Chapter 4

Operations

Marine aviation operates as an integral part of the MAGTF. The MAGTF conducts operations using the principles of maneuver warfare to obtain maximum force capability and versatility.

Assault support, either fixed- or rotary-wing aircraft, can influence offensive and defensive operations by providing tactical mobility and logistical support at the decisive time and place. Helicopterborne assaults offer speed, surprise, and flexibility so the commander can react rapidly to a changing tactical situation. The helicopter’s capabilities along with fixed-wing lift and range capabilities allow the MAGTF to strike over extended distances and terrain barriers. This allows the MAGTF to attack when and where the enemy is most vulnerable. Assault support aircraft are primarily movers of personnel, equipment, and supplies. Because of the helicopter’s vertical lift capability, its use in assault support is dominant. It is a primary provider of combat assault transport, air evacuation, and TRAP. Fixed-wing aircraft provide significant contributions to the assault support function through air logistical support, aerial delivery, and aerial refueling. Both fixed-wing and helicopter assault support aircraft provide battlefield illumination.

Offensive Operations

Offensive operations are the means to decisive victory; however, victory is rarely the outcome of any one battle, offensive operation, or offensive maneuver. The commander’s use of tools determines an operation’s victory or defeat. A commander who gains and maintains a superior tempo, sustains the momentum of the offensive, and employs his force with the principles of war and the concept of maneuver warfare in mind is more likely to achieve victory. Aviation functionality, because it is inherently offensive, is useful in offensive or defensive operations in exactly the same way.

The ACE commander must be concerned with maintaining tempo, sustaining operational momentum, and effectively applying the six functions of aviation in the execution of the offensive. Economy of force is a major factor in the ACE’s choice of options in executing offensive operations.

The helicopterborne assault is the most basic type of offensive operation conducted by assault support forces. It is the insertion or extraction of combat forces. Insertion is the movement of an assault force into an objective area, and extraction is movement of an assault force out of the objective area. When augmented with KC-130s, the helicopterborne force can conduct a variety of offensive operations over long distances.

Attack

An attack is a fast, violent, and coordinated maneuver supported by fire conducted to defeat, destroy, neutralize, or capture the enemy. A helicopterborne attack capitalizes on speed and flexibility to gain maximum surprise. Assault transport helicopters support an attack by inserting the helicopterborne force on or near the objective. Fixed-wing aerial refueling and transport add significant continuity to the attack capability. A helicopterborne force can conduct a hasty or deliberate attack based on the degree of planning, preparation, and coordination involved prior to execution.

The hasty attack trades preparation time for speed to exploit an opportunity. A hasty attack takes audacity and relies on speed and surprise to achieve the commander’s objectives before the enemy can effectively respond. There is little time to plan; orders must be brief. Assault support planners rely heavily on training and standing
operating procedures to make a hasty attack a success.

The helicopterborne force, as part of a larger operation, may conduct a deliberate attack. A deliberate attack is a preplanned offensive action characterized by maneuver and firepower to close with and destroy the enemy. Assault support can play a key role in the rapid massing of forces to conduct a deliberate attack. Mission planners must have enough time to develop a detailed plan. Planners collect detailed information about the terrain to select appropriate pickup zones (PZ)s, LZs, DZs, and flight routes. Unlike hasty attacks on more familiar terrain and with recently acquired intelligence, deliberate attacks deep in the enemy’s rear areas often do not allow aircrews to perform a visual reconnaissance of the flight routes or objective area. Planners must rely on detailed map studies, photographs, and other imagery to formulate their plans.

**Exploitation**

Exploitation is an offensive operation undertaken to follow up success in the attack. During the exploitation phase, assault support aircraft may be used to maintain constant pressure on the enemy by providing mobility to the exploitation force, allowing it to seize key terrain or engage high-payoff targets such as command posts, or support units deep in the enemy’s rear area. Two chief characteristics of exploitation are speed and violence.

**Pursuit**

A pursuit is an operation to catch or cut off a hostile force attempting to escape, in order to destroy it. Pursuit forces trap and destroy the retreating enemy with coordinated maneuver and fire. Assault support aircraft can be used to bypass resistance and to deliver forces to seize objectives that are chokepoints for the retreating enemy. A helicopterborne force can cut off the enemy and delay its retreat so that coordinated fires from combined arms can destroy it.

One of the best examples of assault support aircraft use during offensive operations is Operation Dewey Canyon, conducted during the Vietnam War in the upper A Shau Valley and southern Da Krong Valley from 22 January through 14 March 1969. This was a multi-battalion operation involving the 9th Marine Regiment and two battalions of the 1st South Vietnamese Army Division.

On D-day, 22 January 1969, initial LZs were prepared by fixed-wing air strikes. The first landings occurred at 0800. In the rapid buildup that followed, CH-46s, under a protective umbrella of gunships and observation aircraft, brought 1,544 Marines and 46 tons of cargo into two LZs. By the evening of 24 January, a battery of 105mm howitzers were in place.

Over the next two months, the Marines conducted a series of leap-frogging maneuvers with helicopters to establish multiple fire support bases in the A Shau Valley. During Dewey Canyon, Marine helicopters flew 14,893 sorties for 5,050 flight hours, moved 3,515 tons of cargo, and lifted 21,841 troops.

During the March 1969 withdrawal from the A Shau Valley, more than 350 tons of cargo and 1,400 Marines were transported out of two fire bases without a casualty. Perhaps the most notable item of the operation was the fact that only one helicopter was lost in spite of adverse weather and a determined enemy.

**Defensive Operations**

Defensive operations are often less decisive than offensive operations. The defense is a force’s coordinated effort to defeat an attacker and prevent it from achieving its objectives. An effective defense is never passive. Commanders may assume the defense in one area in order to mass forces in another area. Commanders conduct the defense only until they can resume the offensive. The ACE’s role in defensive operations requires that the inherently offensive functional capabilities of Marine aviation focus on operations and maneuvers that benefit from an aircraft’s speed, mobility, and flexibility. The ACE is no less dynamic in defensive operations than in the
offense and continuously seeks to create and exploit opportunities to defeat the enemy.

During defensive operations, the commander organizes the battlespace into three areas in which the defending force performs specific functions (see fig. 4-1). These areas can be further divided into sectors. A defensive sector is an area assigned to a subordinate commander. In the commander’s sector the subordinate commander is provided maximum latitude to accomplish his defensive operations. The three sectors are the security area, the main battle area, and the rear area. A helicopterborne force can defend against an infantry-heavy threat by using the helicopter’s mobility to achieve a maneuver advantage over the enemy. This allows the helicopterborne force to operate in the security area, main battle area, or rear area. Fixed-wing assault support functions in the defense are typically aerial refueling, air evacuation, and air logistical support.

Figure 4-1. Organization of the Battlespace.

**Security Area**

Actions in the security area are designed to deceive the enemy on the location of the main battle area, cause the enemy to deploy early into attack formations, and make the enemy vulnerable to the effects of combined arms. Assault support aircraft can move engineers and equipment into and out of the security area in support of the MAGTF’s barrier plan. They can provide mobility for reconnaissance teams or fire support teams placed in front of the main battle area. Battlefield illumination employed in the security area can expose an enemy entering the security area.

**Main Battle Area**

The main battle area (MBA) is where the MAGTF fights the decisive battle. It extends rearward from the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA) to the sectors given to the unit’s subordinate elements. The helicopterborne force’s superior mobility allows the commander to defend in greater scope. It fights a series of battles in depth, attacking from the front, flanks, and rear while using minimal forces to maintain surveillance over the rest of the assigned sector. Battle positions throughout the MBA should be selected and prepared along likely avenues of approach. Primary and alternate LZs and PZs should be selected for each battle position, in order to facilitate the rapid vertical movement of forces and supplies wherever and whenever they are required.

**Rear Area**

The rear area extends forward from a commander’s rear boundary to the rear main battle area of responsibility of the commander’s subordinate units. The rear area is provided primarily for the performance of combat service support functions. Assault support aircraft are normally employed to transport supplies and sustain operations of the MAGTF. Other functions of assault support aircraft in the rear area are transport of quick reaction or reserve forces, sensor insert, and reconnaissance of potential infiltration points.

**Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) Operations**

The post-Cold War world is a world in crisis. The Marine Corps provides the Marine expeditionary
unit (special operations capable) (MEU(SOC)) to react properly to these events. This MAGTF is continuously forward deployed to react quickly to crises. The MEU(SOC) possesses specific maritime capabilities based on its expeditionary and amphibious nature. These capabilities are a refinement of the traditional capabilities of Marine forces afloat. These capabilities do not transform MEU(SOCs) into dedicated special operations forces (SOF). Rather, they make them far more useful as forward-deployed forces capable of dealing with a wider range of contingency and crisis response situations.

The mission of the MEU(SOC) is to provide the geographic combatant commanders the capability to conduct conventional amphibious and selected maritime special operations at night, during adverse weather, from over the horizon, under emission control (EMCON) conditions, from the sea, and by surface or air. Due to its unique training and focus, MEU(SOC) forces are capable of commencing mission execution within 6 hours of notification. Assault support plays an important role in these missions and provides direct action support or intelligence gathering for the MAGTF. The ACE, especially in MEU(SOC) operations, brings a significant amount of firepower to the baseline MAGTF. Inherently light and expeditionary in nature, the MEU(SOC) gains from the ACE the mobility and responsive fire support necessary in small-scale, rapidly executed evolutions. Within most MEU(SOC) missions, assault support plays a significant role in deployment and sustainment of the force.

The MEU(SOC) ACE is built around a Marine medium helicopter squadron (HMM), reinforced with utility, attack, heavy-lift assault support helicopters, and fixed-wing attack aircraft. It often includes additional fixed-wing assault support aircraft (shore based). The MEU(SOC) ACE is normally task-organized to provide assault support, offensive air support, limited antiair warfare, control of aircraft and missiles, electronic warfare, and aerial reconnaissance.

The inherent capabilities of a forward-deployed MEU(SOC) are divided into four broad categories: amphibious operations, direct action operations, military operations other than war (MOOTW), and supporting operations. MCO 3120.9A, Policy for Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) [MEU(SOC)], for more information.

**Amphibious Operations**

Amphibious operations include amphibious assaults, raids, demonstrations, and withdrawals. They can be conducted on short notice, at night, under EMCON conditions via helicopter and/or surface means over extended ranges. Amphibious operations are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

**Direct Action Operations**

Direct action operations is the capability to conduct short-duration strikes and small-scale offensive action. In-extremis hostage rescue (IHR) and TRAP are some examples of the many operations that make up this category. Precision raids, ambushes, and direct assault using close-quarter battle skills are all tactics used during direct action missions.

TRAP is a direct action mission that satisfies the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) requirement that each branch of the armed forces maintain its own search and rescue (SAR) capability. SAR is defined as a specialized task performed by rescue forces to effect the recovery of isolated personnel from a hostile environment during wartime or contingency operations. Recognizing the unique environments of maritime and amphibious operations, the Marine Corps fulfills this requirement with the TRAP mission.

TRAP is part of the assault support planning checklist and is usually planned as part of a helicopterborne assault. Aircraft and crew are usually earmarked for TRAP as either dedicated or as on call to be flown by an aircraft conducting the combat assault transport.

A TRAP mission is a raid that relies on specific and flexible force packaging designed to defeat the threat, protect the force, and successfully
recover isolated personnel without any loss to the package. The 8 June 1995 recovery of “Basher 52” (Captain Scott O’Grady, USAF) from war-torn Bosnia proved that detailed mission analysis, specific force packaging based on the threat, quick reaction, and adherence to sound tactic, techniques, and procedures (TTP) led to mission success.

**Military Operations Other Than War**

Included in MOOTW are NEOs, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. These operations focus on deterring war, resolving conflict, promoting peace, and supporting civil authorities in response to domestic crises. The ACE can provide air logistical support by moving supplies and personnel throughout the operations area.

MOOTW include many situations that challenge a commander. Assault support operations provide the commander with many options in meeting these challenges.

**Noncombatant Evacuation Operations.** NEOs are characterized by uncertainty. Noncombatants may include U.S. citizens, U.S. military personnel, citizens of countries friendly to the U.S., or third country nationals (TCN). The Department of State plans for evacuations of U.S. citizens and TCN. The Department of State also determines when that plan will be executed.

NEOs require the commander to consider things not usually associated with offensive or amphibious operations. A NEO is similar to a raid. There is a rapid insertion followed by a planned withdrawal. The use of minimal forces to provide security for the evacuation forces and evacuees is important. Diplomatic considerations significantly influence the execution of a NEO. Situations may change as the NEO is conducted, depending on the political situation within the country and the threat. A NEO may take place in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.

Permissive environments are characterized by little or no resistance from the host nation or its armed forces. ACE participation is minimal in a permissive environment, and noncombatants may depart the country via civil airline traffic. Military assistance, in the form of security forces, may be the primary focus of the NEO.

The degree of danger to the noncombatants is the concern in an uncertain environment. The host nation’s military forces may be supportive of, neutral to, or opposed to the NEO. Assault support operations may be the only ACE participation due to political sensitivities. Innovative planning is necessary to ensure that fire support assets can support the NEO should the situation deteriorate.

A hostile environment can be characterized by civil unrest or full scale war. ACE participation can be expected to be at a maximum to insert combat forces, conduct convoy escort, and provide fire support. Operation Frequent Wind is an example of a NEO conducted under hostile conditions.

Following the withdrawal of most United States combat forces from the Republic of Vietnam and with the fall of Saigon imminent, contingency planners prepared for the evacuation of the last Americans in Vietnam.

Evacuation forces consisted of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB), which included Regimental Landing Team 4 and Provisional Marine Aircraft Group (PROVMAG) 39. PROVMAG 39’s organic assets, 34 CH-53s, 27 CH-46s, 6 UH-1s, and 8 AH-1s, were augmented with 10 USAF H-53s. After surveys of candidate sites, the decision was made that the evacuation would take place from the Defense Attaché, Office (DAO)/Air America Complex at Tan Son Nhut airfield by C-130 aircraft and 9th MAB helicopters and from the U.S. Embassy by UH-1s and CH-53s.

On 29 April 1975, the effects of North Vietnamese air and artillery attacks against the DAO compound and Tan Son Nhut airfield had left the runway filled with abandoned aircraft and vehicles, precluding the use of C-130s for the evacuation. The evacuation had to be made solely by
helicopter. At 1215, 9th MAB was notified to begin the evacuation.

As 9th MAB Marines began the evacuation effort at the DAO Complex, the Commanding General, 9th MAB, received word from the U.S. Embassy that more than 2,000 people needed to be evacuated from the embassy grounds—a number far exceeding the capacity of the three UH-1 and one CH-53 lifts originally planned. Limited landing space precluded using large numbers of aircraft to evacuate the grounds. The solution was to divert all available CH-46s to land on the embassy rooftop and to use CH-53s to evacuate people from the embassy parking lot.

Helicopter extraction of evacuees continued from both the embassy and Tan Son Nhut airfield. At approximately 0012 on 30 April, the last of the 9th MAB elements at the DAO complex lifted off, returning thereafter to assist with the continuing embassy evacuation. The Commanding General, 9th MAB, then focused on evacuating the embassy for fear that Saigon might fall to the North Vietnamese before the end of the morning. Flights at the rate of one CH-53 and one CH-46 every 10 minutes ferried evacuees out of the embassy grounds. At 0458, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam left the embassy compound aboard a 9th MAB CH-46. The last security element left the embassy at 0753, landing aboard Task Force 76 ships at 0825, ending Operation Frequent Wind. The ensuing action, Operation Frequent Wind, would result in the extraction of nearly 7,000 persons from the approaching North Vietnamese onslaught on Saigon. Remarkably, the extraction was completely carried out by helicopters, mostly MAGTF aviation.

Typically, MEU(SOC) units have conducted NEOs. However, NEOs may require a larger force to accomplish the mission. The example of Operation Frequent Wind illustrates that fact.

**Humanitarian Assistance Operations.** Assault support is especially important in HA operations. A force larger than a MEU(SOC) may be involved in HA operations. Usually, a joint task force (JTF) will be tasked with the execution of the relief effort. In a disaster, transportation infrastructures (roads, bridges, or railways) may be damaged or destroyed. This will hinder evacuating and assisting the affected population.

The MAGTF uses assault support assets to move homeless or injured evacuees to safe areas and to deliver food, medicine, and other vital supplies. The following factors should be considered when planning a disaster relief operation:

- Language problems.
- Coordination with local authorities.
- Special medical requirements of evacuees.
- Environmental conditions.

**Supporting Operations**

Supporting operations may include tactical deception operations, JTF enabling force operations, and port and airfield seizures. All of these operations are in support of larger operations. The 15th MEU’s participation in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in December 1992 was an example of a supporting operation. The Marines came ashore to secure the port and airfield, enabling the ships from Maritime Prepositioned Squadron-2 to off-load their supplies. The Marines then improved the port facilities and roads out of Mogadishu, Somalia. This allowed follow-on forces from I MEF and the U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division to conduct relief operations in the country.