Rename the MAGTF

A historical and technical case for an update of terminology

by Mr. Ed Darack

>Mr. Darack is an independent author/photographer and unmanned systems innovator. He has published numerous works about the Marine Corps. These include the books Victory Point, The Warriors of Anbar, *and* War Moments *and numerous articles in the* Marine Corps Gazette *and* Leatherneck, *three of which have been included in anthologies by Marine Corps History Division. He is the founder of Darack Research, a company that innovates unmanned systems that have been extensively tested and evaluated by members of the Marine Corps and other Services.*

The modern Marine Corps operates throughout all technologically available domains: terrestrial, maritime, air, space, information (including cyberspace), and the electromagnetic spectrum (some practitioners consider this its own domain, and some consider it a hybrid domain). This includes physically traversing land, sea, and air; utilizing systems of any or a combination of domains (such as space-based navigation and communication systems); and wielding the ability to engage in any or a combination of domains simultaneously and fluidly, including with kinetic systems, electronic interdiction systems, information operations systems, and cyber systems. This architecture has proven to engender synergized tactical effects that in aggregate have yielded desired operational end states throughout the history of the Service. It is an enduring, fundamental framework unique to the Marine Corps, a multi-domain aesthetic born with the institution itself. It initially evolved out of operational imperative and the necessity of expeditionary integration with the Navy. It has expanded in scope with technology and has been functionally refined through the decades, guided and structured by warfighting pragmatism. The name currently used for this construct, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force—the MAGTF—does not accurately reflect the full scope of this multi-domain aesthetic and the capabilities and effects that it engenders. Marine Corps leadership should consider creating a new term, one that best represents the core aesthetic and the capabilities that it engenders in the modern Marine Corps.

This multi-domain operational construct dates to the genesis of the Continental Marines and their first engagements while integrated with the

A Marine forward air controller directs a Marine Corps UH-1 helicopter during live-fire training at Urban Target Complex, R-2301-W, "Yodaville," in the Barry M. Goldwater Range, outside of Marine Corps Air Station Yuma during a MAWTS-1 Weapons and Tactics Instructor course. *(Photo by author.)*

Continental Navy. These naval infantrymen, *soldiers of the sea*, fought battles on both sea and land during the American Revolutionary War. During the Raid of Nassau, Marines executed the Nation's first coordinated amphibious assault. As part of this campaign, the Marines conducted their first multi-domain, synergized, integrated combined arms-capable operation in a long line of many to come.[1] After its reinstatement in 1798, the Marine Corps continued to refine this synergized warfighting architecture and established itself as a premier expeditionary fighting force, operating in detailed integration with the Navy. This was exemplified during the Barbary War of North Africa in the early 1800s, the first conflict the Nation fought outside its borders.

The domain of air was first pioneered for military use by the French in 1794 with their use of tethered balloons for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) collections during the French Revolutionary Wars. American forces debuted tethered lighter-than-air vehicles in 1861 during the American Civil War, also for ISR collections. The Union Navy embraced the military use of balloons during this time and created its first aircraft carrier to support these airships, the USS *George Washington Parke Custis*, a converted coal barge.

The Navy first expressed interest in heavier-than-air flying craft for warfighting prospects in 1898. This was led by then Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, who was intrigued by flight experiments that promised untethered freedom of movement throughout the sky. That interest was quickly shelved, however, as no such machine had yet successfully flown under its own power. The 1903 success of the Wright Flyer and the aviation innovations that followed renewed Navy interest. This focus surged in 1910 after the Army acquired its first aircraft, the 1909 Wright Military Flyer, a two-seat observation aircraft notable as history's first purpose-created military airplane. The Navy quickly established its own aviation program, including undertaking research and development, forging alliances with the nascent aircraft production industry, and establishing a training facility in the Annapolis, MD, area in 1911. While specific applications had yet to be clearly defined for pioneering craft of the air domain, one concept attracted the attention of force designers for possible use.

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Since 1900, the Marine Corps has been developing the concept of the Advance Base Force, an initiative to use Marine capabilities for coastal and naval base defense on a global scale. Born out of national strategic imperative, it necessitated tight integration with the technologically evolving Navy. The Navy had recently modernized its fleet with long-range, heavily armored surface vessels—the *Steel Navy*—that proved critical to the burgeoning American foreign policy of territorial expansionism at the time. Bases and fleets needed defending, and Marines would undertake the role.

MajGen William P. Biddle, the Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, was keenly aware of the history of aviation to that point and its prospects

Marine Corps UH-1Y "Yankee" Venom helicopter during live-fire training at the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range during a MAWTS-1 Weapons and Tactics Instructor course. *(Photo by author.)*

for military use, particularly for the Advance Base Force concept. MajGen Biddle, who served as Commandant from 3 February 1911 to 24 February 1914, commented: "great benefit to an advanced base force ... might result from trained aviators."[2]

In 1912, Biddle ordered two Marine first lieutenants to participate in training at the naval aviation facility at Annapolis as a prospect to begin complementing Marine Corps infantry and artillery capabilities for the Advance Base Force concept. One of these officers, Marine 1stLt Alfred Cunningham, had long held an interest in aviation. Cunningham had been introduced to flight in the early 1900s during a balloon ride and subsequently studied aviation technology and its potential for military use, pursuits known to the Marine Corps. [Some sources claim that Cunningham, as a first lieutenant, regularly lobbied the upper echelons of the Marine Corps command hierarchy, including the Commandant, instilling interest in the Marine Corps for the pursuit of aviation.]

Cunningham graduated from flight school in the summer of 1912, becoming the first Marine Corps aviator (and fifth naval aviator) in history. He would later lead Marine Aviation, and historians would bestow the title of *Father of Marine Corps Aviation* upon him. Other Marines followed Cunningham into the institution's third physical domain, and the Marine Corps began experimental flights with naval aviators in support of the Advance Base Force concept.

In January and February of 1914, the Marine Section of the Naval Flying School sailed to Culebra, Puerto Rico, and joined the recently created Advance Base Brigade for naval Atlantic Fleet exercises. This was the first expeditionary deployment of Marine Aviation, and during the entire exercise, the aviation section integrated with Marine infantry and artillery personnel as well as components of the Navy. This included ISR test flights where pilots successfully identified submarines and distant surface vessels and took aerial photographs, demonstrating combining flight operations with those of the information domain. These flights also included air-to-surface radio communications (electromagnetic spectrum operations) and experimenting with air-to-surface attacks of battleships and other surface vessels. The Marine Corps at that point was fully invested in pioneering the domain of air. This evolved not for the sake of creating its own air force, nor for future unknown engagements, but specifically to fluidly integrate burgeoning Marine Corps aviation capabilities with Marine Corps ground and maritime capabilities—all within a framework of naval operations.

The exercise was deemed a resounding success for the Marine Corps Advance Base Brigade, and it is a notable institutional highlight as a proof-of-concept for Marine Aviation operational integration and multi-domain functionality. In all, the Marine Corps Advance Base Brigade functioned throughout five domains: sea, land, air, information, and the electromagnetic spectrum—all before World War I.[3]

The Marine Corps continued to accelerate its multi-domain capabilities ...

During World War I, the Marine Corps continued to demonstrate its prowess as a multi-domain force, engaging on land, sea, and air. This included the 1st Marine Aeronautic Company, the first American military aviation unit deployed for a specific mission in the conflict. The unit was deployed to the Azores and conducted air-to-surface operations in an anti-submarine campaign that was tightly integrated with American naval forces. The war also witnessed the 1st Marine Aviation Force, led by Cunningham, undertake air-to-ground engagements, air-to-air engagements, and aerial resupply.

This multi-domain capability was vibrantly celebrated by the Marine Corps in a recruitment poster, produced from 1917 to 1918. The poster features a Marine rifleman in its foreground with a Navy battleship and Marine Corps Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" biplanes in the background. The words "Land," "Sea," and "Air" are emblazoned on the side of the poster. The poster, perhaps more than any other historic visual work, epitomizes the multi-domain heritage of the Marine Corps.

The Marine Corps continued to accelerate its multi-domain capabilities after the Armistice. Direct observation of combat in all domains throughout World War I as well as the continued work to integrate with the Navy, notably for amphibious assaults, would shape Marine capabilities and structures in the years following World War I. In the September 1920 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, then Maj Alfred Cunningham published an article stating that aviation should, above all else, serve to directly support troops on the ground. He described specific missions, including ISR collections, light bombing, and interdiction. In the case of supporting an amphibious landing, Cunningham explained: "the planes could with machine gun fire and small fragmentation bombs so demoralize resistance as to make the task of landing much easier and safer."[4] The Marine Corps then pioneered one of the most notable of all multi-domain missions, close air support, loosely described by Cunningham's quote about aerial support of amphibious assaults. The first Marine Corps air-ground teams proved the utility of close air support during the Banana Wars of Central America and the Caribbean.[5]

The institution's ability to fluidly operate throughout all domains engendered the historic Marine Corps successes of World War II. In locations including Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, and Tarawa, Marines successfully focused multi-domain, combined-arms capabilities against enemy forces, notably in the highly frictional zone of sea-land transition during amphibious assaults. While the Marine Corps' successes in World War II highlighted its renowned institutional cultural qualities of honor, courage, commitment, brotherhood, and fight-to-the-death tenacity to the public, its multi-domain aesthetic is what history reveals to be the most important characteristic for winning battle after battle.

The years immediately following World War II brought a dramatic reduction in the force size of the Marine Corps, with some in senior government positions even proffering that the Service be unified with the Army. After much debate, President Harry S. Truman and the National Security Council signed the National Security Act into law on 26 July 1947. The law legally formalized the Marine Corps as an expeditionary naval force. It stated:

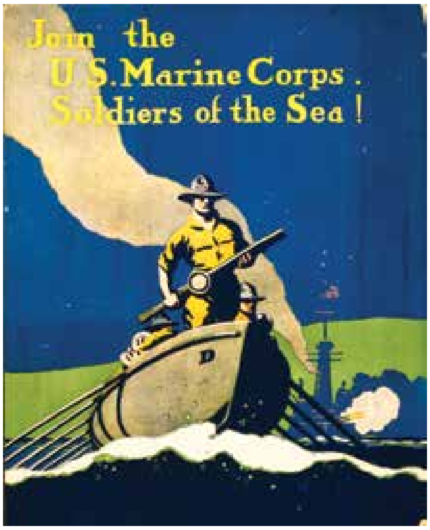
> The Marine Corps shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet Marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.

From a historical perspective, the language references both the Advanced Base Force concept and the Service's multi-domain nature, specifically focusing on aviation.[6]

Air-ground integration ranked among the most salient of the Service's multi-domain capabilities at the time and actions in the Korean War would further burnish this into the institution's legacy both publicly and with governmental decision makers. "The Marine Corps, having learned valuable lessons late in World War II, went to extremes in the late '40s to school its air and ground officers together and to structure its deployments as air-ground teams under a single command," stated Marine Corps MajGen Norman J. Anderson in discussing Marine Corps close air support's role in the recapture of Seoul during the Korean War. [MajGen Anderson flew in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, where he commanded the 1st MAW].[7]

In discussing the Korean War's Chosin Reservoir campaign of December 1950, Gen Oliver P. Smith, Commanding General of the 1st MarDiv, stated:

> This unity between air and ground elements became nearly ideal during the advance from Yudam-ni to the south, and it is no exaggeration to state that the successful conclusion of this operation would have been nearly impossible without the amount and quality of close air support that was provided. It was an ideal combat example of the ultimate perfection of the air-ground team needed to defeat an aggressive determined enemy.[8]



Marine Corps recruitment poster, produced between 1914 and 1918, proclaiming "Soldiers of the Sea!" This poster dramatically illustrates not only the naval heritage of the Marine Corps but also its multi-domain nature. *(Photo by Marine Corps via the United States Library of Congress/Public Domain. Library of Congress Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-7759.)*

Marine Corps recruitment poster, produced between 1917 and 1918, showing a Marine rifleman in the foreground and a Navy battleship with Marine Corps JN-4 "Jenny" biplanes in the air. The poster proclaims "Land," "Sea," and "Air" on its side. This poster, perhaps more than any other historic visual work, epitomizes the multi-domain heritage of the Marine Corps. *(Photo by Marine Corps via the United States Library of Congress/Public Domain. Library of Congress Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-7798.)*

Marine Corps air-ground integration—along with all Marine Corps multi-domain capabilities—had progressed tremendously from the initial concept that Cunningham had forged during World War I. The "air-ground team" had become the de facto face of Marine multi-domain capability. On 28 June 1952, Congress passed the Douglas-Mansfield Act, which amended the 1947 National Security Act to define a specific force structure for the Service: "The United States Marine Corps, within the Department of the Navy, shall be so organized as to include not less than three combat divisions and three air wings, and such other land combat, aviation, and other services as may be organic therein." In December of 1963, over a decade after the passage of the Douglas-Mansfield Act, the Marine Corps formalized a name for its warfighting construct in *Marine Corps Order 3120.3*: the Marine Air-Ground Task Force, the MAGTF.[9]

In the years since the debut of the formalized term Marine Air-Ground Task Force, the Marine Corps has added new domains in which it operates (space and cyberspace), has refined its capabilities throughout all domains, and has innovated novel systems and operational structures throughout these domains. The Service, through a fluid admixture of systems of any appropriate domain, can today engender tactical effects of specified magnitudes at precise locations at precise times that, in aggregate, yield desired operational end states. The Service continues to set ever higher standards in capability, all in the spirit of its pioneers.

Despite the robustness of the Service's multi-domain capabilities, the name of its foundational organizational construct identifies only two: air and ground. To those familiar with the history of the Service, the term MAGTF suggests, without further explanation, all domains in which the Marine Corps functions. Those uninitiated, however, including those considering joining the Service, might infer that a name identifying only two domains reflects that Marines operate "in some climes and a few places."

Addressing the name of the Service's fundamental organizational construct is not mere splitting of semantic hairs. While the term may conjure thoughts of institutional heritage and distinction to those well familiar with the Marine Corps, it does not reflect the full scope of the Service's capabilities to the world, including to other Services. The current focus on littoral operations and renewed integration with the Navy highlights this. The name of the Service's fundamental aesthetic should boldly message its full spectrum of capabilities to all and inspire and propel members (and prospective members) to continue forging new paths of operation and capabilities in all domains, as Marines have since the Service's inception.

Notes

1. Charles R. Smith, *Marines in The Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution 1775–1783* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1975).

2. Edward C. Johnson, *Marine Corps Aviation: The Early Years 1912–1940* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1977).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Joseph Alexander, "Close Air Support: The Pioneering Years," *USNI Proceedings*, November 2012, https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2012/november/close-air-support-pioneering-years.

6. United States Congress, *National Security Act of 1947* (Washington, DC: United States Congress, 1947).

7. Joseph Alexander, *Battle of the Barricades: U.S. Marines in the Recapture of Seoul* (Potomac: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2000).

8. Malcolm Cagle and Frank Manson, *The Sea War in Korea* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1957).

9. Headquarters Marine Corps History and Museums Division, *Brief History of the Corps*, (Quantico: n.d.).