

Charting a Path to Naval Integration

A bias toward maritime action

by LtCol Robert L. Burton

The recently released *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and *Force Design* both add greater weight and institutional inertia toward a Marine Corps that is more naval in character. While many of the ideas outlined in these guiding documents certainly support that theme, integration with the Navy remains rather shallow. To drive naval integration further and deeper into our Corps' character, we must do more than divest of heavy vehicles and artillery cannons. The Corps must fully appreciate naval operational demands from a blue suit perspective. The Commandant stated, "Marines cannot be passive passengers en route to the amphibious objective area."¹ Yet, until Marines learn what fighting from the sea entails, there is little they can contribute that could not be performed by a salty gunner's mate. Marine officers must gain greater familiarity of naval maneuver beyond ship to shore movement. Additionally, the Marine Corps should consider "sailorization" of the infantry to imbue them with the necessary experiences and naval knowledge to lead and fight for sea control. The Marine Corps should also lead an effort to develop a new and shared lexicon for naval operational art. Finally, the Marine Corps should extend its naval integration beyond the general-purpose forces and into the realm of its special operations component.

Although many Marine Corps officers are exposed to naval operations through Reserve Officer Training Corps or the Naval Academy, many never have the opportunity, beyond a ship visit, to truly appreciate the demands of shipboard life until assigned to a MEU. Yet, the Marine Corps is seeking a

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new path that more closely aligns our primary mission in direct support of naval campaigns. Although this vision appears to orient more on the littoral fringes, the Marine Corps will continue struggling to adapt its warfighting concepts to the Navy's composite warfare commander doctrine unless Marines fully grasp the totality of naval warfare. Undoubtedly, the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* will compel greater

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naval doctrinal input into current professional military education. But officers must gain a better understanding of the blue-water fight before they will have the proper perspective on how to contribute. Most officers know little of the difference between a cruiser and a destroyer, much less how an infantryman can support it. If the Corps wants to contribute more than landing parties and landbased firing platforms, officers must also be grounded in surface warfare. One method may include pursuit of surface warfare qualifications for officers or interservice exchange tours with the surface warfare community.

The 31st MEU recently demonstrated the viability of the concept as several enlisted Marines capably earned surface warfare specialist qualifications while underway.² Interestingly, Marine Corps regulations do not permit wearing of most Navy warfare pins, with aviation wings as a notable exception. A Marine with a surface warfare pin would offer much greater creditability to blue-green conversations, especially when dealing with issues of composite warfare or naval campaigning.

Another consideration for deepening the Marine Corps naval investment resides within the infantry. Many have identified a necessity for an older, wiser infantryman who can lead and manage small units in a dynamic, complex operating environment. Gen Scales made it a major feature in his seminal work, *Scales on War*, where he challenged the Nation's investment in its infantry dominance: "Human research and anecdotal evidence prove the optimum age for a close-combat infantryman is between twenty-eight and thirty-two."³ He further suggests only accepting infantry from second termers. "After four years in other arms, such young men would be more mature and closely committed to long-term service. More importantly, they would have some skill translatable to close-combat small teams,"⁴ Scales wrote. Perhaps an initial term as a sailor or before entering the infantry would generate the necessary and translatable skills to succeed in the sea control or denial fight. Although this could be challenging to implement, there are many creative solutions to explore. A Marine could be detailed to sea-duty following boot camp, or Sailors could be offered reenlistment incentives to

interservice transfer into the infantry. Regardless of how achieved, a “sailorization” of Marine infantry would enhance the Corps’ contribution to the maritime fight considerably.

Another significant gap that inhibits unified naval effort is the separate “dialects” of operational and tactical lexicon. Although planning methodologies are relatively similar, the operational graphics of the Navy and the joint force are not quite compatible. A battalion movement to contact order, with all of its graphics and control measures, is practically abstract art to blue water sailors—and appropriately so considering the lack of direct relevance that mission has on a ship, especially a non-amphib. However, if the Marine Corps is to perform landbased missions in direct support of the fleet, it is time to throw out the maps and grab some charts. Marine Corps units, such as the littoral regiments, have to be able to convey the scheme of maneuver and appropriate information in a manner that is relevant to the fleet’s scheme of maneuver. Many of the fire support control measures and aviation related terms and graphics likely require little adaptation as they already suit the parameters of amphibious operations. It is the new and innovative tactical operations that the Marine Corps intends to pursue that must be developed from a blue water mindset. For instance, what does an expeditionary advance base look like on a naval chart? How are the ground lines of communications between distributed, maneuvering, and temporary expeditionary advance bases depicted in order to be relevant to a cruiser or destroyer? What about the utilization of small boat formations or even unmanned aerial systems/unmanned underwater systems swarms? Some may ask if it even matters. If not, then what makes the mission relevant to sea control or denial? The Navy is not off the hook in this regard either. For a ground commander, maritime graphics currently provide limited value. The Navy has had little impetus to make their naval charts intelligible to the joint force because as the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander, they rarely need to deconflict seaspace with

other Services. However, if the Marine Corps is to truly operate as a maritime element, there must be a new, shared common language that accounts for ground maneuver in the littorals.

A final consideration for genuine naval integration is to examine naval special operations forces (SOF). The Marine Corps developed their special operations component with an eye to both its own strengths as well as relevance to its warfighting requirements during a period of extended land campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is composed primarily of an amphibious-skilled special operations force that more closely resembles its Army SOF brethren than Naval Special Warfare. However, as the Marine Corps continues to invest more into its naval identity, MARSOC will be less reflective of the nature and needs of the newer Marine Corps. It may be time to consider a model along the lines of the British Special Boat Service. A single, naval-oriented special operations force which incorporates the strengths of both Services, the Navy and Marine Corps, in order to serve the greater and shared maritime interests. Arguably, the two Services cover the spectrum of maritime/littoral operations as is but with different emphasis on specific SOF core capabilities. Yet, if MARSOC and Naval Special Warfare both support a common mission, might there be a little more commonality in their training, structure and even assessment and selection? A single Naval SOF component would ideally assess operators from both Services, train them to a common standard, field them together in common units, and still serve the requirements of both Special Operations Command and the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander.

The Marine Corps has always been naval in character; although, it has often found itself committed to missions of more terrestrial purposes. However, the current momentum behind the Commandant’s initiatives signals a significant realignment of the Corps’ priorities and will generate enduring force development effects. As usual, the reconfigured force will remain ready

to support the joint force regardless of the demands. Though the response will undoubtedly leverage the synergy harnessed from this reinvigorated relationship with the Navy. It is imperative that the Marine Corps complete its investment into naval integration efforts, or it will sacrifice its joint agility by burdening itself with multiple Service personalities. Success during a joint, naval campaign requires a Marine Corps able to “fight at sea, from the sea, and from the land to the sea.”⁵ If the Marine Corps cannot understand, articulate, or communicate operationally with the Navy, then what shall distinguish it from the Army? Finally, if its other joint force contributions, such as MARSOC, are no longer relevant to emerging naval campaigning concepts or do not capitalize on shared commonalities with the Navy, the Marine Corps must reconsider the capability’s value proposition. The Commandant has provided the necessary catalyst to turn the ship, but the institution must continue feeding the boiler before she runs out of steam.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Sgt Audrey Rampton, “Naval Integration: 31st MEU Marines Earn Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist Pins,” *Marines*, (April 2020), available at <https://www.marines.mil>.
3. MGen Bob Scales, *Scales on War*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).
4. Ibid.
5. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.

