Our Commandant has been crystal clear: The Corps must prepare to execute distributed maritime operations. Gen David Berger explicitly stated it in his Commandant’s Planning Guidance and followed up by saying, “Distributed Operations (DO) capable forces are a critically important component of Marine Corps modernization” and that “codifying DO is critical to implementation” of a new force design.

His comments were echoed in the Chief of Naval Operations’ December 2019 A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority: Version 2.0. The document lauded the Navy’s need to “continue to mature the Distributed Maritime Operations concept and key supporting concepts” and “design and implement a comprehensive operational architecture to support Distributed Maritime Operations.” But what are Distributed Maritime Operations?

The Distributed Maritime Operations concept finds its roots in response to a familiar historical problem: Soviet development of anti-ship cruise missiles in the late 1950s. The Navy recognized that distributing forces spatially/temporally and networking them would improve survivability against precision weapons, increase the number of sensors that could alert the force to a threat, and provide commanders a robust set of potential solutions. Practically, this means a well-armed fleet distributed (potentially over the horizon from one another) with a resilient communications network. Most prescient, it means a clear establishment of commander’s intent for if, or when, that network failed.

To support this concept, Gen Berger emphasized that the Marine Corps needs to distribute for five reasons:
1. To better accomplish the mission against a distant or dispersed adversary.
2. To improve maneuver options in order to gain a positional advantage to assault or engage more effectively with direct or indirect fires.
3. To reduce the effects of enemy fires.
4. To impose costs and induce uncertainty.
5. To reduce our signature and avoid detection; caveating that “in a precision strike regime, sensing first and shooting first are a tremendous advantage.”

All are sound. The third reason best points to threats modern amphibious forces face. Anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles developed by our adversaries may reach thousands of miles, and hypersonic technology makes them difficult to defeat with countermeasures. Our naval forces must prepare for the reality that not all ships will make it to the littoral. What was perhaps historically a Marine’s dull transit to the battlespace aboard unchallenged vessels, depicted in Hollywood by men hazily hanging from bunks and playing cards, is now when we find ourselves massed and most vulnerable. As a matter of course, articles in our professional journals and elsewhere have previously advocated redistributing Marine detachments on board Navy ships, thus increasing flexibility, lethality, and survivability.

The infantry battalion must do this to ensure enough combat power ashore. Once there, companies and platoons will need to infiltrate and operate clandestinely while far dispersed to avoid presenting a large signature and target. They should expect little support and a high demand for accurate and timely reporting to ensure the unit continues to function as a larger “whole.” With this ahead, the Marine Corps must reflect on our complicated history with DO.

Looking Back: Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations

The chaos created for the enemy by the DO concept combines with its worship of commander’s intent and long making it an attractive maneuver warfare milestone. Then-commandant

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Capt Daniel McGurkin is our Commandant’s Planning Guidance and followed up by saying, “Distributed Operations (DO) capable forces are a critically important component of Marine Corps modernization” and that “codifying DO is critical to implementation” of a new force design.
Gen M.W. Hagee published *A Concept for Distributed Operations* in 2005, envisioning units enabled by technological advances to spread far spatially and temporally while maintaining a common goal. In it, he described DO as an operating approach that will create an advantage over an adversary through the deliberate use of separation and coordinated, interdependent, tactical actions enabled by increased access to functional support, as well as by enhanced combat capabilities at the small-unit level. The essence of this concept lies in the capacity for action by dispersed units, throughout the breadth and depth of the battlespace, ordered and connected within an operational design focused on a common aim.

The Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL) began DO experiments before Gen Hagee’s document was released. Col Vincent Goulding, then-head of MCWL’s Experimental Division, concluded initial DO experiments by conceding that “the company is probably the smallest tactical formation capable of conducting independent operations—and frequently does on today’s battlefield.” As Commandant, Gen Conway followed up by directing focus upon what became known as “Enhanced Company Operations” (ECO). This concept attempted to build upon DO by strengthening a company with “improved command and control, intelligence, logistics, and fires capabilities.” Col Blair Sokol, current director of the Marine Corps War College, analyzed DO/ECO in a 2009 monograph titled *Reframing Marine Corps Distributed Operations and Enhanced Company Operations*. In it, he succinctly described the endstate of ECO as a rifle company able to assume the “stature” of a MAGTF, capable of supporting larger MAGTFs. The monograph also identified a major flaw in MCWL’s DO/ECO efforts:

The initial framing of the DO-ECO concept was constrained by a permissive counterinsurgency and security cooperation … approach.

MCWL was responding to an urgent need in the Marine Corps’ current forward deployed units in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their conclusions reflected this limited scope. Col Sokol went on to make recommendations for an overhaul of the infantry battalion’s table of organization and equipment, as well as recommendations for how the warfighting functions could integrate into DO/ECO.

Of the warfighting functions, Gen Conway listed intelligence first in precedence (above maneuver) in his 2008 *A Concept for Enhanced Company Operations*. “Intelligence,” he said, “is at the core of maneuver warfare and the first warfighting function that must be addressed in ECO capability development.”

The Marine Corps has made efforts in integrating intelligence at the lowest level. Most noticeable among these have been the Company Level Intelligence Cell and rapid deployment of unmanned aerial systems (UAS). But these attempts are haphazard and based on a flawed model. In trying to rapidly meet the needs of deployed units in a COIN fight, we put the proverbial cart before the horse. Col Sokol was insightful in concluding his monograph:

If the intelligence function is the principle feature of … ECO design, then the [Headquarters and Service] Company and Weapons Company, which retains the organic dismounted reconnaissance and mobile combined arms reconnaissance capability, should have been reviewed prior to the infantry squad. Only by framing the relationship of the infantry battalion—particularly the command and control,
intelligence, and reconnaissance assets—to the regiment, division, and MEF assets can the DO-ECO concept nest holistically for full-spectrum operations. ISR integration should be provided down to the company level.19 (italics added)

His prophetic comments called for a systemic review of how we structure our infantry battalions. Combined with the Commandant’s Planning Guidance’s focus on DO, the Marine Corps is long overdue in abandoning current intelligence organization at the tactical level. It is time to provide company and battalion commanders with the intelligence capabilities needed to decide and win battles of modernity.

Structuring Tactical Intelligence to Support Distributed Operations: Lay the CLIC to Rest

The Company Level Intelligence Cell (CLIC) was a product of Gen Conway’s ECO push. The CLIC, like ECO, grew out of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The CLIC as it stands today was designed in accordance with the needs identified there. However, the resultant COIN-based organizational recommendations, made within the construct of the current infantry battalion table of organization and equipment, will fail in the DO environment emphasized by senior leaders. We cannot expect a company commander to make decisions in a peer-to-peer battle based on the intelligence recommendations and analysis of a junior intelligence or infantry Marine armed with a SUAS and twenty days of intelligence training. To make decisions based on commander’s intent far from the flagpole, on ship or shore, with degraded communications, we need to give tactical leaders the enablers to do so.

Existing Tools and Past Recommendations: DSTs, 0203s, and the SARCC

To capitalize on the far-reaching nature of DO, intelligence at the tactical level must be “multi-int” and independent. We must seek to increase the distribution of sensors. Though not an inherently special operations forces concept, Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) and other special operations forces units have implemented it for some time. A Marine Special Operations Company deploys with an “Intelligence Direct Support Team (DST)” made up of numerous intelligence enablers from different disciplines. This readily available unit then attaches, detaches, organizes, and integrates itself into the MSOC’s subordinate Marine Special Operations Teams to maximize collection, targeting, and analysis across the area of operations. Importantly, it alleviates the company commander’s need to turn “inward” and focus on coordinating his/her own intelligence operations.

By task-organizing several “Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Platoons” in support of infantry companies, the Marine Corps can provide this level of freedom and flexibility to company commanders. Like a DST, this platoon would house representatives from all collection disciplines. A counter-
tion/intelligence driven battlefield with well-organized sensors. Survivability of those sensors are now increased as they close on the beachhead spread across several ships alongside their companies, promising a collections posture ashore regardless of the denied littoral environment. It will succeed in a DO environment.

Conclusion

Re-organizing the infantry battalion and redistributing intelligence personnel may seem like radical notions. But the Commandant has been frank: The Marine Corps will refuse to be “defined by any particular organizing construct;” even the sacred MAGTF. The “intel company”-structure postures the Corps to “sense first and shoot first.” Now is the time to get serious about intelligence at the tactical level. Playing our role as the Fleet’s Marine Force requires us buy-in, organize, and operate to finally benefit from what we have long championed. The DO concept is not a complication of effort for tactical or operational commanders. Rather, it is a voluntary reduction of control in pursuit of a purer form of maneuver warfare. Calculifying intelligence at the tactical level enables this and the naval Service’s efforts to pursue victory in a complex peer-to-peer fight.

Notes

2. Ibid.


6. 38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance.


15. Ibid.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. 38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance.