

2017 LtCol Earl “Pete” Ellis Essay Contest: First-Place Winner

The 1st Centralian Revolutionary Battalion

Creating an organized ground opposing force

by Maj Leo Spaeder

I have met the CRF (Centralian Revolutionary Force) in combat. I have won some fire fights and lost some fire fights over the course of four 5-day operations. I have seen my fellow Marines mortally wounded but miraculously recovered after a red smoke billowed across a secure landing zone. However, like every lieutenant before me, my comrades and I learned our platoon-level tactics, defeated the CRF on the battlefields of Quantico, won the war, and graduated from TBS. Centralia was saved! Well, at least until the next training company lost the peace and had to fight the same four battles against the CRF to regain victory. I am a Marine officer, ready to lead my provisional rifle platoon.

The Marine Corps is always searching for better, more innovative ways to conduct tough, realistic force-on-force training. TBS created the Centralians as the vehicle to train lieutenants and pit platoons against each other in various tactical situations, and the Tactical Training Exercise Control Group sets Marines against the mixed Arab language contractor and individual Marine augment force of the Dakotians during the Integrated Training Exercise at MCAGCC (Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center) Twentynine Palms, CA, to simulate the global war on terrorism operating environment. Beyond these example adversaries, every ground unit in the Marine Corps creates some

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type of ad hoc unit to challenge itself in the field: a hand-picked fire team of NCOs planting improvised explosive devices against friendly convoys, a red cell platoon designated to attack an expeditionary airbase, or personnel providing injects during command post exercises.¹ Even Marines from the Inspector-Instructor staff of the 76th Spe-

cial Infantry Company, Steubenville, OH, created a black-clad, six-Marine aggressor force—in 1957!² These examples across time have one critical similarity: they are all improvised.

In 1986, Marine aviation created a permanent, professional adversary squadron, VMFT-401 (Marine Fighter Training Squadron 401), to improve the Corps’ air-to-air combat readiness. Today, some articles even contend that the Marine Corps does so better than the Air Force.³ *It is time for the ground element of the MAGTF to catch up and establish the Marine aggressor battalion*



Creating a Marine opposing force is not something new. (Photo by Sgt Allison DeVries.)

as the enduring means to enable quality ground force-on-force training across the spectrum of military operations.

As previously mentioned, VMFT-401 was established on 18 March 1986 at MCAS Yuma, AZ, to improve the Marine Corps' air-to-air combat readiness by employing current threat tactics against Marine pilots. The "Snipers" are manned by experienced Top Gun or WTI (Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course) graduates and fly F-5N Tiger II aircraft painted with communist red stars.⁴ As adversaries, they train WTI students on anti-air warfare during the semi-annual exercises as well as student F/A-18 Hornet pilots of VMFAT-101 within their training pipeline. While VMFT-401 is the Marine Corps' only aggressor squadron, the air and space domains are well represented across the Services: the Air Force possesses two aircraft aggressor squadrons, an air defense aggressor squadron, and two space aggressor squadrons, while the Navy operates four aircraft aggressor squadrons in addition to the Top Gun program at the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center.⁵ These organizations improve the performance of American aviators across the Services to engage peer or near-peer adversaries in the skies.

Dropping altitude to ground level, the Army also has considerable formalized OPFORs (opposing forces). The largest is the 11th ACR (Armored Cavalry Regiment)—the "Blackhorse"—stationed at the NTC (National Training Center) in Fort Irwin, CA. Its mission is two-fold: to conduct offensive hybrid threat operations in sector (the NTC) to defeat U.S. Army BCTs (brigade combat teams) in training and to deploy in support of worldwide contingency operations. The 11th ACR is the latest unit to serve as the NTC OPFOR since the post's establishment in 1980, when it was designed to prepare for potential conflict with the Soviet Union. Its two armored cavalry squadrons and support squadron—consisting of over 2,000 soldiers—are reinforced by two National Guard units of armored cavalry and field artillery. East of the NTC, the JRTC (Joint Readiness Training Center) at Fort Polk, LA, leverages the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry. As the

JRTC OPFOR, they provide stressful and challenging combat conditions for rotational units as replicated national security forces, insurgents, and a hybrid threat; provide feedback to improve the force and prepare units for success on future joint battlefields; and maintain readiness as a U.S. Army airborne infantry battalion.⁶ Finally, the JMTC (Joint Multinational Training Center) in Hohenfels, Germany, uses the 400 soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment (1-4) as its indigenous enemy. 1-4 Infantry trains not only U.S. Army Europe units but also many foreign partners, to include NATO and non-NATO allies alike.⁷

Unfortunately, this is where the list of U.S. formalized ground OPFORs ends: without a Marine Corps contribution. Unfortunately, the Corps' potential adversaries possess these capabilities. China created the 195th Mechanized Infantry Brigade in 2014 at the Zhurihe Combined Tactics Training Base—the Chinese Fort Irwin—to serve as their "Blue Force." The unit's first commander stated his job was to "study the enemies and act like the enemies." The unit adopted systems and tactics typical of NATO forces and challenged PLA (People's Liberation Army) units in various terrains (grasslands, hills, desert, urban) and environments (nuclear,

chemical, and biological). The Chinese military accepted their current technological disadvantages, providing the Blue Force with upgraded tanks and artillery before the rest of the PLA, and executed their exercises under the most challenging of tactical conditions. China has also hosted joint exercises with Russian, Kyrgyzstani, Kazakhstani, and Tajikistani forces at Zhurihe with the 195th Brigade. In addition to the tactical training value of the Blue Force, China also leverages it for strategic communications. State media broadcast video of PLA soldiers fighting the Blue Force in front of a building that looked like Taiwan's Presidential Office Building, sending an ominous message to Taiwan to influence diplomacy.⁸ China truly has realized the value of an OPFOR across all levels of war.

So, what is the Marine Corps missing without a dedicated OPFOR? A Marine aggressor battalion could provide five key contributions to the Service:

- Increase unit combat readiness through a professionalized, proficient OPFOR across the spectrum of military operations from insurgent to near peer;
- Challenge "exercises doomed to succeed" and add force-on-force realism;
- Test new concepts, weapons, and equipment with the MCWL (Ma-



Opposing force personnel have proven themselves capable of challenging Marine ground units. (Photo by Sgt Allison DeVries.)

rine Corps Warfighting Lab) and the Supporting Establishment without disrupting a training unit's training, exercise, and employment plan;

- Develop innovative, disruptive-thinking Marines like LtCol "Pete" Ellis, the namesake of this annual essay contest;
- Deploy forces in support of worldwide contingency operations, if required.

A Marine aggressor brigade would improve the combat readiness of Marine Corps ground forces, whether they are from the MarDiv, MAG, or MAW. The 11th ACR's published commander's intent is to provide the most lethal opposition force in the world to help their fellow soldiers win the *first time* against any opponent anywhere. That attitude, employed against fellow Marines in the field, will indubitably increase our units' abilities to win battles. A dedicated OPFOR whose sole mission is to study enemy doctrine, capabilities, and tactics, techniques, and procedures and adapt those elements in conjunction with developing technologies in order to destroy friendly forces is a considerably more powerful training asset than the ad hoc OPFOR that we currently employ. Moreover, the Marine aggressor battalion is external to the training unit, so there will be less sensitivity to "go easy" when an operation is poorly executed; the OPFOR's personnel will not come "out of hide" and disrupt the unit's internal cohesion; and the short-timers, legal holds, or other less-than-stellar Marines will not train your Marines for the harsh realities of combat. As America's expeditionary force-in-readiness, the Marine Corps must be ready to deploy quickly and win the first battles to enable follow-on forces to win the war.⁹ We do not have the luxury of "trying again," so the "win the first time" attitude of the Marine aggressor battalion will be a key aspect of increasing combat readiness.

Second, *MCDP 1, Warfighting* states, the essence of war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills ... While we try to impose our will on the enemy, he resists us and seeks to impose his will on us.¹⁰

The establishment of a Marine aggressor battalion would live up to our doctrine.

Capt Dennis Dunbar identified the problem of "exercises doomed to succeed" in the September 2015 *Gazette*.¹¹ While he focused on larger exercises such as BOLD ALLIGATOR, I pose this question: how many fire team-/squad-/platoon-/company-level engagements against an OPFOR are assessed as wins just because the good guys are supposed to win? How many Maj Powers "are building an elite company of fightin' men" by telling the OPFOR where and when to die?¹² Again plagiarizing from the Army, the 1-509 Infantry's website specifically states, "make rotational training units pay for their mistakes."¹³ An aggressive, thinking OPFOR will create a dynamic force-on-force trial for our combat leaders to make mistakes, similar to the trial that the joint force command planners learned at the hands of LtGen P.K. Van Riper during MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE 2002. In the October 1998 *Gazette*, Timothy Maxwell described his experience serving in the OPFOR at the NTC against U.S. Army units as a member of 3d Bn, 7th Marines. He describes the force-on-force training as a very rewarding experience because of the steep learning curve and an enemy with a free will. As Maxwell states, force-on-force training is a great complement to live fire.¹⁴ Against a *Heartbreak Ridge* GySgt Highway-type OPFOR, our Marines will often fail. But they will also learn important lessons in the safety of garrison rather than the cruel crucible of combat.

Next, the MCWL and the Supporting Establishment are tirelessly working to develop new concepts and technologically advanced equipment in order to field it to the force. These developments require a unit to test them, which can burden a unit that is already laboring under a busy training, exercise, and employment plan. The presence of a Marine aggressor battalion would provide a unique opportunity to develop and test new ideas without overtasking a unit. Additionally, while developing friendly tactics, techniques, and procedures for employment of new innovations, the Marine aggressor battalion could also develop an enemy threat template as well. This unique double-

sided approach could improve requirement development, jump-start doctrine or tactics, techniques, and procedures' modifications, and prepare the total force to succeed in future operating environments.

Fourth, the unit could create an environment to develop innovative, disruptive thinking Marines like LtCol "Pete" Ellis. Using the 11th ACR's commander's guidance, one of his key tasks to achieve his end state is the idea of the leadership laboratory, growing and providing the next generation of leaders who set the example and know their business.¹⁵ The Marine aggressor battalion could be the Corps' innovation laboratory, attracting Marines who live outside the box, challenge the status quo, and are often viewed as troublemakers. Sound familiar? Those were the exact words of the Commandant, Gen Robert B. Neller, who wants to retain and develop our disruptive thinkers.¹⁶ Using this unit as a petri dish to grow and develop this type of Marine, the rotation of Marine aggressor battalion alumni back into the Operating Forces can reinforce a culture of learning and innovation as the Marine Corps University and SNCO academies do for military education and professional development. The *Gazette* frequently asks, "Where has Pete Ellis gone?"¹⁷ The Corps can use the Marine aggressor battalion to stop searching for him and develop new Pete Ellises instead.

Finally, this unit would directly support the Marine Corps' mission: to win battles. Emulating the 11th ACR mentioned above, the Marine aggressor battalion could be worldwide deployable, if needed, based on a carefully crafted mission-essential task list that balanced training others with training and readiness standard-based metrics.

Now that we have studied what the Marine aggressor battalion can do for the Corps, how should we structure it? The Marine aggressor battalion should be a distributed, Commandant-selected, colonel-level command based on the 11th ACR model and headquartered at MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, with company landing teams at MCAGCC, Camp Pendleton, and Camp Lejeune. The battalion should be subordinate to

MAGTFTC (MAGTF Training Command), which would be collocated at MCAGCC, while the companies on the east and west coasts report to the battalion headquarters and have a direct support relationship to I and II MEFs via the G-3. The following sections will unpack these characteristics in detail.

The U.S. Army already has refined this OPFOR concept over decades, and the Marine Corps should base its aggressor battalion on the 11th ACR model with a few refinements. Previously, the 11th ACR had adopted Soviet methods en-masse: from the uniforms they wore to the vehicles/equipment they employed and the doctrine that drove their tactics. Currently, they employ various OSVs (OPFOR surrogate vehicle) to simulate enemy equipment: HMMWVs for BRDM-2s, M1113s as MBP-2s, and M1 tanks as T-80s. The 11th ACR also has acquired and modified civilian pickup trucks to serve as technical vehicles employed by non-state actors. They conduct force-on-force training against training brigades, who rotate through Fort Irwin every two years, while retaining their own ability to deploy in support of contingency operations. This model provides a strong foundation to build the Marine Corps' OPFOR from a doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities standpoint.

The unit should be commanded by a Commandant-selected colonel for a number of reasons. First, this colonel will frequently oppose battalions and regiments up to, possibly, divisions or MEFs commanded by lieutenant colonels to general officers. Many times, the Marine aggressor battalion will have catastrophic success against friendly forces and those commanding officers/generals, which will require the appropriate rank, experience, and emotional intelligence to transform anger, hurt feelings, and/or embarrassment into a constructive learning experience. Moreover, this command will frequently interact with the Deputy Commandants to develop and adapt new technologies and concepts and thus will require a more senior commander to manage these delicate relationships. Finally, a



HMMWVs can be outfitted as required and used by the opposing forces during field exercises. (Photo by Sgt Ricky Gomez.)

colonel—preferably one with continued service potential—will have the ability to properly advocate for a Marine OPFOR and the capabilities that accompany it that a lieutenant colonel will not have. The Commandant should select this commander under the CMC Special Selection Process, outlined in *MCO 1300.64B*, to ensure he is an innovative, disruptive thinker who will vigorously challenge the entire Service on a variety of fronts. This is the opportunity to slate

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“the Innovators,” as LtGen Victor H. Krulak outlined in Part II of *First to Fight*. The Pete Ellises, Dion Williamsses, “Brute” Krulaks, and Paul K. Van Rippers would be the natural commanders of this battalion. The Commandant should look at out-of-the-box officers or those with eccentric career paths for the Marine aggressor battalion: FAOs (foreign area officers) and RAOs (regional

affairs officers) from Asia, Eurasia, and the Middle East; PhDs or others with non-military advanced education; and other non-standard types. Only these officers will elevate the value of the unit to its full potential.

Below the colonel-level headquarters, there should be four company landing teams, each headed by a major, with two located at MCAGCC, one stationed at Camp Pendleton, and the fourth at Camp Lejeune. All aggressor companies should possess two motorized infantry platoons with heavy machine guns and anti-armor weapons, a mechanized infantry platoon, a 120mm mortar section, and a tactical logistics platoon. In addition, the MCAGCC-based companies should also possess a tank platoon each. The Marine Corps should consider the acquisition of legitimate enemy threat equipment to add to the realism of capability; however, training and sustainment issues (teaching tank mechanics to fix T-80s instead of M1A1s) may preclude this strategy. The OSV construct employed by the Army serves as a strong fallback position. Additionally, the Marine Corps needs to determine what doctrinal model the Marine aggressor battalion should assume. The Corps' should modify Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Joseph F. Dunford's 4+1 threat

framework (Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and transnational violent extremist organizations) and adopt a 1+1 model for the unit, selecting a traditional state adversary based on a review of combat likelihood.¹⁸ A 1+1 threat profile of Russia+violent extremist organization, for example, could prepare Marines for potential intervention in an eastern Ukraine-type scenario against a hybrid enemy. These general capabilities, not including the high-speed prototype equipment being tested, will provide the Marine aggressor battalion the ability to play OPFOR from insurgent to powerful near-peer adversary across all terrains.

The companies' distributed nature is a key advantage to this OPFOR construct. At MCAGCC, the two units provide MAGTFTC either a consolidated battalion (minus) OPFOR or individual company-sized OPFOR for each east and west corridor during the integrated training exercise, while I and II MEF each have an OPFOR to employ. The two non-MCAGCC units would operate on a Marine Forces Reserve command model, where a commander retains operational control and reports on distributed commands. These distributed companies would be in direct support of the MEF and would receive unit prioritization from the

MEF G-3 if demand exceeds available capability. Additionally, the distributed companies can consolidate for large-scale exercise as needed, such as BOLD ALLIGATOR at Camp Lejeune, STEEL KNIGHT across the southwest United States, TALISMAN SABRE in Australia, or NORTHERN STRIKE for Marine Forces Reserve. Unlike the U. S. Army's OPFOR construct which contains three independent commands (11th ACR, 1-509 Infantry, and 1-4 Infantry), this distributed construct under a common command allows for the effective communications of lessons learned across the Service and adaptive tactics between the aggressor companies.

As observed above, the Marine aggressor battalion personnel would be more senior than the traditional battalion. This unit would welcome disruptive thinking Marines at all levels, but it should particularly focus on the wicked smart sergeants, first lieutenants, and captains, those who won't re-enlist as they may be frustrated with the Corps' slow adoption of innovation as Gen Neller warned.¹⁹ All officers should apply to serve in the unit—similar to other special duty assignments—to ensure they have the intelligence, critical thinking skills, and boldness to challenge the status quo and encourage independent thought in their subordinates. Person-

nel could be screened numerous ways: a non-statutory Manpower & Reserve Affairs board or a type of interview/board conducted by the unit itself. All personnel would be limited to two years of service in the Marine aggressor battalion in order to avoid intellectual stagnation, regenerate new ideas, disperse these innovative thinkers across the Corps, and provide opportunities to more Marines. While demand for these billets will probably exceed supply, incentives for service in the Marine aggressor battalion (educational opportunities, recognition as a special duty assignment, additional military occupational specialty, pay, etc.) could be leveraged to encourage participation.

Creating this unit will not be easy, painless, or inexpensive. Rough calculations of the table of organization and equipment require approximately 1,000 Marines, OSV-armored personnel carriers, OSV tanks, 120mm mortars (to simulate enemy fires capabilities), unmanned aerial vehicles, dozens of OSV light vehicles, modified civilian vehicles, and medium cargo vehicles plus the thousands of non-U. S. rifles, optics, tool kits, etc., as well as appropriate funding, office space, maintenance bays, and associated facilities. The Corps would also need to reinvest and expand current MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system) capabilities and contractor support. New schools required to train and educate aggressor Marines in the adopted 1+1 threat framework will also require resources in funding, personnel, and facilities. Strictly focusing on personnel as the largest hurdle, establishing this unit will be genuinely painful and require thoughtful sourcing, while concurrently attempting to reinforce other capabilities such as information warfare. As costly as this seems, it is a small price to pay in order to prepare our Marines to defeat potential adversaries during combat operations ashore.

Faced with these challenges, it is imperative to understand why the Corps needs this capability. For the past 30 years, Marines defeated our technologically disadvantaged adversaries in conventional battle. We were victorious when America called. Why should



Opposing force staff personnel would be more senior than in an infantry battalion. (Photo by SSgt Leon Branchaud.)

we change? Because our enemies are learning and adapting to us, are closing the technology gap and the tactical asymmetry on which we have overly relied, and won't sit stationary to be destroyed on the mechanized assault course at Twentynine Palms. The Basic School staff platoon assistants (formerly the Marines of Instructor Battalion), combat instructors of the Schools of Infantry, and our internal unit training teach our Marines how *we* fight; the Marine aggressor battalion will teach our Marines how our *enemies* fight.

Our hallmark Service-level training event—the integrated training exercise—focuses on live fire events and urban combat, which do not allow for higher level and wide maneuver against a thinking enemy. The Corps does not currently have a means of vigorously exercising its commanders, forcing them to maneuver and employ their companies, battalions, regiments, or divisions against a thinking opponent. The Marine aggressor battalion may identify which commanders are skilled only at training, equipping, and administering their units but not fighting them in force-on-force combat. Live fire training is an essential facet to combat readiness, but it's not the only part. Taking the foundational lessons of live fire-and-maneuver ranges at any base and combining them with force-on-force, MILES-enabled maneuver warfare against a constantly shifting enemy will elevate our Marines' abilities to survive and thrive downrange. Across all of our exercises, we always seem to win, while any reading of American military history shows a fair share of disasters at the hands of "inferior" opponents. Despite recent conventional successes, the Corps is not guaranteed to succeed in the future.

In conclusion, it is time for the GCE of the MAGTF to match the ACE, the U.S. Army, and foreign militaries and establish a Marine aggressor battalion. In 2014, China conducted Exercise STRIDE and pitted the 195th Mechanized Infantry Brigade described previously against the PLA's top seven brigades. Six of seven units failed under realistic combat conditions, sending a shockwave through the PLA and rein-

vigorating the force.²⁰ In 2015, all of the "friendly" PLA units were defeated while simulating an invasion of enemy territory.²¹ If our adversaries are willing to test themselves this honestly, then the Marine Corps must similarly challenge our assumed "tactical superiority" and execute the rigorous force-on-force training described in *MCDP 1, Warfighting* through a Marine aggressor battalion.

Notes

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