Reinvigorating the Fleet Marine Force Architecture

The Marine Corps must align to and complement the fleet
by Majs Jonathon Frerichs, Matthew Rohlfing, & CDR Brent Peterson, USN

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In crisis prevention and crisis response, the Fleet Marine Force—acting as an extension of the Fleet—will be first on the scene, first to help, first to contain a brewing crisis, and first to fight if required to do so.

This is an inspiring vision and call to action for the Service. However, the question remains: Will the current FMF structure or FMF structure of old suffice to meet this vision? The answer is simply, no. Renewed funding and commitment to the dual FMF construct, FMF PACIFIC (FMF PAC), and FMF ATLANTIC (FMF LANT) is not the answer. A redefined FMF model is best supported by a new Navy-Marine Corps component command relationship. Rather than adjacent Navy and Marine components, we propose that the Naval Services create integrated Naval components.

We propose that the Marine Corps and Navy adopt a FMF paradigm that defines FMFs as Marine Corps units that conduct naval operations in support of the Fleet Commander’s concept of operations within a maritime campaign.

Figure 1. Modified notional maritime task organization from JP 3-32 with supporting definitions. (Figure provided by author.)

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Figure 1. Modified notional maritime task organization from JP 3-32 with supporting definitions. (Figure provided by author.)

Naval Component: an integrated naval headquarters responsible for planning, directing, supervising, and assessing maritime campaigns in support of Combatant Commander, or Joint Force Commander, campaigns.

Fleet Marine Forces: Marine Corps units that conduct naval operations in support of the Fleet Commander’s concept of operations within a maritime campaign.

Numbered Fleet: a major tactical unit of the Navy immediately subordinate to a major fleet command and comprising of various task forces, elements, groups, and units for the purpose of prosecuting specific naval operations. (JP 1-02)

Numbered FMF: the senior Marine Corps Unit under the operational or tactical control of the corresponding numbered fleet.

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Naval Operations and the FMF

Over the years, the existing dual-FMF paradigm of FMFPAC and FMFLANT has failed to adapt to the framework of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, (Washington, DC: 1986), and the subsequent changes in Navy and joint force structure. Established on 7 December 1933 by MajGen John Russell, the FMF was a purpose-built force. Under the operational control of the Commander-in-Chief, U. S. Fleet, the FMF was established to develop, test, and evaluate amphibious operations. This model for Marine Corps organization and employment resulted in publication and refinement of the Tentative Landing Operations Manual (Washington, DC: 1934), and proved its worth during the execution of the Second World War’s Pacific maritime campaigns.

The success of this organizational model resulted in the establishment of FMFPAC in June 1944. Three years later with the establishment of U.S. Atlantic Command, the Marine Corps created FMFLANT to support U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Diverting from Gen Russell’s purpose-built FMF, FMFPAC and FMFLANT were assigned full type command status, responsible for the administrative manning, training, and equipping functions.

After the Nation Security Act of 1947 (Washington, DC: 1947), established periodic Unified Command Plans, and Goldwater-Nichols established a new joint force employment framework, the globe was effectively partitioned into geographic areas of responsibility assigned to individual unified commanders. Adapting to this construct, the Navy realigned its organizational laydown, force design, and employment methodology. Today, the Navy employs numbered fleets, immediately subordinate to the Navy component, to execute specific naval operations.

This model sufficiently aligns numbered fleets to support combatant commanders in accordance with the roles, responsibilities, and constraints articulated in the Unified Command Plan. An FMF model that fails to align to the Navy’s employment construct will result in a convoluted Navy-Marine Corps relationship that subsequently inhibits the development and prosecution of cohesive and unified maritime campaigns and the execution of their requisite naval operations.

The Naval Component and Maritime Campaigns

At the first echelon of command, Combatant Commander’s or Joint Force Commanders campaign to “shape the operating environment, deter aggressors, mitigate the effects of a contingency, and/or execute combat operations in support of the overarching national strategy.” Component commands, at the second echelon, are assigned tasks from which they develop supporting campaigns and direct, supervise, and assess subordinate force activities in pursuit of objectives and effects within the first echelon’s campaign (see Figure 3). In turn, units at the third echelon and below execute operations within their higher headquarters’ campaign.

The existing paradigm of independent Navy and Marine Corps components artificially bifurcates the Naval Services’ echelon two headquarters. This separation leads to a misperception that the Navy and Marine Corps’ operational responsibilities are separate and distinct, rather than intertwined. The result is often disparate Service-specific campaigns that impede unity of effort, operational flexibility, and integrated application of Navy-Marine Corps capabilities throughout the maritime domain. This separation contributes to sub-optimal inputs to the global
force management, program objective memorandum, posture, and strategic capabilities processes. While this approach may have made sense over the last twenty years, with Marines operating predominately in support of a land component, strategic guidance has now changed and the Marine Corps must as well.

Proposed FMF and Navy-Marine Corps Component Relationship

In his planning guidance, the Commandant directed the reinvigoration of the FMFs. To accomplish this, the Marine Corps must establish a new purpose-built FMF and Navy-Marine Corps component command relationship. We propose:

• The Marine Corps establish numbered FMFs aligned to support the numbered fleet commander’s concept of operations. (see Figure 4).
• The Navy and Marine Corps establish integrated, echelon two, naval components assigned to unified, sub-unified, and, as required, joint task force commanders. (see Figure 4).

The above framework is not prescriptive in size, location, or unit type. The numbered FMF is the senior Marine Corps unit under the operational or tactical control of the corresponding numbered fleet (for example FMF 4 in support of Fourth Fleet). Depending on the numbered fleet commander’s requirements, the numbered FMF could serve at the task force, task group, or task unit level and could range in size from a Marine Expeditionary Force to a small detachment.

Further, this model does not define by any single organizing construct such as the Marine Air Ground Task Force. Separate Marine forces, independent of the numbered FMF, can and should work for adjacent task forces, task groups, or task units. This small unit integration allows the Marine Corps to provide unique capabilities in accordance with concepts espoused in Distributed Maritime Operations (December 2018) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (March 2019). Ultimately, the task organization is dependent on the unique requirements of the supported commander and the service’s assessments of Naval force requirements.

To support this FMF model, the Naval component requires meaningful integration—not merely augmentation. A Naval headquarters requires appropriate general, flag, and senior enlisted representation at key positions within the command, but this will depend on the organization’s unique requirements. For example, Naval Component Pacific is likely to have larger requirements than Naval Component Europe. Additionally, the headquarters will require suitable staff organization and structure to ensure the unique and complementary capabilities of the Naval Services are appropriately represented. However, the intent is not to create additional staff requirements but rather to more efficiently employ staff officers through service-wide reorganization. In fact, efficiencies in manpower can likely be found for both Naval Services by eliminating redundancies caused by maintaining separate component headquarters.

This new naval component model ensures that the Marine Corps’ forces, capabilities, and equities are appropriately represented in maritime campaigns. Most critically, it aligns the Marine Corps’ force employment model to the organization and needs of the Navy. By embracing this proposed paradigm, the Naval Services will achieve integration at echelon, thereby facilitating the development and prosecution of cohesive and unified maritime campaigns and the execution of their requisite naval operations.

Obstacles and Opportunities

The prevailing framework of having

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—38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance

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Figure 4. Proposed FMF and Navy-Marine Component Relationship. (Figure provided by author.)
two FMFs and the bifurcated second echelon headquarters of the Navy and Marine Corps is incompatible with the Unified Command Plan and does not best support the combatant commander. The Commandant’s guidance to reinvigorate the FMF is a tremendous opportunity to reshape the structure and employment of Navy and Marine forces to most effectively accomplish the needs of combatant commanders. There will be institutional resistance to this proposal, but it is important to appreciate our own doctrine and the historical underpinnings of the FMF and fleet relationship.\(^\text{11}\)

Some may argue that the purpose of an FMF is not operational but rather to inform force design and provide a force that complements the Navy. They will say this is best done by aligning FMFs to the Navy force providers. At the end of the day, this argument misses the point and the Commandant’s intent as articulated in his planning guidance. Our proposal does not abdicate the Marine Corps, as a distinct Service, of its Title 10 man, train, and equip responsibilities. These responsibilities should continue to be executed by HQMC and Marine Forces Command as a consolidated type command and without confusing these functions with those of FMFs.

The Marine Corps should avoid a myopic approach to the Commandant’s guidance and adapt a flexible organizational structure which aligns with the current operating environment. The realities of Goldwater-Nichols, geographic combatant command organization, and the roles and responsibilities of the component commands and numbered fleets highlight the importance of rejecting the two-FMF construct in favor of integrated naval components and tactical FMFs. This will ensure the Naval Services are best organized to develop and prosecute cohesive and unified maritime campaigns and conduct their requisite naval operations.

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**Notes**


4. Department of the Navy, *Navy Doctrine Publication 1: Naval Warfare* (Washington, DC: 2010). NDP-1 defines Naval as “the Navy and Marine Corps and, when operating with other services, the Coast Guard.”

6. Ibid

7. RDML Julius Furer, *Administration of the Navy Department in World War II*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Publishing Office, 1959). This source provides the 27 November 1946 definition of a FMF and identifies them as full type commands. It also states, “Fleet and Task Force Commanders were relieved of distracting details, leaving them free to conduct operations, by turning over many of their former functions to type commanders based ashore, who handled the administrative details involved in manning, training, equipping and keeping the ships of the fleet in a state of readiness.”


10. Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations defines operation as “a military action or the carrying out of a strategic, operational, tactical, service, training, or administrative military mission.”


>Authors’ Note: All opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the opinions of the DOD, Navy, or the Marine Corps.