

# Utilization of the MWSS

Necessary adjustments to Service-level training venues for better training and operational employment

by Capt Kristina Warren

**T**wo MV-22s touch down after a 500-mile trip from Kuwait to “Five Guys” forward arming and refueling point (FARP) in Jordan. The Special Purpose MAGTF–Crisis Response–Central Command (SPMAGTF–CR–CC) tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel (TRAP) team off-loads and stages for on call support while the MV-22s refuel. The FARP reduced the distance to the objective area to only 15 miles, allowing the TRAP force to reach the objective area within 10 minutes of an isolated personnel or downed aircraft event. Two Marine Wing Support Squadron (MWSS) expeditionary firefighting and rescue (EFR) Marines conduct a final check of the “Broco” torch and rescue saw that allows them to quickly recover individuals or equipment from the wreckage.

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At an airbase in Iraq, MWSS engineers berm the U.S. perimeter, conduct airfield damage repair, establish a power grid, and construct an AM2 helicopter-landing pad for the coalition medical facility. At another Iraqi airbase 100 miles away, MWSS motor transport Marines conduct a tactical convoy to transport U.S. trainers and Iraqi troops to a combat marksmanship range, while communications Marines set up a new tactical network. At airbases in Kuwait and Bahrain, MWSS Marines provide 24-hour fuel support and

flightline security, explosive ordnance disposal. Marines conduct a range sweep, and expeditionary airfield Marines prepare the M-31 arresting gear to receive a partnership tail hook aircraft. This is a day in the life of the SPMAGTF’s MWSS, where distributed operations are the baseline.

Many who have never served with an MWSS often view the unit as little more than a provider of mobile gas stations. Few understand the MWSS’s robust engineering and logistics capabilities, its critical role as the true expeditionary enabler for Marine aviation, and that its structure is well suited for distributed operations in a vast battlespace. With 76 different MOSs and a diverse equipment set, it is the ground tactical arm of the MAG that extends the reach and lethality of Marine aviation.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the institutional status quo and culture of the MWSS was (and sometimes still is) to focus almost exclusively on aviation ground support (AGS) at static locations during Service-level exercises, predeployment training, and while deployed. The future operating environment requires a MWSS that is well-trained in basic infantry skills and convoy operations, in addition to being well-postured to conduct multiple distributed simultaneous operations across a complex battlespace. To be effective in a distributed operations paradigm, continued revisions to the Service-level exercises for the MWSS and a cultural focus on expeditionary vice static AGS are required.



**MWSS provide more than just a refueling capability to deployed aircraft. (Photo by author.)**

## OEF/OIF MWSS AARs

Prior to deploying with SPMAGTF–CR–CC 17.1B, MWSS-372 conducted

a detailed review of the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF)<sup>2</sup> and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)<sup>3</sup> after-action reports (AARs). The OIF AARs indicated that there were over 20 FARPs and forward operating bases, all in close proximity to the forward line of troops, significantly enhancing on station time for close air support platforms. In addition to enabling Marine aviation to effectively support the rapid advance of the GCE, the MWSS routinely provided services and supplies to GCE units when traditional logistics support was unavailable.<sup>4</sup> Despite AARs from over a decade ago noting that garrison training did not sufficiently integrate the MWSS with supported ACE or GCE units,<sup>5</sup> the current MWSS continues to train separately from the MAGTF and supported units. The analysis of the data obtained through the AARs demonstrates MWSS's need to further integrate with all elements

of the MAGTF during predeployment training. Additionally, MWSS training needs to extend beyond MOS-based AGS skills, with an enhanced focus on basic small unit combat skills and motorized operations.

### Status Quo of the MWSS Predeployment Training Program (PTP)

The recent status quo of MWSS participation in Service-level exercises, particularly Weapons and Tactics Instructors Course (WTI) and Integrated Training Exercise (ITX), called for administrative FARPs and static AGS at airfields. "Success" for the MWSS was often defined as timely provision of fuel to aircraft, safe lift and transportation of required assets, and uninterrupted power and chow to the supported units. The MWSS was generally relegated to a training aid. There was little to no requirement to execute tactically or integrate capabilities into the exercise scheme of maneuver. With its 76 MOSs

and diverse equipment set, the MWSS has a more robust engineering and logistics capability than any other unit in the Marine Corps. The MWSS is a unit that is understood by relatively few in the MAGTF because of the constant training barrier of administrative support. The MWSS needs to be exercised across the full spectrum of its capabilities at both WTI and ITX to better train its Marines, expand the education and understanding of all MAGTF officers through exposure, and enhance the capabilities of the MAGTF. TTECG added AGS Coyotes to their staff in a highly successful effort to better integrate the MWSS into the exercise construct. Recent ITX evolutions added live fire exercises with integrated aviation support, improved involvement with the MAGTF command element, and a tactical mindset in the execution of the exercise. This action represents the first of many steps towards the ultimate goal.

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## The Diamondback Mindset

Even prior to the execution of these Service-level exercises in 2017, the Marines of MWSS-372 leveraged an aggressive, mission-oriented, no-fail culture to attack the administrative status quo of MWSS predeployment training. The unit's leadership embedded a tactical mindset into each Marine by augmenting the PTP requirements with rigorous field training intensely focused on basic small unit infantry skills. Rather than simply accepting the typical MWSS culture of "FARPing" and refining MOS specific skills, the unit conducted extensive training on crew-served weapons, demolitions, tactical convoy operations, immediate action drills, tactical radio employment, land navigation, and combat reporting. Additionally, the unit heavily emphasized MOS cross-training and equipment licensing to build the bench of Marines capable of performing all possible engineering missions while deployed, regardless of MOS. Maximum flexibility and proficiency in all tactical tasks remained the mantra over the six month period leading up to ITX 2-17. From day one of predeployment training, this aggressive and flexible mindset was engrained into every Marine in the unit, creating a "support 'til it hurts" approach that characterized MWSS-372's many unique accomplishments during the SPMAGTF 17.1B/17.2A deployment.

## Establishing the "New Normal" for MWSS PTP

MWSS-372 took a fresh approach to the MWSS exercise force (EXFOR) role during ITX 2-17. Refusing to simply run the strategic expeditionary landing field (SELF) and execute two FARPs, MWSS-372 coordinated with MAG-39 and 1st Marine Regiment (MAGTF-1 EXFOR) to mirror the command relationships of SPMAGTF-CR-CC. This command structure placed all lieutenant colonel-level commands, such as the MWSS, directly under the command and control of the regiment vice the MAG. While the MWSS still coordinated closely with the MAG and its MAG-39 sister flying squadrons, the flattened command hierarchy greatly



**MWSS-372 took a fresh approach to the MWSS exercise force (EXFOR) role during ITX 2-17.**  
(Photo by Cpl Samuel Ruiz.)

increased information sharing and the MWSS's effectiveness in terms of timely direct support to the MAGTF. Instead of establishing the aviation ground support operations center at the SELF, MWSS-372 collocated the AGSOC at Camp Wilson with the rest of the MAGTF. In addition to providing routine AGS to the MAG, on many occasions MWSS-372 utilized excess engineering and logistics capacity to execute missions typically assigned to the LCE. The MAGTF received an LCE "light" capability set from the MWSS that extended the breadth and effectiveness of MAGTF logistics operations.

MWSS-372 went above and beyond the exercise requirements with a tactical approach to each assigned mission during ITX; maximizing integration into the ground and aviation scheme of maneuver. During each FARP mission, MWSS-372 exercised a different level of FARP capability in order to train for crisis response and contingency missions. The "heavy" FARP capability focused on providing a dedicated mobile security force, counter-mobility, and survivability positions. The "light" FARP capability focused on providing an air delivered fueling and security force team for quick insertion into any location. During Final Exercise I and II, the MAGTF-1 forward combat operations center and MWSS-372 collocated at the FARP to supplement the C2 capabilities of 1st Marine Regiment.

This collocation allowed the MAGTF-1 commander the ability to quickly place himself at the point of friction. The EXFOR ACE and TTECG leaned into developing a red cell for the final FARP, which provided a valuable training opportunity that rehearsed the ability to integrate air and ground forces into the FARP security plan. The GCE also utilized excess capacity to integrate mobile security forces into the defensive posture of this FARP, building cohesion and maximizing use of available resources.

Outside of the FARPs, MWSS-372 effectively worked to integrate TRAP enablers, such as the EFR Marines, into GCE training in preparation for deployment. The EFR Marines lived and trained with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in order to ensure that they could be effectively employed as riflemen in any TRAP scenario. Additionally, Marines not required to support the SELF had the opportunity to conduct the motorized operations live fire events in order to build self-supporting, self-securing forces for FARPs, logistics convoys, or engineering missions.

This "enhanced" ITX 2-17 package was an effective starting point for building the necessary training for the MWSS. MWSS-372 recommended relieving the EXFOR MWSS of a large portion of the SELF mission in order to allow it to focus on integrating into the tactical picture during this exercise, providing each Marine in the MWSS, and

the MAGTF as a whole, an invaluable predeployment training opportunity for both small units and staffs alike.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to ITX 2-17, MWSS-372 participated in WTI 1-17. This venue provides an outstanding opportunity to exercise MOS skills in the establishment of a 1,000-man base camp in the desert of Arizona and the execution of FARPs across the southwestern United States

requirements. Additionally, the unit reorganized on-the-fly to establish a new, more flexible, task organization. This effort resulted in sustained simultaneous MWSS operations in three countries. These operations include AGS at Al Jaber Airbase, AGS and security force operations at Isa Airbase, continuous TRAP enabler support (EFR and EOD) to the MAGTF, and over 60 MWSS

ing distributed operations at multiple locations across three countries, providing invaluable support to Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. Additionally, the MWSS culture needs to continue to shift toward a focus on training and exercising skills well beyond administrative AGS. MAGTF commanders should view the MWSS as a legitimate ground combat unit that can fight to the FARP and conduct the diverse set of engineering and logistics tasks required to effectively support the entire MAGTF, not just the ACE. Adjusting the Service-level training scenarios to better incorporate the MWSS into existing tactical training, and the overall tactical scenario, will benefit the entire MAGTF tremendously in the long-run.

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## ***The MWSS is the most capable engineering and logistics unit in the Marine Corps.***

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over a two-month period. However, there are no tactical scenarios for the MWSS. During a WTI exercise, the MWSS is the quintessential “working party.” The WTI MWSS EXFOR is not even read into the play of the problem. Its sole purpose during WTI is to feed and shower people at the base camp and to put gas in airplanes. This minimal level of exercise participation amounts to missed training opportunities for the MWSS, and reinforces the pervasive perspective of the institution; that the MWSS is simply a provider of mobile gas stations.

### **SPMAGTF-CR-CC Deployment**

The preparatory actions during squadron pre-deployment training and at ITX set MWSS-372 up for success in support of SPMAGTF-CR-CC. At the onset of the deployment with the MAGTF, MWSS-372 found that previous MWSS rotations had been characterized by the same static AGS status quo associated with Service-level exercises. The preponderance of the work for the MWSS revolved around static AGS at two established airbases, Isa Airbase in Bahrain and Al Jaber Airbase in Kuwait, with small episodic engineering or enabler missions in Iraq. In an effort to change the status quo and provide engineering and logistics support at multiple locations, MWSS-372 worked with the SPMAGTF-CR-CC command element and the staffs at Task Force Al Asad and Al Taqaddam to identify long-term, large-scale engineering re-

Marines conducting ADR and general engineering operations at both Task Force Al Asad and Al Taqaddam. In addition to establishing this new status quo, MWSS-372 remains postured to support additional engineering and logistics tasks outside of these locations in support of emerging requirements or crisis response missions. This additional capacity exists only because of the extensive predeployment cross-training efforts focused on maximum flexibility and proficiency in all tactical tasks, and the unit’s collective drive to train beyond the established MWSS status quo. It is reasonable to assume that the MWSS’s role will continue to grow in importance to the institution as we move closer toward the future of warfare described in the *Marine Corps Operating Concept for the 21st Century*.<sup>7</sup>

### **Continuous Improvement and Maintaining the “New Normal” for MWSS PTP**

The MWSS is the most capable engineering and logistics unit in the Marine Corps. With its 76 MOSs and incredibly diverse equipment set, an MWSS can be used to support a multitude of missions across the spectrum of military operations. The MWSS should be exercised and utilized like the engineering and logistics powerhouse that it is. We need to get away from the mobile gas station mindset. The MWSSs of OEF and OIF were the critical enablers to projecting the ACE’s combat power. The MWSS of today’s SPMAGTF-CR-CC is execut-

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#### **Notes**

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-21.1, Aviation Ground Support*, (Washington, DC: October 2001).
2. MWSS 371, Marine Wing Support Squadron 371 OEF 11.2 After-Action Report, Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, (Quantico, VA: March 2012).
3. Initial Observations Report Combat Assessment Team OIF: Aviation Ground Support, Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, (Quantico, VA: October 2003).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. MWSS 372, Marine Wing Support Squadron 372 After-Action Report for Integration Training Exercise 2-17, Marine Corps Center For Lessons Learned, (Quantico, VA: March 2017).
7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).

