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 sluggish. 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.” 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 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 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. 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 credibility 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.” 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,” 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

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

Another significant gap that inhib-
its unified naval effort is the separate “dialects” of operational and tactical
lexicon. Although planning methodo-
gies are relatively similar, the op-
erational 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 pa-
rameters of amphibious operations. It is
the new and innovative tactical opera-
tions 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 grounds 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/un-
manned 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 Mar-
time 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 rel-
ance to its warfighting requirements
during a period of extended land cam-
paigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus,
Marine Corps Special Operations
Command (MARSOC) is composed
primarily of an amphibious-skilled spe-
cial 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—
however, 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 assess-
ment and selection? A single Naval SOF
component would ideally assess opera-
tors from both Services, train them to a
common standard, field them together
in common units, and still serve the
requirements of both Special Opera-
tions Command and the Joint Force
Maritime Component Commander.

The Marine Corps has always been
naval in character; although, it has of-
ten 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 rela-
tionship with the Navy. It is impera-
tive that the Marine Corps complete
its investment into naval integration
efforts, or it will sacrifice its joint agil-
ity 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.” If the
Marine Corps cannot understand, arti-
culate, or communicate operationally
with the Navy, then what shall distin-
guish 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 com-
monalities 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 War-
fare Specialist Pins,” Marines, (April 2020),
available at https://www.marines.mil.
3. MGen Bob Scales, Scales on War, (Annapolis,
4. Ibid.
5. 38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance.