

Hindsight Is 20/20

Why a tour at Marine Corps Systems Command is worth your time

by Maj Neal T. Jones

The following fictional vignette takes place in the summer of 2026 on an atoll somewhere in the South China Sea.

The weather is warm but pleasant, thanks to the prevailing southwesterly winds this time of year, and LtCol Johnson—Commanding Officer of the 2nd Marine Littoral Regiment's Combat Team—sits quietly observing the crystal blue water surrounding his command post. Although deep in thought, Johnson lets slip a chuckle when he considers how different combat in the South China Sea is compared to his last combat tour in Afghanistan. He recalls how the water in the Boghra Irrigation Canals or the Helmand River pales in comparison to the warm tropical blue waters of the South Pacific. The People's Liberation Army Navy and China's hidden Navy—the Chinese Maritime Militia—are proving far more capable than the Taliban and their proxy militias. Johnson's infantry units are smaller and more specialized than those he led as a lieutenant; however, they are more mature, equipped with better gear, have better spatial awareness of the battlefield, and are more comfortable making decisions absent guidance from the brass. Now his thoughts shift to himself. Johnson knows that he is better prepared for competition in this war when compared to his previous combat experiences, and a tour at Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) is largely credited for this.

After serving as a rifle company commander, Johnson begrudgingly followed the guidance of senior mentors and sought orders to MCSC. Johnson reasoned that a tour in Quantico would place him among the change makers behind the modernization efforts taking place across the Naval Service—an experience that he figured would pay divi-

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dends when fighting future adversaries. Throughout his MCSC tour, he gained institutional knowledge through collaboration and engagement with other supporting establishment commands and cultivated his understanding of the systems that he and his Marines would

employ against their adversary. Additionally, the tour at MCSC afforded him the opportunity to take advantage of the onsite resources offered by the Marine Corps University. In doing so, he maintained his tactical prowess and also cultivated his role as an administrator—two skills required of any field grade officer that is worth one's salt. Most notably, Johnson's experiences working alongside and collaborating with Combat Development and Integration Command, the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, science and technology community stakeholders, Training and Education Command, Marine Corps University, a myriad of active duty FMF units, and industry



Competition in the South China Sea will be drastically different than our Nation's most recent conflicts. (Photo by Marine Corps photo by LCpl Brienna Tuck.)

introduced him to new perspectives. These new perspectives strengthened his position on the importance of inclusive teams, increased his desire to promote greater diversity within his organization, and enhanced his understanding of effective communication techniques, ultimately better informing his commander's guidance and the way in which he managed his unit. As he sat on the atoll ruminating about the past he realized that his tour at MCSC was worth its weight in gold. And, like the flip of a switch, Johnson's thoughts transition back to the mission and patrol occurring later tonight.

Johnson's unit is spread out across many atolls in the first island chain. From a command and control perspective, Johnson's concerns center on the disposition of his forces, but he reasons that if he has a hard time keep tracking of all his unit's positions then surely the enemy would too—at least that is the running joke between he and his sergeant major. Johnson readies his gear and prepares for the night's mission—a fifteen-mile movement over open ocean to Outpost Lava.

Outpost Lava is located along a maritime chokepoint often congested with commercial fishing vessels. Therefore, Lava's position allows Marines to monitor commercial vessel movements in key maritime terrain, apprise the Navy's 7th Fleet of flagged military vessels operating in the area—in some cases, even submarines—and support the Navy's response to any unsafe or intimidating maneuvers that the Chinese Maritime Militia direct toward commercial shipping. The squad of Marines manning Outpost Lava are making final preparations to receive an Unmanned Assault Amphibious Vehicle (U-AAV) equipped with a newly fielded Low Cost Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Swarming Technology (LOCUST) system. It is now standard practice to maintain radio silence for

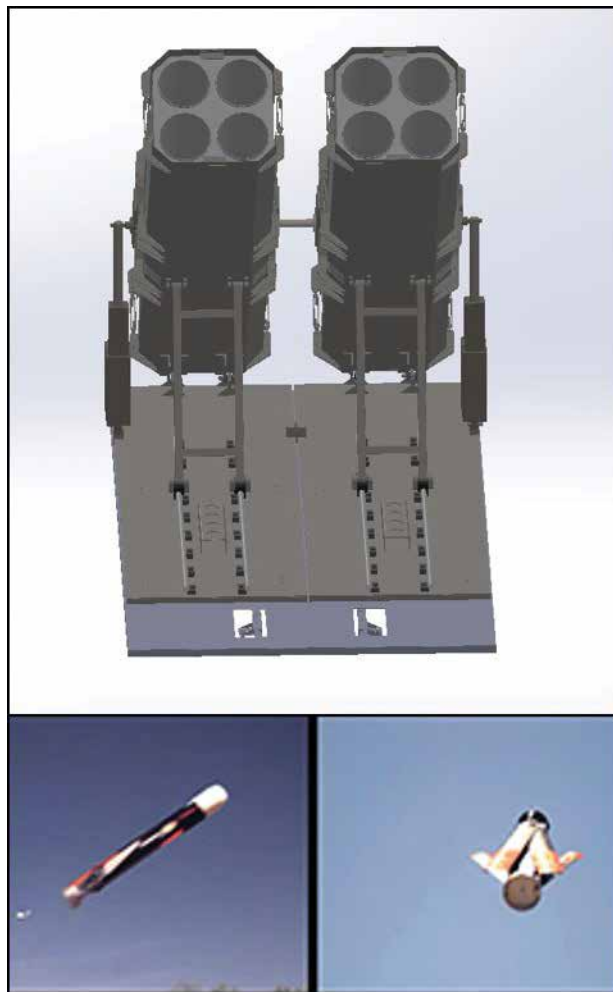
24–48 hour intervals—to avoid enemy detection—and Johnson's company commander informs him that Outpost Lava missed its second designated communications check. Johnson suspects that his Marines are likely okay as they are led by the best staff sergeant in the battalion, but old habits die hard—

as the base station for UAVs launched through the roof hatches. The U-AAV can fit several four-shot launchers in the crew compartment. Moreover, he worked with some of the wicked-smart civilian engineers behind LOCUST at MCSC and saw some of the prototypes in action. When placed in the hands of creative and disruptive SNCO's, Johnson knows LOCUST can be a force multiplier for their unit.

After sunset, Johnson and five members of his command group quietly board a Combat Rubber Raiding Craft and set off for their destination. Arriving in vicinity of Outpost Lava under the cover of darkness, Johnson and his command team conceal their Combat Rubber Raiding Craft in a palm grove and then encounter a small contingent of Marine sentries. After traditional challenge and password procedures, Johnson is led to the staff sergeant in charge of Outpost Lava. Johnson steps into a 3D-printed shelter that is indistinguishable from its jungle surroundings, and the staff sergeant provides Johnson a concise battlefield update brief and the concept of operations plan for the U-AAV. Johnson muses to himself that he is fortunate to have staff sergeants of such high caliber in his unit.

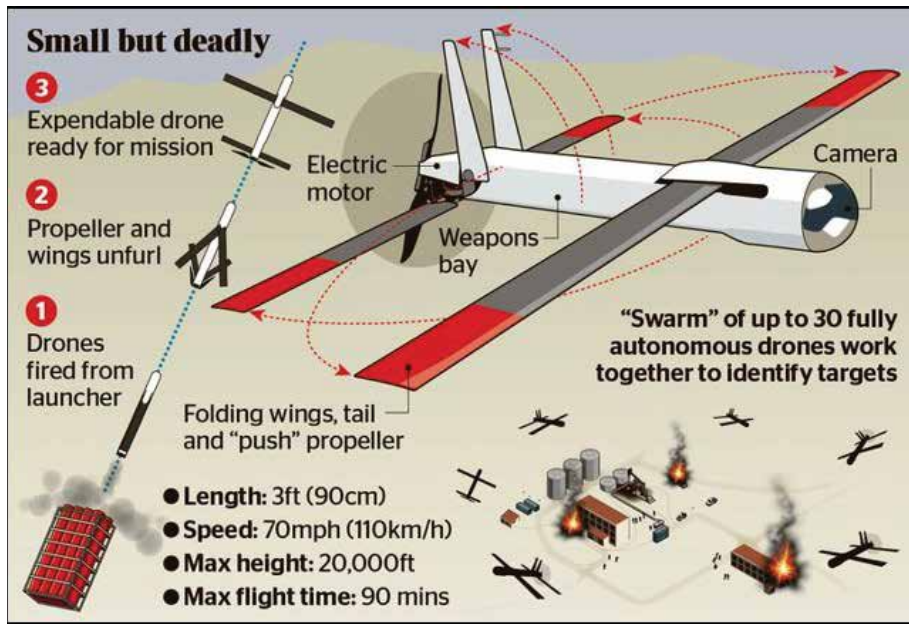
A few hours later, the U-AAV arrives at Outpost Lava on schedule and is now a game changing capability in the hands of a forward most unit. Johnson watches outpost Lava's designated systems operator conduct operational and functional checks of the U-AAV—Johnson

is impressed by the 23-year-old corporal's understanding of such a complex system. Johnson knows that any further time he and his command team spend at Lava will only increase the outpost's physical and electromagnetic signature—not something that the staff sergeant in charge will accommodate or allow. After final pleasantries and a firm handshake with the staff sergeant,



A U-AAV serving as the base station for UAV's launched through the MK154 roof hatches is a way that the Marine Corps can utilize legacy systems in creative non-traditional methods. (Photo by Naval Surface Warfare Center.)

Johnson wants to go check on his Marines. Additionally, Johnson wants to satisfy his personal curiosity and see the U-AAV in action. Specifically, how well the U-AAV provides intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and aerial-delivered munition capabilities to a remote outpost in his area of operations. From his time serving in MCSC, Johnson knows that the U-AAV can serve



LOCUST provides an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) or munition capability. (Photo by Naval Surface Warfare Center.)

Johnson and his command team depart before dawn and return to their command post.

Following debriefs, Johnson cleans his weapon, resets his gear, devours his morning food ration, and retires to his

beachside sleeping quarters. Once in the comfort of his hammock, Johnson's thoughts cycle between his mission, his Marines, and home. He knows that his Marines are well trained and led. Although he obsesses over his unit's overall mission, he compartmentalizes that for now and settles on thoughts of home. Johnson has been deployed for over six months and will be returning home soon. He is looking forward to attending the Saturday morning soccer games of his two daughters and volunteering at their schools. Luckily enough, Johnson had the time and was able to attend family activities and volunteer a few years ago during his tour at MCSC. In a couple months he will be home, move across country for another supporting establishment tour in Quantico, and be able to do it again, but for now, all that matters is preparing for the next patrol.

