

The End of the Road for the 4th MEB (AT)

Subject Area Strategic Issues

EWS 2006

The End of the Road for the 4th MEB (AT)
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07 February 2006

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE 07 FEB 2006	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The End of the Road for the 4th MEB (AT)		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

*"The very name MEB engendered a sense that the MEB was a complete, mission-capable Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) ready for employment."*¹

The United States Marine Corps leapt to the forefront of antiterrorism operations in October 2001 when it established the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism) (4th MEB (AT)), just weeks after the events of September 11, 2001. The establishment of an antiterrorism Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) was a ground-breaking endeavor that provided the nation with a greater sense of security when it was most needed. Over the past four years, it became apparent that the 4th MEB (AT) is an organization that the Marine Corps and the nation wants, but does not require. As the Marine Corps executes its continued mission in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), it is evident that the fifty-nine officers and one hundred sixty-five enlisted Marines that compose the 4th MEB (AT) command element could better serve the Marine Corps and the nation in other capacities, namely as members of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MarSOC). The Marine Corps was able to remain innovative by establishing the 4th MEB (AT) in October 2001, but the brigade is no longer necessary.

¹Griffin, Major Sean. "Making Sense of the MEF(Fwd) Nebula." *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1999, 39-42.

A Background in Misrepresentation

In its haste to present this concept to Congress and the nation, Headquarters, Marine Corps (HQMC) designated its new antiterrorism unit a Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB), despite the fact that it was not a Marine air-ground task force (see figure 1).

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0, Marine Corps Operations defines a MEB as the following:

The Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB) is the "middle-weight" MAGTF. It is a crisis response force capable of forcible entry and enabling the introduction of follow-on forces. It can serve as part of a joint or multinational force and can provide the nucleus of a joint task force headquarters. It is unique in that it is the smallest MAGTF with a fully capable aviation element that performs all six functions of Marine aviation and is self-sustaining for 30 days. A MEB is capable of rapid deployment and employment, deploying either by air, in combination with the MPS, or by amphibious shipping.²

The task organization of the 4th MEB (AT) is without two of the four elements that compose any doctrinal MAGTF or MEB—the aviation combat element (ACE) and the combat service support element (CSSE). The 4th MEB (AT) is a misrepresentation of the MAGTF concept that forms the cornerstone of the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy.

² United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0: Marine Corps Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 3-17.

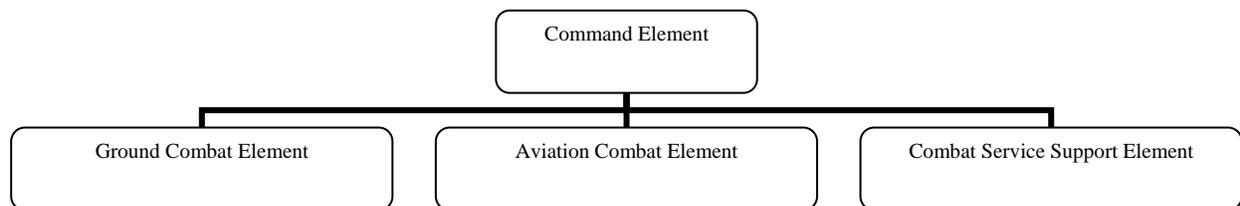


Figure 1: Organization of a MAGTF

Cloudy Command Relationships

The mission of the 4th MEB (AT) command element is that of a force provider:

Commanding General 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism) provides designated supported commanders with rapidly deployable, specially trained, and sustainable forces that are capable of detecting terrorism, conducting activities to deter terrorism, defending designated facilities against terrorism, and conducting initial incidence response in the event of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or high yield explosive (CBRNE) terrorist attacks, worldwide.³

Moreover, the fact that the 4th MEB (AT) is not a true MAGTF headquarters is reflected in its organizational chart (see figure 2). *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0* states that a MAGTF command element must be "...task-organized to provide the command and control capabilities necessary for effective planning, execution, and assessment of operations across the warfighting functions."⁴ However, the Major Subordinate Commands (MSCs) of the 4th MEB (AT), which compose the ground combat element, do not fall under the operational or tactical control of their parent MAGTF while in support of expeditionary

³ United States Marine Corps, Table of Organization 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism), May 19, 2002.

⁴ MCDP 1-0, 3-14

operations. The Operations Officer for the 4th MEB (AT), Lieutenant Colonel Matthew StClair, states that "The brigade staff is available to provide planning, coordination, and administrative oversight, but unable to exercise the command and control afforded all other MEB or MAGTF command elements."⁵

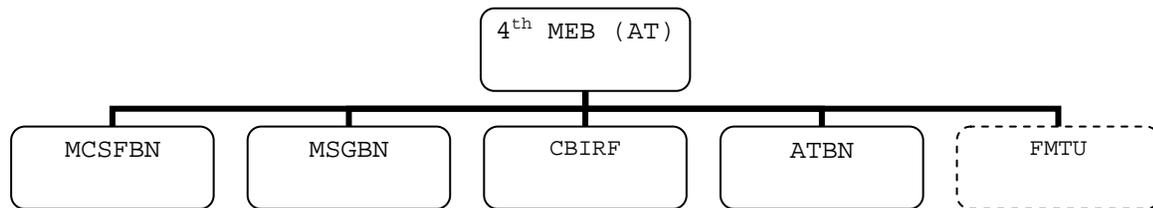


Figure 2: Organization of 4th MEB (AT)

The four functional MSCs within the 4th MEB (AT) fall under the operational control (OPCON) of other commands when deployed. The detached unit leaders, primarily staff noncommissioned officers (MSGBN) and company grade officers (MCSFBN/FAST, CBIRF, and ATBN), are required to establish new command relationships with officers and government officials of rank and stature that exceeds the level that they are exposed to during pre-deployment training. The "...planning, coordination, and administrative oversight..."⁶ provided by the 4th MEB (AT) command element ultimately offers little assistance to these leaders when overseas and faced with the myriad of decisions that they must make each day.

⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Matthew StClair, email message to author, November 22, 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

The fleet antiterrorism security team (FAST) platoons that belong to Marine Corps Security Force Battalion (MCSFBN) are OPCON to the commander of the numbered United States Naval Fleet to which they are deployed. When conducting operations, the FAST platoons are OPCON to a regional combatant commander (RCC) and fall under the tactical control (TACON) of a component commander or joint force commander (JFC).

The detachments from the Marine Security Guard Battalion (MSGBN) that are present at diplomatic missions overseas are OPCON to the United States Department of State.⁷ These detachments fall under the administrative control of a regional Marine Security Guard Company and the Marines have zero interaction with the 4th MEB (AT).

Chemical / Biological Incidence Response Force (CBIRF) elements are OPCON to United States Northern Command and TACON to either Joint Task Force–Civil Support or Joint Task Force–Consequence Management when conducting operations.

Elements of the Antiterrorism Battalion (ATBN) have the closest administrative and operational command relationship with the 4th MEB (AT) when deployed, but they are ultimately OPCON/TACON to a component or joint force commander. This results in the deployed unit commander having to establish a

⁷ Statement of Brigadier General Douglas O'Dell, USMCR, Commanding General, 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism), before the House Armed Services Committee Special Oversight Panel on Terrorism, October 10, 2002.

pre-deployment mission essential task list (METL) based upon the guidance of two higher commanders. The 4th MEB (AT) has its own METL and provides the ATBN with its training support, meanwhile the receiving commander provides operational guidance, yet rarely is capable of providing the necessary training support.

Specialized Mission Set Training

When established, a primary goal of the 4th MEB (AT) was to create a comprehensive training pipeline to provide the skill sets necessary for all elements of the unit to perform their duties. Due to the specialized missions sets that each MSC is required to perform, the operations section (G-3) was faced with an unattainable goal. The G-3 struggled to populate their training section with personnel that could understand the uniqueness of the mission sets, let alone plan, coordinate, and support the training of the collected MSCs. Therefore the responsibility to develop, support, and execute the pre-deployment training remained with the MSCs. Overall, the G-3 provided minimal oversight, as indicated in the earlier quote by LtCol StClair.

A difficulty faced by MCSFBN, MSGBN, and CBIRF was the regulation of finances, ammunition, and school quotas by the 4th MEB (AT) G-3. The MSCs had exercised greater control of these assets prior to the formation of the MEB, and suddenly were losing much of their training assets in order to support the

requirements of the Antiterrorism Battalion. The operational requirements of these units grew considerably following the formation of the MEB, but their training support dropped. The MSCs were forced to compromise capabilities in order to ensure that the ATBN had support.

Once deployed, the detached unit leaders faced the dilemma of advertising proficiency in all capabilities or being honest as to the actual level of training their unit possessed. Many commanders deployed less capable units to receiving commands without informing them of the decreased skill level. Fortunately, the reduced training level did not result in increased casualties or mission failure. This is a testament to the efforts of the small unit leaders and their ability to adjust to dwindling training support.

The Road Ahead

For the past three years, the future planners at HQMC have shifted their efforts from antiterrorism to special operations. With the success of Marine Corps Special Operations Command Detachment One (MarSOC Det-One), the Marine Corps has decided to follow through with the establishment of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MarSOC). The first element to be fully manned is the Foreign Military Training Unit (FMTU), which initially formed as the fifth MSC of the 4th MEB (AT). FMTU will

transition to MarSOC once the MarSOC headquarters element is functional.

Manpower shortfalls in the Marine Corps have clouded the development of the MarSOC program since MarSOC Det-One formed in 2003. With the sustained activation of reservists and minimal end-strength increases, the Marine Corps faces a dilemma when attempting to create new commands. Populating the table of organization for MarSOC will require the Marine Corps to increase its end-strength by 2500 officers and enlisted Marines.⁸ A step in addressing this problem is the deactivation of the 4th MEB (AT). The 4th MEB (AT) command element has proven to be a capable headquarters element and has the personnel and equipment on hand to build this new arm of SOCOM.

Conclusion

The 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism) enabled the Marine Corps to rise to the forefront of military services during the opening years of the Global War on Terrorism. The foundation that the MEB's command element has laid is invaluable and capable of transitioning to HQMC's latest endeavor, Marine Corps Special Operations Command. By not claiming to be a Marine air-ground task force, MarSOC will be able to exist as a flexible organization, not governed by the constraints of

⁸ Schultz, Fred. "MarSOC: Just Call Them Marines." *Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 2006, 48-50.

traditional Marine Corps doctrine. MarSOC can avoid facing the training problems faced by the units within the 4th MEB (AT) by maintaining special missions training branches at Camp LeJeune and Camp Pendleton. As a member of Special Operations Command, deployed MarSOC units will possess a clear operational chain of command which will allow unit commanders to focus on the mission at hand. The lessons learned by the Marine Corps during the brief lifespan of the 4th MEB (AT) will prove to be of great assistance during the formative years of MarSOC.

Word Count: 1635

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