

The Rifle Company Experiment

A looking glass to change

by Col Vincent Goulding, USMC(Ret)

Since 2007 the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) has collaborated with Training and Education Command (TECom) and the Operating Forces to turn enhanced company operations (ECO) from operational concept to operational reality. Company-level intelligence cell (CLIC) and company-level operations center (CLOC) were the first ECO limited objective experiments (LOEs), conducted in 2007 and 2008, and although CLOC has subsumed CLIC, the combined training package figures prominently in unit predeployment training. As a division commander stated at a recent ground board meeting, “My commanders cannot get enough CLOC training.”

This year has been busier yet. MCWL recently concluded two follow-on events at the Marine Corps

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Mountain Warfare Training Center (MWTC) Bridgeport—distributed logistics with the 4th Marine Logistics Group and 23d Marines and CLOC(Light) with 3d Battalion, 1st Marines. Distributed logistics experimentation employed and examined unmanned air and ground vehicles for resupply and limited distance casualty evacuation, as well as a “follower” vehicle to help lighten the tactical unit’s load. It also looked at associated tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). The CLOC(Light) project looked at a prototypical communications suite that enabled a dismounted company to

exercise command and control (C²) over the horizon and on the move. The MWTC was chosen as the venue for both experiments because of the challenges it presents to both Marines and new technologies.

Finally, at the request of the Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration, the MCWL joined forces with TECom’s Fort Sill detachment and 10th Marines to conduct a distributed artillery experiment designed to examine employment of M777 howitzer platoons on complex, distributed battlefields.

While all of these undertakings built on 3 years of distributed operations (DO) experimentation (2003–06), they were not about hindsight. Every aspect of every ECO experiment was a calculated steppingstone to the “holy grail” of Marine Corps capability development—preeminence in seabased expeditionary operations. The final stage occurs in July 2010, with execution of LOE 4, which is designed to bring it all together and, most importantly, to take ECO to sea.

The CoLT, the T/O, and Emerging Capabilities

In LOE 4, a company landing team (CoLT) will be used to focus the experiment’s design and define its deliverables. The CoLT will maneuver from the sea, over the horizon, and into a complex distributed environment against a hybrid threat. It will be constructed around a revised rifle company table of organization (T/O). The experimental T/O itself will be carefully scrutinized, hopefully as a starting point for more serious analysis and



Every part of ECO is a calculated steppingstone toward greater capability. (Photo by Cpl Ray Lewis.)

IDEAS & ISSUES (CONCEPTS)



Figure 1. Experimental rifle company T/O.

modification. Few believe that the current rifle company T/O is adequate for future or even current missions. We already know that company commanders are ignoring it and pulling Marines from the rifle platoons in order to accomplish critical battlefield functions. Note in Figures 1 and 2 that the experimental T/O doubles the size of the company headquarters (HQ), adds a scout section (with joint fires observer), and eliminates the assault section and embeds those Marines in the rifle platoons. Figure 2 also provides additional detail on the revised headquarters and scout sections. It is envisioned that none of this changes the standard augments to the company (e.g., artillery/81mm mortar forward observers, joint terminal attack controller, radio operators, etc.). While the organization reflected in the figures does not increase the total number of Marines, any new T/O that follows the current 1013G T/O probably should.

In addition to exploring the effect of a revised T/O, the CoLT will include an M777 howitzer platoon. While it could be argued that the expeditionary fire support system is the weapon of choice for seabased operations, the

MCWL holds that, as long as the M777 is part of the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF), we must explore the ramifications of employing it from the sea. This is especially so when you consider the advantage it brings in range and the size of the battlespace on which companies are operating today

and on which they will be operating tomorrow. This particular aspect of the experiment will build on the lessons learned from the distributed artillery experiment alluded to above, as well as from an ongoing ECO fires initiative focused on fire support coordination at the company level.

The MCWL also intends to provide the company with a limited number of unmanned ground vehicles—one system to provide a “follower” capability that lightens the Marines’ tactical loads and the other to provide remote surveillance and direct fire capabilities. It is also planned to provide a vertical Group 1 (formerly Tier 1) and Group 2 unmanned aircraft system for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Of course, as with all emerging capabilities, plans do not always survive contact with the emerging technologies. Nonetheless, the role of unmanned systems at tactical levels is something that MCWL continues to explore.

What, When, and Where

The simple objective of ECO LOE 4 is to candidly assess this experiment for the purpose of identifying capability gaps across multiple battlefield

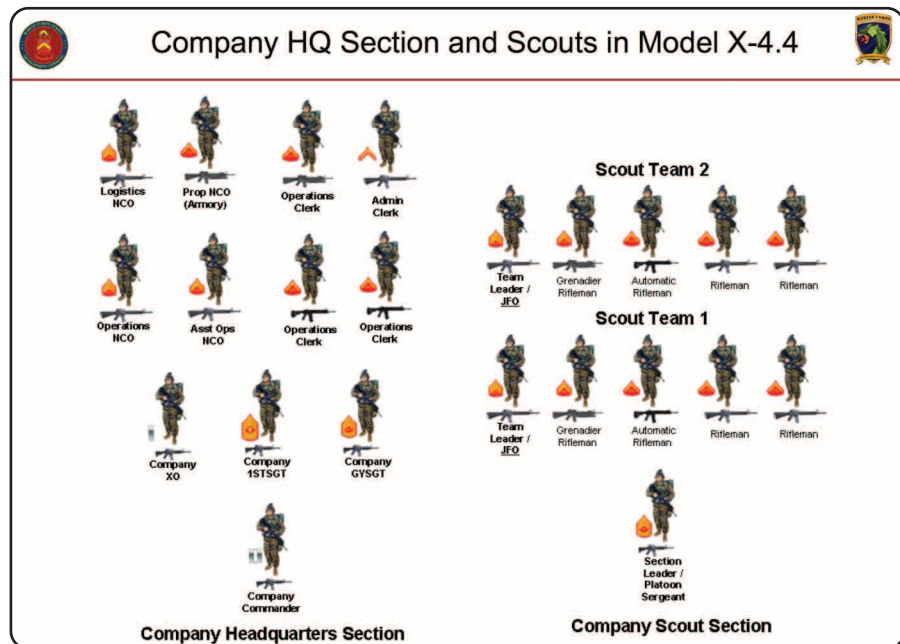


Figure 2. HQ/Scout elements of the rifle company.

functions, not only within the CoLT but also at higher HQ levels. This experiment is not about demonstrating how good we are; rather, it is about identifying what stands between us and becoming as good as we need to be. The MCWL believes that the experimental communications suite provided to the CoLT will prove adequate internally. Larger issues of seabased communications and data throughput will help point out the criticality of overall C² to mission accomplishment. Surface- and air-delivered fires, sustainment, casualty movement and evacuation, and ISR sharing and integration must factor into the assessment equation—and they will. Resident Center for Naval Analyses observers at MCWL are to be involved throughout and will write a report independent of normal MCWL after-action reporting.

In July 2010, LOE 4 will begin in conjunction with the biennial RIM of the PACIFIC 2010 exercise sponsored by the Commander, Pacific Fleet. The exercise will provide access to amphibious shipping, reasonable joint/coalition higher HQ participation, and MAGTF participation without significantly adding to operational tempo.

It is envisioned that the CoLT will maneuver from over the horizon into the rugged Kahuku training areas and Bellows Air Force Station on Oahu for 4 days. The training venue is a good fit and an excellent test site for all aspects of the experiment. It will require realistic force distribution to accommodate LCAC employment of the artillery platoon and CH-53D (simulated V-22) insertion of the rifle company. At the risk of preempting and/or prejudging conduct of the actual experiment, it should be self-evident that C² within the CoLT, fire support coordination, physical security of the M777 platoon, and multiple missions over a distributed and topographically challenging battlespace will stress the company HQ. The additional elements of seabased communications, logistics, and fires provide fertile ground for gap identification across the naval force. One of the primary objectives of the



Starting from a blank sheet of paper may be better than starting with dated doctrine. (Photo by Cpl Antonio Rosas.)

experiment is to better define the role of the company commander as a fire support coordinator.

Why?

Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025 is an easy default answer to the “why” question. But, in reality, it is incumbent on Marines and sailors to do what their predecessors did 70 years ago. As was true in the 1930s, this will often entail defying conventional wisdom, even questioning authority. It will be recalled that Gallipoli “proved” that opposed amphibious operations were not possible. *Joint Publication 3-02, Amphibious Operations*, might be considered authoritative owing to its signature page; however, it is as much rearward as forward looking. In many ways the Corps’ current situation vis-à-vis an amphibious capability is analogous to that of the interwar period. A blank sheet of paper might well be a better starting point than dated doctrine, especially as the Navy seeks to shrink the amphibious fleet and the potential employment of distributed nontraditional landing forces becomes more likely than not. The ECO LOE 4 does not purport to be the “be all” and “end all,” or anything more than a sin-

gle look at a specific aspect of expeditionary operations accomplished in the spirit of the 1996 ship-to-objective maneuver concept.

The MCWL will use the capability gaps identified in LOE 4 to shape planning for the follow-on effort, enhanced MAGTF operations (EMO) experimentation, scheduled to begin in 2011. Like DO and ECO, EMO will be as much about TTP and training as it will be about technologies, all of which are reflected in the MCWL mission statement:

Conduct concept-based experimentation to develop tactics, techniques, procedures and technologies in order to support the warfighter by enhancing current and future warfighting capabilities.

It is a mission the MCWL takes very seriously.



Agree or disagree? Join the discussion at www.mca-marines.org/gazette/goulding.