

# Operating at the Speed of Relevance

**Optimizing relationships and connections  
between Defense acquisition and the FMF**

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In great power competition, where the rapidly evolving and increasingly contested operational environment demands that defense acquisition professionals design, build, test, produce, and sustain systems at *the speed of relevance*, strong relationships between acquisition professionals and the FMF is a most vital component. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* states,

[The Marine Corps] cannot afford to preserve legacy capabilities with little to no demand signal, or systems that are only being retained in support of surge requirements associated with the least-likely, worst-case scenario.<sup>1</sup>

It is logical to surmise, if the Marine Corps expects to play an integral role in the prosecution of any future naval campaigns, then it will need relevant materiel solutions that support the approved joint naval concepts. Following this logic, if the Marine Corps expects to acquire relevant materiel solutions, then it must optimize relationships and connections between the defense acquisition workforce and the FMF. The purpose of this article is to propose ways in which changes associated with force structure, policy, procedures, and culture can optimize relationships between acquisition professionals and the FMF—so that the FMF receives materiel solutions at *the speed of relevance*.

## Optimizing Relationships for the Future Fight

As the Marine Corps evolves in its role supporting the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) (Washington, DC: 2018), its needs to build a network of

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uniformed acquisition professionals who understand the collective voice of their primary customers—the FMF—throughout the entirety of the acquisition process. Conversely, the Marine Corps also needs its FMF to be aware of the challenges faced by the acquisition community, so that the FMF understand how their involvement throughout the acquisition process increases the likelihood that the FMF receive relevant materiel solutions. Notably, this is a shared responsibility between the acquisition community and the FMF; the Marine Corps needs its FMF to be more familiar with the DOD's processes, regulations, and laws that govern defense acquisition, and it needs an acquisition community that maintains familiarity with operational necessity. Simply put, the Marine Corps needs to optimize its relationships and connections between the defense acquisition community and its FMF.

In many instances, the FMF's unfamiliarity with defense acquisition—processes, laws, regulations, and workforce—results in both a lack of shared understanding and miscommunication

between defense acquisition professionals and the FMF. Alternatively, given the amount of time since many uniformed acquisition professionals have served in the FMF, or in the case of the civilian acquisition workforce, the amount of time since serving on active duty—or whether a civilian acquisition professional has military experience—the acquisition workforce does not always comprehend operational necessity. This becomes most problematic when the effects of miscommunication manifest into “rework,” ultimately contributing to slower procurement timelines or even worse—operationally irrelevant systems.

## The Way Forward

Strong relationships do not develop overnight. However, by focusing on meaningful change in two key areas: investing in the right people across the Marine Acquisition Officer (MAO) community and creating useful communication mechanisms designed to better connect the FMF with the acquisition process, the Marine Corps can optimize relationships between its acquisition professionals and its FMF.



**A lighter, more agile “commando-like” force must be equipped with the right materiel solutions in order to successfully combat aggressors in the littorals. (Photo by Cpl Matthew Teutsch.)**

First, the Marine Corps should increase force structure within the MAO MOSs (8061 Ground Acquisition Officer and 8059 Aviation Acquisition Officer), designate a select number of MAOs who will become Materiel Development Officers (MDOs), and then assign MDOs to Materiel Development Cells (MDCs) that serve MEF CGs, MEF staffs, and each MEF's major subordinate commands. Furthermore, the Marine Corps should code a select number of current MEF-level billets within the G-3s and G-4s as “eligible for defense acquisition training,” increasing the pool of enablers capable of filling roles within the MDC. Second, Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) and Program Executive Office Land Systems (PEO LS) must establish and promote mediums facilitating direct communication between Program Managers (PMs) and the FMF.

### **Investing in the Right People**

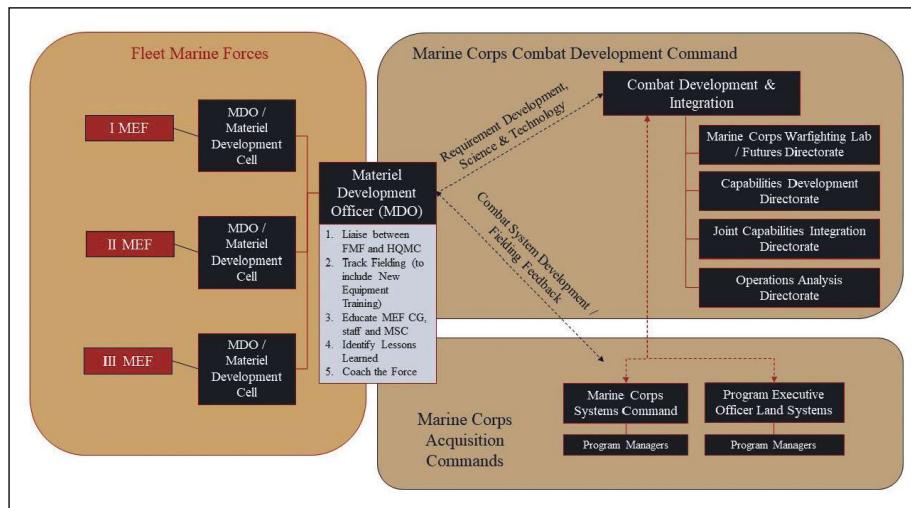
*Creating a network of uniformed Marine MAOs who will support the materiel demands of Force Design 2030.* Acquisition professionals are more than just “buyers of things.” Through a triad comprised of training, experience, and education requirements, acquisition professionals are accountable for taking requirements from concept

exploration to deployment of an operational piece of equipment.<sup>2</sup> They are truly invaluable members of the joint force. In fact, their value is further reinforced in that they are required to earn a level-three certification—approximately a three year process, in accordance with the *Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act*, a law that requires the DOD to establish education and training standards, requirements, and courses for the civilian and military workforce.<sup>3</sup> As a result, this certification communicates to the joint force that an acquisition professional—with level-three certification—possesses validated proficiency in program management (cost, schedule, and performance), understands the importance of effective resource management (budget and personnel), has demonstrated an understanding of the military-industrial complex, and has the ability to communicate both the fiscal and operational value of a program to senior leaders. Remarkably, acquisition professionals must also possess the aforementioned skills while simultaneously remaining cognizant of the FMF's evolving operating environment so they can guarantee the operational necessity of a materiel solution and then deliver it to the FMF at the speed of relevance.

Regardless of how streamlined, agile, or professionalized a program or process becomes, there is no “silver bullet” that ensures the FMF receives materiel solutions at an acceptable pace. However, there is a way the Marine Corps could ensure Marines tasked with leading the Corps’ principle warfighting organizations—MEF CGs—have the ability to be more responsive when influencing the “needs-based” requirements process through the Capabilities Development Directorate, inform emerging scientific and technology efforts through the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, and apprise PMs of relevant information that impacts their specific MEF’s mission. This is by increasing the force structure of uniformed MAOs and then assigning MAOs filling acquisition-coded billets to each MEF. To be clear, the aforementioned proposal is not an isolated or one-step solution. Rather, it is a significant first step toward creating a network of acquisition professionals who will eventually serve across the FMF, Office of Secretary of Defense, Department of the Navy, and Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research Development and Acquisition.

Once assigned to a MEF staff, a MAO will assume duties as the MEF CG’s MDO. In their role, the MDOs will focus on five lines of effort (LoE): *lateral and horizontal communication, information management, educate and inform, facilitate feedback, and coach the force.* (See Figure 1 on next page.)

- LoE 1: *Lateral and horizontal communication:* MDOs will be a MEF CG’s direct link with Combat Development & Integration (CD&I), Warfighting Lab, MCSC, and PEO LS.
- LoE 2: *Information management:* MDOs will coordinate with their MEF’s G-3 and G-4 to track the fielding status—to include new equipment training.
- LoE 3: *Educate and inform:* MDOs will keep their MEF CG abreast of emerging technology and inform their MEF CG and staff of programmatic issues throughout MCSC or PEO LS that may impact their MEF’s ability to accomplish its mission.
- LoE 4: *Facilitate feedback:* MDOs will identify the most important les-



**Figure 1. Proposed materiel development officer information flow structure.** (Image created by Ms. Ashley Calingo.)

sons learned from force design implementation—from an acquisition perspective—and provide feedback to MCSC, PEO LS and, when appropriate, directly to the PMs.

- LoE 5: *Coach the force*: MDOs will be responsible for coaching MEF staffs and MSCs through a campaign of learning with regards to the acquisition process.

Once an increase in the MAO force structure occurs and MAOs mature in their roles—in approximately three to five years—the MEFs will be able to establish their own MDCs. The MDCs will be led by a senior and experienced MAO, complemented by junior field grade and company grade officers in the MAO accession pipeline, and supplemented by a select number of MEF personnel with appropriate defense acquisition training—level-two certification in accordance with the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act. Moreover, as the Marine Corps continues its experiments with operating concepts, and the MEFs identify specific materiel solutions needed to accomplish their missions, then each MEF can tailor the number of personnel in their MDC accordingly.

For context, while the above-mentioned proposal is designed to meet materiel solution-related challenges for the future operational environment, the old-guard Marines may recall a similar structure in support of Operations DESERT SHIELD, DESERT STORM, and

IRAQI FREEDOM. In the 1990s and early 2000s, acquisition liaison officers (LNOs) existed within each MEF.<sup>4</sup> Principally staffed by Marines from the Reserve Component, the acquisition LNO's role was similar to the proposed MDO, in that the acquisition LNO provided direct feedback to Combat Development & Integration Division and MCSC regarding requirement development, combat system testing and fielding plans.<sup>5</sup> However, manpower constraints and the assumption that a LNO's function could be replaced by a regularly scheduled video teleconference (VTC) between the MEFs and MCSC led to their removal from MEF staffs.<sup>6</sup> These reasons were not entirely without merit. With regard to the MEFs combat systems, all three MEFs were similarly designed as opposed to custom tailored to cover a variety of different missions. Moreover, once the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq started, the focus of effort shifted from other priorities to fielding combat systems supporting the warfighters operating in those theaters, rightfully so. At the time, given the relatively standardized combat systems across all three MEFs, the regularly scheduled VTCs proved

mostly capable of capturing updates regarding the fielding of equipment. However, by removing the acquisition LNO embedded with the MEFs, the Marine Corps lost the force multiplying effect that a dedicated LNO can provide.<sup>7</sup>

While VTCs between MCSC and MEFs were deemed sufficient during the 1990s and early 2000s, we argue that this is no longer the case. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* suggests that all three MEFs—to include their major subordinate commands and MEUs—are looking at the possibility of having different force structures, equipment sets, and missions.<sup>8</sup> As a result, this will necessitate a closer and more symbiotic relationship between each of the MEFs, Combat Development & Integration Division, MCSC, and PEO LS in order to identify and field the right system, at the right place, at the right time—the speed of relevance.

### Direct Communication Between the FMF and PMs

The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) places a premium on including their operators throughout the entirety of the acquisition process. The Marine Corps would find value in replicating this proven policy across every program within its portfolio; specifically, including Marines attending advanced tactical schools and personnel in the FMF who have proven they possess the requisite operational experience, maturity, critical thinking skills and tactical expertise to provide relevant feedback that will help shape a PM's decisions. In a 2018 interview Mr. James Smith, USSOCOM's Acquisition Senior Executive expressly stated,

We benefit from the [Special Operations Forces] operators' involvement in the process. Our SOF are, by design, older with more training, more education and more deployments. Frankly, we gain an acquisition advantage from these operators by receiving better requirements at the front of the process and better feedback during operational testing at the back end of the process. Throughout the process, we keep them fully involved to continue to squeeze benefit from their expertise.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, USSOCOM benefits from operator inputs based on their extremely relevant ongoing mission, but given the Marine Corps' extensive combat experience over the last two decades, a variation of SOCOM's approach could be successfully replicated in the Ma-

rine Corps. For example, the Marine Corps could leverage the capabilities of a commercial virtual remote teams live webcast—technology that is already endorsed and frequently used by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition Mr. James Geurts during his “Ask Me Anything” sessions. Through commercial virtual remote teams live webcast, PMs could host regularly scheduled virtual meetings with their target audience throughout the FMF. In doing so, PMs could receive operator-level feedback and engage in meaningful, unfiltered, direct question and answer with the FMF—perhaps leading to more informed decision making for leaders at all levels within their program office. Also, in the same way that Tricare Online uses a mobile messaging application to facilitate secure communications between medical providers and their patients, the Marine Corps could use a secure messaging application that gives mature, proven operators throughout the FMF the opportunity to recognize and communicate emerging shortcomings, challenges, and successes directly to specific PMs.

## Conclusion

Great power competition will certainly test the joint force in ways we have not seen in decades. Perhaps one of the most challenging tests will be a test of the relationships between the acquisition community and the FMF. In 2017, former Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, the Honorable Mr. Frank Kendall, opined,

An enormous amount of time and energy goes into designing our processes and implementing them, but at the end of the day it is not those processes or policy documents that really drive our results. What really matters in defense acquisition is our people and their professionalism and leadership.<sup>10</sup>

In doing so, Mr. Kendall communicated both the importance of human beings within defense acquisition and the significance of relationships with respect to the success of the enterprise. From the perspective of defense acquisition, if the Marine Corps expects to ad-



***Long-range, precision strike munitions will play an integral part of the Marine Corps' ability to support the prosecution of future naval campaigns. (U.S. Marine Corps photo.)***

dress the principle challenges the CMC believes are facing the institution—effectively playing our role as the Nation’s Naval expeditionary force-in-readiness while simultaneously modernizing the force to play its necessary roles in the operating environment described in the NDS<sup>11</sup>—then it will need both an acquisition community and FMF that are better connected, understand each other’s roles and responsibilities, and possess concrete relationships so the FMF receives materiel solutions that will facilitate operations at *the speed of relevance*.

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## Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC 2019).
2. This information is available at the official Marine Corps Systems Command website at <https://www.marcorsyscom.marines.mil>.
3. See *Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act*, H.R.5211, 101st Congress (1990).
4. Scott Allen, Marine Corps Systems Command G-3, Group Interview conducted on 26 May 2020.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Megan Eckstein, “Marines’ Force Design 2030 May Allow MEUs Tailored for Different Geographies, Adversaries,” *USNI News*, (Annapolis, MD: April 2020), available at <https://news.usni.org>.
9. Vivienne Machi, “Q&A with SOCOM’s New Acquisition Executive, James Smith,” *National Defense*, (Tampa, FL: 2018), available at <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org>.
10. The Honorable Frank Kendall, *Getting Defense Acquisition Right*, (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2017).
11. Gen David H. Berger, “The Case for Change,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2020).