SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

The Marine Corps and Air Force in Combat

By DANIEL J. DARNELL *and* GEORGE J. TRAUTMAN III

Lockheed Martin

F–35 approaches KC–135 for midair refueling

In the spring of 2009, the U.S. Air Force will host the next Marine Corps–Air Force Warfighter Talks, the third in an annual series of high-level discussions between the two Services. Last year, 31 general officers of three- and four-star rank, including commanders serving in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), attended the 2-day session held in Washington, DC. These talks provided a forum for senior leaders of the Marine Corps and Air Force to meet face to face to discuss and resolve key inter-Service warfighting issues, many of which impact the ability to think and fight as a joint team.

History

The 2007 and 2008 Warfighter Talks grew from a series of discussions, over several years, between general officers of the two Services. A February 2006 memorandum from the chief of staff of the Air Force was the impetus for more formal guided talks between Marine Corps and Air Force leadership. The commandant of the Marine Corps and chief of staff of the Air Force determined that whether serving in combat overseas or in the halls of the Pentagon, the two Services must be fully integrated, synergistic joint partners. To that end, they directed annual formal talks, which formalize a review process designed to examine in

Lieutenant General Daniel J. Darnell is Deputy Chief of Staff for Air, Space, and Information Operations, Plans and Requirements, Headquarters U.S. Air Force. Lieutenant General George J. Trautman III is Deputy Commandant for Aviation, U.S. Marine Corps.

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depth the ways in which the two Services combine, share information, plan, and fight.

Over the past 3 years, senior leaders at the talks have engaged in robust discussions about such issues as supporting/supported command relationships, air command and control, gaps and seams in systems and processes, and the difficulties inherent in overcoming the friction and fog of active combat. As a result, the Service chiefs stood up tiger teams to look for ways to improve the level of coordination and cooperation between the two Services to fulfill obligations to the joint force.

The first tiger team was formed in 2007. The commandant and chief of staff directed members to focus on improving dialogue between the Services and creating a common understanding of the use of aviation assets to enhance joint warfighting capabilities. The team was also charged to assess whether current command and control procedures were fully supporting the joint force commander (JFC) mission. In the end, the team discovered numerous systemic factors hampering Service command and control systems contributions.

Among the command and control obstacles was an extremely complicated Operation *Iraqi Freedom* airspace construct, resulting somewhat from numerous revisions and modifications required to facilitate the reintroduction of a Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) during *Iraqi Freedom II*. The seams created between the Marine and Air Force airspace were a constant source of command and control friction. Additionally, command relationships were sometimes unclear. This was especially evident in the special considerations afforded Marine Corps aviation and how these assets properly fit into the JFC theater-wide aviation requirements and priorities. Marine Corps aviation is an integral component of the MAGTF, and efforts to split it apart from other task force elements fail to recognize this synergy. Finally, the absence of sister Service liaison personnel in some critical command nodes such as the Marine Corps Tactical Air Command Center were found to hamper operational transparency and mutual understanding between the Marine Corps and Air Force aviation forces operating throughout the USCENTCOM AOR. These factors, among others, were the basis for the establishment of a follow-on tiger team with a more focused charter aimed at finding specific solution sets to these identified issues.

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F/A–18A Hornet from VMFA–232 "Red Devils" lands aboard USS *Nimitz*

U.S. Navy (David Mercil)

The second tiger team, led by a general officer from each Service, spent 2 weeks in January 2008 traveling throughout the USCENTCOM AOR. It conducted a comprehensive review of current policies and issues while talking with commanders and operators at all levels and from both Services, including all major Air Force and Marine aviation command and control nodes. The team briefed Service leadership, and the trip report informed the Warfighter Talks held in April 2008. These talks provided direction to Service commands and staffs to resolve bilateral issues and fostered a mutual respect and greater trust and understanding between the two Services. The team report gave answers to the tough questions these officers had asked of those in the AOR. Their findings were the basis for many of the tasks that came out of the talks.

The issues discussed at the talks fell into four categories, two broad and deep, and two specific and doctrinal. The two broad, higher level issues were:

- integration of air forces and air support to and for ground forces, their schemes of maneuver, and the differences in the way Marine Corps and Army ground units request, plan for, and execute the use of aviation
- difficulties inherent for all components of a joint force when shifting from major combat operations to an irregular/counterinsurgency fight.

These issues led into two specific areas:

- integration of the Air Force Theater Air Control System (TACS) and the Marine Corps Marine Air Command and Control System (MACCS) to create a truly integrated, joint theater-wide air command and control system
- relationships between and among the components of a joint task force in combat, need for exchange officers, and necessity to train jointly in peacetime as we will fight together in war.

Toward Common Ground

Senior leaders discussed these issues in depth throughout the last Warfighter Talks, with each engendering lively debate. More important, each Service vowed to work through their differences and overcome obstacles to finding common ground and

workable solutions. At the end of the talks, the commandant and chief of staff directed their respective staffs to investigate five specific tasks. The first three involve command and control relationships and enablers, and the other two focus on exchange and information-sharing structures. All of these tasks should improve our ability to think, plan, and fight more effectively as a joint team.

1. Formalize an Air Force–Marine Corps Battle Command Training Initiative. The objective of this initiative is to incorporate Air Force liaison elements and TACS functionality into Marine Corps combat exercises, major mission rehearsal exercises, and battle command training programs. Air Force officers and enlisted personnel will participate in training venues such as the Weapons and Tactics Instructor course, MAGTF Staff Training program, Desert Talon, and predeployment mission rehearsal exercises. Marine Corps personnel will participate in the Air Force Operational Command Training program, U.S. Air Force Weapons School exercises, Blue Flags, and other applicable venues. Through this initiative, the Marine Corps and Air Force will seek new ways to integrate people and aviation command and control capabilities into their respective training exercises and advanced schoolhouses.

2. Broaden and Deepen the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC)–Tactical Air Command Center (TACC) Relationship. The two Services explored and assessed the Marine Corps TACC ability to assume an "in extremis" temporary role as the CAOC. The Services trained to this role in major upcoming exercises. The MACCS is fully compatible with other joint command and control systems, including the CAOC, and the capabilities organic to the MACCS (such as the TPS–59 radar and air controllers) will be leveraged to improve visibility and situational awareness of airspace that existing sensors cannot observe in order to improve the overall theater-wide common operating picture. Both Services believe that by practicing this capability they will improve understanding of Marine capabilities and limitations and improve Marine interoperability in the joint command and control environment.

3. Explore Opportunities to Enhance TACS and MACCS Understanding in the USCENTCOM AOR through a More Robust Liaison Officer Program. The Services will seek to add liaison officers between the TACS and MACCS to improve interdependence and enhance theater-wide operational transparency. The Marine Corps has expressed continued interest in receiving a small Air Force element to provide liaison within the TACC at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq. An experienced Marine colonel with a dedicated staff will continue to serve in the Air Force's USCENTCOM CAOC as the Marine liaison officer.

4. Expand the Number and Scope of Marine–Air Force Exchange Billets (as differentiated from liaison officers). One of the best ways to learn from each Service's "best practices" and to understand how to leverage respective unique contributions to the joint fight is to exchange personnel—that is, giving highly qualified officers and enlisted personnel the opportunity to learn from and share ideas while actively serving as part of an operational unit or advanced tactics schoolhouse.

To this end, Marine and Air Force leaders are conducting a thorough review of existing exchange billets in order to propose modifications and possible additions to make the program more robust. The Marine Corps and Air Force currently have nine officers in exchange billets. Marine aviators are flying Air Force F–15C, F–22, F–16, and MH–53 aircraft, and one Marine officer is instructing forward air control procedures. Air Force officers are flying Marine Corps F/A–18, UH–1N, and F–5 aircraft. The two Services have agreed to explore expanded opportunities for F–35A and F–35B, KC–130J, AC–130, EC–130, EA–6B, MV–22, and CV–22 aircraft, as well as unmanned systems officer exchanges.

The Air Force and Marine Corps also plan to double the size of the aviation command and control exchange program. They have agreed to send one Marine air traffic control expert and one Marine air defense control expert to serve in a like capacity with Air Force units, while the Air Force sends two of their officers with similar skills to serve with the Corps. Next, exchange officers from the CAOC and Air Support Operations Center will serve in the Marine Advanced Tactical Schoolhouse as instructors, and two Marine like-qualified experts from the Direct Air Support Center and TACC will serve on exchange in the U.S. Air Force Weapons School as instructors.

5. Build a Full-spectrum Overview of Current and Future Electronic Warfare and Attack Systems. Electronic warfare (EW) as

the Marine Corps and Air Force will seek new ways to integrate people and aviation command and control capabilities in their respective training exercises

Marine pilot guides CH–53E Super Stallion helicopter while taking on fuel from Air Force HC–130

U.S. Air Force (Veronica Pierce)

a warfighting discipline must evolve from its historic contexts of counter–integrated air defenses, aviation survivability, or intelligence-gathering functions. In current operational environments, we see asymmetric applications of tactical EW in support of ground maneuver. Due to the understandably tight focus on current threats, however, cooperative Service efforts to develop next-generation EW capabilities have languished. All four Services have independently pursued unique capabilities without significant coordination to synergize effects, address new concepts of operations that leverage advanced technologies, and fully and effectively integrate nonlethal fires into the JFC command and control toolkit.

While the EW environment tends to be highly classified, opportunities and programs exist within each Service that provide significant enhancement to the operational capabilities of forces to deliver the right mix of technology, systems, and concept of operations to the joint battlespace. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the F–35, a very capable EW platform in its baseline configuration. With Service cooperation, the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) block upgrade rubric provides for technology and capability insertion on a regular basis. The Marine Corps and Air Force are dedicated to enhancing EW capabilities (attack, support, and protection) through this improvement process. Expectations include adding the Navy's Next Generation Jammer system to the JSF, as well as expanding the radar, EW, and communication, navigation, and identification subsystems to increase the tremendous capabilities of the platform. There are boundless opportunities not only to expand JSF mission capabilities, but also to develop cooperative EW systems. As such, this forum provides senior leaders the opportunity to address issues and agree to collaborative courses of action that maximize Service investment while delivering the most appropriate capabilities to warfighters.

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Moving Forward Together

The Marine Corps–Air Force Warfighter Talks are an effective means for senior leaders from these Services to engage on myriad topics, and they have provided a guidepost to which Airmen and Marines can anchor themselves in the execution of joint warfare. Through candid and professional dialogue, the talks yield a greater appreciation for the best practices and unique contributions that each Service brings to the joint fight as well as a better understanding of each other's perspective on current challenges. Upcoming talks promise to increase the understanding between the Air Force and Marine Corps, ultimately creating a more effective, agile, and interdependent joint force. **JFQ**

F–35B short takeoff and vertical landing variant at takeoff

Lockheed Martin