

Rapid, Smart, and Flexible Acquisition

Looking ahead to the Marine Corps Force 2030

by Col Robert Bailey

Gen David H. Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance* compels action across every part of the Marine Corps. Unequivocally, the Commandant asserts that the Marine Corps is not "organized, trained, or equipped to support the naval force." Furthermore, in regard to equipment, he directs that the Corps must "continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few."¹ To meet the Commandant's intent, the Marine Corps must reevaluate methodologies and adopt, to a greater extent, a new model for equipping the force where it is appropriate. Specifically, the Marine Corps needs to do three things. First, embrace the "buy-try-decide" model to accelerate requirements generation by leveraging the Fleet Marine Force's (FMF's) operational knowledge and urgency in the acquisition process. This promotes a culture of fast learning so we can equip Marines intelligently and responsively. Second, accept formal acquisition risk by pursuing minimally viable products to satisfy initial capability requirements and either rapidly execute iterative upgrades and enhancements over time or kill the project if either the requirement becomes overcome by events or the technology proves to be non-viable. Lastly, the Marine Corps must maximize the use of its existing financial authorities to align funding against emergent requirements during the budget years.

"Buy, Try and Decide": A Model to Acquire Capabilities in a Responsive and Relevant Time Frame

Threats from peer and near-peer nations and violent extremist organizations

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necessitate U.S. initiative to gain and maintain decisive military advantages over our adversaries.² Part of gaining and maintaining this advantage is accessing and rapidly employing emergent technologies and capabilities. Innovation, or doing something new or different, comes in many forms, including policy, process, and technology.³ Policy and acquisition processes are elements of developing and delivering innovative and transformative commercial and defense industrial base technologies. To effectively leverage these technologies, *how* Services develop and acquire equipment can be equally important as *what* they acquire. The perfect requirement and program executed in four-to-five years may simply be too late-to-need. The Marine Corps can accelerate the acquisition of innovative capabilities by adapting procurement processes. The buy-try-decide combat evaluation model, borrowed from the Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics center, can get equipment into Marines' hands rapidly while minimizing financial exposure and technical risk.

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has agile and accelerated acquisition authorities and processes that prioritize speed, flexibility, and acceptance of informed risk. The Marine Corps has access to many of these same authorities. The Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Tech-

nology, and Logistics Acquisition Executive underscores the organization's values and priorities,

USSOCOM's competitive advantage is velocity—to achieve the velocity our SOF operators require, we are continuing to pilot new acquisition methods, expand our network, incentivize collaboration, increase our iteration speed, and reduce our iteration costs. We create an agile acquisition team whose focus is on rapidly leveraging or inventing new processes to improve our acquisition agility.⁴

USSOCOM implements a model for rapid acquisition that aligns well with its size, structure, and mission, which is more like the Marine Corps' than the other Services in the DOD. The Marine Corps has adopted this method to a degree, often in response to urgent needs generated by the FMF. We should do more of this.

The Marine Corps can better integrate the FMF in acquisition decisions like SOF by more prolifically implementing buy-try-decide evaluations, specifically on non-major acquisitions and abbreviated acquisition programs that have lower total acquisition costs, small or tailored procurement quantities, and fewer formal acquisition requirements and gates. The Marine Corps can evaluate candidate materiel capabilities to accelerate the formal acquisition process through technical experimentation with commercial or non-developmental capabilities in actual operational environments like large-scale exercises and deployments. Common examples include evaluating weapons and individual equipment, sensors, and tactical command and control (C2) systems. This practice rapidly

informs the requirements generation and acquisition process by combining several iterative steps from conventional acquisition processes into a concurrent, parallel process.

The FMF identifies a capability gap and initiates action through the Combat Development and Integration Directorate, the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, and the Marine Corps Systems Command. An appropriate “color of money” determination is made and the requirements transition process initiates.⁵ A minimally viable product (MVP) is defined. Funding is identified, a Program Management Office is assigned, and the process of acquiring the equipment starts. The Marine Corps has a variety of options to acquire equipment quickly: a bailment agreement with industry, a sole source acquisition or competitive award purchase order, an other transaction authority, a lease or a Platform as a Service subscription, an undefinitized contract action, etc. The FMF receives the equipment and, concurrently through employment, the Marine Corps refines the requirement, the concept of employment, and the

tactics, techniques, and procedures. At the conclusion, the Marine Corps evaluates the utility of the equipment, forecasts the procurement and sustainment costs, identifies cost offsets (i.e., What will we not do or buy if we buy this instead?), and identifies Fleet integration issues and institutional training as well as MOS impacts. The Corps makes a decision to cancel the evaluation and project, or initiate a program of record to continue to develop the capability or procure the equipment as a non-developmental item and establish an initial quantity of systems and a fielding plan. The most significant benefits to this process are the velocity that the buy-try-decide continuum generates and the close integration of the FMF in the requirements generation and acquisition decision-making processes.

Buy-try-decide evaluations are usually initiated and executed in a single financial year, and may be resourced with both operations and maintenance as well as investment (i.e., Research, Development, Test and Evaluation, and Procurement) dollars realigned within the Service’s top line budget.

The process initiates with an identified capability gap and concludes with a determination to cancel the initiative, initiate a program of record, or pursue a hybrid acquisition strategy. Figure 1 depicts a notional Special Purpose MAGTF combat evaluation scenario derived from the *USSOCOM Directive 70-1, Acquisition Management System Policy Combat Evaluation* appendix, and tailored for the Marine Corps.⁶

Implicit in this accelerated process is the close alignment and continuous exchange of information between the FMF, Marine Corps Systems Command, Combat Development and Integration Directorate, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, HQMC Programs and Resources, and the HQMC advocate for the capability area.

The Marine Corps currently has the authorities and the expertise to execute rapid acquisitions for the FMF in this manner. Critical to this process, however, is the ability and the will to define and initially accept a MVP as opposed to a one-step to full operational capability. The Marine Corps can accelerate the delivery of capabilities to the FMF

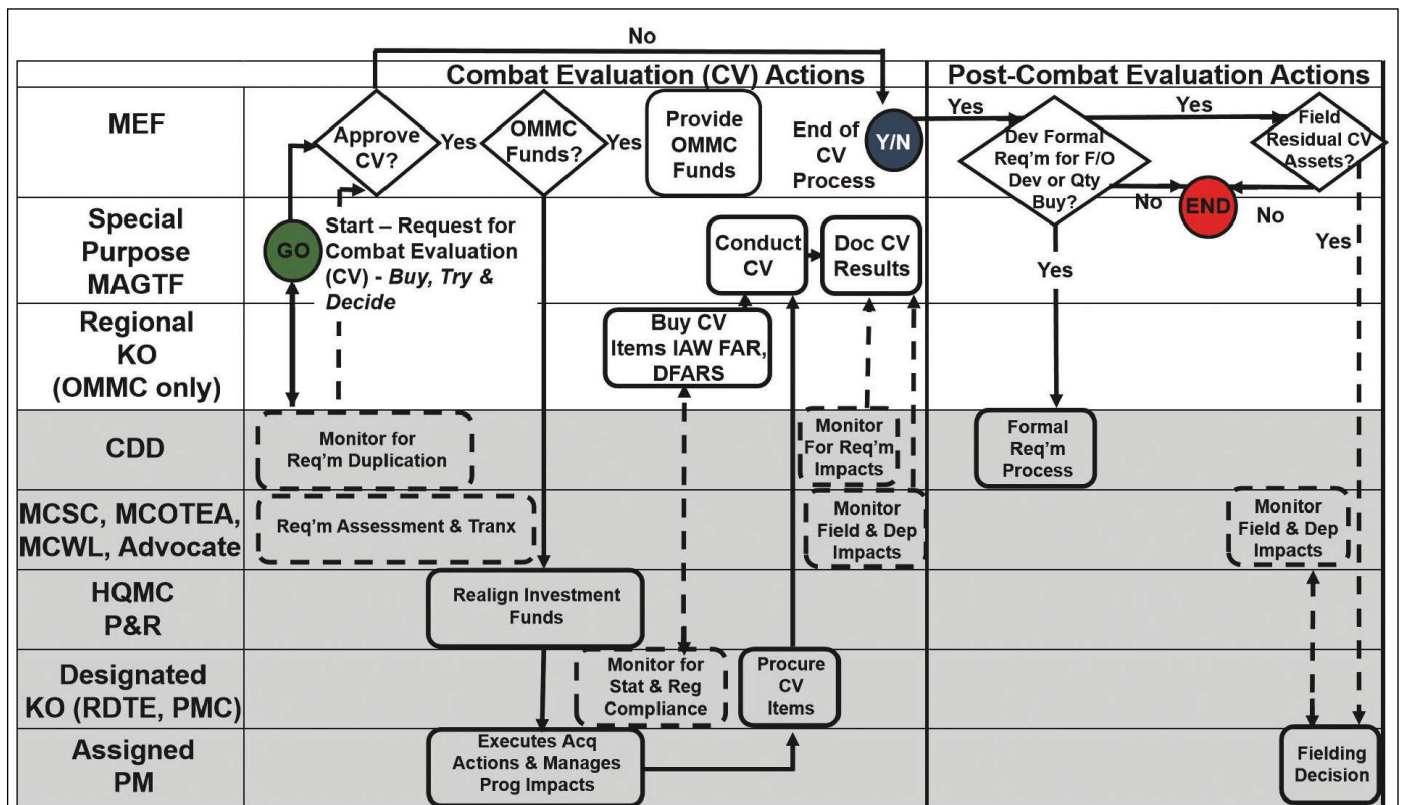


Figure 1. Notional SPMAGTF combat evaluation process flow.⁷ (Figure provided by author.)

and iterate rapidly by pursuing MVPs at the outset of a program.

The MVP

The MVP is part of what the Commandant implies when he says we must “continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few.” Much like SOF does, the Marine Corps needs to embrace the 80 percent equipment solution *now* rather than the 95-100 percent solution usually at a disproportionate cost and schedule to achieve the last 20 percent of the capability. The acquisition “red zone,” as the football analogy implies, is an area in product development or integration where each yard is hard-fought, the forces that generate friction against your project intensify, and compress and limit maneuver space. The outcome is often minutes off the clock and no points on the board, which translates to getting product to Marines too late and at exquisite acquisition costs as well

as an unaffordable sustainment costs. It is most effective to get an 80 percent solution in the hands of Marines within the current operations horizon and execute a plan to iterate capability maturation rapidly over time.

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The MVP is a strategy often associated with technology start-up ventures. The objective of the MVP is to get a product or application to market quickly with enough value and functionality that early adopters will accept it and use it.⁸ The early adopters become part

of a continuous feedback loop with the developers for requirements refinement, future functionality prioritization, and trade-off decisions. The MVP also allows investors, or in the Marine Corps our senior leaders, with frequent opportunities to assess progress and make off-ramp or additional investment decisions rapidly and iteratively while minimizing technical risk and financial exposure to the Service associated with traditional, early decision, long-term equipment buy-ins.

Objectively, not every capability the Marine Corps pursues is an appropriate candidate for a combat evaluation or a rapid, iterative acquisition. The defense acquisition system is deliberate and can be cumbersome, but often for good reason. There are enough historical examples of extraordinary cost and schedule over-runs and underwhelming technology demonstrations despite billions of dollars spent that reinforce the need for deliberate,



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disciplined, oversight-laden acquisitions. However, many of the programs the Marine Corps manages are small, leverage mature commercial technologies and other Service developments, and have well-defined requirements and strong Fleet advocates. Furthermore, as the Commandant articulates in his planning guidance, we do not have the luxury of time and we must regain decisive advantages over our adversaries in areas like resilient C2, cloud-enabled technologies, freedom of maneuver in contested domains, and long-range lethality. To this end, the Marine Corps would be wise to ensure our financial resources are available when we need them so we can capitalize on these opportunities.

Financial Agility

To maximize flexibility for the Corps' senior leadership and be responsive to realtime threats and capability gaps, we need to take full advantage of the financial latitude that exists within our current authorities. These authorities should be delegated to the lowest level possible to enable speed of decision making. Additionally, we need to take care about how we articulate to Congress what our intentions are with our budgets.

At the *National Defense Authorization Act* level, the Marine Corps' money is organized into line items and program elements (PEs) that align with top-level capability areas. Our current authorities allow us to realign money within line items and PEs without statutory limitations. We can move money between separate line items and PEs, a below threshold reprogramming action, with limitations to percentages of total dollars and maximum amounts. The authority to transfer money between line items and PEs above the threshold levels exist, but requires Congressional approval—not generally a smooth or rapid process.⁹ Lastly, the Marine Corps submits annual budget exhibits through the Service and DOD to Congress that describe how we intend to spend the money.¹⁰

When writing to Congress in our budget exhibits, we need to write about capabilities rather than specific pro-

grams to the greatest extent possible to maximize the Corps flexibility in the budget years. For example, our budget exhibits should discuss “tactical C2” as opposed to specific radios or programs; “long-range precision fires” as opposed to specific missile systems. Doing so minimizes the recurrence of initiating new start programs, which require certain actions and are generally prohibited during the increasingly predictable continuing resolutions where the Service is limited to previous year spending levels and existing investments. Additionally, this allows the Marine Corps' maneuver space to invest in capability areas rapidly, such as a FMF-initiated buy-try-decide evaluations during the financial year of execution. We can realign funding within a line item or PE to address an emergent priority more quickly and with fewer approval gates. Fiscal agility and access to funds is as important a component to rapid and responsive acquisition as mature technology and nimble acquisition practices.

Conclusion

Gen Berger's planning guidance compels immediate action to substantively change how the Marine Corps organizes, trains, and equips. The Marine Corps can begin to take steps to change how responsively we equip our Marines and how we better integrate the FMF in combat development by capitalizing on opportunities to leverage buy-try-decide equipment evaluations. We need to embrace the concept of initially pursuing MVPs so we can put value-added, baseline capabilities into the hands of Marines quickly. The Marines will be better off today with a MVP than with their legacy equipment from yesterday. We can rapidly iterate capability development through a continuous FMF feedback loop and minimize the Service's technical and cost risk by designing iterative check points to learn fast and make informed investment and divestment decisions. Finally, the Marine Corps needs to invest great energy into how we plan and program our dollars in capability portfolios, as well as how we communicate to Congress what our intentions are so we can retain maximum flexibility in

budget year investments. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* tells us that change is imperative. Implementation of the aforementioned steps will better position the Marine Corps to rapidly and responsively equip the FMF with the capabilities necessary to gain and maintain decisive advantages over our peer and near-peer adversaries in the future fight.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Department of Defense, *The Defense Innovation Initiative*, (Washington, DC: November 2014), available at <https://www.defense.gov>.
3. Information available at <http://www.defenseinnovationmarketplace.mil/>.
4. Staff, “Be Like SOCOM and Bet on the Little Guy,” *Defensetech*, (February 2017), available at www.defensetech.org.
5. Department of Defense, Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller), *DOD 7000.14-R, Volume 1-16, Department of Defense Financial Management Regulation*, (Washington, DC: May 2019).
6. Department of Defense, United States Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Directive 70-1, Acquisition Management Systems Policy*, (Tampa, FL: March 2010).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ash Maurya, “What is a Minimum Viable Product (MVP), Love the Problem,” *Leanstack*, (June 2017), available at <https://leanstack.com>.
9. Department of Defense, Defense Acquisition University, “Funds Management Platinum Card,” (July 2007), available at <http://acqnotes.com>.
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