

The Marine Corps Operating Concept: Neglecting History to Develop a 21st Century Force

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Marine Corps Operating Concept: Neglecting History to Develop A 21st Century Force, by Major Matthew L. Rohlfing, USMC, 36 pages.

The *2016 Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC); How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century* makes the assertion that the Marine Corps is currently not organized, trained, and equipped to meet the demands of a future operating environment. The MOC espouses the use of dispersed combat elements in amphibious operations and provides guidance for the generation of the future force. In doing so, the MOC breaks from the historically demonstrated requirement for superiority of force in amphibious operations. The ideas presented in the MOC caused this author to ask the following questions: is the MOC right? Are Marine Corps forces designed, trained, and equipped to operate in dispersed formations able to conduct decisive maneuver from the sea?

This monograph conducted a comprehensive examination of the development of US Amphibious Doctrine and its initial implementation during Operation Watchtower in 1942, the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Pacific Ocean's Solomon archipelago, as a case study, demonstrating that the MOC fails to account for the historically proven requirement for superiority of force in amphibious operations. The monograph concludes that the MOC serves as a normative theory due to its divergence from historically demonstrated requirements for superiority of force. As such, the MOC's divergence from history jeopardizes the Marine Corps' ability to conduct decisive maneuver from the sea and field a force capable of meeting its Title 10 requirements.

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Acronyms

A2AD	Anti-Access/Area-Denial
EAB	Expeditionary Advanced Base
EABO	Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations
EF 21	Expeditionary Force 21
FTP	Fleet Training Publication
LOCE	Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment
MAGTF	Marine Air Ground Task Force
MOC	Marine Corps Operating Concept
PPBS	Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System

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Section 1: Introduction

What is to be accomplished must be clearly and definitely understood by everyone charged with the direction of a business, either public or private. In many cases, especially in public undertakings, the “Mission” can only be stated in very general terms and in the accomplishment of it many “Special” or “Sub-missions” may be found necessary, but the “General Mission” will always be found to stand out clearly above them all. It represents the purpose for which the organization was created and exists and never, for a moment, must it be permitted to become smothered by the introduction of “Minor Missions.” The trail once lost is hard to regain.

—Major John H. Russell, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine”

In June 1916, Major John H. Russell, published his now famous article, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine” in the *Marine Corps Gazette*. In this turbulent period of Marine Corps history, he asked, “How many officers of the Marine Corps, if interrogated separately, would give the same answer as to the primary mission of the Marine Corps?”¹ The decades following the publication of this article saw the Marine Corps struggle to solve this problem. Debate raged about the primary mission of the Marine Corps, with ideas ranging from a constabulary force to service as a secondary land army.² After its many hard-fought battles in the Second World War, the Marine Corps cemented its role in the United States military structure. That role, still in place today, means the Marine Corps does not lack a “general mission.”³ It is an expeditionary force that “fights at sea, from the sea, and ashore as an integrated part of the Naval force.” The Marine Corps “exists to defeat our Nation’s enemies.”⁴

The First World War marked the birth of the modern-day Marine Corps.⁵ The requirement for large land forces to fight on the European continent initiated the Marine Corps’ transformation from a small ship-based service to a substantial land power. Following the war,

¹ John Russell, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (June 1916): 112.

² Leo J. Daugherty, *Pioneers of Amphibious Warfare, 1898–1945: Profiles of Fourteen American Military Strategists* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 225.

³ Russell, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine,” 111.

⁴ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept; How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century* (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2016), 8, i.

⁵ Alan Axelrod, *Miracle at Belleau Wood: The Birth of the Modern U.S. Marine Corps* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2007).

with rapid military downsizing, the Marine Corps struggled to identify its role in the American military structure. Three differing perspectives came to the foreground. The first was the belief that the Marine Corps should focus its efforts, as a land force, to serve as an adjunct to the Army much like it had in the First World War. The second, drawing on a broader perspective of Marine Corps history, saw the service's primary role in "small wars." The third perspective identified the Marine Corps' principal mission as service with the Fleet.⁶ While the Marine Corps' history demonstrated its ability to do all these things, a rising imperial power in the Pacific and future World War would cement its role for service with the Fleet.

While debate over the Marine Corps' general mission raged, a small group of Marine officers took actions that still impact the institution today. Recognizing the rising threat of Japanese aggression in the Pacific, these officers set out to understand the operational and tactical requirements to assault from the sea. Major Earl H. "Pete" Ellis studied the requirements of amphibious operations across the central Pacific and produced *Operation Plan 712, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* in 1921.⁷ With the Marine Corps' role in support of the Fleet increasing, it organized itself to seize and defend advanced naval bases in support of naval campaigns.⁸ Simultaneously, it conducted a pragmatic study of history, tested new concepts, and developed a new body of amphibious doctrine.⁹ This doctrine proved to be one of the most far-reaching tactical innovations in the Second World War.¹⁰

Through many hard-fought battles, from Guadalcanal to Okinawa, the Marine Corps validated the effectiveness of its amphibious doctrine and confirmed its ability to fight at and

⁶ Robert G. McCarthy III, "Rebuttal to the 2010 Marine Corps Operating Concept" (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2013), 10–16.

⁷ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72.

⁸ Merrill L. Bartlett, ed., *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 121–132.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 185–191.

¹⁰ Michael Howard and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *The Theory and Practice of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 222.

from the sea. These battles had a lasting impact on the role and organizational identity of the Marine Corps. Images and artifacts from the Marine Corps' service in the Pacific permeate the institution today. Its role as an amphibious force is central to the institutional identity of the Marine Corps. Title 10 of US code codifies this role in law; "the Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign."¹¹ However, the establishment of a "general mission" does not mean the Marine Corps cannot conduct "special" or "sub-missions," as demonstrated over the past two decades.¹²

Since 2001, the Marine Corps fought primarily as a second land army in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These conflicts drove Marine Corps force generation, deployment, and force development during this period. However, the Marine Corps' primary mission remained unchanged. In his 2016 Commandant's planning guidance, General Neller stated that "the United States Marine Corps will remain the Nation's crisis response force and serves as a maritime based expeditionary force that operates across the range of military operations."¹³ General Neller also recognized that while the Marine Corps engaged in the current fight, its potential adversaries did not stand idle. Instead, these adversaries developed capabilities that equal or exceed the Marine Corps.¹⁴

To solve this problem, in September 2016, the Marine Corps developed and implemented the Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century (MOC). This concept describes, in broad terms, how the Marine Corps will conduct the range of

¹¹ United States of America, *10 U.S. Code §5063, United States Marine Corps: composition; functions.*

¹² Russell, "A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine," 111.

¹³ United States Marine Corps. Commandant's Planning Guidance: FRAGO 01/2016 Advance to Contact (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2016), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

military operations in accordance with its Title 10 responsibilities in the 21st Century.¹⁵ Only one year since its release, this concept is already driving change within the Marine Corps. Predicated on a rapidly changing operating environment, the MOC claims that the Marine Corps is neither organized, trained, nor equipped to meet the demands imposed by these changes. The MOC does not claim to answer every problem presented by these changes. Instead, it is a concept that requires refinement through exploration, debate, and discussion.¹⁶ This monograph is an attempt to add to that debate and discussion.

At its core, this monograph offers a comprehensive examination of the development of US Amphibious Doctrine and its initial implementation during Operation Watchtower in 1942, the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Pacific Ocean's Solomon archipelago, as a case study, demonstrating that the MOC fails to account for the historically proven requirement for superiority of force in amphibious operations. This study contends that the traditional understanding of the need for superiority in the air, sea, and land domains in the conduct of amphibious operations is an historical continuity and uses these criteria to evaluate evidence.¹⁷

The research for this monograph focused on the analysis and synthesis of primary and secondary source documents. Primary source documents such as the *Marine Corps Operating Concept, Advance Base Operations in Micronesia*, Fleet Training Publication 167, and US Department of Defense Joint Publications provide current and historic views and official methodologies regarding the execution of US amphibious operations. Articles from the *Marine Corps Gazette* provide insight to the beliefs and perspectives of individuals and groups with significant influence on the development of amphibious doctrine. Sources such as the US Department of the Navy's *Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz* and 1st

¹⁵ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, i.

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30. Defines "continuity" as patterns that extend across time, phenomena that recur with sufficient regularity to make themselves apparent.

Marine Division's *Final Report on Guadalcanal Operations* provided official military correspondence and reports for the analysis of the case study. Secondary sources including Merrill Bartlett's *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare*, John Zimmerman's *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, and Richard Frank's *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* provided the study with valuable perspectives on the development of US amphibious doctrine and Operation Watchtower.

The study begins with a brief history and analysis of the Marine Corps' development of amphibious doctrine between 1898 and 1942. Following this analysis, the study examines the Marine Corps Operating Concept and its logic in detail. The study then presents a detailed analysis of Operation Watchtower, demonstrating the operational impact the initial lack of superiority of force in the air, sea, and land domains had on amphibious operations. Finally, the study presents the implications for the United States Marine Corps, which may result from the adoption of the MOC.

Section 2: The Marine Corps' First Operating Concept

The modern-day Marine Corps uses the US Department of Defense Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System to obtain the military capabilities with which to discharge its statutory responsibilities.¹⁸ A primary input to this system is a concept. A concept, as defined by the Marine Corps, is "an expression of how something might be done; a visualization of future operations that describes how warfighters, using military art and science, might employ capabilities to meet future challenges and exploit future opportunities." An overarching or "capstone operating concept" articulates, in broad terms, the basic ideas to apply across the widest range of military contexts and describes how the Marine Corps intends to operate.¹⁹ As

¹⁸ United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Order P3121.1, Marine Corps Planning and Programming Manual (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1991), 1–4.

¹⁹ United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Combat Development Command/Combat Development and Integration Instruction 5401.1 (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2016), 2.

depicted in Figure 1, this concept drives Marine Corps experimentation, analysis, and capability development ultimately resulting in fielded capabilities.²⁰

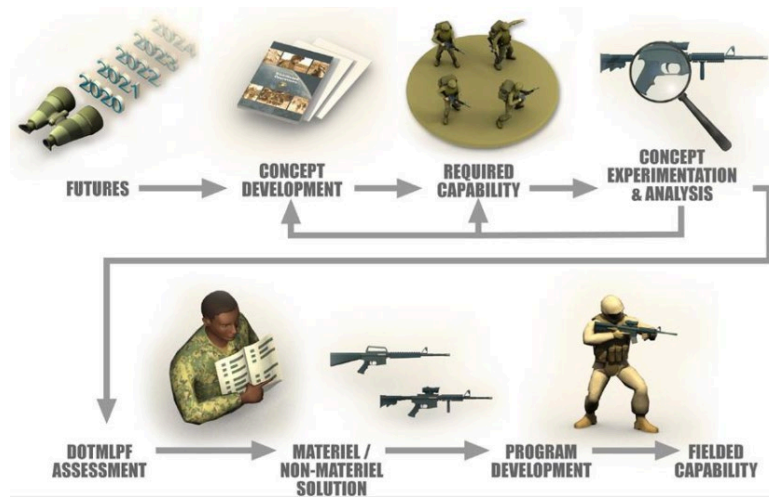


Figure 1. Concepts-Driven Force Development. Marine Corps Combat Development Command, “Concepts Overview,” accessed September 28, 2017, <http://www.mccdc.marines.mil/Portals/172/Docs/MCCDC/Concepts/Concepts%20Overview.pdf>.

While this formal concept-based force development system did not exist until 1961, the Marine Corps developed its first operating concept, amphibious operations, in the early twentieth century to counter a rising threat in the Pacific. Japanese victories in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 propelled the formerly insular nation onto the world stage. Japan’s military victories led to international recognition of Japan as a civilized nation and significant regional power.²¹ The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 confirmed Japan’s role as an eastern power and increased the nation’s legitimacy on the international stage.²² The First World War increased Japan’s

²⁰ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, “Concepts Overview,” accessed September 28, 2017, <http://www.mccdc.marines.mil/Portals/172/Docs/MCCDC/Concepts/Concepts%20Overview.pdf>. DOTMLPF is an acronym used by the US Department of Defense that stands for Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership, Personnel, and Facilities. The force development process considers solutions for requirements or desired capabilities involving any combination of DOTMPLF.

²¹ S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3–20.

²² Rotem Kowner, ed., *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 15–20.

territorial holding and transformed the nation to a global power.²³ The spread of the Japanese Empire and the threat this expansion posed to US interests in the Pacific caught the attention of American military planners.

To counter the Japanese threat, American war planners in 1906 envisioned a strategy of unlimited economic war, blockading Japanese ports, and destroying commerce related shipping. By 1914, War Plan Orange, the title of the US plan to defeat Japan, consisted of three broad phases. During the first phase, the Japanese would quickly overrun US possessions in the western Pacific. Phase II consisted of the entire US Navy and an Army expeditionary force advancing to the Far East, developing a base, securing lines of communication, and preparing for the next phase. In the third and final phase, this US force would blockade and siege the Japanese home islands until the Japanese Empire capitulated.²⁴ While Japan's power rose and US planners contemplated how to respond, the United States Marine Corps underwent an institutional transformation.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw drastic changes in naval technology. The transition from sail to steam dramatically impacted the requirements of sustaining a Navy abroad. As a result, the requirements to occupy and defend advanced bases and coaling stations grew as the US Navy extended its reach.²⁵ The United States Marine Corps demonstrated its ability to meet those requirements during the Spanish-American War. On June 10, 1898, the First Marine Battalion, a self-contained unit built as a combined arms team and operating from a ship fitted for expeditionary operations, landed unopposed on hostile shores and seized an advanced base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Marine actions on that day demonstrated that the Marine Corps

²³ Frederick R. Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 1919-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13–37.

²⁴ Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 28–34.

²⁵ Bartlett, *Assault from the Sea*, 121.

played a vital role in fleet operations and “set a pattern for employment of U.S. Marines which would still stand more than half a century and three wars later.”²⁶

Nearly two years later, Brigadier General Charles Heywood, the Commandant, formally accepted the advanced base mission for the Marine Corps.²⁷ Over the next fifteen years, the Marine Corps made significant strides in the field of advanced base operations, developing an initial theory and doctrine. In 1914, they conducted training exercises in Culebra and combat operations in Vera Cruz, Mexico.²⁸ From the end of the Spanish-American War to 1917, the Marine Corps grew from nearly 4,800 to over 13,500 members. However, enduring institutional requirements, such as security for naval yards and detachments aboard ships, prevented the formation of permanent advanced base forces.²⁹ The progress the Marine Corps made in advanced base operations in the early twentieth century came to an abrupt stop in 1917, when the United States entered the First World War. This global conflict brought to light the industrial revolution’s impact on the character of war, dramatically influenced the Marine Corps’ institutional identity, and the global perception of amphibious operations.

Every participant of the First World War walked away from the conflict with different lessons learned. After the loss of over 1,300,000 military casualties, French security policies and doctrines became defensive. Britain returned its military focus to its traditional role of imperial policing and implemented a doctrine of limited liability for the European continent.³⁰ Meanwhile, the German and Soviet militaries developed new methods of warfare, the war of movement and

²⁶ Robert Debs Heinl, *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775–1962*, 2nd ed., Great war stories (Baltimore, MD: Nautical & Aviation Pub. Co. of America, 1991), 117.

²⁷ Bartlett, *Assault from the Sea*, 121–122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 121–141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 123. Edwin N. McClellan, *The United States Marine Corps in the World War* (Washington, DC: Washington Government Printing Office, 1920), 9.

³⁰ Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 598–623.

the deep battle theory of annihilation, respectively.³¹ While the conflict transformed theories of warfare, it also affected views of subordinate operational concepts including amphibious operations.

The Gallipoli Campaign of 1915 was an Allied attempt to break the deadlock of the western front via naval and amphibious actions in the Dardanelles. Strategically, the campaign aimed to disrupt Turkish war efforts and open a sea line of communication to Russia via the Black Sea. In execution, the campaign accomplished none of these effects. Instead, the allies merely found themselves locked in trench warfare on another front, unable to maneuver on land or sea. The Gallipoli campaign, viewed as the first modern example of amphibious operations, significantly influenced military thought. Most military leadership believed the campaign proved that amphibious operations were inefficient and impractical. With nearly every western military service undervaluing the potential of amphibious operations, US Navy and Marine leaders viewed Gallipoli as a gold mine of lessons learned.³² The Marine Corps' studies of the Gallipoli campaign provided the foundational understanding for decisive maneuver from the sea. Analysis demonstrated that while Allied naval forces enjoyed sea supremacy, the landing force lacked the superiority of force required to defeat the defending military forces of the Ottoman Empire. Landings during the Gallipoli campaign dispersed the combat power of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps forces, resulting in an inability to concentrate sufficient superiority in land power anywhere.³³ With these lessons in mind, US Navy and Marine leaders recognized the

³¹ Robert Michael Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*, Modern war studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 238–290; Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford; NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 632–639; Georgii Samoilovich Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, trans. Bruce W. Menning (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Institute Press, 2013), 42.

³² Donald E. Gillum, "Gallipoli, It's Influence on Amphibious Doctrine," *Marine Corps Gazette* (November 1967): 41–46.

³³ G. Stephen Lauer, in press, "Damn the Torpedoes: The Marine Operating Concept and the Failure of Decisive Maneuver from the Sea in the 21st Century." Forthcoming, *Marine Corps Gazette*. Edward Erickson, "Strength Against Weakness: Ottoman Military Effectiveness at Gallipoli, 1915," *The Journal of Military History* 65, no. 4 (October 2001): 985, 998.

future requirement for amphibious warfare and began efforts to develop a force capable of executing it.

Operation Plan 712, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia written primarily by Major Earl “Pete” Ellis in 1921, served as the Marine Corps’ capstone concept during the interwar period. The strategic environment in the Pacific changed significantly after the First World War. Japanese territorial gains provided bases and staging points allowing for attacks on American holdings in the Pacific, namely the Philippines. This shift meant that a war with Japan required the US to seize and secure advanced bases to support Naval operations. However, the US did not have the existing capability to do so. To help solve this problem, *Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* described the operating environment, introduced operational requirements for seizing, occupying, and defending advanced bases, recommended organizational constructs, and identified required equipment. The study was a pragmatic analysis of the adversary and the operating environment and served to crystallize the “ideas as to the future operations in that area, thus obtaining a sound basis for the preparation of plans of operation and mobilization, training schedules and materiel programs.”³⁴ It was a “visualization of future operations that described how warfighters might employ capabilities to meet future challenges and exploit future opportunities”—in other words, a concept.³⁵

From the concept presented in *Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia*, the Marine Corps focused its efforts and became the dynamic center for the evolving art of landing operations. Except when diverted to other duties, the Marine Corps concentrated on developing the theory and practice of amphibious assault.³⁶ Between 1921 and 1941 the Marine Corps made dramatic increases in the practice of amphibious assaults. Incorporating Marine Corps Schools, field training, and fleet landing exercises, the Marine Corps developed organizations, capabilities,

³⁴ Earl H. Ellis, *Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 1921), 1–27.

³⁵ United States Marine Corps, Combat Development and Integration Instruction 5401.1, 2.

³⁶ Howard and Hart, *The Theory and Practice of War*, 222. Bartlett, *Assault from the Sea*, 178.

and equipment that previously did not exist. Some of these developments included a balanced combined arms expeditionary formation built around an infantry nucleus known as the Fleet Marine Force; doctrines and equipment for naval gunfire support; doctrines and equipment for close air support; ship to shore communications and logistics capabilities; specially organized base defense units; and an amphibious operations doctrine.³⁷ The underlying requirement for amphibious operations, the superiority of force, drove all of these critical developments as the base assumption for successful landing operations.

Landing Operations Doctrine, Fleet Training Publication (FTP) 167 of 1938, used throughout the Second World War, articulated the requirement for the superiority of force in the sea, air, and land domains. The superiority of force in this doctrine meant more than just numbers of personnel and equipment. It included the proper organization, equipment, and training of Naval and Marine forces. The doctrine stated, “an extensive overseas expedition presupposes marked superiority on the sea and in the air within the area of, and during the time required for, the operation.” Establishing local sea and air superiority were preliminary operations required to justify a landing.³⁸ The doctrine recognized that amphibious operations required a spatial and temporal multi-domain superiority, to allow the joint force to gain a relative position of advantage. To project and sustain land power ashore required superiority in the sea and air domains.

FTP 167 also expressed a requirement for landing force superiority. In fact, this doctrine required unquestionable superiority in infantry and supporting arms to the opposing enemy to justify a landing.³⁹ This requirement led to the development of naval gun fire and close air support procedures. The ability to use these arms allowed landing forces to close the gap from

³⁷ Bartlett, *Assault from the Sea*, 188–189.

³⁸ US Department of the Navy, *Landing Operations Doctrine*, Fleet Training Publication (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938), 4–7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

ship to shore, using non-organic fires, until they could establish local superiority with their organic weapons systems.

The requirement for the superiority of force did not mean amphibious operations were brute force frontal attacks. Naval and Marine leaders understood the ability to maneuver provided by the mobility of ships. They recognized that this ability gave the attacking force the initiative, permitting them to select their objectives and lines of approach to gain a position of relative advantage. They promoted the use of demonstrations and surprise landings to achieve an advantage.⁴⁰

However, the advantage provided by surprise lasts only until the enemy responds. This adds increased importance to the superiority of force. Sea and air superiority denies the adversary critical capabilities, reduces the options available, and helps the landing force retain the initiative. Superiority in the land domain denies the adversary the ability to defeat friendly forces piecemeal and allows for mission accomplishment.

During the interwar period, Marine and Naval leaders used a pragmatic and threat-based approach to develop the amphibious doctrines and capabilities they would use successfully during the Second World War. Major Ellis' *Operation Plan 712, Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia* clearly articulated the requirements for seizing and defending advanced bases in the Pacific. While most viewed Gallipoli as proof that modern technology prohibited opposed landings, these leaders saw it as an opportunity to learn. It demonstrated the requirement for the superiority of force across multiple domains. With this requirement identified, the Marine Corps invested significant effort to develop, experiment, and field new capabilities. The lessons and capabilities developed during this period were instrumental to the success of US efforts in the Pacific during the Second World War. Even after the war, Marine leaders expressed the validity of the requirement for superiority of force. In 1946, Lieutenant General Holland Smith, the senior

⁴⁰ US Navy, Fleet Training Publication (1938), 4–12.

Marine leader in the Pacific Theater of Operations, confirmed this in an article he wrote for the *Marine Corps Gazette*: “superiority of force is a prerequisite of amphibious assault. A condition of sea and air supremacy of decisive superiority must exist at the objective area and in the approaches thereto before a landing is justified.”⁴¹

Section 3: Marine Corps Operating Concept 2016

In September 2016, after nearly fifteen years serving primarily as a second land army in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps introduced its current capstone operating concept, *Marine Corps Operating Concept; How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*. This concept describes the steps the Marine Corps “will take to design, develop, and field a future force for the 21st century.”⁴² Instead of focusing on a specific threat, the MOC intends to build a force capable of successfully operating in a complex future environment as presented in the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity’s 2015 report, *Future Operating Environment 2015–2025: Implications for Marines*. This report presents five key drivers of change upon which the MOC focuses to change the way the Marine Corps organizes, trains, and equips itself. The key drivers of change are complex terrain, technology proliferation, information as a weapon, battle of signatures, and an increasingly contested maritime domain.⁴³ The MOC posits that the key drivers of change affect Marine forces in the following ways.

Complex terrain in and around the world’s littorals allows adversaries to mitigate US advantages in technology, mounted maneuver, and firepower. Densely populated areas, in and around the world’s littorals, with constricting topography and poor infrastructure makes vehicular and aerial movement readily observable and easily disrupted. As a result, mission demands in

⁴¹ Holland M. Smith, “The Development of Amphibious Tactics in the U.S. Navy,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (June 1946): 15.

⁴² Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, i.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

complex terrain place a greater requirement to conduct sustained, foot-mobile operations in and among populations.⁴⁴

Technology proliferation limits US technological supremacy. Peer and near-peer adversaries will continue to develop sophisticated anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities limiting US operational reach and freedom of maneuver while allowing non-state adversaries to gain ever increasing tactical-level capabilities. Additionally, technology proliferation shortens the production timeline for new equipment, allowing adversaries to outpace the current US acquisition process. As a result, the US acquisition process needs improvement and streamlining.⁴⁵

Using information as a weapon, adversaries leverage every type of information as an arm of hard and soft power to mask actions, mislead unwitting publics, and undermine the legitimacy of their opponents. The MOC espouses that as a result, Marines must understand that controlling physical terrain is no longer a sufficient condition for battlefield success. The future force must navigate the landscape of knowledge and perception. It must operate in the information domain to take actions that inform, promote, persuade, coerce, dissuade, convince, compel, deceive, mask, and intimidate.⁴⁶

Adversary networks and technology proliferation allow opposing forces to locate, track, target, and attack their opponents. This produces a battle of signatures in which “to be detected is to be targeted is to be killed.” As a result, the MOC concludes that the Marine Corps must acquire the offensive capabilities to detect enemy signatures, make meaning of those signatures, and rapidly take actions to exploit opportunities. Further, the future force must be able to manage its own signatures to deceive opponents and increase friendly force survivability.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The MOC posits that the combination of the other drivers of change with improved adversary capabilities results in an increasingly contested maritime domain. Surface, air, and subsurface fires allow near-peer competitors to challenge US maritime forces and restrict freedom of maneuver. As these capabilities increase and proliferate, competitors can hold US forces at bay at greater distances and deny our ability to maneuver in the littorals. To respond to this change, the MOC states that the Marine Corps must develop capabilities and increase training to enhance its ability to project power and contribute to sea control as part of a Naval campaign.⁴⁸

These key drivers of change and the requirements they place on the Marine Corps leads to what the MOC identifies as its central problem: “the Marine Corps is not currently organized, trained, and equipped to meet the demands of a future operating environment characterized by complex terrain, technology proliferations, information warfare, the need to shield and exploit signatures, and increasingly non-permissive maritime domain.”⁴⁹ To solve this problem the MOC identifies five critical tasks to guide the Marine Corps’ efforts to change how it organizes, trains, equips, and sustains itself to operate, fight, and win in the 21st century.⁵⁰ The five critical tasks are to integrate the Naval force to fight at and from the sea; to evolve the Marine Air Ground Task Force; to operate with resilience in a contested-network environment; to enhance the Marine Corps’ ability to maneuver; and to exploit the competence of the individual Marine.⁵¹

Perhaps the most complete expression of how these keys tasks relate to a future force is the three-page fictional vignette at the beginning of the MOC. In this vignette, a future Marine Expeditionary Force, operating as part of a Combined Joint Task Force, conducts operations to assist a US ally to repel an aggressive neighbor and quell a proxy-force insurgency.⁵² Operating as part of a combined maritime component, Navy and Marine forces arrange tactical actions to

⁴⁸ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 6–7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.

create seams in the adversary's A2AD defense and project power ashore via vertical lift and ship to shore movement. Leveraging manned-unmanned teaming, unmanned aerial systems, precision munitions, organic platoon-level signals intelligence, ultralight vehicles, robotic cargo systems, coastal riverine forces, platoon-level joint terminal air controllers, and non-lethal weapons, the force projects power ashore and defeats the adversary's conventional military forces and proxy-insurgent force. This vignette arranges tactical actions based on dispersed small-unit maneuver elements that have both organic combined arms capabilities and the ability to leverage joint capabilities. The approach of dispersed small-unit actions draws from the Marine Corps' previous operating concept, Expeditionary Force 21.

Published in 2014, *Expeditionary Force 21: FORWARD and READY; Now and in the Future* (EF 21) "provided an initial heading to move the Marine Corps forward as a Naval expeditionary force in the 21st century."⁵³ While the MOC superseded EF 21, this concept provides a foundational understanding of the method of employment of Marine forces espoused in the MOC. As an operating concept, EF 21 recognized operational requirements ranging from security cooperation to forcible entry but emphasized crisis response.⁵⁴ It established a requirement for Marine forces to operate in task-organized distributed formations to counter growing threats caused by technology proliferation and improved enemy capabilities.⁵⁵ The concept shifted the main focus of force development to the Marine Expeditionary Brigade and introduced the concept of the company landing team.⁵⁶ EF 21 posited that company landing teams provide a means to engage forward in more locations and respond to crises. During entry operations, these independent company landing teams enable dispersed operations to secure

⁵³ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 3.

⁵⁴ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Expeditionary Force 21: FORWARD and READY; Now and in the Future*, (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2014), 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

landing sites or maneuver deep to inland objectives.⁵⁷ This idea of small, dispersed forces operating across the battlespace remains a prevalent method of force employment in the MOC.

In the February 2017 issue of the Marine Corps Gazette, the Marine Corps' Ellis group stated that the key drivers of change identified in the MOC "offer not only threats but also opportunities for maneuver." The authors go further to state that the tactical trends resulting from the key drivers of change make the need for units to operate in dispersed and decentralized manner vital.⁵⁸ This line of logic follows the argument that the combination of dispersed forces and the innovations called for in the MOC allows the 21st century Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) to maneuver in the physiological, technological, temporal, informational, and spatial environments to achieve a position of relative advantage over the adversary.

The idea of dispersed forces operating in small units across the battlespace during amphibious operations is in direct conflict with the historically demonstrated requirement for the superiority of force. As demonstrated in the previous section, the superiority of force served as the primary requirement for amphibious operations in the Second World War. The requirement remained in the 1989 Joint Doctrine for Landing Force Operations, which stated "establishment of a lodgment by amphibious assault requires the projection of significant forces against a hostile or potentially hostile shore. Factors such as the need for a favorable ratio of combat power, gaining air superiority and naval supremacy, and attaining strategic or tactical surprise will be foremost concerns in developing the plan for tactical operations."⁵⁹ This requirement changed in the 2014 update to the joint publication. The 2014 Joint Publication states;

amphibious operations use maneuver principles to transition ready-to-fight combat forces from the sea to the shore in order to achieve a position of advantage over the enemy. During combat operations, maneuver, in conjunction with fires (organic and supporting), is essential to gaining access where the enemy least expects it. It provides a position of advantage in order to destroy or

⁵⁷ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Expeditionary Force 21*, 15.

⁵⁸ Ellis Group, "21st Century Maneuver," *Marine Corps Gazette* (February 2017): 73–74.

⁵⁹ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication 3-02.1, *Joint Doctrine for Landing Force Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989), III–3.

seriously disrupt the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions that create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.⁶⁰

Analysis of Operation Watchtower, the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi in August 1942, demonstrates the disparity between the empirical historic requirements for amphibious operations and the normative ideas presented in the MOC.

Section 4: Operation Watchtower

As the first major amphibious operation conducted by the Marine Corps in the Second World War, Operation Watchtower demonstrates the transition from theory to practice. As such, Operation Watchtower tested the amphibious doctrine and capabilities developed over the previous decade against a free-thinking adversary with an independent will and unique objectives. American forces faced an adversary with years of operational and tactical experience preparing to fight in the islands of the Pacific and a continuous series of amphibious force victories from December 1941 to August 1942. In contrast, the American forces drew their experience from training exercises and the naval battles of Coral Sea and Midway. Success in Operation Watchtower was not a foregone conclusion. It depended on the efforts of the individual Marines, sailors, and soldiers, and the effectiveness of an operating concept developed during the interwar period.

By early 1942, Japanese forces occupied a significant portion of the western Pacific. Operating from numerous advanced island bases, the combination of Japanese airpower, coastal defenses, and naval forces presented a significant A2AD challenge. In January 1942, Japan captured Rabaul, in New Britain. This position allowed them to threaten key allied facilities in Port Moresby, New Guinea. With plans to expand their position to the southeast by seizing Fiji and New Caledonia, Japanese positions threatened to cut the allies' key sea line of communication to the southwest Pacific. If successful in severing this line of communication, the

⁶⁰ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication 3-02, *Amphibious Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), I-2.

Japanese would limit US access to Australia and New Zealand, effectively denying US access to its western allies and severely limiting the allied ability to build combat power to threaten Japanese forces in the Pacific. However, by mid-1942, an opportunity presented itself to allied forces as the tide began to change in Pacific theater.

In the Battle of Coral Sea, from May 4–8, 1942, the US Navy checked Japanese expansion for the first time. In the Battle of Midway, June 4–6, 1942, the United States achieved a significant strategic victory. “At one blow—in a single day's fighting—the advantage gained at Pearl Harbor had been lost and parity in carrier power was restored in the Pacific.”⁶¹ Due to their defeat at Midway, the Japanese cancelled their planned invasions of Fiji and New Caledonia. They did however continue operations in the Solomon Islands and built a sea plane base on Tulagi and began construction of an airfield on Guadalcanal to support a planned attack on Port Moresby—actions that drew the attention of allied forces.

In response, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recognizing the window of opportunity provided by their recent victories decided to launch offensive operations in the Southwest Pacific Area. Commonly known today as the Guadalcanal Campaign, Operation Watchtower was the first of three operations in a campaign designed to the seize and occupy the New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea area to deny the area to Japan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff directive on July 2, 1942 set the tasks for the campaign as follows: “Task One seizure and occupation of SANTA CRUZ Islands, TULAGI, and adjacent positions. Baker. Task 2 seizure and occupation of the remainder of the SOLOMON Islands, of LAE, SALAMAUA, and Northeast Coast of NEW GUINEA. Cast. Task 3 seizure and occupation of RABAUL and adjacent positions in the NEW GUINEA-NEW IRELAND area.”⁶² The design of this campaign is similar to the concept of expeditionary advanced based operations presented in the MOC.

⁶¹ Robert Leckie, *Challenge for the Pacific: The Bloody Six-Month Battle of Guadalcanal*, 1. Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 42.

⁶² Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz Volume 1 of 8, United States Department of the Navy, maintained by Captain James M. Steele (US Naval War College, 2013), 605.

The MOC places a requirement for Marine force to seize, establish, and operate expeditionary advanced bases (EABs). These EABs can then facilitate offensive operations to support sea control and as “hubs supporting the integrated Naval logistics network, providing temporary forward and intermediate staging areas for MAGTF follow-on echelons and sustainment operations.”⁶³ EABs in support of a naval campaign therefore generate more combat power than the limits of sea-based platforms allow. Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE), a subordinate operating concept to the MOC, calls for Marine forces to establish an expeditionary advanced base to deny adversary use of sea-lines of communications; establish forward arming and refuel points for aircraft, ships, or submarines; establish forward missile and air defense; increase intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities; and improve the sensor-shooter network.⁶⁴

While many of these technological capabilities did not exist in 1942, the underlying theme was still present. In the design of the New Britain-New Ireland-New Guinea campaign, Tulagi and the surrounding islands served as a position “to set up an expeditionary advanced base on an island at the fringes of the enemy keep-out zone.”⁶⁵ This expeditionary advanced base in the southern Solomon Islands could then provide a foothold, allowing US forces to generate combat power, extend operational reach, deny adversary freedom of action, and set conditions for the follow-on tasks.

The ongoing Japanese construction of an airfield on Guadalcanal drove the rapid planning and pace of Operation Watchtower. As the plans for the campaign developed, Vice Admiral Ghormley, Commander of the South Pacific Area, grew concerned with the forces available to complete task one. Without forces available for tasks two and three, Vice Admiral Ghormley’s task inhered significant risk. However, the ongoing Japanese construction of the

⁶³ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 13.

⁶⁴ Marine Corps Combat Development, *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* (Quantico, VA: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2017), 13.

⁶⁵ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 1.

airfield on Guadalcanal required the operation to commence prior to its completion. On June 10, 1942, in correspondence to Vice Admiral Ghormley the Joint Chiefs of Staff recognized “the disadvantage of undertaking Task One before adequate forces and equipment can be made available for the continuance without interruption of Tasks Two and Three.” However, they deemed it “necessary to stop without delay the enemy’s southward advance that would be effected by his firm establishment at TULAGI.”⁶⁶

As a result, despite the doctrinal requirement for the superiority of force, Operation Watchtower did not receive the forces its leader desired. In all, Vice Admiral Ghormley controlled “a small, highly trained striking force of ground troops, consisting of less than one Marine division with its supporting organic units, surface forces of fluctuating and never overwhelming power, and an extremely scanty array of land-based aircraft” with no assurance of reserve ground forces.⁶⁷ On July 16, Vice Admiral Ghormley issued Operation Plan 1-42. This plan defined the operational objective of Operation Watchtower: seize and occupy the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area, with intermediate tactical objectives to capture and occupy Tulagi and adjacent positions, capture and occupy adjoining portion of Guadalcanal suitable for the construction of landing fields, initiate construction of landing fields without delay, and defend seized areas until relieved by forces designated later.⁶⁸

The planning and pace of preparation for Operation Watchtower created significant friction for 1st Marine Division. Time constraints prevented adequate reconnaissance, study, and inter-theater liaison for adequate planning.⁶⁹ As a result, “the undertaking was planned and executed as a normal amphibious operation premised upon a firm control of sea and air by our

⁶⁶ Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz Volume 1 of 8, 616.

⁶⁷ John L. Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign* (Quantico, VA: Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1949), 11.

⁶⁸ Commander South Pacific Area. Operation Plan No. 1-42. COMSOPAC file No. A4-3/A16-3, Serial 0017, (16 July 1942), 6.

⁶⁹ 1st Marine Division. *Final Report on Guadalcanal Operation* (San Francisco, CA: Fleet Marine Force, 1943), 1.

naval forces. Naval forces “however regarded the enterprise more in the nature of a large scale raid or hit and run operation.”⁷⁰ Adding to this internal confusion was a near total lack of intelligence. The entire amphibious force lacked any detailed information about the enemy and basic geography of the islands they had to seize and occupy. In fact, “from an intelligence point of view, the Guadalcanal-Tulagi landings can hardly be described as more than a stab in the dark.”⁷¹ This demonstrates how difficult it is to “make sense of what was going on and act quickly” even without enemy interference.⁷²

Despite the lack of intelligence, US forces exploited a seam in Japan’s A2AD defenses, and assaulted Tulagi, Gavutu-Tanambogo, and Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. Inclement weather and the pace of the operation, launched a mere eight months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, allowed the force to achieve complete surprise. Initial success confirmed the validity of Marine Corps’ efforts over the past decade. Despite limited intelligence, Marine forces landed at undefended beaches and moved aggressively to secure beachheads and destroy Japanese defenders.

With initial local sea and air superiority, American naval gunfire and carrier-based aviation reduced defensive positions inland and provided fires allowing the landing force to move from ship to shore unmolested. By nightfall on August 8, American forces secured Tulagi. The fighting on Gavutu-Tanambogo and its surrounding islands lasted until the morning of August 9. In just three days, Marine forces eliminated enemy garrisons on Tulagi and its satellite islands.⁷³ On Guadalcanal, all division forces including two reinforced regiments landed on the first day. With minimal enemy resistance, the regiments accomplished their assigned missions where

⁷⁰ 1st Marine Division, *Final Report on Guadalcanal Operation*, 2.

⁷¹ Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, 14.

⁷² Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 2.

⁷³ Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, 39.

geographically possible.⁷⁴ The Japanese response to the early actions of Operation Watchtower on the night of August 8, however, changed the character of the operation.

“Even before the first radioed yelps from Tulagi indicated whether a raid or major landing was in progress, Admiral Mikawa decided audaciously to counterattack with his surface units despite the presence of American carriers.”⁷⁵ In the Battle of Savo Island on the night of August 8, Admiral Mikawa closed the seam, which American forces exploited to conduct its initial actions. Leveraging the advantages provided by Japan’s night fighting expertise and technologically superior torpedoes, Admiral Mikawa’s task force destroyed or seriously damaged seven American ships, including four heavy cruisers, killing or wounding over seventeen hundred allied service members.⁷⁶

The unexpected defeat of the US Navy combined with the early withdrawal of American aircraft carriers yielded the previously held local sea and air superiority. This left the Marines ashore operationally fixed. Enemy surface craft enjoyed practically undisputed possession of the waters adjacent to Guadalcanal.⁷⁷ “An all-out offensive on the part of Marine forces was out of the question” and the division held “but a tiny fragment of the total surface of the island.”⁷⁸ Without a superiority of force, Major General Vandergrift, the Commanding General of 1st Marine Division, decided to transition operations on Guadalcanal to the defense. At a 0900 conference on August 9th, he directed that “further ground operations be restricted to vigorous patrolling, defenses be immediately organized to repel attack from the sea, supplies be moved to

⁷⁴ Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, 46.

⁷⁵ Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁷ Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, 57.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

dispersed dumps, and the field be prepared to support air operations at the earliest possible moment.”⁷⁹

The events during the initial days on Guadalcanal offer unique insight into the challenges of amphibious operations in an A2AD environment. Before debarkation, amphibious forces have significant freedom of maneuver and action provided by Naval assets. As in the case of Operation Watchtower, this allows the amphibious force to identify and exploit gaps in the enemy’s defense and attack in unexpected locations. However, once ashore, landing forces lose the element of surprise. With mobility limited to the capabilities placed ashore, the landing forces’ ability to maneuver diminishes significantly. On Guadalcanal, as proposed in the MOC, this meant foot mobile infantry in complex terrain. Even with two infantry regiments ashore, the 1st Marine Division did not have sufficient combat power to maneuver and destroy the defending Japanese garrison to secure the island.

Despite achieving complete operational surprise, as soon as the landings began, allied actions drew an enemy reaction. Recognizing the gap in defenses, an aggressive enemy leader exercised informed initiative and moved to contest allied actions isolating the landing force. While this enemy reaction was a resounding tactical success, it did not destroy allied transport ships or the critical aircraft carriers. Yet, by contesting the sea domain, Japanese forces posed a significant enough threat to shift the character of the campaign. Japanese actions in the sea domain at the Battle of Savo Island closed the gap initially exploited by the allies, resulting in a contest across all domains, air, land, and sea—a result which turned Operation Watchtower into a six-month battle of attrition.

As the Navy withdrew, 1st Marine Division prepared for the unknown. As early as August 10, Watchtower leaders believed Japanese forces would counterattack to regain

⁷⁹ Samuel B. Griffith, *The Battle for Guadalcanal*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 68.

Guadalcanal.⁸⁰ The responsibility to defend Guadalcanal fell on the 1st Marine Division. To accomplish this task, “it was realized that a successful defense of the island, and a consequent denial of that island to the enemy, depended directly upon the ability of the Marines, to develop and use the airfield.”⁸¹ Complicating this task was the lack of local air or sea superiority.

“The thirteen days which elapsed between the landing and the arrival of the first combat planes were marked by daily air raids as well as by attacks from surface craft, submarines, destroyers, and, from time to time cruisers.”⁸² On August 20, the first aviation elements landed on the airfield, named Henderson Field. The thirteen days taken to establish this expeditionary advanced base required significant effort from man and machine. It required the division to secure the area around the airfield, significant air defense capabilities, and enormous engineer efforts assisted significantly by captured Japanese heavy equipment. Once established, ground-based aviation immediately proved its value.

Henderson field, and more importantly the aircraft operating out of it, allowed US forces to contest Japanese actions in the land, air, and sea domains. While the Battle of Savo Island closed the gap in Japan’s A2AD defense, US ground-based aircraft on Guadalcanal allowed allied forces to fight to reopen it. Within eight hours of the arrival of Marine aircraft, US forces threw back the first Japanese counterattack. Within twelve hours, the newly arrived planes performed their first missions in support of ground forces.⁸³ These assets allowed for increased freedom of action on Guadalcanal, but even with the support of these assets the ground forces remained operationally fixed.

The establishment of the airfield on Guadalcanal, which in effect functioned as an expeditionary advanced base, anchored land power to defend it. As more assets flowed in to

⁸⁰ Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz Volume 1 of 8, 642.

⁸¹ Final Report on the Guadalcanal Operation Phase III, 2–3, quoted in John L. Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign* (Quantico, VA: Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1949), 62.

⁸² Zimmerman, *The Guadalcanal Campaign*, 62–63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 65.

operate out of the airfield, the logistical requirements to sustain these forces grew. More planes meant more fuel, ordinance, maintenance capabilities, and sustenance. Uncertain of the enemy's composition, disposition, and plans, General Vandergrift decided to continue the defensive approach he initiated on August 9. Even with the five infantry battalions and land-based air power he had at his disposal, he lacked the superiority of force to maneuver, transition to the offense, or secure the island. As Marine forces ashore focused their efforts to defend Henderson field, the capabilities provided by special reconnaissance assets and indigenous forces allowed the allies to contest Japanese in the sea and air domain.

The indigenous forces on Guadalcanal and the surrounding islands proved to be an invaluable aid. Leveraging their intimate knowledge of the terrain, they served as scouts, assisted the Marines in identifying trails and mobility corridors, and provided valuable intelligence on the Japanese forces. The complex terrain and dense jungle canopy on the islands prevented aerial reconnaissance efforts to locate and identify enemy movements and locations.

A small group of local inhabitants known as the coast watchers served as a special reconnaissance force in the lower Solomon Islands. During the operation, the coast watchers served as an extended line of sensors, which provided early warning of Japanese movements out of Rabaul. They provided allied forces a distinct advantage in the battle for signatures. The warnings provided by the coast watchers allowed ground-based aviation on Guadalcanal to sortie and gain the required elevation to counter Japanese air raids. Combining the coast watchers with air warning radar provided a thirty-five to forty-minute warning for allied forces on Guadalcanal, just enough time for F4 Wildcat fighter planes to gain vital altitude. "Without these warnings, Henderson Field, and ultimately Guadalcanal, could not have been defended; even with these warnings only a few minutes, perhaps a bare five to ten minutes, spelled the difference between a successful and a failed interception."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 207.

This employment of special reconnaissance is in keeping with the MOC's desire to acquire the capabilities to raise and detect enemy signatures and rapidly act to exploit any opportunity.⁸⁵ It also demonstrates additional requirements for the establishment of an expeditionary advanced base. Advanced bases require extensive assets to protect them due to their geographically fixed nature. In addition to ground forces, air defense, engineering, and logistical requirements, advanced bases require persistent assets dedicated to collect intelligence and provide early warning.

The establishment of ground-based aviation on Henderson Field, assisted by the early warnings provided by the coast watchers, allowed allied forces to contest the sea and air domain. During the day, aircraft operating out of Henderson provided air coverage allowing American ships to move back into the water around Guadalcanal. These ships provided much needed supplies to sustain both land and air forces. At night, without air support, American ships yielded the seas to the Japanese. However, Japanese ships limited the time they remained around Guadalcanal to be out of range of allied aircraft by daylight. The lack of persistent superiority of force in the air and sea domains allowed the Japanese to transport additional troops and supplies to Guadalcanal to regain the island.

As the battle to establish air and sea superiority persisted, both sides continued to reinforce their land forces. On September 18, the 7th Marine Regiment arrived on Guadalcanal bringing American troop strength to nineteen thousand. Admiral Turner originally proposed "sprinkling the 7th Marines in small parcels all around the island" to "put a Marine reception committee on or near every landing beach to wipeout each batch of Japanese soldiers as soon as they arrived."⁸⁶ General Vandergrift hastily rejected the employment of forces in this dispersed manner. He identified that the Japanese "could just as easily annihilate isolated pockets of

⁸⁵ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 6.

⁸⁶ Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 227.

Marines” and urged that they employ 7th Marine Regiment near Henderson Field where they were most needed.⁸⁷ The Commanding General eventually got his way.

General Vandergrift “now had available on Guadalcanal nine battalions of infantry, a depleted Raider Battalion, four battalions of artillery, two companies of light tanks, and a Special Weapons Battalion.”⁸⁸ With these increasing capabilities, the 1st Marine Division transitioned to an active defense. General Vandergrift intended to “hold what he had and jab at the Japanese with limited operations designed to keep them off balance and under constant strain.”⁸⁹ Despite the dramatic increase in supplies, men, and machines, the Marines did not possess the superiority of force to transition to an all-out offensive.

As weeks turned to months, the tactical stalemate on Guadalcanal continued. Limited offensive success allowed the 1st Marine Division to extend its perimeter, but by mid-November, Japanese’s forces amassed thirty-thousand soldiers on Guadalcanal compared to the twenty-three-thousand Americans. However, American efforts in the air and sea significantly limited the supplies and equipment the Japanese placed ashore. Despite significant losses to allied shipping, naval battles in the waters around Guadalcanal significantly reduced the available Japanese transports. As a result, the Japanese were unable to sustain their land forces with required rations and ammunitions. Despite the shortage of supplies, the battle on Guadalcanal remained a stalemate.

To regain the island, the Japanese planned to establish additional air bases and regain air superiority. However, the “August landing at Guadalcanal had served to divert Japanese attention from New Guinea.”⁹⁰ In November, MacArthur launched an attack at Buna in New Guinea. This threatened Japan’s most significant base in the south Pacific, Rabaul. The combined pressure of

⁸⁷ Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 227–228.

⁸⁸ Griffith, *The Battle for Guadalcanal*, 133.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹⁰ Frank, *Guadalcanal*, 498.

MacArthur at Buna, the ongoing battle at Guadalcanal, and the toll inflicted by the US Navy required Japan to reassess its war plans. By the end of December, the Japanese decided to withdraw from Guadalcanal.

Operation Watchtower demonstrates the effectiveness of many of the ideas presented in the MOC. The establishment of expeditionary bases allows the joint force to generate more combat power than the limits of naval assets allow. The establishment of advanced sensors and incorporation of special forces provides early warning, allowing forces to react effectively to enemy actions. However, it also highlights the most significant shortfall in the MOC, the requirement for the superiority of force.

Despite the requirement established in doctrine, Operation Watchtower did not have the requisite superiority of force to justify a landing. Conducted on short notice to capitalize on the advantage provided after the Naval victory at the Battle of Midway, Operation Watchtower “had to be carried out at the earliest possible moment regardless of the disadvantages incident to haste and improvisations.”⁹¹ As a result, the forces required for its completion were not available for execution. Despite the short timeline, the forces put together an effective plan and accomplished the tactical objectives outlined by Vice Admiral Ghormely in his operation plan 1-42.

Exploiting a seam in the enemy’s A2AD the amphibious force proved the effectiveness of their operational concept. Landing at undefended beaches, where possible, the Marines achieved total operational and tactical surprise. Nevertheless, the enemy reacted. The actions of an aggressive leader closed the gap the allies initially exploited. The result was the loss of local air and sea superiority, a prerequisite for amphibious operations. Over the next six months, Marines ashore endured disease, hunger, and unrelenting combat. Pilots fought daily, struggling to contest the air domain, prevent enemy reinforcement, and provide support for ground forces.

⁹¹ 1st Marine Division, *Final Report on Guadalcanal Operation*, 3.

The Navy fought numerous battles in the waters around Guadalcanal. The operations turned into a battle of attrition in all domains.

The lack of superiority of force in effect fixed the Marines as soon as they went ashore. With only enough combat power to defend the critical airfield, the Marines could not maneuver. The complex terrain compounded the issue, requiring unique and innovative defense techniques. The infantry relied on crew served weapons and indirect fires to kill the aggressive and unrelenting enemy in close combat. Marine leaders immediately rebuffed proposals to disperse the force across the island. The logistical challenges the dispersal of forces bring aside, the isolated forces presented easy targets for the enemy to defeat piecemeal. The superiority of force in all domains is a requirement for amphibious operations.

Section 5: Conclusion

This monograph demonstrates the MOC's failure to account for the historically proven requirement for the superiority of force in amphibious operations by comparing the development of US Amphibious Doctrine and its initial implementation during Operation Watchtower in 1942 with the 2016 Marine Corps Operating Concept. By failing to account for this requirement, the MOC diverges from historical amphibious doctrine. In doing so, the MOC serves as a normative concept that ignores the historical continuities of amphibious warfare.

Operation Watchtower, the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Pacific Ocean's Solomon archipelago, reveals the impact the lack of superiority of force has on amphibious operations. Attempting to exploit the advantages earned at the Battle of Coral Sea and Midway, allied forces rushed headlong into Operation Watchtower. With limited time and a small window of opportunity, the seizure of Guadalcanal and Tulagi began without adequate air, naval, or land power. As a result, the allied forces on and around Guadalcanal endured a six-month battle of attrition.

The empirical evidence demonstrated by analyzing Operation Watchtower counters many of the ideas expressed as facts in the MOC. The significant benefits that mobility provided by sea

and air lift became negligible as soon as forces went ashore. With mobility limited to only the assets they had with them, these forces became vulnerable to enemy reactions. Complex terrain significantly limited even foot mobile forces' ability to maneuver. The result on Guadalcanal was not small, dispersed operations, but battalion- and regimental-sized operations to secure limited objectives.

Having “the connectivity to reach out for almost every capability in the Joint force” is only relevant if the Joint force can provide those capabilities to support you.⁹² In the Battle of Savo Island, the Japanese Navy closed the seam in their A2AD defenses, which US forces initially exploited. Isolated for thirteen days, with extremely limited joint support, the First Marine Division endured near constant bombardment from Japanese naval and air forces. Without enough forces for offensive operations, the Division focused efforts on establishing and defending an airfield—efforts that eventually swung the tide of the battle back into the Allies' favor.

While the MOC deviates from the historical continuities of amphibious operations, it is in keeping with the Marine Corps' theory of warfare, maneuver warfare. First implemented as the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy in 1989, maneuver warfare seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions that create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.⁹³ Within this theory of warfare, “the object of maneuver is not so much to destroy physically as it is to shatter the enemy's cohesion, organization, command, and psychological balance.”⁹⁴ While this theory created

⁹² Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Corps Operating Concept*, 2.

⁹³ US Department of the Navy, Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989). General Al Gray, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, established maneuver warfare as the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy when he signed FMFM-1 in 1989. US Department of the Navy, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 73.

⁹⁴ US Navy, FMFM 1 (1989), 29.

significant debate within the Marine Corps during its early years, it now serves as the Marine Corps' institutional paradigm.

By institutionalizing this single paradigm as “the authoritative basis for how the Marine Corps fights and prepares to fight,” the Marine Corps is at risk of what the renowned psychologist Daniel Kahneman terms “theory-induced blindness: once you have accepted a theory and used it as a tool in your thinking, it is extraordinarily difficult to notice its flaws.”⁹⁵ Looking from a broader perspective, the concept of theory-induced blindness helps to explain the lack of historical and empirical evidence in the current capstone operating concept. Instead of considering the historical continuity for the requirement for the superiority of force, the sole institutional paradigm of maneuver warfare bounds the concept. This is even more dangerous when one analyzes the validity of the theory of maneuver warfare. As the preeminent strategic studies professor Sir Lawrence David Freedman stated: “It was one thing to argue that because minds controlled bodies, disrupting the workings of minds was preferable to eliminating their bodies, but quite another to assume that just as physical blows could shatter bodies, so mental blows could shatter minds.”⁹⁶ The validity of maneuver warfare theory aside, theory-induced blindness explains how the Marine Corps' capstone operating concept fails to consider its own service history and instead builds upon the unproven concepts of EF 21.⁹⁷

Recommendation

The Marine Corps should reevaluate how it develops and assesses its operating concept. The development of amphibious doctrine offers a superb example of effective concept-based force development. Drawing from a pragmatic analysis of the adversary and terrain the service

⁹⁵ US Navy, FMFM 1 (1989), 1; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 277.

⁹⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213.

⁹⁷ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Operating Concept*, 4. “The MOC builds on proven concepts and practices, such as Operational Maneuver from the Sea, Ship-to-Objective Maneuver, Seabasing, and Expeditionary Force 21 (EF21).”

was most likely to face, the Marine Corps developed a theory of amphibious warfare and transitioned this theory to execution without failure. In contrast to this enemy focused analysis, “the MOC focuses on key drivers of change” in the future operating environment to effect changes in how the Marine Corps trains, organizes, and equips.⁹⁸

Instead of accepting the constraints placed on the force by the current limited inventory of amphibious ships, the Marine Corps should identify the capabilities it requires to meet its Title 10 responsibilities. If, as the MOC claims, the Marine Corps must be a coherent and fully integrated Naval Force, then the Marine Corps has a responsibility to identify the capabilities it requires to do so. Instead, “eliminating the necessity for absolute land superiority, *by the Marine Corps*, diminished the justification for amphibious shipping towards that end... Why should the nation fund the Navy to build amphibious ships for the purpose of decisive maneuver ashore, if the Marine Corps itself refuses to define the necessity for such land superiority?”⁹⁹

Perhaps most importantly, the Marine Corps should refocus on what it is, an infantry centric organization built to “provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.”¹⁰⁰ This is the Marine Corps’ general mission. It is the purpose for which the service “exists and never, for a moment, must it be permitted to become smothered by the introduction of “Minor Missions.” The trail once lost is hard to regain.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Marine Corps Combat Development Command, *Marine Operating Concept*, 5. The key drivers of change listed in the MOC are complex terrain, technology proliferation, information as a weapon, battle of signatures, and increasingly contested maritime domain.

⁹⁹ Lauer, in press, “Damn the Torpedoes.”

¹⁰⁰ United States of America, *10 U.S. Code §5063, United States Marine Corps: composition; functions.*

¹⁰¹ Russell, “A Plea for a Mission and Doctrine,” 111.

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