

The Marine Wing Support Squadron: A Success Story in Somalia

by LtCol William D. Johnson

The mission of a Marine wing support squadron (MWSS) is to provide all essential aviation ground support to the Marine aviation combat element (ACE) at a deployed airfield. During the Marine Corps deployment to Somalia for Operation RESTORE HOPE, MWSS-372 not only supported the Marine ACE at a primary expeditionary airfield and several other widely dispersed locations but also augmented 1st Force Service Support Group (1st FSSG) combat service support (CSS) efforts and provided essential logistical support to U. S. Army and Coalition forces throughout the southern half of Somalia well into the relief operation.

On 29 November 1992, MWSS-372 at Camp Pendleton was assigned to deploy with the ACE composed of rotary-wing aircraft from the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing to Somalia for Operation RESTORE HOPE. On 2 December 1992, the first MWSS Marines departed for Somalia as part of the maritime prepositioned ship (MPS) offload preparation party. On 12 December 1992, the MWSS advance party departed from Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, with 75 Marines and 3 C-5 aircraft filled with their MWSS essential equipment. By Christmas Day, all but a few of the Somalia-bound MWSS Marines had deployed with their fly-in echelon equipment. Only a few Marine ACE helicopters had arrived as yet in Mogadishu, but the MWSS was on the ground in force, equipped mostly by MPS delivered assets and already in the process of establishing air support facilities at several locations throughout southern Somalia.

In all, approximately 300 MWSS-372 Marines and Sailors were committed to the operation. They were called on to support major ACE base camps and air facilities at Baledogle and Mogadishu along with outlying air facilities at Baidoa and Bardera. Further, a detachment of MWSS bulk fuel Marines established an airfield fuel dispensing system at the port city of Kismayu to support U. S. Army flight operations. Although able to embark only a portion of the essential equipment that was planned for the fly-in echelon and 200 Marines short of its planned deployment strength, the

MWSS was tasked to provide aviation ground support to the Marine ACE at multiple locations and also to provide essential logistical support to all U.S. Army forces (to include a brigade from the 10th Mountain Division) located at Baledogle.

Receiving about 100 items of equipment from the MPS staging area, the MWSS faced an enormous challenge. Armed only with those assets and what it had been able to squeeze through the fly-in echelon funnel, the MWSS turned to the mission at hand. As precious little was available through in-theater sourcing, essential items not received from MPS or cut from the meager airflow were done without. "Work arounds" became common place as MWSS Marines used the "MacGyver" approach to accomplish all they had been tasked to do.

Immediately upon establishing a base camp at Mogadishu, MWSS-372 Marines expanded operations to outlying sites. Refueling and crash, fire, and rescue (CFR) Marines and assets were trucked and flown to Baidoa and Bardera while the ACE concentrated on moving the focus of its effort from Mogadishu to Baledogle. Relocating the ACE from Mogadishu to Baledogle presented an immense logistical challenge. Further, MWSS-372 was tasked with providing Supply Class I and IV support to all U.S. and Coalition forces at Baledogle. The challenge was met by running long haul MWSS convoys, twice daily from Mogadishu to Baledogle (a 60-mile trip one way) using every available MWSS motor

transport asset. The MWSS did not possess sufficient transport assets to move all of the supplies and equipment being pushed inland to Baledogle, so what could not be handled by the MWSS was transported by the FSSG. Additional water "sixcon" units were borrowed from the FSSG, which eased the water transport crisis. MWSS water purification units operated 24 hours-a-day on the beach in Mogadishu to keep up with the increasing demand for water at the newly created Baledogle Air Facility. During the deployment, MWSS water purification units manufactured 500,000 gallons of potable water.

By the middle of January 1993, the MWSS was supporting 3,500 Marine, U. S. Army, and Coalition personnel at Baledogle with essential life sustaining supplies. Working with the 1st FSSG, all of the Supply Class I required to sustain the ACE was hauled over the limited road network supporting the outlying sites. Doctrinally, the MWSS motor transport mission does not extend beyond operations internal to the airfield, with the FSSG being responsible for intratheater Marine Corps convoy operations. However, in Somalia, survival of forces at the Baledogle expeditionary airfield depended on continuous MWSS convoys from Mogadishu. In total, the MWSS during its stay in Somalia, operated 187 long haul convoys, moved nearly 10 million pounds of cargo, hauled 56,000 passengers, and drove 500,000 miles.

Although the MWSS is designed and



MWSS convoy arrives at Baledogle.

structured for airfield explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), the scope of tasking during RESTORE HOPE was much greater. From the beginning of the deployment, the MWSS EOD team traveled throughout Somalia supporting a wide variety of forces. Abandoned ordnance was identified, collected, and destroyed. There was a continuing need to identify and dispose of the numerous mines detected during road sweeps and other operations. Almost every type of weapon and ammunition in the world was encountered. The MWSS EOD team received tasking directly from the commander of Marine Forces Somalia for critically needed support and participated in the training of U. S. Army EOD teams who eventually assumed the theater EOD mission.

From the last week of December 1992 through the middle of January 1993, the MWSS continued to expand its airfield operations at all deployed sites. Aircraft fuel delivery capability was increased at Mogadishu, Baledogle, Baidoa, and Bardera, and a fifth and final refueling site was established at Kismayu for the U. S. Army.

dent Bush's visit. A second, much larger, expeditionary airfield project was undertaken in Baledogle where 250,000 square feet of aluminum matting was installed to facilitate ACE operations.

Before January gave way to February, the MWSS completed base camp construction at Baledogle where a full range of camp support functions were provided to support a 1,000-man ACE. These functions include hot meals, showers, medical, and religious and recreational activities. At this point, how long the ACE was to stay in Somalia was unclear, so the MWSS focused its attention on improving the quality of life for individual Marines living in this austere environment.

Eventually, responsibility for supplying U.S. and Coalition forces passed to the U. S. Army. By 1 February, the MWSS was able to free itself of logistical responsibility for joint forces at Baledogle and elsewhere. Now the MWSS was finally able to focus on its primary mission of providing aviation ground support to the Marine ACE. For the MWSS, this meant providing camp and airfield services to the ACE primarily at Baledogle and reduced support at Mogadishu.



MWSS-372 EOD clearing operations in Somalia.

In February, however, the ACE redeployed from Baledogle and settled in at the airport in Mogadishu. Once again, every motor transport asset the MWSS could put on the road was called on to support the redeployment to Mogadishu. For 5 days the MWSS operated daylight convoys, which were augmented by U. S. Army motor transport units, in order to consolidate the ACE at Mogadishu. Additional aluminum matting was installed at the Mogadishu Airport to accommodate all of the ACE's aircraft. Further, the MWSS enhanced the base camp and airfield services at the Mogadishu Airport to accommodate the ACE at a single location. An MWSS CFR section, however, remained in Baledogle to support U. S. Army aviation efforts there. MWSS CFR firefighting vehicles were also utilized in Mogadishu for riot control purposes.

The MWSS remained in Mogadishu providing the full range of aviation ground support services to the ACE until the last Marine ACE helicopter redeployed to El Toro in May.

The MWSS was among the first ACE units to arrive in Somalia during December 1992 and was the last ACE unit to leave in May 1993. The MWSS mission in Somalia was not complete until all ground support equipment was prepared for reintroduction to the United States, agriculturally inspected, and then embarked on aircraft, MPS, or Merchant Marine shipping.

As graphically demonstrated in Somalia, the MWSS is a capable, versatile, and mission-organized unit that can not only provide aviation ground support to the Marine ACE as required by the MWSS doctrinal mission, but also provide limited support to other Services and Coalition forces if needed. However, planners must keep in mind that even though the MWSS has many of the same capabilities as the FSSG, these capabilities are not sufficiently sized to provide logistical support to other than ACE units. The MWSS is organized, staffed, and equipped to provide aviation ground support to the ACE at an expeditionary



MWSS-372 waterpoint at Mogadishu.

airfield. The MWSS is designed to support the ACE, not provide CSS for the entire joint force. In fact, the MWSS is itself a consumer of CSS like all other equipment intensive ground units.

The MWSS came to Somalia in December 1992 prepared, staffed, and equipped (with the addition of MPS equipment) to support the Marine ACE at airfields in Baledogle and Mogadishu. Before the MWSS redeployed to California in May 1993, it had not only supported the ACE at these airfields but at outlining locations as well. Logistical support was provided to the joint task force operating from Baledogle until D+50, and aircraft fuel was provided to U.S. Army units operating from Kismayu. The MWSS in some support areas was stretched to its limit and was able to sustain its widely dispersed scope of operations only because the Somalian deployment was relatively brief. As the MWSS was tasked to provide a significant amount of logistical support to outside forces, the Marine ACE was at times "short changed."

Does this have any implication for future operations? Somalia is an austere environment where logistical support was a finite quantity. Future operating environments may likewise be austere. A unit can be expected to perform those functions that it is organized, staffed, equipped, and trained to perform. The MWSS is a mission organized unit de-

signed to support the Marine ACE at one primary location. Additional support can be provided to other units and forces when needed for a short duration, but not without cost. Perhaps the most critical lesson is that if the MWSS is to be required in future operations to provide logistical support to other than Marine ACE units it should be staffed and equipped accordingly.

Future joint deployments to austere Third World locations will require proactive and thorough logistical planning. Other Service organizations that possess the doctrinal mission for theater-level logistical and CSS must be in the theater and mission capable before the organizations they support need them. Further, all supporting organizations must be sufficiently staffed and equipped to handle the demands placed upon them. If this occurs, the MWSS and other Marine Corps support units who arrive early in the deployment sequence will not be overwhelmed with logistical demands they are not staffed or equipped to handle. In this way, the MWSS's customer, the Marine ACE, and on a larger scale the Marine force, can and will be properly supported.



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