

The Meaning of Expeditionary

Keeping the tempo constant

by 1stLt Kirk Kostrzewski

After several weeks in the austere Mojave Desert, living in the sand on meals-ready-to-eat, thousands of Marines and Sailors breathed a strong sigh of relief. The prospects of a possibly hot shower, a somewhat sturdy cot, and food not originating from a vacuum-sealed bag filled every dusty vehicle with elation. However, the idea of creature comforts at the terminus of one final, monotonous, convoy were not the sole reason for Marines and Sailors of the 2dMarDiv to hold their heads high. For these 12,000 warriors, marred in dirt and sweat, this final convoy marked the successful completion of the largest exercise in recent Marine Corps history. MAGTF Warfighting

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Exercise 1-20 (MWX 1-20) afforded the opportunity for units to build, test, and refine how they worked as a team under the most challenging conditions. This occurred in light of the recently published guidance by the Commandant, directing the Marine Corps to focus on its expeditionary roots and embrace that which it prides itself on: being a small, mobile, and ferocious force, capable of adapting and

overcoming in any clime and place. 2d Tank Battalion was one unit that strived and succeeded at achieving this vision. The exercise not only provided opportunities for the unit to test itself, but it also produced evidence that the expeditionary spirit survives in corners of the Corps many thought impossible. Serving as a tremendous combat multiplier, 2d Tank Battalion proved its ability to mask its signature, self-sustain, and be ready at a moment's notice to be the deciding arm for the "Follow Me" division.

Rumors of the colossus MWX began circulating throughout the ranks as early as November 2018. Whispers of a *division*-level exercise escaped through the ajar doorways of unit commanders and filtered down to the deep depths of the lance corporal underground. The prospective scale alone baffled most, even driving some to scoff at the idea—believing the concept to be unmanageable. Indeed, a vast majority of Marines were not even *alive* the last time anything this enormous was attempted by the Marine Corps. Low and behold, eleven months later, there sat the 2dMarDiv, several-thousand strong, overflowing the berthing spaces representing tin cans, and setting up two-man tents in the sand. A true sight to see, not a square inch was left to waste in Camp Wilson. It was a hub, bustling with activity and the constant in-flow of new units. At its



An M1A1 Abrams tank camouflaged in its fighting position. (Photo by 1stLt Christian Forbes.)

apex, the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms maintained over 10,000 personnel with representation from all *four* MEFs, every Service, the British Royal Marines, and one Canadian tactical helicopter squadron. For all who would bear witness to accomplishing the feat of assembling this massive force, the next task seemed equally as daunting: execution. With an extraordinary opposing force, reflecting that of a well trained and equipped “peer-level” threat, the Division’s challenge was clear yet complex. “Clear” in that Marines would be fighting a more or less conventional battle against an enemy seeking decisive engagements. The enemy in question, however, maintained capabilities far beyond the friendly force’s, in many cases fielding tactics and systems not yet introduced to the Marine Corps or even the DOD at large. This aspect created the perfect storm of a complex dilemma that every unit was forced to face.

Before analyzing how any unit performed against this capable force, one must consider a key pre-existing condition. In July 2019, the 38th Commandant published his planning guidance. Its contents were far from conservative, and the effects were equally as earth shaking for many. The most focused-upon sections, by far, were those concerning the composition and disposition of the Marine Corps as a whole: Force Design and Warfighting. Out of the gate, he states that “no piece of equipment ... defines us—not the AAV, ACV, LAV, M1A1, M777 ... or any other program.” Force design is stated as his “number one priority,” declaring that “[the Marine Corps] *will* divest of legacy defense programs and force structure that support legacy capability.”¹ These initial statements set the tone for a majority of his planning guidance, as 14 of its 23 pages focus almost solely on that which is antiquated and needs to be drastically overhauled. For those individuals working with the oldest legacy systems previously mentioned, this editorial seemed more like their communities’ last rites. This was especially felt in the tank community, in which the Marine Corps already only maintains one full-strength battalion

and operates with a decades-old system. This implied foreshadowing of termination-by-obsolescence only grew with the additional references to extreme naval integration and an emphasis on the need for the Marine Corps to re-establish “[its] identity as a naval expeditionary force.”² Tanks have been known to be some of the most logistically-heavy and high-signature platforms the Marine Corps owns, giving some credence to the rumors of discontinuation. Questions such as, “Does heavy armor still have a place in the Marine Corps?” or “Can a tank battalion really be expeditionary?” were commonly posed after HQMC published the guidance. Thus, as MWX reared its head, a new purpose could be found within 2d Tank Battalion: meeting the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* in stride. The months spent training and executing would culminate not with defeat or victory over a well-equipped opposing force. Rather, by 9 November 2019, there would be an absolute, definitive, and simple answer to the questions above: Yes.

Upon arrival to the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center, 2d Tank Battalion wasted no time in debarking their equipment and finding a way into the training area. With several weeks to prepare in Johnson Valley, priorities of work were established in order to rapidly mold the unit into a light, agile, and stealthy force. An enduring task for every echelon was finding the best method for masking the force. One of the most prominent characteristics of the scenario would be the enemy’s total air superiority at the exercise’s onset, as well as a litany of bolstered, multi-domain dominating capabilities. Far from an uncomplicated assignment, the battalion had to take any moment available to review, readjust, and review again the posturing and locations of its forces in order to ensure survivability, yet responsiveness. The tank battalion tested several tactics, techniques, and procedures, eventually adopting the most effective by the onset of MWX. Force protection was at the forefront of every Marine and Sailor’s mind when



2d Tanks wasted no time in getting to the training area. (Photo by 1stLt Christian Forbes.)

finding new positions, ensuring each occupation was made hastily into well-masked terrain, usually taking the form of tight, dry creek beds surrounded by high peaks. Every position was meticulously chosen so vehicles could be deliberately placed for ease of egress and fast response times while denying enemy detection. Additionally, to bolster the hide sites, camouflage netting was used at every opportunity conceivable. Despite limited access to the appropriate-colored nets, the battalion made do by dragging the green nets through dusty trails and dry lake beds to give them a more suitable appearance for the arid climate. Vehicle preparation also became paramount to every movement and occupation. Economy of space and ease of access to mission-essential equipment would prove invaluable to ensuring the largest vehicular footprint in the Division could “tear down” and execute a movement within minutes. While a typically heavy-set unit, over time the tank battalion developed a “use-it-or-stow-it” mentality. By execution, any echelon could pick up and move to support at a moment’s notice.

Terrain could not support the most survivable positions for line companies tasked with defending key passes. Thus, with some support from engineering attachments, as well as through the use of their own organic tank blades, tank crews constructed entrenchments to conceal the several ton Abrams to further avoid detection, enemy acquisition, and to provide alternate and supplementary fighting positions. The result of these efforts could be seen well before the exercise’s commencement. Early on, during the “white space training” where-in units were afforded ample time to prepare for the exercise how they saw fit, the CG, 2dMarDiv, took a section of rotary-wing aircraft to review his Division’s initial positions. While several units were easily identified through both sight and sensors, the general could not find a single tank. During the initial defensive phase of the fight itself, section after section of Marine fixed- and rotary-wing assets constantly controlled the skies in support of the adversary forces, many times directly above the major command and control and lo-



SSgt Mathew Howell, a JTAC attached to Company B, 2d Tank Battalion conducts casevac drills with an MV-22 Osprey. (Photo by Capt Erik “Dong” Capulong.)

gistics nodes for the battalion. Alas, to the adversary commander’s discontent, aircraft could not identify and attack a single tank nor fuel truck. These practices of being “light on the deck” while remaining in an aggressive force protection posture directly contributed to 2d Tank Battalion’s ability to remain in the fight and support as an arm of decision for the division.

The Final Exercise Report described an “ADFOR [Adversary Force] Academy,” which specifically trained units on small unmanned aerial systems, electronic warfare suites, electronic warfare surveillance and reconnaissance teams, and direct finding equipment—all of which greatly strengthened the enemy force.³ With an adversary “capable of indirect strike of the [Exercise Force] ... well outside standard engagement ranges,” the odds of detection could almost be interpreted as inevitable.⁴ However, physical efforts to mask the unit’s potentially hefty signature were not the only actions taken to remain “below the radar” for the duration of execution. 2d Tank Battalion also found and enacted a multitude of constraints to remain undetected in the various non-visual spectrums that can often pose more of a threat to detection than simple line-of-sight. First, each echelon needed to consider how it would meet idling requirements for its vehicles in the sometimes below freezing temperatures. Tracked vehicles tend to give off an immense and lingering heat signature, which presented a significant dilemma

when attempting to maintain a constant capacity to respond immediately. For the most part, lighter vehicles remained off when in hide sites; operators ran them for only the minimum amount of time needed to keep them from dying. Tanks and amphibious vehicles were turned on as the sun had just begun to warm the earth below them, typically at around 1000. This practice kept thermal contrasts to a minimum at all times.

As for the electro-magnetic signature predicament, 2d Tanks was not alone in its struggles to find a way to positively maintain command and control on the battlefield without using its litany of high-emissions communications equipment. For starters, the use of VHF and non-DOD-encrypted “black gear” communications equipment were nearly struck from the list of options in the initial phases. Various forms of tactical chat were widely put to the test like never before, whether via satellite, HF, or L-Band on the Blue Force Tracker. By emitting smaller bursts of energy on often more reliable platforms, the battalion was able to keep a high level of situational awareness across long distances. At the small unit level, far more timeworn, yet evidently reliable, methods were dusted off and put to the test. Field phones with slash wire were a redundant way to allow vehicles to disperse yet remain in communication, all while simultaneously integrating the most fool-proof asset of all: runners. Often, small units had to rely on an individual Marine’s understanding

of the commander's message and intent. While no human is perfect, the human brain does tend to accurately interpret instructions far better than ancient VHF radios. Whereas some of these approaches may be construed as antiquated, the proof was in the proverbial pudding. Again, no units from 2d Tanks were discovered. By enacting this uncommon plan, the battalion never revealed itself to enemy detection assets, and thus remained in the fight for the entirety of the exercise.

Perhaps the most invaluable characteristic of any expeditionary unit is its ability to remain as self-sufficient as possible at the lowest level possible. Notorious for being a logistically heavy community, tanks require uncommon repair parts, an inordinate amount of fuel, and unique vehicle sets that can also be a complex logistical undertaking in and of themselves. The result of this widely-assumed truth was the adversary force adopting a strategy to attack the fuel for the tanks, as opposed to the tanks themselves. However, as stated before, not only were tanks never located but neither were their logistics trains, including, but not limited to, the gargantuan refueling containers. What led to this end state was the litany of measures taken to ensure survival of those assets as well as a rare distribution of said assets that ensured supportability. Nested in the same force protection model as the battalion's forward units were the logistics elements, which es-

tablished themselves in non-standard tactical assembly areas, exceptionally dispersed in draws or canyons with terrain to mask their presence. Vehicles were also subsequently entrenched and covered for total concealment. The task organization was overhauled into separate, functional platoons that could operate more autonomously. Many of the high-impact assets, such as maintenance teams, were distributed down to line companies in order to allocate much needed services where the demand was ever present.

Possibly the most significant contributor to the battalion's expeditionary nature was its constant ability to push logistics packages. Amazingly enough, the herculean effort of transporting these packages was ensured by just 24 Marines with a maximum of 12 vehicles at their disposal. Established as high pay-off targets by the adversary commander, Marines pushed these packages solely under the cover of darkness, having covered hundreds of miles by the exercise's terminus. The refreshing approach 2d Tank Battalion took in tackling the logistical dilemma of feeding and fueling a tank battalion was paramount to its success. By ensuring a more distributed footprint, supplies and services were broadly distributed, all while keeping exposure to a minimum.

The time spent in the California high desert was a true test to all present. Between the freezing cold nights,

constant inhalation of powdery moon dust, and consecutive late evenings spent planning, not a soul found himself calling a day easy. For heavy units like 2d Tank Battalion, the effort was twice as much. With a heavy toll placed on the exercise force, as dictated by a highly capable adversary, the tank battalion had the choice of becoming either a burden or a berserker in the fight. Through months of planning, weeks of experimentation, and days of disciplined execution, it became more and more evident how mean and capable the Masters of the Iron Horse truly are. The CG, 2dMarDiv placed a tremendous amount of confidence in Tank Battalion's ability to not only survive and sustain, but to show itself as a deciding arm in the battle when called upon. Day after day, event after event, they proved to be just that. Indeed, as a result of their innovative concealment tactics, some of the most advanced sensors in the DOD could not find an entire armored battalion. While logistical strains may have tested the Iron Horse, it prevailed in always finding a means to sustain and keep the tempo constant. Furthermore, by sheer force of will, 2d Tank Battalion made a perfect case for that which is to come. As the Marine Corps returns to its expeditionary roots, some may struggle to find their way back. Second Tank Battalion, however, will have no issue in defining what it means to be expeditionary.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. Commanding General, 2d Marine Division, *Marine Air Ground Task Force Warfighting Exercise 1-20 Final Exercise Report*, (Camp Lejeune, NC: January 2020).
4. Ibid.



A platoon from 2d Tank Battalion, staging for the counter attack during MWX. (Photo by SSgt Nils Aylor.)