

# Red Teams

Strengthening through challenge

by LtCol Brendan Mulvaney



*Challenge the way we do business. We have to freely offer comments on structure and operational capabilities. (Photo by LCpl Jeremy T. Ross.)*

**S**trengthening our Corps through challenging the way we do business is the essence of Marine “red teaming.” The Marine Corps continues to adapt to an ever-changing environment, both international and domestic, and one of the newest tools we have to accomplish our mission is the red team. As we continue to develop this nascent capability, we also need to develop our understanding of what it is and how to use it. This article will outline the fundamental requirements for, and the principal functions of, Marine Corps red teams. Additional articles further explaining the specific Marine Corps implementation plan, challenges, and differences from other red teams will follow.

The very term, red team, creates confusion, as it means different things to different people. It is also often mis-

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understood because of the word “red,” or it is confused or conflated with a red cell. The red part does not necessarily refer to the enemy, despite the common military parlance. In fact, it often means looking at ourselves and our way of doing business. A red team may play the devil’s advocate or Napoleon’s corporal in order to outrate the enemy. Although sometimes adversarial, it is not intended to be negative in nature.

The general idea of red teaming can be described as a bright light we shine on ourselves to expose areas where we can improve effectiveness. This light starts out white for everyone under the banner

of red teaming, but it goes through the prism of the particular organization and takes many different forms in its application. Some of these forms are as different as black and white. Sandia National Laboratories uses teams that attempt malicious entry in both the physical and cyber world, while the intelligence community has teams that speculate about alternative futures and write articles as if they were despotic world leaders. There is sparingly little in formal doctrine or publications about red teaming in the military. In fact, there is a faction that believes we should never move beyond a draft version of red teaming publications so as not to limit the field. As far as official resources, there is a brief description in a joint publication, a line here or there in Army field manuals, and a description of the Army’s version in *Field Manual 5-0*,

*The Operations Process* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, March 2010). Everything else is based on experience and word of mouth. Much as if I asked about football, most readers of this journal would picture the gridiron, pigskin, and the Super Bowl; however, the vast majority of the world pictures a round ball kicked back and forth by 11 people on each side. To ensure a common understanding, it is necessary to discuss what the Marine Corps intends for red teams.

Red teams are different than red cells; red cells are a specific wargaming function that has a distinct place within the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP). Red cells are valuable tools, intended to role-play the enemy and help to test our plans and courses of action against likely reactions, played by informed friendly actors. Red teams have a valuable role in wargaming, and throughout MCPP, by supporting the blue force commander to help improve his effectiveness. This contribution is in addition to their greater role in the organization. Red cells are often ad hoc, and members are often called on because of a particular expertise or experience with the given enemy and then return to their primary duties when the wargame is complete. Red teams in the Marine Corps will be the primary duty of their members. Red team Marines will be tasked with improving the overall effectiveness and not simply limited to wargaming or the planning process.

The idea of using red teams has been around for a long time. Private businesses, such as IBM, and other government agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency and Sandia National Laboratories have long used them to help improve their organizations. Red teams in the military got a boost after a 2003 Defense Science Review Board recommended increasing the use of red teams to help guard against the shortcomings that led up to 11 September 2001. Largely in response to a 2003 report, the Army stood up its Service-level red team, the Army Directed Studies Office (ADSO), in 2004. This was the first Service-level red team and until this year was the largest red team in the Department of Defense.

In June 2009, the Marine Corps made its initial formal foray into the expanding world of red teaming. The impetus to develop a red teaming capability was given by LtGen George Flynn, then-Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command. This decision was in response to an express interest by Gen James F. Amos, then-Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, based upon his personal experiences during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM as Commanding General, 3d MAW. In response to LtGen Flynn's direction, the Marine Corps University convened a planning team to determine the best way to investigate red teaming and how to best implement it in the Marine Corps. The result was a plan to partner with the Headquarters, Department of the Army Red Team at the ADSO. In June 2009, five field grade officers were assigned to gain an understanding of red teaming and begin implementation into the Marine Corps.

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Over the course of 2 years, the Marines at ADSO gained valuable insights and experience in both the theory and practice of red teaming in the military. Each of the Marine officers at ADSO graduated from the Army's red team member's course offered by the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies. They all worked on Service, component, and joint projects, and each traveled to support Marine, Army, and joint units in the field. Two Marines, LtCol Jim Traver and Maj Ron Rega, volunteered to deploy with II MEF (Forward) to Afghanistan to gain firsthand experience of red teaming in the field. The challenges they faced and their solutions to problems, within the organization and those which the organization faced, will be the subject of a future article. Each

of these experiences has contributed to our understanding of how the Marine Corps can best benefit from red teams.

There are fundamental aspects that must be in place for a red team to function effectively as it was intended by the Commandant. These represent some of the aforementioned "white light" common to red teams.

First and foremost, the red team must have the trust of and access to the commander. The commander must in turn understand the benefits of a red team and provide them personal support in order to best employ this capability. This is essential to the success of their mission. The main job of the red team is to challenge the organization; the support of the commander is critical to this endeavor. This applies to all aspects of the organization, so the team must know what the commander is being presented, and they must also know what keeps him awake at night. The red team has to develop the relationship with the commander to know what information the commander receives and to ensure that true alternatives are presented. The commander must support the red team so they can develop and present these alternatives and challenges to the other staff sections without hesitation. The red team is intended to be a key member of the staff, not outside of it. They will work closely with each of the staff sections. Ideally the red team will be able to assist and deliver input throughout the staff and organization to improve the overall effectiveness. Sometimes the commander may never know the red team has improved effectiveness because they were working directly with a staff section on a particular issue that was resolved before it ever got to the commander's level. However, the independence and direct access is critical for those times when the red team is asking tough questions, or when multiple valid positions exist, but the commander is only hearing one of them. The red team must be able to challenge the unit and tell the commander the hard truth, about the leadership, the staff, or the organization as a whole, and have the top cover from the commander to do it. This relationship must come with the understanding that it is the role of

the red team to challenge. This process is not intended to necessarily be adversarial and certainly not to diminish the work of others. The challenge is to improve overall effectiveness.

The red team must have the independence and license to move throughout the organization in order to improve effectiveness. As described above, the red team is intended to help improve both the individual staff sections and the organization as a whole. The team must not be buried in the staff, lest they simply become an alternative planning team. Red teaming can certainly assist in the planning process, but it also has a role in other areas. Independent reviews of staff processes, intelligence products, training plans, logistics integration, etc., would all contribute to improved effectiveness. At the Service level, alternative views of programs, budgeting, strategic roles, and capabilities will help strengthen our Corps and better prepare for the challenges ahead. At the end of the day, the red team requires the independence to look at a variety of aspects, while not reporting through the very section they may be challenging. The red team should not be concerned about harmonizing its message. For this reason the leader of the red team must be the same rank as the primary staff, and ideally is selected personally by the commander. Within the team, all members must be willing to leave rank at the door when they go into discussion. Everyone has a perspective and valuable input, and the key role of the red team is to ensure that they all get heard. This is especially vital for the team itself.

A key to success for the red team is ensuring that multiple perspectives are captured and heard; this can be simply within a particular staff section or by the commander. Every Marine (on the red team) has different skills, language, culture, economics, background, and a myriad of different experiences, all of which help to widen the view of the team. For this reason, the team includes members from multiple communities and across the rank structure. The MEF red teams are currently designed to have representatives from ground combat arms, combat service support, aviation, officer, enlisted, and a civilian.



**Alternate views are important and are not always harmonious.** (Photo by LCpl Brian A. Jaques.)

It is impossible to ensure that each team has the same mix, and indeed there is no ideal mix, but by staffing the team with a combination of skills and experience, the team gains ideas and insight that a homogenous group would likely not see. The Marine Corps has included a place for an enlisted foreign area specialist (FAS) at the MEF level. The FAS program is a new initiative that seeks to identify experienced senior SNCOs, provide them with foreign language and cultural background and in-country experience, and then leverage this broadening experience. Most FASs will go to units to serve alongside the foreign area officers and focus on regional areas; however, the broadening experience and the ability to critically think and see things through another lens, combined with their knowledge gained as enlisted Marines, should make our MEF-level FASs valuable members of the red teams.

Having discussed the fundamentals that must be in place for red teams to function effectively, a discussion of the roles and mission of Marine Corps red teams follows. The MAGTF red teams will:

Provide the MAGTF Commander an independent capability that offers critical reviews and alternative perspectives that challenge prevailing notions, rigorously test current TTPs [tactics, techniques, and procedures] and coun-

ter group think in order to enhance organizational effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>

The Commandant's Red Team and future red teams at other organizational levels will share the fundamental tenets. Inherent in this mission are three tasks, which broadly outline the projects and products that Marine Corps red teams will undertake for the commander.

*Challenge the organization.* At its core, the red team mission is about challenging the organization to make it better. The Marine Corps must constantly find ways to "do things better to attempt to 'out rate' the enemy's ability to innovate and adapt."<sup>2</sup> The Marine Corps mans staffs with hard-working, well-trained, and dedicated Marines. Marine staffs do excellent work, and the MCPP is far ahead of any other alternative available today.

Red Teams do not replace, nor do they augment, existing staffs or their products and processes. They are independent members of the staff, not outside of it, working directly for the Commander . . . Red Teams actively challenge the conduct of operations, planning, execution, assessment, and throughout all MAGTF activities.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals and personalities will inevitably play a role in the initial implementation of red teams. Staffs may be resistant to a new group whose mission

is to challenge them. However, as long as our leaders understand the relationship and role of the red team with the current staff sections, the Marine Corps is strengthened through the challenge. Inherent in any staff plan or process are certain biases and assumptions, both stated and unstated. Every member of the staff, including the commander, makes them. While integral to the process, it is the job of the red team to identify these wherever they may occur across Marine activities, and then to challenge them. If biases or assumptions go unchallenged and do not stand up to scrutiny, they can prevent mission success; the red team is specifically tasked to assist in this endeavor.

*Explore alternatives.* There are definitions of red teams that state that the red team is:

A function that provides commanders an independent capability to *fully* explore alternatives in plans, operations, concepts, organizations and capabilities in the context of the operational environment and from the *perspectives of partners, adversaries and others* [author's emphasis].<sup>4</sup>

From the Marine Corps' perspective, this is unrealistic and not the ultimate value of a red team. The Marine Corps has large and well-trained staff that develops plans, branches, and sequels. The red team is supposed to ensure that options are not dismissed without good reason simply due to lack of time or resources and that viable alternatives are explored. But Marine Corps red teams will not be staffed to "fully" explore alternatives. Additionally, Marine Corps red teams will represent a cross-section of the MAGTF, but they will not have the breadth or depth of knowledge of every partner, adversary, and other that we will encounter during engagements, exercises, or operations. This is best left to specialists and subject matter experts hired specifically for a time and place. Red team members will be able to "actively challenge the conduct of operations, planning, execution, assessment, and throughout all MAGTF activities,"<sup>5</sup> but they need not be cultural and operational environment experts to ensure that alter-

native perspectives are accounted for. The Marine Corps is investing plenty of resources into Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, Marine Corps Information Operations Center, and similar organizations to make sure the perspectives of partners, adversaries, and others are addressed.

Commanders, staffs, and Marines at all levels are highly effective. As such, red teams may not always come up with something new or alternative because

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**. . . red teams may not always come up with something new or alternative because the Marine Corps often gets the answer right the first time. . . .**

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the Marine Corps often gets the answer right the first time, but the process of red teaming is valuable in and of itself. Even if staffs had all of the resources, manning, and time in the world, red teams would still provide a valuable capability; in the real world we all operate in a time- and resource-constrained environment. Without becoming invested, as is natural when a staff invests so much time and effort to getting it right, and with no particular equities to protect, the red team provides an independent critique and looks for ways to improve effectiveness so the whole unit is strengthened.

*Counter group think.* Dominant personalities, including the commander at times; inexperience with a situation; logical fallacies; and encountering those who bully by expertise can all contribute to group think MAGTFs, and the Marine Corps in general, developing their own culture and rhythm and growing to have a shared world outlook. This happens during specific planning events, the execution of operations, or in garrison and training. It is a natural occurrence and is not in and of itself a bad thing. Shared culture can mean that a unit is

functioning well and has a common understanding of its goals and the way to achieve them. This is a good situation and often leads Marine units to effective mission accomplishment. There are also times when Marines can fall into group think without realizing it and without fully thinking through the issue they are facing. This need not be done with malice; the G-5 (plans) who makes a decision and tasks the planners to develop that decision, to the exclusion of others, is not necessarily intending to limit the commander's options, but he may be inducing group think and preventing others from investigating other initiatives that could prove viable. This can happen at the Service level as well.

The Marine Corps is investing in red teaming, even during a time of reduced resourcing and manning. As we continue to improve our understanding of red teaming and integrate it into our staffs and our Marine culture, leaders and commanders will appreciate the value and capability provided to them. Red teaming is a new capability for the Marine Corps that, when implemented correctly, will improve our effectiveness in everything we do. The Marine Corps accomplishes great things; our commanders, leaders, and staffs do excellent work and are the best at what they do. Red teams will simply assist in continuing to improve and do it even better. The Commandant is personally dedicated to this endeavor and is convinced that the Marine Corps will be strengthened through the challenge.

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#### Notes

1. Draft, Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) White Letter to be determined (unsigned as of 20 March).
2. Gen James F. Amos' direction to the III MAFW Red Team during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.
3. CMC White Letter.
4. University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, *Red Team Handbook*, Fort Leavenworth, KS.
5. CMC White Letter.

