

Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force–Crisis Response

Filling the Gap



Leathernecks with SPMAGTF–CR, a self-mobile, self-sustaining U.S. Marine task force capable of responding to a range of crises, conduct fast-rope training from a hovering MV-22B Osprey at Morón Air Base, Spain, Dec. 6, 2013.

By Murielle Delaporte

“For 7.8 percent of the entire Defense budget, you get a U.S. Marine Corps that responds to today’s crisis, today. In combat, natural disasters or a combination of those things, our nation needs such a hedge force because the future is

completely unknown. That hedge force is our nation’s shock absorber against uncertainty. When things don’t go as planned, you at least have a force to send in until the situation becomes clearer.”

—Gen James F. Amos

Leatherneck magazine, November 2011

“The types of missions that we would do deal with the defense of American interests in places where the United States has interests. We have a capability to do support to our embassies, noncombatant evacuation, support to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel [TRAP]. So we have the capability to exercise the force anywhere we are asked to do so.”

That is how Colonel Scott F. Benedict, the commanding officer of the Spain-based Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force–Crisis Response (SPMAGTF–CR), described his mission in his area of responsibility (AOR) a few days before U.S. Africa Command asked the force to assist in the South Sudan evacuation operation which took place at the end of December 2013 and early January 2014 under the command and control of the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA).

The evacuation was the second mission of the SPMAGTF–CR on the African continent (the previous one was also the reinforcement of a U.S. Embassy, that time in Tripoli last May). Those kinds of missions are not unusual for the Marine Corps which evacuates 25,000 people a year from harsh places, but the concept of long-range dedicated and fully integrated assets is unusual in many ways.

The SPMAGTF–CR: A Unique Unit

SPMAGTF–CR is a self-command and -controlled, self-deploying and highly mobile maritime crisis response force allocated to U.S. Africa Command to respond to a broad range of military operations to provide limited-defense crisis response in the AFRICOM/EUCOM region. The Marine task force can serve as the lead element, or the coordination node, for a larger fly-in element. It also can conduct military-to-military training exercises throughout the AFRICOM and EUCOM areas of responsibility.

Like other MAGTFs, the SPMAGTF–CR includes a command element, a ground combat element (GCE), an aviation combat element (ACE) and a logistics combat element (LCE). It is composed largely from II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, N.C., coordinating a balanced team of ground, air and logistics assets under a central command.

SSGT ROBERT L. FISHER III

SPMAGTF-CR leathernecks train at Morón Air Base, Spain, December 2013. (Photo by Murielle Delaporte)

At the time of this writing, the task force was commanded by Col Benedict, now the commander of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). Its current commander, Col Kenneth Detreux, served as the Eighth Marine Regiment commander before taking command at the end of January 2014.

In December 2013, the command element was sourced from the 24th MEU, along with several augments from II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). The current command-element rotation is sourced from 8th Marines, along with several augments from the MEF.

The previous ACE, Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron (VMM) (Reinforced) 162, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Freeland, included attachments from Marine Aerial Refueler Squadron 252 from Cherry Point, N.C.; Marine Wing Support Squadron 273 from Beaufort, S.C.; Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 26 from New River; and Marine Air Control Squadron 2 from Cherry Point, along with several augments from the Second Marine Aircraft Wing.

The GCE, commanded by Captain Thomas Wallin, was composed of a reinforced company of infantry Marines, sourced from Company A, 2d Reconnaissance Battalion from Camp Lejeune. The use of a reconnaissance company is, however, not the model for future rotations, and the current rotation of GCE leathernecks is from 3d Bn, 8th Marines.

Commanded by First Lieutenant Brandon Sullivan, the LCE comprised Marines from Combat Logistics Regiments 25 and 27 from Camp Lejeune, along with several augments from Second Marine Logistics Group.

All together, the SPMAGTF-CR is composed of approximately 500 Marines and sailors, six MV-22 Ospreys and two KC-130J Super Hercules aircraft, which allow the force not only to be self-sustainable, but also self-mobile and therefore self-deployable. That organic aviation and self-deployment capability is what makes SPMAGTF-CR unique.

“The way Marines operate, we have a Marine air-ground task force—MAGTF—so we always organize with that aviation combat element and ground combat element and the logistics combat element,” said Col Benedict. “The GCE is based around an infantry company; today we have a reconnaissance company, but built



Marines and sailors with SPMAGTF-CR help U.S. citizens board a Marine Corps KC-130J Super Hercules aircraft in Juba, South Sudan, during an evacuation of personnel from the U.S. Embassy, Jan. 3, 2014.

around an infantry company and an ACE around a VMM, and the rest is proportional in order to support these two forces.

“So, if we were to project a portion of that force, we would task-organize to make sure we have all the appropriate elements to project it,” continued Col Benedict. “One of the things which is unique about this force, as a Marine force, is that we are self-sustainable, as well as self-mobile. So we are a self-deployable force. We do not need to ask anybody’s help in order to project, and once we project that force, it is scalable. Based

on what the mission requirements were, we could project it all or just a portion of it. Most Marine air-ground task forces do have a self-mobile capability, but this one is particular because of the size of the C-130s and characteristics of the MV-22s and is certainly the highlight of this force.”

All elements of the SPMAGTF, including the ACE, are based out of Morón Air Base in Spain. Built in 1940 as the Vázquez Sagastizábal Military Aerodrome, Morón Air Base was first used to train Spanish fighter pilots. Strategically located, it became one of the three major Cold War



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Marines and sailors with SPMAGTF–CR load a KC-130J at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Dec. 24, 2013. The air-ground task force recently had repositioned from Morón Air Base, Spain, in order to be ready to assist U.S. citizens and partner nations.

U.S. Air Force air bases in 1953 (built under the direction of the U.S. Navy) along with Zaragoza and Torrejon. After the Cold War ended, Morón de la Frontera remained active on a reduced scale, but has been used for critical support in many operations from the Gulf War to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Most recently, during Operation Unified Protector in 2011, it served as the main tanker base for KC-10A and KC-135R aircraft. Since then, and within the framework of the 1988 defense cooperation agreement between Spain and the United States, the government of Spain agreed, on March 18, 2013, to host temporarily SPMAGTF–CR at Morón Air Base.

The location provides a forward-positioned capability allowing the USAFRICOM combatant commander to respond quickly to crisis in its principal area of responsibility identified as North and West Africa. Basing of the SPMAGTF–CR in Europe increases the capability of the command to respond rapidly to incidents not only on the continent, but also throughout the Mediterranean area, in coordination with affected host nations and the U.S. Department of State.

Juba: The Longest-Range Insert

For the commander of SPMAGTF–CR, if the capabilities brought in with the task force are indeed new in a sense, they bring

the Corps back to its historical roots after the long wars of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“This force provides new capabilities where there has been a gap,” said Col Benedict. “Historically, we would provide this kind of capability of a Marine expeditionary unit [MEU], i.e., the Marine forces that are on ships. Where there have been some gaps in the coverage of these ships, the Marine Corps created this force and intends to create others like it in order to fill those gaps. So in that sense, it is a new capability, but the skills that we bring as a SPMAGTF are the same types of skills that Marines have always brought to the fight. In terms of comparing what we are doing now with what we have been doing in the past, my experience over the years has been that this is more the type of missions that Marines have done historically.

“Marines respond to crisis: This is what we do; this is who we are,” continued Benedict. “This is the experience that we had in the Mediterranean, on the African continent or in the Pacific. So, in a lot of ways this is not new for us; this is getting back into our roots and in the way we have been doing business over the years. We have an old saying ‘Marines win battles,’ so we would stand along the side of the U.S. Army when it is necessary for us to do so [like in Afghanistan, for instance].

“However, what we have historically done is operate small units like this and

provide very flexible and agile capabilities to respond to crisis. We have done it for years off amphibious shipping, and now we do it with the extended range capability of the V-22 which allows us to provide some very similar capabilities over the vast areas that we are responsible for.”

The ACE commander, LtCol Freeland, who has been trained as both a CH-46 and a MV-22 pilot, said there is a paradigm shift due to the juxtaposition of the expeditionary vertical-landing capability of the V-22—especially useful if a runway or an airfield is not available or if it is necessary to land near the target—and the long legs brought by the KC-130J is able to generate on the theater.

“Both the MV-22 and KC-130J have worked together before in the past, but the way we are teaming them here is a little different: I think one of the best analogies is the tank-infantry team concept,” said Freeland. “We now share the whole mission together: It is shared mission management, shared functional responsibilities within the same flight. Such a change is not overly difficult, but it is different, and we are expanding tactics, techniques and procedures to leverage the unique capabilities of each airframe.

“You have, on the one hand, one V-22 aircraft going a distance, a good one but nothing incredible—let’s say 350 miles—and land vertically anywhere, and you have, on the other hand, one KC-130J which can fly thousands of miles, but [has] to land on a runway: Now you put the two of them together, and you can take this team thousands of miles away and land anywhere. This is a very significant paradigm change. We bring agility and task organize the Ground Combat Element to go anywhere we need to quickly.”

“The work we have been doing traditionally in Africa has been done off amphibious shipping,” Col Benedict added. “We would send a ship up and down the coast, and we would operate. So, this is the same idea that we would not have a permanent presence, but different aircraft. The capability that we have now is unique, as this pairing of the MV-22 and the KC-130J gives us the type of ranges that is necessary to be able to operate in Southern Europe, while still being able to reach all the operational areas that are necessary in Africa. That is what I meant by bringing together the old and the new, because when the Marine Corps was envisioning bringing the V-22 forward as a capability, we envisioned this kind of distance to employ the force.

“We just have not been [until now] in a position to take advantage or to have

to use that capability. In this particular mission and with this particular force in the area we are responsible for, we are employing the V-22, the KC-130J and a task-organized ground force at the distances we envisioned when this aircraft was designed. That is revolutionary.”

The Marines also are going back to some geographic roots as well, since they have had a long history in West Africa during the Cold War and in the '90s and early 2000s.

Benedict added, “Well before the current ‘post 9/11,’ it has been episodic because we do exercises and theater security cooperation where we partner with nations, so we learn from them and they learn from us, keeping in mind that we might work together in the future for a common goal. However, we have not based there. We have been doing these operations for years, and it has paid dividends when we had to do ‘provide support’ for different countries on the continent.”

Another MAGTF, called SPMAGTF Africa, is, in fact, more dedicated to training and partnering with African forces and has been building those relationships for several years on the continent.

This long-lasting effort has proven an essential part in the success of the recent evacuation of U.S. and non-U.S. citizens from South Sudan, with the ability to rely



1ST LT JOSHUA W. LARSON

on neighboring partners such as Uganda, which at the time of the crisis actually was involved in a pre-planned small logistics exercise with SPMAGTF Africa, while USAFRICOM also was overseeing an aircraft mission flying 850 Burundians as peacekeepers in Central Africa.

Juba, South Sudan, also has been a case

Above: The CO of SPMAGTF-CR, Col Scott F. Benedict, speaks to French legionnaires with the 2d Foreign Infantry Regiment, 6th Light Armored Brigade at Camp des Garrigues, France, Oct. 28, 2013, during the first bilateral training between SPMAGTF-CR and the French military.

U.S. Marines with SPMAGTF-CR post security while an MV-22B Osprey takes off from Camp des Garrigues, Oct. 28, 2013, during bilateral training with legionnaires from the 2d Foreign Infantry Regiment, 6th Light Armored Brigade. The aircraft, attached to SPMAGTF-CR, is with VMM-162 (Rein).



CPL MICHAEL PETERSHEIM

An Organic Crisis Response Medical Capability Within the LCE

The commanding officer of the Spain-based Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force–Crisis Response (SPMAGTF–CR), Colonel Scott F. Benedict, described the sustainability parameter as building blocks the Marine Corps assembles for a tailored ground force, a flexibility made possible because of the organic quality of logistics in the SPMAGTF. If the mission were to last longer, the MAGTF would then be reinforced and rely on the joint force for sustainment overtime.

“The size of the force determines how to sustain the force. We have the capability based on this size force to sustain it for a period that is appropriate for us to conduct our operations. We are also a very scalable force—not only this particular one, but the Marine Corps in general—so if we went into a large operation, more than likely we would scale up, and, like building blocks, we would build around this organization into a larger organization,” Benedict explained.

“What is unique about the Marines is because we operate as a MAGTF, we bring that capability with us. We do not land anywhere and wake up the next morning thinking we need somebody to feed us or to bring us water; we do not operate that way. We bring a capability that is commensurate with the mission that we are going to execute, and then we follow with appropriate supplies.

“As part of the logistics combat element (LCE) that makes

up one leg of the MAGTF, we have in particular a very robust medical capability inherent to the organization. We therefore provide our own expeditionary medical capability that includes not only the line corpsmen who are part of GCE CO [Ground Combat Element Commanding Officer] Captain

Thomas Wallin’s force and would actually get off the aircraft and move with the ground element, but also a very robust capability that we retain at the headquarters’ level in order to support our force.

“Our expeditionary medical is movable and deployable in a C-130, but the Marine Corps does not have a dedicated air ambulance.

“We have combat litters though in the back of the V-22, combat litters in the back of the C-130, and we have our own organic medical capability in boxes, so anytime there is an injury, we can provide that onsite medical care and then prepare the patient for transport.

“In a humanitarian situation we bring food, water and basic medical care, disease prevention and specific skills. That medical capability is exactly what the Marine Corps provided in the Philippines.

“In a mass casualty situation, we would task-organize the force in order to best accomplish that mission with the assets that we have.”

—Murielle Delaporte



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Capt Thomas Wallin, right, the CO of SPMAGTF–CR’s ground combat element, coordinates with one of his team leaders, Sgt Andrew Rodriguez, on the flight line in Juba, South Sudan, during an evacuation of personnel from the U.S. Embassy, Jan. 3, 2014.

in point demonstrating the revolutionary capability of the pairing between the MV-22B and the KC-130J with the longest-range insert ever accomplished by the SPMAGTF–CR.

As the domestic situation worsened in South Sudan on Dec. 15, 2013, a decision was made to evacuate part of the personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Juba. The mission was given to USAFRICOM, which assigned its execution to the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa based in Djibouti. It was under the authority of the CJTF–HOA commander, Brigadier General Terry Ferrel, USA, that on Dec. 22, 2013, SPMAGTF–CR repositioned about a third of its force—160 Marines and sailors—from Morón de la Frontera to Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti.

Approximately 12 hours later, a platoon-size element (about a third of that very force) was flown by a KC-130J to

Entebbe, Uganda, in order to be better postured to support operations at the U.S. Embassy in Juba.

“Within 60 hours of receiving the execution order, SPMAGTF–CR inserted forces more than 4,000 nautical miles from Spain to Djibouti, Uganda and South Sudan,” said Capt Sharon Hyland, SPMAGTF–CR public affairs officer. “The distance from Spain to Djibouti is equivalent to a flight from Anchorage, Alaska, to Miami, Florida. This was the longest-range insert to date for this force and was a testament to the organic aviation assets and our task organized force which enables us to accomplish our mission.”

On Jan. 3, 2014, a squad-size element of Marines from SPMAGTF–CR successfully evacuated more than 20 personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Juba, via a KC-130J in coordination with the East African Reaction Force (EARF).

Since then, the Marines have been remaining on standby, ready to go ... “anywhere they are asked to do so.”

Author’s note: This article stems from interviews conducted in December 2013 at the Morón de la Frontera Air Force Base in Spain, where the SPMAGTF–CR temporarily has been deployed since April 2013.

Author’s bio: After receiving degrees from Sciences Po and the Sorbonne in Paris and Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., Murielle Delaporte has been working as a defense analyst and writer in the French government, in several French and American think tanks, and as a journalist for various French, British and American defense publications. She is the founder and editor of Opérationnels SLDS, a French magazine focusing on support and logistics.

