

Reconnaissance-Strike Tactics and Maneuver Warfare II

Marine Corps 3.0
by Maj B.A. Friedman

Perhaps the least understood aspect of the Marine Corps warfighting philosophy is the non-linearity of warfare. The idea gets a paragraph in *MCDP 1*, which describes it as a source of war's inherent uncertainty. This is undoubtedly true, but it is also an aspect of war's complexity (in the scientific sense) as a competition between two or more complex adaptive systems. Scientists have learned more about complexity in the years since *MCDP 1* was written. In fact, we now understand that all military forces are complex adaptive systems and many aspects of complexity and chaos apply to war as a whole.

Air Force Col Eric Michael Murphy, for example, has examined force design through the lens of complex adaptive systems and has identified seven aspects of complexity that military forces exhibit. These include diversity, interdependence, adaptation, nonlinearity, emergence, coevolution, and path dependence.¹ Warfighting organizations display all of these characteristics. Although Col Murphy applied his analysis to the Air Force, the conclusion equally applies to the Marine Corps.

Complex adaptive systems that are composed of human agents are sometimes referred to as complex adaptive social systems. All warfighting organizations, whether armies, navies, or insurgent groups, are complex adaptive social systems. Complexity science tells us that as new behaviors—tactics—emerge, organized agents will adapt, creating new forms of organization to optimize

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The Marine Corps has an established track record of adaptation as new tactic and technologies emerge. (Photo by GSgt Ismael Pena.)

for the new actions. Change and continuity will coexist: some aspects of the organization will remain relevant while others will not and will be replaced. Any force design effort, deliberate or not, is an application of this adaptation to the operating environment and subsequent emergence of new behaviors.

Through this lens, we can examine Marine Corps history to gain insights

into its future. As a complex adaptive social system, the Marine Corps has gone through this process of adaptation before as new tactics emerged. Examining this history can lend insight as to how the Marine Corps should evolve for emergent reconnaissance-strike tactics.

The First Two Marine Corps

In my ongoing post-graduate re-

search, which focuses on Marine Corps amphibious operations prior to World War I, I have identified two stages or phases of Marine Corps organization, which I term Marine Corps 1.0 and Marine Corps 2.0

Marine Corps 1.0 is the original, modeled on the 18th century Royal Marine Corps. Marine Corps 1.0 was optimized for pre-industrial naval warfare during the age of sail. It was composed of ship's detachments made up of professional (as in, not conscripted or part-time militia) Marines that fought alongside the Navy at sea and ashore. It was thus composed of distributed, modular, self-sufficient units that could be employed individually or combined for larger-scale operations. It was a Marine Corps tailored to its amphibious platform: the sailing vessel. Of course, the Marine Corps was not static dur-

I. These reforms began with the commandancy of John Lejeune.

By World War II, it was optimized for industrial warfare: built for the efficient application of mass and firepower against an objective ashore. It goes without saying that the concepts and tactics developed during the interwar years served the Marine Corps well, as it did the Army units that used the doctrine and equipment that developed—even as both Services had to adapt them to changing Imperial Japanese and Nazi German tactics as the war went on. While the Army abandoned such amphibious capabilities by the late 1960s, the Marine Corps has remained until very recently optimized for industrial-era amphibious warfare and its amphibious platform: the amphibious warship.

Through this transition, as new adaptations emerge, new organizations

dancy of John A. Lejeune began the process of implementation that continued right up until World War II and beyond.

Marine Corps 3.0

If Marine Corps history can be categorized into a pre-industrial Marine Corps 1.0 and an industrial Marine Corps 2.0, then we may be on the cusp of an information-age Marine Corps 3.0. The leading edge of the vanguard idea for Marine Corps 3.0 is *FMFM 1, Warfighting*, far ahead of its time. It is analogous to the ideas developed by Pete Ellis and their appearance decades before true implementation became possible. The equivalent of the tactical schema that informed the force design of that time, infiltration tactics, are the emerging reconnaissance-strike tactics of today.

If so, the commandancies of Gen Neller and Gen Berger have begun the process of true implementation. Gen Neller's 2016 *Marine Corps Operating Concept* identified the problem: the Marine Corps was not organized to implement maneuver warfare on an information-age battlefield. Gen Berger has promulgated a number of changes necessary for it to do so. This continuity between the two was made explicit on the first page of the 2018 *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* is analogous to Gen Lejeune beginning the implementation of ideas.

We see the same mix of change and continuity in Gen Berger's reforms as we did with Gen Lejeune's. For example, distributed operations have always been an aspect of Marine Corps operations, even during Marine Corps 1.0. The Marine Littoral Regiments are an update of the Marine Defense Battalions of Marine Corps 2.0. Components of the previous version of the organization are retained if they are useful, even if their role within the organization changes.

Recall the discussion from the first article in this series about information-driven reconnaissance-strike complexes and reconnaissance-strike tactics. Marine Corps 3.0 has the potential to leverage the strengths of the Marine Corps to provide the joint force with a forward,

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ing this period. Tactics and concepts evolved slowly, but it remained an institution based around ship's detachments throughout this period.

As a result of the industrial revolution, new technology allowed new types of tactics to emerge in a rapid burst. After the Marine Corps' baptism by fire into industrial warfare in World War I, the Marine Corps went through a sustained period of modernization during the interwar years. The reforms were based on ideas that had been developed even before Gallipoli, the infamous failed amphibious operation carried out by the British in World War I. Sources for inspiration included the works of LtCol Pete Ellis, who wrote about modernized amphibious warfare as early as 1912, and lessons learned from Gallipoli and Operation ALBION: a successful amphibious operation carried out by the Germans against the Russians in 1917.² Many of the lessons learned and applied built on the infiltration tactics developed by Germany in World War

emerge to perform them as efficiently and effectively as possible. Tactics constantly evolve but periodically rapid revolutionary changes are called for, a pattern called punctuated equilibrium. This does not mean that old organizations and components thereof are completely abandoned. Aspects of older organizations that are still relevant are retained. This explains why Marine Corps 1.0 and 2.0 overlapped. The ship's detachments continued to be employed long after World War II. But the modular nature of ship's detachments took new form under the MAGTF system of MEUs, MEBs, MEFs, and Special Purpose MAGTFs (albeit in a more complex form).

Lastly, the transition from Marine Corps 1.0 to 2.0 shows that ideas are the vanguard of the emergent form of organization. Marine Corps 2.0 was built on a foundation of ideas that Pete Ellis began developing in 1912 and 1913 before the Marine Corps' participation in World War I in 1918. The comman-

resilient, maritime reconnaissance-strike complex. It may not be able to outright defeat adversary forces, but it also does not have to do anything other than set follow-on forces up for success, degrading and disrupting the enemy prior to the arrival of follow-on forces. When surge forces from the rest of the joint force and the Marine Corps arrive, they do so armed with high-quality, actionable information about an adversary that has already taken a punch or two from forward-based Marine stand-in forces. Moreover, this mission falls well within the joint definition of amphibious operations. Fast-moving stand-in forces will be executing amphibious raids to establish, move, and withdraw expeditionary advanced bases at times and places driven by opportunity and the employment of reconnaissance-strike tactics. These can then be transitioned to amphibious support to other operations as the rest of the joint force arrives.³

The transition to Marine Corps 3.0 will take some time, and we are perhaps only in the beginning stages. The *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* of World War II, for example, was

Marine Corps-led maritime reconnaissance-strike force will be built around the MEF Information Group finding, fixing, and shaping, the MAGTF CE executing a rapid response planning process to keep up with the increasing pace of warfare, the GCE and ACE striking adversary forces via precision-guided strikes exploited by maneuver forces, and the LCE sustaining and supporting the whole.

As for what is old, Marines as ever continue to be the Marine Corps' asymmetric advantage. The modular, flexible MAGTF system can and should continue, providing MEUs for crisis response and MEFs as part of a surge force alongside Marine Littoral Regiments and MEBs to execute maritime reconnaissance-strike tactics. Of course, as the joint force transitions to all-domain and multi-domain operations, the inherent multi-domain nature of the Marine Corps will serve it just as well as it has for over a century.

Some old communities will have new relevance. The reconnaissance communities will have to take on a multi-spectral character, integrating electronic and signals reconnaissance

cannot hope to match. In lieu of coalitions, adversaries will seek to limit their operations below the threshold of open conflict by employing irregular warfare. The Marine Corps should draw on its centuries-long strength in irregular warfare and recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan to formulate a new *Small Wars Manual*. The *Small Wars Manual*, which at its core is about how to work with partners during low-intensity strategic competition, should be modernized by the Marine Forces Special Operations Command, Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, Marine Corps Advisor Company, and Civil Affairs Group communities, then placed alongside *MCDP 1* as a foundational philosophy. As LtCol Chris Graham pointed out in the February 2022 issue, all warfare will contain varying proportions of irregular warfare (in fact it always has).⁴

The Marine Corps has a long history of irregular conflicts as both advisors and partners. Going forward, it should lean into the latter, not the former. The Marine Corps does not have the end strength necessary to provide full-time advisors at scale as the Army does with its Security Force Assistance Brigades. Rather than just advising, the Marine Corps should focus on being the force of choice for partnering; integrated units working alongside each other under one chain of command. By partnering as units rather than advising as individuals, partner forces can be tied into and integrated underneath the MAGTF. Liaison officers and liaison staff sections in every unit, organized on an Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company and Marine Corps Advisor Company-like model, can enable partner forces to plug and play with Marine forces at any level. Doing so will create another Marine Corps capability that is unique across the joint force and yet rooted in our history, traditions, and strengths.

Lastly, as vital as naval integration is, the Marine Corps also needs better aerospace integration. Marine stand-in forces will be far more potent if they are able to achieve synergy with the nascent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities of the Space Force and the unmatched firepower

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first issued in 1934. Still, we can start to identify some things that are new, some things that are old but will still be relevant, and some things that are still missing.

As mentioned already, the MEF Information Groups are new and may prove to be both the most prescient and important reform. Both Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Stand-In Forces concepts are new even as they are rooted in older ideas such as distributed operations and advanced base operations. Both envision more active and offensive participation in sea control than was envisioned for the Marine Defense Battalions of World War II which performed a similar mission. A

alongside physical reconnaissance. Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Companies will be in extremely high demand as forward operations will require both operating alongside partners and extremely complex fire support coordination of joint and organic precision-guided munitions fire. Others will have new challenges, especially the artillery community as it masters more complex processes and longer-range platforms.

As for what is missing, the current reform efforts lack a vital focus on security cooperation and irregular warfare. There will be no operating forward except alongside allies and partners, and coalition-building is an American strength that adversaries



FD2030 optimizes the Marine Corps for reconnaissance-strike tactics. A Marine launches an RQ-20 Puma sUAS during Mountain Warfare Training. (Photo by Cpl Eric Tso.)

of the Air Force. Better Marine Corps aerospace integration will be just as important as naval integration. It is an as yet untapped relationship that would benefit both Services. Marine stand-in forces can provide data from ground-based sensors and reconnaissance, terminal attack guidance, and forward arming and refueling to the Air Force while the Air Force provides data from its sensor grid, advanced command and control, assured air control, and of course additional firepower. Additionally, the logistical challenges associated with the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operation concept and the Air Force Agile Combat Employment concept are so similar that dual solutions can be found. The Services can begin to establish this synergy by bringing Air Force Tactical Air Control Party personnel back to the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, which traces its lineage to the Joint Assault Service Companies of World War II, which combined Marine, Navy, and Army Air Force liaison personnel to coordinate joint combined-arms support.

Conclusion

In part I, we talked theoretically about how a warfighting service should organize for maneuver in the 21st century. We also mentioned that an older

version—blitzkrieg—was a myth. But there is one lesson we should take from the German Army of that era. Their tactical success was not a result of pioneering the tank or motorized operations; they did not. It was not a result of pioneering close air support; they did not do that either. It was not a result of inventing radio communication. Again, they did not. What they did do was organize themselves to exploit all of those advancements in combination by basing their structure around the panzer division and infiltration tactics. It is not about innovating any new capability; it is about organizing in such a way that you can exploit an emergent tactical schema. In the early 20th century, the key was organizing around armor-infiltration tactics. In the early 21st century, the key is organizing around reconnaissance-strike tactics.

Part II has been about how the Marine Corps has succeeded in organizing for the emergent tactical schema in the past, and how it may be on the cusp of doing so again. Marine Corps 1.0 was organized for the line-of-battle tactics of the 19th century. Marine Corps 2.0 was organized for the armor-infiltration tactics of the 20th century. Marine Corps 3.0, whether through *Force Design 2030* or something else, must be organized for the reconnaissance-strike tactics of the

21st century that exploit the combined arms of pervasive intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance, unmanned platforms, and precision strike weapon systems. Complexity theory offers an explanatory framework for how the Marine Corps has organized around these emergent tactical regimes when necessary to perform its missions in any given era.

But the enemy gets a vote. In part III of this series, I will examine another vision of an Information-Age warfighting organization, that of the People's Liberation Army.

Notes

1. Eric Murphy, *Complex Adaptive Systems and the Development of Force Structures for the United States Air Force*, (Montgomery, AL: Air University Press, 2014).
2. See B.A. Friedman, *21st Century Ellis: Operational Art and Strategic Prophecy*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015); Angus Murray, "The U.S. Marine Corps and Gallipoli," in T.G. Heck and B.A. Friedman eds. *On Contested Shores: The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations in the History of Warfare*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2020); and Bruce Gudmonsson, "Ambiguous Application: The Study of Amphibious Warfare at the Marine Corps Schools, 1920–1933," in Heck, T.G. and B.A. Friedman eds. *On Contested Shores: The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations in the History of Warfare*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2020).
3. For doctrinal definitions, see Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 3-02, Amphibious Operations*, (Washington, DC: January 2019).
4. Chris Graham, "Readiness for the Irregular Future," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2022).

