

# SEA DRAGON

## The Marine Corps Service-Level Experimentation Campaign Plan

by Staff, Experiment Division, MCWL

**P**reparing for Future Conflict  
The *2017 National Security Strategy* and the *2018 National Defense Strategy* posit that we are currently operating in a global geopolitical and military environment that is more complex and volatile than recent memory can attest to. Specifically, in the *National Defense Strategy*, the Secretary of Defense declared that interstate competition, not terrorism, is the primary concern of U.S. national security. China and Russia leverage all elements of national power to manipulate other nations while continuing to expand their influence in geo-strategic areas of the world.

Recognizing the fact that our strategic competitors have made rapid advances in defense technology and contributed to its rapid proliferation, our Commandant stated publicly that the “Marine Corps is not optimized to meet the bold demands of the *National Defense Strategy*.” Gen David H. Berger further clarified that his “number-one priority as Commandant of the Marine Corps is to design a force suited to the reality of the pacing threat as prescribed in the *National Defense Strategy*.” Gen Berger acknowledged that significant change is required and stated in his planning guidance that the Marine Corps must be “prepared to meet the demands of the Naval Fleet in executing current and emerging operational naval concepts.”

The *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* provides us with a clear framework to address the rise of strategic competitors, acknowledging that any future conflict will require a joint force that can fight and win across the spectrum of conflict. Moreover, the Marine Corps recognizes the absolute requirement to focus on our role as a naval expedition-

**“The Lab will serve as the focal point and integrating ground for new concepts, capabilities and technologies ... we will only have one integrated Service-level wargaming and experimentation campaign plan led by the warfighting laboratory.”**

**—Commandant’s Planning Guidance**

**The Experiment Division conducts planning, execution, analysis and transition of concept-based experiments in order to develop new tactics, techniques and procedures, recommend organizational and training enhancements, and inform program requirements.**

ary force to support the fleet and the joint force maritime component commanders. This requires experimentation to test and refine our current naval operating concepts (*Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* and *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*) as well as to determine what “distributed operations” and “stand-in forces” will look like in the years ahead.

The Commandant tasked the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) to serve as the focal point and integrating ground for new concepts, capabilities, and technologies. Consistent with that guidance, and in conjunction with the Navy and the Fleet Marine Force (FMF), MCWL is developing an integrated Service-Level Experimentation Campaign Plan (SLECP) intended to provide focus, synchronization, and unity of effort. We call that plan SEA DRAGON.

### SLECP at a Glance

*The main idea.* The Marine Corps

will annually conduct a threat-based advanced warfighting experiment (AWE) to address key Service capability gaps designated by CMC. These events will be coordinated with the Navy so that they are synchronized with the Fleet Experimentation Plan (FLEX). The AWEs will be organized by MCWL but rotated among the MEFs so that each of the latter will have the opportunity to leverage a major experiment once every three years. While the Service-level objectives will take precedence, the Marine Corps component commanders (MARFORs) and their subordinate MEF commanders will be able to incorporate their own experimentation objectives. The goal is to achieve a balance between top-down and bottom-up innovation. Toward that end, MCWL will assist the MEFs in developing their experimentation pathways and coordinating with the Office of Naval Research, Navy Warfare Development Command, and the various Navy warfare development centers.



**Exercises will rotate between MEFs on a three-year cycle. (Photo by LCpl Angel Travis.)**

*Working by, with, and through the FMF.* Concept development teams (CDTs) from MCWL will assist the host MARFOR/MEF in designing the AWE to ensure CMC objectives are realized, incorporate MARFOR/MEF objectives, facilitate technology insertion, and ensure effective data collection and analysis. The SLECP will also include events that support the MEF in preparation for their AWE as pathways events. While MCWL may conduct additional experiments as required, MCWL's priority will be to accomplish all experimentation objectives by, with, and through the FMF. As experiments inform the Future Force Assessment and the Marine Corps Capabilities Investment Plan, all experiment data will be collected and input into the FLEX Information Management System.

### **SLECP Methodology**

Within the context of our extant naval operating concepts, Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, Marine Corps experiments will seek to contribute to the common goal of enabling a naval expeditionary force capable of deterring malign behavior and, when necessary, fighting inside the adversary's weapons engagement zone to facilitate sea control or sea denial in support of the fleet and joint force.

With this in mind, MCWL will implement the SLECP and support threat-based FMF experimentation through numerous pathways to include regular guidance, coordination, CDT presence, administrative assistance, and naval integration.

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*Threat based, integrated with a main effort.* To facilitate FMF experimentation in support of Service objectives, MCWL will outline threat-based future force experimentation in the annual SLECP message based on direct CMC guidance, the requirements of the future force, emerging concepts, and identified capability gaps. Until otherwise directed by the CMC, Indo-Pacific Command challenges will be the priority for experiment scenario development, and III

MEF will remain the Marine Corps' main effort for determining Marine Corps experimentation priorities.

*Naval integration.* The quarterly Maritime Working Group and the Marine Corps Forces Command force synchronization conferences will be the primary venues for synchronizing CMC and MARFOR/MEF experimentation priorities with the Navy's. The MCWL CDTs will stay abreast of emerging concepts, wargames, capability developments, and experiments to engage effectively in these forums and inform revisions to the SLECP. The MCWL CDTs will coordinate with Navy counterparts seeking to synchronize our efforts with the Navy FLEX Plan, Navy Fleet Battle Problem Campaign Plan, and the Office of Naval Research Experimentation Campaign Plan.

### **SLECP End State**

The desired end state of the SLECP is an integrated naval experimentation plan that both shapes and supports MARFOR/MEF experimentation in coordination with the Navy, and informs combat development across the Fleet and FMF in support of common objectives. Lessons learned will be captured and shared broadly across the force to speed the pace of learning while reducing redundancies and inefficiencies.

### **Conclusion**

Only by testing ourselves in a realistic and future-oriented series of experiments can we hope to meet the significant challenges of tomorrow. We must do this by harnessing the innovation and knowledge resident within the FMF to build the future force envisioned by the 38th Commandant. Using this integrated, Service-level campaign plan, MCWL will help the FMF—operating as an arm of the Fleet—bring the Marine Corps' future force to life, better positioned to deter our adversaries and win our Nation's future battles.

