

In Gulf War II, Air Force and Marine airmen devised an informal pact that paid big dividends.

MARINE AIR



IN OPERATION Iraqi Freedom, Marine Corps aviation was integrated into a joint force as never before. Take, for example, the concept of urban close air support. Gen. T. Michael Moseley—the air boss of the war—credited it to “a Marine major” working in his air operations center.

Marines took an active role in joint force air component planning, committing all Marine Corps aircraft to fulfilling the daily air tasking order.

The Marines also won praise for controlling air support to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) area east of the Euphrates River in Iraq.

This result was not foreordained.

In Marine Corps doctrine, the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) reigns supreme. Any expeditionary outfit—whether a small Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) or huge Marine expeditionary force (MEF)—can be a MAGTF. Whatever the unit’s size, it will always have command, aviation combat, ground combat, and combat service support elements.

The MAGTF concept governs avia-

tion organization, equipment, and training. The whole point is to send the MAGTF into battle as a coherent whole, with aviation bound to it.

Marine aviation has six canonical roles, ranging from offensive air support to reconnaissance. Still, Marine aviators think the main task is to support Marines on the ground.

Roles and Missions Fight

History shows that Marine aviators have done many things as part of a joint force, as was true in World War II (see box). However, Marine aviation survived the fierce roles and missions battles of the late 1940s by emphasizing close air support (CAS) for Marines.

Marine aviator and historian Fred Allison described the postwar moves in this way: “For the Marine Corps to say it needed airpower to support its infantry was a risky argument, especially when one considered that, in many cases in World War II, the Marines made do with ‘generic’ air support. But it [the argument] worked, and the Marine Corps was allowed to keep its aviation.”

IN THE MAINSTREAM



By Rebecca Grant

Two Marine Corps AV-8B Harriers pass each other on the flight lines at Al Jaber AB, Kuwait, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During OIF, Marine airpower was integrated into the joint air campaign as never before.

In Korea and Vietnam, Marine aviation made contributions under joint command but tended to focus on needs of Marine ground forces. Later, Cold War strategies of the 1970s and 1980s favored independent operational concepts for naval forces. The formal adoption in 1983 of the MAGTF concept reconfirmed the requirement for organic Marine aviation.

It is true, though, that a 1986 agreement left room for a joint force commander to employ all US assets—including Marine aviation assets—as he saw fit.

Planning for Desert Storm in 1991 put the MAGTF concept to the test. US air assets were to be organized under the control of a joint force air component commander (JFACC)—in that particular case, USAF Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner.

The Marines, however, preferred independence for their air arm.

“Warplanes were an integral part of Marine Corps combat power, no different from artillery and tanks,” explained Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor in their book,

The Generals’ War. As they told it, Marine leaders worried that the JFACC setup would lead to “a drain on their resources.”

That view was particularly strong when it came to strategic air attacks and other attempts at battlefield shaping. One Marine colonel cited by Gordon and Trainor argued that Marine aircraft should not drop any bombs in Iraq before Marine ground forces started their attack.

In a compromise, the Corps agreed to put under JFACC authority all its A-6 medium-attack aircraft and EA-6B electronic warfare aircraft plus half of its F/A-18 fighters. However, the Corps kept control of all AV-8B Harriers and half of the F/A-18s to schedule and direct as they chose.

It was an extraordinary deal, and it was not an entirely successful one. As the war approached, it was apparent to JFACC’s officers that the Marines on their own had not hit Iraqi forces hard enough. Horner, in a book he authored with Tom Clancy, noted that he “shifted air over the eastern sector” to help them out.

Despite the problems, the Desert

Storm experience did not shake the Corps’ faith in the MAGTF concept. Nor was that faith affected by the work of Marine airmen in joint operations of the 1990s—Bosnia, Kosovo, the no-fly zone enforcement over Iraq—even though Marine aviators flew as small detachments at forward Air Force bases or launched from aircraft carriers.

When the US went to war in Afghanistan in 2001, no MAGTF was even in the theater; one arrived relatively late in the campaign. At the peak phase of Operation Enduring Freedom, Marine pilots did most of their flying from Navy carrier decks.

Run-Up to War

In the run-up to the Iraq War of 2003, the Marines worked hard on urban CAS. They had substantial organic air assets in 3rd Marine Air Wing and firm ideas on how to employ them—joint campaign or not.

For example, a direct air support center (DASC), on its own, could run the air defense, airspace coordination, and air strikes for the 1st Marine Division. But imposing strict

MAGTF doctrine was not in the interest of the joint force. It would fence off Marine Corps air assets. For one, Moseley would not be able to use Marine air to strike targets near Baghdad early in the war. Worse, it could leave the Marines without full benefits of reconnaissance assets such as the U-2 and Global Hawk, and it would deprive the Marine sector of the added strike power of attacks delivered by other coalition aircraft.

In fall 2002, top Air Force and Marine Corps leaders met at NAS Miramar, Calif., for their annual warfighter talks. Moseley said he wanted to figure out a way to run 3rd MAW air operations for OIF “through the CAOC (combined air operations center) and then back out,” and he wanted to make sure the Marines were comfortable with the arrangement.

At a special session, Moseley took Marine briefings. He declared that, while Billy Mitchell at St. Mihiel in 1918 was the first US combined force air component commander (CFACC), Marine Brig. Gen. Roy S. Geiger, commanding general of the Marine wing on Guadalcanal, was the second. “Geiger did it right on Guadalcanal because he was meshing ashore Navy squadrons, Army squadrons, and Marine squadrons,” as Moseley put it.

Moseley recalled, “We spent three or four hours locked up in that room.”

The result was an informal pact. All Marine aircraft would be placed

on the ATO (although the CFACC would not have tactical control of organic Marine air assets). The Marine Corps aircraft might be tasked to work deep targets as team players in the air component, but there would be no intent to siphon off sorties.

Moseley remembered telling the group, “I am not worried about *you* giving *me* excess sorties. *I’m* going to give *you* excess sorties because, when they come through the CAOC and back out, you’re going to get Global Hawk, you’re going to get Rivet Joint, you’re going to get JSTARS, you’re going to get Predator, you’re going to get everything that the air component can bring to bear on this problem.”

Moseley wanted the MAGTF concept to work, but “I wanted it to work in the construct of a bigger air effort,” he said.

Moseley asked the Corps leaders to assign a first-class Marine aviator to his CAOC staff as a liaison. He also asked for a senior Marine to become the CAOC’s CAS expert in the A-3 operations division. “He was the CAS guy for the whole theater,” Moseley said.

Getting a “Marine Injection”

The Marines readily accepted, according to Marine Maj. Rich Hilberer, an I MEF planner in the war. At every planning meeting, he said, “we had some Marines there, ... injecting our way of seeing the world and how we do business in the MAGTF and

making sure that ... the final product ... supported MAGTF combined arms operations, and we feel it pretty much did.”

The air component also backed up 3rd MAW with extensive Air Force base support in Kuwait.

Taking the time to plan, rehearse, and prepare paid off. So did development of personal relationships, from the generals on down. Parochial views gave way to dialogue.

Hilberer said: “I’ll be very blunt. We don’t normally get a terribly warm reception when we go talk to CFACC about Marine air command and control, but this CFACC staff was different. They were very positive.”

In turn, the Marines brought to the table a sophisticated system for air command and control over a battle area, one which won high marks from other airmen.

Key to it all was the direct air support center or DASC. “Primarily what it does is coordinate [air] at the senior ground combat element level,” said Hilberer.

In Iraq, the DASC had four unique traits.

- It controlled rotary and fixed-wing assets: attack helicopters like the AH-1 Cobra, fixed-wing aircraft such as AV-8B Harriers and F/A-18s, and medevacs and other utility aircraft operating with the division.

- It had organic Marine air assets preplanned for air support. In OIF those were the forces ashore in Kuwait or on amphibious ships in the Gulf.

- It was crewed by “DASC-keteers,” Marines who worked as part of a dedicated DASC career path. The typical division-level DASC has a crew of 12 to 17 officers and enlisted troops to receive and process requests.

- It was attached to the 1st Marine Division—not to I MEF. This focused the DASC on the division-level fight, chiefly the area out to only 18.6 miles beyond the forward line of troops, or FLOT. “In our opinion, the division commander ... has a better understanding of what’s going on in his immediate battlespace,” explained Hilberer.

When OIF began on March 19, 2003, the time had come to put this new working relationship to the test.

The US Army’s V Corps, on the left, was designated the main effort of the Combined Force’s Land Component Command’s drive. I

USAF photo by MSgt. Michael E. Best



Marines were active participants in OIF’s combined air operations center at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia. Gen. T. Michael Moseley credited a Marine major with developing the coalition’s urban close air support concept.

MEF, on the right, was the supporting effort. Plans called for both to converge on Baghdad then link up in the city. Troops in each sector faced opposition from regular Iraqi army units, irregulars in the cities, and Republican Guard divisions before Baghdad.

From the start, V Corps and I MEF used the air weapon in different ways, with V Corps making early moves to shape the deep fight with their own Apache helicopters and Army tactical missile systems. As a result, the fire support coordination line (FSCL) extended out far beyond the forward lines, putting a heavy burden on air support operations centers (ASOCs) to direct deep strikes on Iraqi military targets and meet numerous requests for air support along V Corps' line of advance from Kuwait to Karbala.

Traffic Jam

The result was a traffic jam of aircraft clogged up in CAS stacks. Frustration abounded. While the overall volume of strikes in the V Corps area was high, and increasing daily through March, it was taking too long to run air strike missions in that area. Some aircrews were turned back without dropping their bombs even as commanders worked to increase the pressure on the Republican Guards and other units.

The after-action report from V Corps' lead unit, the 3rd Infantry Division, spoke to the frustration on the ground. It recommended that the



A pair of F/A-18D Hornets refuel at Al Jaber. During Gulf War I, half the Hornets and all the Harriers were withheld from joint planning and kept under Marine Air-Ground Task Force Control. By 2001, things had changed.

USMC photo by LCPL Christopher H. Fitzgerald

FSCL be placed closer in since "V Corps ... demonstrated their inability to manage said battlespace."

The writers of the 3rd Infantry Division's report declared, "CFACC is better prepared [than V Corps] to engage targets to effectively shape the battlefield."

For I MEF, the situation was very different. There was no temptation to run an oversize deep battle at corps level.

On its own, 1st Marine Division had "little capacity to run an organic deep fight," said Air Force Col. Gary L. Crowder, a CAOC expert who is

now vice commander, 505th Command and Control Wing. What they did have, he said, was an efficient air control system to open the spigot for organic and coalition aircraft.

The Marines put in place a supplementary battlefield coordination line (BCL) to speed "expeditious attack of surface targets of opportunity" between the BCL and the more distant FSCL as Marine doctrine defined it.

A typical BCL extended 18.6 miles out from the FLOT—roughly the range of 105 mm artillery. Air strikes short of this line were typically Type I, II, or III CAS calling for varying degrees of control.

Beyond the battlefield coordination line, the "kill boxes" could be opened more easily, and the DASC was able to put its brisk procedures into play, pointed out USMC Maj. Brian Annichiarico, a Harrier pilot. All levels monitored the air requests and intervened only to stop them. "It works out to be a much faster chain," he said.

The DASC was co-located with a fire support coordinator, who updated the ground picture as the DASC personnel worked the air picture. It wasn't "what most Air Force guys think of as 'the air picture,'" Hilberer pointed out. The Marines used procedural control with aircraft checking in at control points to give route headings which the DASC controller cross-referenced.

Overall the DASC was well-posi-

Airpower Jointness on Guadalcanal

In World War II, Marine aviators on Guadalcanal fought off Japanese Zeros and bombers to hold the runway at Henderson Field in the harrowing weeks after Imperial Japan's August 1942 invasion of the island.

Marine Brig. Gen. Roy S. Geiger arrived to take command of Guadalcanal air operations on Sept. 3, 1942. He typically had 70 operational aircraft, including some Navy and Army aircraft, but the core of the air fight indisputably belonged to the Marine squadrons. The fight for air superiority consumed the "Cactus Air Force" and produced new Marine aces in record time. Joe Foss, Marion E. Carl, and John L. Smith were among them.

Meanwhile, close air support for Marine ground units often fell to the island's handful of Army aircraft, especially in late August and early September. The creaky Army Air Forces P-400s that landed at Guadalcanal in late August lacked oxygen equipment for higher altitude dogfights but ably toted 500-pound bombs. On Guadalcanal, everything counted.

"The Army pilots proved valuable in support of ground troops," wrote Robert L. Sherrod in his epic *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*. Dawn attacks by a handful of P-400s "all but annihilated the last of the enemy concentration" at the Battle of Bloody Ridge on Sept. 13-14, 1942.

By October, Foss and others were locked in the main crisis of the air superiority battle. The AAF's 67th Squadron brought in P-39s and developed innovative tactics such as dropping depth charges into ravines to hit the Japanese defenders, according to Sherrod.



In April 2003, a B-52 demolished the lead elements of a large Iraqi tank column that was threatening a Marine division. Here, SrA. Andrew Marshall checks a BUFF's lights at a deployed location.

tioned in the first two weeks of the war, and it worked "a little bit better than the ASOC" at first, said Crowder.

Aircrews quickly caught on to the fact that the DASC could give them targets fast. "It was so bad, aircrews created a DASC bingo," Crowder added. They would calculate their time on station for V Corps, then, if they weren't needed, they'd take the last few minutes to switch frequencies and contact the DASC in hopes of being assigned a target for their bombs.

Soon the flow of coalition strike sorties, planned and unplanned, far exceeded anything the Marine air planners thought the CAOC would give them.

Dial-Up BUFF

"Not very long into it, we started to get a whole lot of stuff coming in from CFACC—in real time or near real time—[which had been] shifted over to support our efforts," Hilberer said, adding that the amount the Marines got was "way more than we ever expected." Even B-52s were used to check up on the net, he added.

On April 1, 2003, a B-52 crew dubbed "Thrill 35" flew a mission under DASC direction. After striking an ammunition dump north of Baghdad, the crew was "put in touch with a Marine division that was being threatened by a very large Iraqi tank column," said the aircraft commander of Thrill 35. They dropped two CBU-105 cannisters containing sensor fuzed weapons on a column of about 20

tanks. The first third of the tank column died instantly. Iraqis in the rear of the column "poured out of the tanks, hands up, game over," said this aircraft commander. He joked, "The Marines didn't have to do a single thing except cover their ears."

The opening up of kill boxes beyond the BCL let the DASC employ a concept called strike coordination and reconnaissance, or SCAR. For SCAR, the direct air support center tagged a strike aircraft already on station with a good tactical picture to loiter and coordinate other aircraft "coming in and dropping on targets," according to Annichiarico. The SCAR aircraft could work up to four kill boxes while the DASC fed airplanes into them. "It's as impromptu as that," said Hilberer.

The Air Force's "Killer Scouts" did much the same thing a decade earlier in Desert Storm, launching on dedicated sorties to direct other strike aircraft to Iraqi military targets, usually in just a single kill box. In OIF, aircraft outside of the Marine wing—such as the USAF F-15E—also performed SCAR to great effect.

The air support was so steady that the Marines used it to control bypassed Iraqi units on their right flank.

They did not pose a threat since the "MEF had [kill] boxes open along its frontage and all the way down on one side, because we didn't want to have to go over there and fight those guys, so we blew 'em up with airplanes," said Hilberer.

It was an efficient use of airpower to stifle enemy maneuver and keep the Marines on the march. Both "the 10th Armored and the Baghdad Division received virtually nonstop attention by the MAW and other coalition assets," said Brig. Gen. John F. Kelly in the February 2004 issue of Marine Corps *Gazette*.

"East of the Euphrates, the Marines really were joint," commented Crowder. They employed organic and joint assets via SCAR and other means to work deep battle targets. The efficiency of the DASC caused airmen to take notice. Marines on the ground praised the air attacks.

Air support in OIF opens the question of how to build better fire support control measures for the nonlinear battlefields of the future. A key issue will be defining when and where the CFACC—not the DASC or ASOC—should have free rein to push air strikes into kill boxes beyond the immediate front lines. That will call for review and revision of traditional fire support control measures.

The OIF experience raises a larger question about the future of Marine air in the MAGTF: how to ensure that future joint force commanders can count on a swift and productive integration of organic Marine air assets with the larger air war.

In OIF, months of careful advance work by the air component ensured that Marine air—with all its unique traits—was employed to best advantage. There was time to talk, plan, and prepare. The nature of the fight made it suitable for the DASC to focus on support to 1st Marine Division, as outlined in MAGTF doctrine. The question now is whether the same set of circumstances will present themselves in future operations—and whether other commanders would go out of their way to draw organic Marine air into the joint battle. ■

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