Ideas & Issues (Future Force Design & Modernization)

Change is Hard, and No Less So in the Marine Corps

The imperative to modernize
by LtGen David J. Furness

Every rifleman knows you are always checking out the next firing position, terrain feature, and axis of advance. Similarly, the Marine Corps continues to look beyond its current position to identify future challenges, potential missions, and likely adversaries across the globe. This constant probing allows the Service to see and understand a new strategic environment as well as significant changes in the character of war. Every Marine also knows that when the strategic situation changes, concepts and capabilities ought to follow suit. As Marine warfighting doctrine states, “war is both timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously.”

The vision and courage to change is how we keep our sacred promise to be “most ready when the Nation is least ready.” Force Design 2030 serves as the main effort of our transformation to confront the changing operating environment. It is informed by the rapid advancements of America’s potential adversaries, the proliferation of sensors and long-range precision strike weapons, and information-related capabilities that present challenges to the Naval Services. Force Design 2030 embraces the naval character, expeditionary nature, crisis response mindset, and warfighting ethos of the Marine Corps. It forces change where needed most while maintaining sufficient capability to ensure the Service meets the challenges of the present.

While the United States fought simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, China, amongst numerous other potential foes, made major advancements in their military capabilities and developed concepts designed to counter U.S. military strengths. As a result, the Marine Corps has a brief window of opportunity and a moral obligation to our Nation to transform itself for future warfare. The Service is leveraging its most important asset—the tough, creative, and initiative-driven Marine—along with advances in technology to prepare for these looming challenges. Accordingly, new concepts and tactics must reflect new battle-changing technologies and, ultimately, the changing character of war. Thus, we are in the midst of a long-overdue transformation rooted in our combat history and traditions.

Our History of Change

The history of the Marine Corps is filled with inspiring examples describing how the Service became the fighting force that America has grown so fond of. The Continental Marines manned guns, participated in boarding and landing parties, and ensured good order and discipline aboard Navy ships. Before the Civil War, the Marine Corps honed its amphibious capabilities at Vera Cruz and fought in the Halls of Montezuma during the Mexican War (1846). For the first three decades of the 20th century, the Marine Corps fought small wars in Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and Latin America to protect American foreign interests. In World War I, Marines fought in Belleau Wood (1918) and on the plains of Western Europe as infantry battalions. By then, our Corps had nearly 150 years of loyal combat service to the Nation, and our victories in World War I represented the birth of the “modern Marine Corps.”

—Gen Charles C. Krulak, 10 October 1997

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In the 1920s, Army and Navy planners grew increasingly concerned over Japan’s growing military strength and regional aggression. Pete Ellis began writing the initial idea that informed the Tentative Manual for Landing Operations in 1921. In 1925, the 13th commandant, Gen John A. Lejeune, foresaw the need for change and suspended the Marine Corps Officers’ Schools in Quantico so that its student officers could participate in joint Army and Navy studies, war games, and maneuvers on landing operations. Later in 1927, a document called the Joint Action of the Army and Navy defined the Marine Corps mission as “land operations in support of the fleet for the initial seizure and defense of advanced bases … essential to the prosecution of the naval campaign.”

Seven years later in 1934, the Marine Corps published the Tentative Manual of Landing Operations (later published as a U.S. Navy Landing Operations Doctrine Publication). It was another eight years, in August 1942, before the Marine Corps finally demonstrated its amphibious combat capability on the beaches of Guadalcanal. The Marine Corps’ first amphibious assault cost nearly 1,200 men over six months, but its success marked the start of America’s strategic offensive in the Pacific.

We must never forget that the Marine Corps succeeded at Guadalcanal and in many other amphibious landings over the next three years because it started thinking, planning, and adapting to a changing military environment long before war erupted. Still, that period of transformation gives me pause. Seventeen years passed from Lejeune’s actions in 1925 until the Service’s first amphibious landing in combat using its new amphibious combat capability on the beaches of Guadalcanal. The Marine Corps finally demonstrated its amphibious combat capability on the beaches of Guadalcanal. The Marine Corps’ first amphibious assault cost nearly 1,200 men over six months, but its success marked the start of America’s strategic offensive in the Pacific.

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warfighting domains, and the natural advantages gained from their defensive posture and tight interior lines of communication are establishing a future combat environment that necessitates new ways and means. If today’s Marine Corps is going to win tomorrow’s fight, it cannot idle along or only make superficial changes on the margins. Not for the type of fight we see ahead of us.

I joined the Marine Corps in 1987 and have had the privilege to command infantry formations at all levels from platoon to division and have seen the Marine Corps undergo significant change in the 90s and then again in the early 2000s. From my perspective, the changes the Marine Corps is experiencing in Force Design 2030 are indicative of the culture the Service fosters—that of a learning organization. I am encouraged by the ongoing debate surrounding Force Design, the work done in our military classrooms, and the many legions of thinkers and doers making this happen. Major changes in our combat organization should always spark a healthy and respectful discourse inside and outside of our Service. Debate is healthy. Debate demonstrates we are invested and care deeply about ensuring the Marine Corps’ future success. I would be more concerned with an absence of spirited debate. I cannot recall any consequential decision during my service that did not include impassioned disagreement. Through a healthy discourse, we learn, we change, and we do it again until we get it right. The discourse is ongoing and will continue. This is how we become more lethal, mobile, survivable, and agile as a fighting force.

The Contemporary and Future Environment

The People’s Republic of China—the Marine Corps’ pacing challenge—is the threat by which the Service will not only measure its capabilities but also its rate of adaptation. Combined arms, a skill that served our Marines so capably in the past, is evolving into domains once considered science fiction. Marines are combining traditional arms with effects in space and cyberspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the information environment. Marines must now learn how to integrate these arms on battlefields saturated by sensors, where technology accelerates kill chains, decreases decision space, and increases the number of attack avenues. While China remains the pacing challenge, it is not the only threat. The proliferation and diffusion of technology allow states with relatively meager resources to field capabilities that were once only the purview of great powers including deep strike unmanned aerial systems, loitering munitions that leverage artificial intelligence, and offensive cyber capabilities.

In a world of accelerating change, the Marine Corps’ rate of adaptation matters. Our processes were designed in an earlier era where speed of adaptation mattered less and the U.S.’s technological superiority remained unchallenged. The Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System defines requirements, the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution process provides funding, and the Defense Acquisition System manages programs through a series of milestones and reviews. These processes are designed at getting it right instead of getting it fast. As a consequence, their inflexibility is poorly suited to “Competing in Time” against adversaries unencumbered by similar bureaucracies who transform at the pace of commercial innovation. Today, our commercial sector is driving technological advancements, and innovating at speeds that outpace defense acquisitions by years. Incremental defense solutions no longer set the speed of U.S. commercial innovation, nor are they pacing with the People’s Liberation Army. Given where the Marine Corps stood in 2019, bold course corrections were required.

Enablers of Change

The Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) represents just one key aspect of the Marine Corps’ transformation as it represents a major bid for success in the Indo-Pacific arena. While critics of the MLR claim it represents an ill-informed detour from the proven Marine air-ground task force, this simply is not the case.17 The 3d MLR will lead Service experimentation efforts and inform the development of subsequent regiments. It is a logical outgrowth of years of concept development and wargaming, and it will continue to increase in lethality as we refine its missions and capabilities. The MLR is a standing formation, purposefully organized to support sea control, postured to win the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance battle, and ready to impose a range of challenges against the People’s Liberation Army. Its story is far from over, and this formation is getting better every day through the hard work and dedication of Marines on the ground.

The challenge that the People’s Liberation Army offers, and the speed with which they pursue advantage, denies the Marine Corps the luxury of building a less specific formation or maintaining this force in any lower state of readiness.18 While the MLR is tailored for high-end maritime combat with peer competitors, we continue to enhance our MEUs and MEFs to provide flexible, amphibious combat units that can operate across the entire spectrum of conflict.

The MEU and the MEF

Carefully structured to respond to a broad range of missions, MEUs continue to respond to our Nation’s security demands even as they too transform.19 MEUs combine ground, aviation, and
logistics elements under a single com-
mander, embarking this force aboard 
three of the Navy’s amphibious warfare 
ships, known as an amphibious ready 
group. MEUs deploy worldwide to per-
form missions including amphibious 
assaults, raids, embassy reinforcements, 
humanitarian assistance, and noncom-
batant evacuation operations. Marine 
expeditionary units, consisting of about 
2,200 personnel, form the smallest of 
the Marine Corps’ MAGTFs. The Ma-
rine Corps is in the midst of deploy-
ing its first MEU with the Amphibious 
Combat Vehicle, and we will continue 
to experiment and transform these units 
for other future combat scenarios. 

MEFs are the largest of the MAGTFs. 
The MEF exceeds 40,000 personnel 
with its command, ground, aviation, 
and logistics combat elements. The MEF 
will remain ready to respond to 
crisis, and in the future, they will in-
corporate MLRs into their concept of 
operations. Often with less fanfare than 
the MFR, our MEFs are transforming in 
subtle yet consequential ways to support 
the naval and Joint Force.

This includes well known shifts such 
as the divestment of tanks, prioritiza-
tion of longer-range precision-guided 
fires over cannon artillery, and greater 
investment into the skills of our in-
fantry Marines. We do not yet have 
it right. Our current infantry battal-
ion experimentation, called IBX30, is 
showing us that we may need to make 
more adjustments to the infantry bat-
talion; including novel combined arms 
formations that equip Marines with 
beyond-line-of-sight precision strike ca-
pabilities and requisite sensors.20 Our 
traditional understanding of combined 
arms employs organic mortars, support-
ing artillery fires, rotary and fixed-wing 
aviation assets, all in support of infantry 
Marines maneuvering onto the objectiv-
et—to locate, close with, and destroy 
the enemy. The 202X battlefield de-
mands a refinement of the traditional 
employment of combined arms. Marine 
learning and experimentation are itera-
tive and there is a long way to go before 
we are done.

Conclusion

As recently demonstrated during the 
difficult and tense withdrawal from Af-
ghanistan, the Marine Corps remains 
America’s premier crisis response force. 
The Service’s warfighting ethos is con-
stant, and it is an essential source of 
strength. Accordingly, the Marine 
Corps grounds its force design efforts 
in its naval heritage and focuses on sup-
porting the “broaden naval campaign” 
just as it did a hundred years ago. Force 
Design 2030 recognizes that the char-
acter of war is drastically changing 
and is driving us to re-conceptualize 
the future maritime battle. As our 
former commandant, Gen Alfred M. 
Gray eloquently wrote, “our approach to 
warfighting must evolve. If we cease to 
refine, expand, and improve our profes-
sion, we risk becoming outdated, stag-
nant, and defeated.”21 We must change 
to remain the most ready when the Na-
tion is the least ready.

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