3120.9C, Policy for Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) and Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable) MEU(SOC)*, (Washington, DC: 4 August 2009), Enclosure (1).
4. Based on the notional organization of a battalion landing team, which includes an artillery battery and the range of a M777 firing the standard M107 projectile.
5. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-02, Amphibious Operations*, (Washington, DC: 18 July 2014), I-2.
6. Col. V.J. Goulding, USMC (Ret), discussions with the author, September 2012.

