

Forward bases

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Marine Corps Gazette; Apr 1994; 78, 4; Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines
pg. 38

1992 Chase Prize Essay Contest Entry

Forward Bases

by Maj Michael J. Motes

By looking in a fresh, innovative way at the tables of organization of Marine Corps bases and the logistical support needs of forward deployed units, the Corps could design new, deployable organizations—call them MCBs Forward—that can enhance expeditionary logistics capabilities and ease the ever-mounting personnel crunch.

It is time to match current mission requirements with available assets and consider having Marine Corps bases furnish deployable units. Extensive personnel assets and critical combat service support (CSS) expertise and materiel lie idle when they could better be used to support major operational units committed to deployment as in the Gulf War. The purpose of this article is to briefly outline this concept and to provide the rationale for such a drastic change in Marine Corps philosophy in hope that it will lead to a change in doctrine.

Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM have barely faded into our memory, and we are now faced with the actual downsizing of the Marine Corps. We must look at the way we conduct business, and reconsider each unit's mission and associated functions, and keep an eye on streamlining and eliminating duplicate assignments. These hard facts drive this proposal. It is time to consider how to make better use of base personnel and equipment in light of a leaner Corps that must remain as a worldwide mobile force-in-readiness. Now is the time to explore concepts for deploying Marine Corps Bases Forward (MCB Fwd).

The closing of U.S. bases in the Philippine Islands in 1992 brought to mind previous classroom discussions about how forward bases played key roles in projecting sea power throughout the world. However, even as early as the mid-1980s, many forward naval bases, scattered throughout the seven seas, were wasteful with respect to personnel and materiel costs. We were coming to the conclusion that it was just too costly to continue the heavy commitments in permanent forward naval bases. Sufficient benefits simply were not there when the site was far removed from any

anticipated threat. For some, maritime prepositioning ships (MPS) were the answer, for they provided a flexible response that was not dependent on friendly relations with host nations. An expeditionary brigade of Marines reinforced with MPS could secure the necessary foothole. Then, if necessary, a few Army divisions and some Air Force units could deploy to drive any tyrant to his knees. This is great in theory—small, mobile, cost efficient, flexible, with world-wide applications. It will get the job done on a small scale. However, when expanded and used in conjunction with a Marine expeditionary force (MEF) on extended deployment it is another matter. Such a commitment requires extraordinary rear area logistical operations.

To cope with these expanded logistical operations and ensure that the necessary Marines are available with their combat units, we should develop a MCB Fwd concept to provide rear area combat service support (CSS) to MEFs deployed for operational commitments.

Traditionally, MCBs have the responsibility to act as a home port and serve as host, caretaker, and provider of common household products and services. Before one dismisses MCBs as mere "landlords" that extract a heavy rent from their tenants, a review of assets and associated benefits should be conducted to determine what might be useful for fully integrated MEF deployment support.

MCBs, which are essentially rather large towns, have significant logistical assets. Their table of organizations (T/Os) include both military and civilian billets, and most sections have the ability to continue at least minimal operations using only their civilian structure. This means that MCBs can afford to task organize a deployable force to support MEF commitments and

leave in place a civilian caretaker force commensurate with reduced activity at the home port. What happened at Camp Lejeune during the Gulf War supports this concept.

On Christmas 1990, Camp Lejeune resembled a ghost town, not because everyone was on leave and with loved ones, but because most personnel from II MEF units were on their way to Saudi Arabia. When I drove through 2d Marine Division and 2d Force Service Support Group areas, there was a noticeable lack of personnel, equipment, and activity. Base personnel, especially logistical and administrative sections, had been working from August through December 1990 supporting deployment of their tenants to Saudi Arabia. As units commenced their deployment, associated facilities and training areas were closed. With decreased personnel on base, demands for services diminished. Activities at the commissary, exchanges, and recreation facilities, in particular, decreased. Fully staffing the MCB baseline T/O with both military and civilian personnel was no longer necessary and deployment of an MCB Fwd could have begun by early January 1991.

Processing Reserve and combat replacement company (CRC) personnel for duty was stepped up during November 1990 and continued throughout DESERT STORM to include deactivation upon return from the Gulf. As this was the only activity in town at the time, all hands turned to support it. At the same time, however, there was a considerable influx of Individual Ready Reserve personnel who were used to augment base operations to the extent that baseline T/O Marines could have deployed in-trace of MEF elements, establishing MCB Fwd. It should be noted that additional labor for day-to-day operations,

in conjunction with care, storage, or shipment of remain behind equipment could easily have been contracted to local area commercial firms thereby offsetting austere effects of dislocating a community's normal source of income during mass military mobilization. This would, of course, benefit both the local economy and the Marine Corps.

With civilian and Reserve backup, an MCB could deploy a broad spectrum of Marines from all ranks and military occupational specialties. Job-related experience and unit structure needed for MCB Fwd would include command, personnel management, facilities management and maintenance, transportation management, supply, motor transport, purchasing and contracting, and food services. MCB Fwd personnel would relieve deployed MEF commanders of the requirement to staff and manage a rear area logistics operation. Employment of MPS and deployment of an entire MEF is predicated on having host nation support and relatively secure air and seaports for debarkation. Situations that occurred at the Al Jubail seaport during DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM exemplify why many functions could be more readily performed under the command of an MCB Fwd.

Ship after ship pulled into Morehead City, Sunny Point, and Wilmington ports in North Carolina, and ship after ship sailed away full of equipment and supplies destined for Southwest Asia. Considering all of the equipment that left the shores of North Carolina in support of Marine forces alone, it is little wonder that Al Jubail, as a sea port of debarkation (SPOD), quickly became flooded with material.

With the exception of the first squadron offloaded at Al Jubail, MPS equipment and supplies were efficiently offloaded at the SPOD. Likewise, assault follow-on echelon equipment and supplies to support a deploying MEF were offloaded and distributed in relatively good order and with appropriate controls—largely because the items were designated for specific units that were waiting in theater for their warfighting equipment. Once the basic personnel, unit equipment, and first 60 days of supplies were offloaded, distributed, and moved to forward areas, MCB Fwd could have arrived at the SPOD to begin functioning as a forward base.

In order to sustain combat operations, large quantities of materiel and supplies must be shipped to the forward area and a regular supply pipeline established and

filled via Department of Defense sources of supply. During DESERT SHIELD, when Fleet Marine Force Atlantic executed a 60-day withdrawal of prepositioned war reserve materiel stock (PWRMS); the "barn doors" opened up; and massive quantities of all types of supplies were shipped from various remote storage activities. One example, noted for its combat criticality, was ammunition; almost all of the Marine Corps' war reserve stocks were shipped to Saudi Arabia. Total ammunition shipped, including what had been provided by MPS, was nearly 120,000 short tons. If short tons seem a bit hard to visualize, consider that it took six ships to retrograde PWRMS ammunition alone (only 85,000 short tons) back to the United States at the conclusion of the Gulf War.

To understand the nature of PWRMS supplies that were on hand at the Al Jubail SPOD one need only review what was retrograded as excess once all MEF equipment had been backloaded: lumber and construction products occupied an area of over 2 football fields in size; general supplies were packed onto a 20-acre space stacked over 12-feet high; repair parts, medical supplies and clothing were contained in 5 warehouses each the size of a football field; and food products, which were salvageable, were packed into 88 containers the size of a 40-foot tractor trailer. All these items and much more had to pass through the Al Jubail SPOD. To manage such an enormous operation, 1 MEF had to take CSS personnel out of their force structure and task organize them into an ad hoc unit.

Consider what could have happened with an MCB Fwd. A MEF commander would program personnel and selected support equipment into the time phase force deployment schedule to arrive in-country after MPS and MEF units had completed their debarkation at the SPOD. This task organized MCB Fwd unit would report directly to the MEF commander with a primary mission of providing rear area logistical support to the deployed MEF in the prosecution of its objective.

Facilities management would include securing additional supply storage sites, maintenance areas, buildings, and local equipment as necessary to establish a fully functional logistical base. To the maximum extent possible, contracting with host nation activities would be used to provide functions, services, and products available locally and reduce the need to ship from DoD sources and tie up scarce transporta-

tion resources. Food service is continuously required—all functions to deploy cooks and food service equipment should be under the cognizance of a single base food service officer, pushing support forward. Motor transportation functions, coordinated with host nation and transportation management office (TMO), would allow for tactical materiel handling and mobility equipment to be released from SPOD operations to support mission needs of MEF units. Organizing a port and establishing a rear area logistics base of operations are ideal functions for an MCB Fwd, ones that can be anticipated and for which fairly detailed plans can be developed. Asset accountability and visibility can be greatly improved with these arrangements, and the MCB Fwd would be the logical activity to initiate retrograde and MPS retrofit operations once hostilities end.

A final note that must be adhered to with respect to deploying a base element: Fleet Assistance Program personnel would not be included. An MCB Fwd deployed and attached to an operational MEF has to be sufficient with its own personnel. A primary consideration is that bases are to support their MEF, not be a millstone around the operational commander's neck. CRC personnel that are sent into theater must be processed to the front, not held by a base unit to "augment" baseline T/O personnel.

Whatever the final end-strength of the Corps, the challenge to meet commitments will be monumental. It is imperative that we include every available Marine unit in our total force management effort and expand the units that provide combat ready forces. MCBs with a built-in civilian management and labor structure are prime units to furnish logistical personnel with a wide range of skills and experience that should be deployed to support MEF-level commitments as forward bases. Let's move ahead at once with this plan while the Gulf experience is still reasonably fresh in mind and while the key players from that era both in Saudi Arabia and at home are available to guide the effort.

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