

AH-1W returning to  
USS Bonhomme  
Richard.



USS Bonhomme Richard (Spike Call)

# MAGTF Area of Operations Turf War or Doctrinal Necessity?

By MICHAEL R. KENNEDY

If given a mission and area of operations, Marine air-ground task forces (MAGTFs) fight as a whole, by integrating ground maneuver, rotary and fixed wing aviation, and logistic support. The longstanding insistence by the Marine Corps on retaining operational control over aviation is legendary. Although the omnibus agreement was superseded by Joint Pub 0-2, *The Unified Action Armed Forces* (UNAAF), its principles still apply.

While recent joint operations have sought to improve efficiency by consolidating assets in

blocks of like capabilities with functional competency, the Marine Corps is focused on tactical and operational integrity. Unfortunately, joint doctrine is vague on this point and questions surface regarding MAGTF battlespace: Where do the Marines get doctrinal authority to assume command and control over areas of operations? Does this authority include airspace? If not, how is it assigned? Is there a conflict with joint force air component commanders (JFACCs) in prosecuting targets? How do assigned MAGTFs fit into functionally organized joint forces?

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## Joint Doctrine

UNAAF reaffirms the primacy of joint force commanders and acknowledges that its intent is



Marines during training exercise in Korea.

U.S. Marine Corps (Roberto Torres)



F/A-18 taking off from USS John C. Stennis.

U.S. Navy (Michael Arteaga)

meeting their needs while maintaining the integrity of service organizations:

*[They possess] full authority to assign missions, redirect efforts, and direct coordination among subordinate commanders. JFCs should allow service tactical and operational*

*assets and groupings to function generally as they were designed. . . . The MAGTF commander will retain operational control of organic air assets. The primary mission of the MAGTF air combat element is the support of the MAGTF ground element. During joint operations, the MAGTF air assets will normally be in support of the MAGTF mission. The MAGTF commander will make sorties available to the joint force commander, for tasking through the joint force air component commander, for air defense, long-range interdiction, and long-range reconnaissance. Sorties in excess of MAGTF direct support requirement will be provided to the joint force commander for tasking through the joint force air component commander for the support of other components of the joint force or the joint force as a whole.*

Unlike other organizations, joint doctrine specifically addresses MAGTFs and their organic aviation assets. UNAAF recognizes that these task forces are organized, trained, and equipped to fight as integrated and interdependent units. And it recognizes that the strength of organizations is synergism. Accordingly, commanders assign missions based on capabilities rather than the sum of aircraft, infantry battalions, and logistic units.

Proponents of functional competency who object to organic MAGTF aviation assets forget that UNAAF makes provisions for commanders to make the following sorties available:

- *Air defense sorties.* Air superiority is an absolute necessity. If JFCs through JFACCs do not have sufficient assets to provide it, they must use all available assets (including MAGTF). It is assumed that JFCs require MAGTF air superiority sorties until air threats are diminished or JFACCs deploy sufficient assets in theater to ensure air superiority over the entire joint force.

- *Long-range interdiction sorties.* If MAGTF F/A-18s represent the long-range interdiction assets in theater, marines were the first to arrive or serious problems exist. In either case, JFCs must decide (together with the Marine Corps Forces (MARFOR)/MAGTF commanders) whether advantages of striking long-range interdiction targets outweighs disadvantages, both on MAGTF and

HC-130 refueling  
CH-53s, Cobra Gold '02.



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jerry Morrison)

joint force missions, of stripping away MAGTF direct support sorties. Clearly, the intent of UNAAF is ensuring that MAGTFs are employed generally as designed, but not at the expense of the overall joint force mission.

■ *Long-range reconnaissance.* While the advanced tactical airborne reconnaissance system provides an added capability to a percentage of Marine F/A-18Ds, it is doubtful that these aircraft can fulfill the long-range reconnaissance role. If JFACCs lack assets in theater or the Marines were first in theater, joint force priorities may require MAGTF commanders to provide long-range reconnaissance sorties for JFC tasking.

UNAAF also identifies excess sorties as the excess of MAGTF direct support requirements. Many joint force planners do not realize that MAGTFs are truly task-organized. When JFCs assign the mission and area of

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operations, task force commanders bring only what is needed to fight. Through analysis and consultation with aviation combat element commanders, they assemble packages of air assets (fixed and rotary wing, command and control, logistic, and air defense) to accomplish missions. Because of the paucity of intertheater lift, they cannot bring more. If done properly, there are few if any excess sorties in the initial stages of the operation. As the operation continues and the threat decreases, excess sorties may be available. Conversely, if task forces are given more battlespace, face greater threats, or are assigned additional ground forces, excess sorties may not be available. If deficits occur, forces can request further sorties through the target nomination process or specific platform/capability support from JFACCs.

As further proof of commitment to the joint force, if MAGTFs have not received a mission and

requisite area of operations, for instance as its forces flow into the theater, all its tactical fixed-wing sorties would be considered excess and be given to JFCs for tasking by JFACCs.

### Single Battle

It is a truism that every marine is a rifleman. In boot camp or at officer candidate school, marines learn to be basic riflemen. Those who are pilots, logisticians, or mechanics remember that they must support the guy on the ground. Similarly, the single battle concept directs the entire power of MAGTFs on the assigned mission and the intent of commanders. There is only one task force commander and all his elements are synchronized for maximum effectiveness while accomplishing the JFC-assigned mission. Although areas of operations may be divided into the deep, close, and rear, that is more to facilitate specific warfighting functions than to reassign or divide responsibility for actions in those areas. For example, commanders perform shaping operations in the deep fight to set conditions for the close fight. Sustainment operations are conducted in rear areas to maintain freedom of maneuver or ensure that operations are uninterrupted. Fires, spanning every portion of the battlespace, are the most critical resources. To be expeditionary, MAGTFs must be relatively light in terms of surface fires; firepower advantages must arise through synergy in combined arms. Exponential increases in overall firepower by combined arms is a direct result of habitual relations developed by MAGTF elements as well as common background. Only by using organic aviation assets and integrated command and control can task forces achieve their potential. Failure to uphold the intent of UNAAF, and thus compromising MAGTF integrity, could have several results:

■ *Loss of synergy within the force.* Decreased cohesiveness lessens the ability to accomplish assigned missions as well as overall joint missions.

■ *Decreased flexibility within the joint force.* Despite contrary arguments by proponents of functional component, MAGTF firepower is more responsive under its own command element. If JFCs need the ability to either flex to different threats or take advantage of fleeting opportunities, these task forces are structured to respond.

■ *Increased potential for fratricide.* Substituting an ad hoc joint air command and control system, unfamiliar with MAGTF operations, for an integrated, highly specialized command and control system will drastically increase the potential for fratricide.

■ *Decreased tempo and loss of shock factor.* A benefit of small but tightly integrated forces is that decisions are made faster, resulting in significant shock to enemies, which enables the Marines to seize the initiative and defeat enemies of greater size and strength. Decreasing the ability to control tempo reduces the effectiveness of overall joint forces as well as MAGTFs.

Task force commanders ultimately get their mission from JFCs. After thorough study and consultation with major subordinate commands, MAGTFs correlate battlespace requirements with the mission and available forces, both on the ground and in the air. Factors such as enemy threats, terrain, numbers and ranges of fixed-wing sorties, and endstates figure into calculating the required size of areas of operations. Areas must then be coordinated with not only adjacent commanders on the ground, such as joint force land component commanders (JFLCCs) in a functionally organized area of responsibility, but also with the airspace control authority—usually JFACCs in functionally organized areas. While some JFACC staffs consider this step as meddling in their patch, it is not. UNAAF states that

**fire support coordination lines are permissive measures of coordination and not boundaries as such**

MAGTF commanders have operational control over their organic air assets and JFCs should allow service assets to function as designed. This means all organic assets, including the Marine air command and control system. Since it is the intent of UNAAF to retain the tactical and operational integrity of MAGTFs, they cannot fight as integrated task forces if the glue that binds them together—their command elements (in this case, Marine air command and control systems as extensions of commanders)—is replaced by joint force structures unfamiliar with task force operations. Air command and control systems provide internal and external connectivity and the commitment to the single battle concept that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

JFACCs control airspace requirements. As air capable components, MAGTFs must make their requirements known to achieve connectivity between the respective airspace control agencies. Because air command and control systems routinely participate in joint and combined exercises, this effort is accomplished with no loss of control or efficiency to JFCs. In fact, in many instances the capabilities are complimentary, thus enhancing overall joint force capabilities.

Enabling commanders to command and control areas, including airspace, does not preclude JFACCs from accomplishing assigned missions. Nor does MAGTF control interfere with JFCs in providing instructions on targets to be attacked. As indicated in Joint Pub 3-09, *Doctrine for Joint Fire Support*, land and naval commanders are authorized to control the priority, timing, and effects of fires in assigned areas. If JFACCs strike fixed and mobile targets in the MAGTF or other areas, they must coordinate with ground commanders in either deliberate or reactive targeting.

Following MAGTF deliberate targeting timelines, they can check direct support air tasking orders, which are sent to JFACCs to merge in-theater air tasking orders. It delineates what targets are scheduled for attack. Since targeting is related to JFC priorities as construed through assigned missions, targets are likely to be listed in air tasking orders. If targets are not listed, JFACCs can request MAGTF planners to strike them. For reactive targeting during execution, commanders can request aircraft to strike targets. That can be easily arranged as long as the strikes are coordinated without disrupting ongoing operations. Even when JFC-level time sensitive targets are detected, the first step is notifying commanders. If MAGTFs cannot strike within the prescribed time, they will override conflicting operations and clear JFACC (or other) assets to prosecute them.

### Command and Control

Fire support coordination lines are permissive measures of coordination and not boundaries as such. Task force commanders must retain authority and responsibility for fires beyond the lines (within areas of operations) to ensure that crucial shaping operations are accomplished. Conflicts are resolved quickly through both MAGTF force fires and aviation combat elements to ensure that priorities set by commanders are executed.

Targets can be prosecuted beyond the fire support coordination line as long as task force or ground commanders are notified in time to deconflict and avoid fratricide. They can be prosecuted even if attempts to reach commanders are unsuccessful, but fratricide remains a danger. The other caveat is that fires must not produce negative effects on or short of the fire support coordination line. Though the MAGTF area of operations and airspace beyond the line are commanded and controlled by MAGTF commanders, JFACCs are not precluded from prosecuting time sensitive targets. But task force commanders alone control priorities, timing, and effects of fires in accomplishing JFC-prescribed missions within an area of operation.

Even though task forces are assigned missions and areas of operations, they do not fight in isolation. They conduct and coordinate planned and immediate fires, including cross-boundary fires, as part of a joint force. When command relationships and areas of operations are assigned, task force staffs must ensure that no seams exist between MAGTF areas and adjacent warfighters. Toward that end, MAGTFs and MARFORs generally have liaison and staff augmentees with every functional component—joint force



Fleet Combat Camera, Atlantic (Michael Sandberg)

AV-8s aboard  
USS Nassau,  
Enduring Freedom.

land, maritime, and air component commanders as well as joint special operations task forces—to ensure that coordination procedures are thoroughly understood and executed. MAGTF areas, although configured slightly differently than conventional functional component battlespaces, are easily assimilated into overall joint forces. The primary difference is that MAGTF aviation invariably provides direct support for ground combat elements with organic air command and control instead of being assigned missions by JFACCs.

Certain scenarios may require JFCs to assign MAGTF tactical control to JFLCCs, who then designate an area of operations for the task force. As noted, in consonance with UNAAF, this area must be attended by a proportional amount of airspace for command and control of aviation assets. Airspace is requested by MAGTFs through JFLCCs—when assigned operational or tactical control to JFLCCs—to JFACCs. If given other Army or coalition forces by JFLCCs, MAGTF aviation combat elements may not be able to support the new size of the task force, because of either a lack of aircraft or command and control assets. To compensate, MAGTFs may request more JFACC sorties via the target nomination process or additional JFACC aircraft.

Another notable point is that, although MAGTFs are under the tactical control of JFLCCs, excess MAGTF sorties do not go to JFLCCs but to JFCs for tasking by JFACCs. MAGTF target nominations are forwarded to the JFLCC deep operations coordination center for deliberation at the daily targeting board and subsequent submission to the combined coordination board. Although MAGTFs may be under the tactical control of JFLCCs and will be represented by their members of the board, MARFOR provides JFC with any additional expertise based on specific and unique issues and/or Marine capabilities. In other words, the MARFOR representative at the JFC targeting board must be prepared to address not only force provider issues, but also fires-related issues as applied to the functional component to which they are assigned.

Lessons are either learned or relearned in every operation and exercise. Shortcomings have arisen because of the inability or lack of opportunity to accurately portray the integration of Marine expeditionary force and brigade operations in the joint arena. The first priority must be to establish sound MAGTF doctrine and teach mid-level and senior officers to apply it. Battlespace and command relationships must be addressed as critical to MAGTF integration.

Moreover, the billets to conduct joint operations must be identified. Tables of organization must include joint liaison and augmentation billets needed for training and times of crisis. Though many positions will be assigned as collateral duties or filled by Reservists, the Marine Corps must accept its responsibilities and staff accordingly. Component representatives must be augmented to include expert fires officers to assist component representatives during exercises and operations in which the warfighter—on the expeditionary force or brigade level—is embedded under joint force land or maritime component commanders.

Failure to complete any of these steps may result in a distorted application of unified action and give the perception that MAGTFs will accept the loss of command and control within their areas of operations. It will cost task force and joint force commanders the flexibility, synergy, and seamless integration that MAGTFs bring to the joint fight. **JFQ**