

Interview: Mike Hagee

Sea Power | Matt Hilburn | June 23, 2006



As commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Michael W. Hagee presides over the service during a tumultuous time. Marines have been engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq from the onset of both wars, and today more than 20,000 are deployed to the two countries; most in Iraq. Marines also have provided humanitarian relief services in Indonesia, the Philippines and, after Hurricane Katrina, on the U. S. Gulf Coast. Marines have done much of the heavy lifting for the coalition task force in Djibouti, located at the

Bab al Mandeb strait, the strategically vital link between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

After years of continual grind, the operations tempo is taking a toll on the Marines and their materiel. The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have so far claimed the lives of more than 700 Marines, and Hagee estimates the Corps' will have to "reconstitute" its equipment at a cost of \$12 billion over and above his annual budget.

In addition, he is deeply involved in preparing for future conflicts. This means developing options for major combat operations and smaller contingencies, and testing new tactics such as distributed operations, the concept that empowers small tactical teams to fight independently, miles apart in the battlespace.

Hagee foresees that Marines will be heavily engaged in humanitarian crises around the world. A contingent was dispatched to the southern coast of Java following the earthquake that struck the island May 26. The Marine Corps also is reaching out to nations from Georgia to Niger to build goodwill, bolster friendly military forces and counter terrorist activities. These diverse missions require even better trained and educated Marines, versed in battlefield tactics and able to adapt easily to different cultures.

Meanwhile, Hagee and other top officials are engaged in a Washington battle to keep the Corps' end strength at 180,000, as opposed to the 175,000 prescribed by the Quadrennial Defense Review, an analysis of the nation's long-term defense requirements. And in late May, he abruptly left Washington for Iraq in response to allegations that Marines last November had killed unarmed civilians in the town of Haditha. His mission: to remind Marine forces about the Corps' core values.

A Marine officer for 38 years, Hagee has been commander of I Marine Expeditionary Force and the 1st Marine Division, and served as director of strategic plans and policy for the U.S. Pacific Command.

About Sea Power



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In an interview with Associate Editor Matt Hilburn, he said the adoption of distributed operations will alter the expectations of young Marines. They will be given great responsibility and authority on the battlefield and will want the same in a garrison environment. "And we're going to have to be willing to give that to them," Hagee said. Excerpts follow.

What are the major challenges the Marine Corps faces today?

HAGEE: Obviously, the first priority is to provide the type of Marine forces combatant commanders want in the global war on terror. And that includes a well-trained, well-equipped, well-educated Marine.

The second is recruiting the number of quality Americans that we need in the Marine Corps to prepare us for the future. The Marines we're recruiting today won't be full-up rounds for another couple of years. We have to recruit them, train them and get them out to the unit.

The third priority is reconstituting our equipment. The equipment we have has stood up very well in a very harsh, demanding environment, and we have put a lot of miles on it. But we need to reconstitute it. I've been very open about how much that's going to take. To put it in perspective, the Marine Corps' peacetime budget is \$18 billion. As of Oct. 1, 2005, it would cost approximately \$12 billion additional to reconstitute our equipment.

Fourth is ensuring that we are structured correctly, that we have the training and education done right to prepare us for 2015 and 2020. We have to be prepared to do major conventional operations. Also, we're going to see much more of the irregular battlefield. We're going to see much more cooperative and security programs and engagement. I don't know whether we're going to fight a major combat operation in the near or midterm. But I can guarantee that we're going to respond to a hurricane, a tsunami, an earthquake or a mudslide, and we have to have that capability.

Are you placing more emphasis on humanitarian assistance operations?

HAGEE: The major population centers or major Islamic nations are not located in the Persian Gulf. They're Indonesia, India and in the Pacific. Most are democratic countries, and we should be engaging with them. We should be supporting them, giving them the opportunity to fight this internal conflict that's going on in the Islamic world. Yes, I think we're going to be more involved in that.

How, specifically?

HAGEE: We're going to do more engagement in the southern Asia region. I recently made a trip to India where I talked with all the chiefs of service there. I intend to go to Indonesia. They want to engage. We want to engage with them.

The Marine Corps has been involved in a train-and-equip mission in Georgia over the last couple of years, building capacity in the Georgia armed forces. We've been involved in training armed forces in Ghana, Niger and Kenya. We're building that partnership capacity, teaching armed forces from other countries how an armed force performs under a civilian, democratically elected government; how an armed force treats its people.

What is the future for distributed operations?

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HAGEE: Distributed operations is going to have a significant impact on major combat operations and conflicts like we see in Afghanistan and Iraq. We're experimenting right now with a platoon in Afghanistan. We spent about six months equipping it with off-the-shelf technology and enhancing its training to give the squad leaders the capability to call in close air support, to integrate both ground and air fires, a capability that two years ago they did not have.

We put this platoon on the ground in Afghanistan about five months ago. It had immediate impact. They were able to distribute their squads throughout a much larger battlespace. They were connected by technology and able to communicate and influence a much larger area, to bring and coordinate fires into a much larger area.

As luck would have it, we were involved in a major operation, Mountain Lion [a coalition operation against terrorist forces in eastern Afghanistan]. That platoon received rave reviews because of what they were able to do. Our intent is to slowly but surely make every company, every battalion in the Marine Corps distributed-operations capable.

One element of distributed operations is that decision-making is "pushed down" to the lower ranks. How is that being done?

HAGEE: It's being done in Iraq and Afghanistan right now. We have squad leaders and platoon commanders making very difficult decisions on a day-to-day basis over there.

The personal radio is a capability that we did not have before Operation Iraqi Freedom. You see Marines now walking around with that personal radio; they're able to talk to one another on the ground. That's one small example.

Actually, the education and the training is just as important, if not more important, in this type of environment. Putting them under significant pressure like we do out at Mojave Viper [an intensive 30-day training exercise at the Corps' Twentynine Palms combat center, Calif.] where there are no easy solutions. ... Putting Marines in that type of environment prepares them for decisions they're going to have to make on the battlefield.

We have given them a great deal of responsibility and authority on the battlefield and they are performing unbelievably. And one of the challenges we're going to have is that they will want the same responsibility and the same authority when they return to a garrison-type environment. We have to be willing to give that to them.

You've placed a great emphasis on cultural and language training. What are the benefits?

HAGEE: For example, simple interaction between the Iraqis and the squad leaders or the individual Marine on a daily basis. Over there, we require that they wear protective glasses, and most of them wear sunglasses most of the time. But when you talk with an Iraqi you take the sunglasses off. It means a great deal to the Iraqi. He takes umbrage with the fact that you're not willing to have eye contact with him. Unless we have cultural training, Marines don't understand that.

I'm a strong proponent of having the ability to speak another language, but for me it's a vehicle to understand and learn the culture. When I think of individuals who understand the Arab culture, two come to mind: Army Gen. John Abizaid, Central Command commander, who speaks

Arabic, and [retired] Gen. [Anthony] Zinni, the former Central Command commander, who speaks very little Arabic yet probably has the best understanding and appreciation of the culture of any Marine I know. We want that sort of sensitivity and cultural understanding.

Tell us about the discussions under way in Washington regarding Marine Corps end strength.

HAGEE: We have an assessment group looking at the capabilities and capacities we need in order to adhere to the guidance in the Quadrennial Defense Review and the global war on terror plan. We're pretty close to delineating those capabilities and capacities and then looking at them through the filter of end strength. If we had a 175,000-person Marine Corps, what would the capabilities and capacities be? What about an 180,000-person Marine Corps?

Now there's money associated with that. Then the questions will be: Is it worth it? Can we afford it? Where are we willing to take risk? How much money are we willing to put against a particular capability and capacity?

That's what we're looking at right now, and we had the senior leadership in the Marine Corps very involved with the assessment group. We're already engaging with the Secretary of the Navy and the Office of the Secretary of Defense staff to say, "OK, here it is. These are the capabilities and capacities that we can provide to the combatant commander and this is what it's going to cost."

You appear to be describing a very different Marine Corps of the future. Is that correct?

HAGEE: I'm not sure I'd call it very different. When I was the commanding general of the I Marine Expeditionary Force, we spent a lot of time focused on the Korea war plan, and we spent also a lot of time on the Iraq war plan. When I talk with commanders now, they still want to have their force capable to do a major combat operation, but they're talking a lot more now about security cooperation, about engaging with partner nations. So it's more of a shift.

Fortunately, the capabilities that you need to do major combat operations and some of what one would call lower-end operations (humanitarian relief, for example) are the same. First Battalion, 8th Marines responded to Katrina. That battalion out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., went down to New Orleans. They were also involved in the battle for Fallujah in November of 2004. When I talked with individuals from that battalion, they said, "Sir, going in there and picking up people who were stranded was just like a noncombatant operation that we have trained for."

So it's a Marine Corps that spends more time thinking about how you're going to react to some of the lower-end operations and also maintain the capability for major combat operations. It is a shift.

What progress is being made in countering Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)?

HAGEE: We are working this unbelievably hard, and money is not a factor. It is a scientific challenge. It is an engineering challenge. As in any conflict, we are going against a thinking, quite dangerous enemy and that enemy is flexible and adaptable. As we come up with jammers, they come up with different ways to detonate that particular device. I believe we need to go further down that chain to the origin, to the individuals that are making it, to the products that are coming in. I don't believe

that we will make IEDs go away.

Is the Marine Corps developing an armed escort for the MV-22 Osprey?

HAGEE: We're still working out the tactics, techniques and procedures [for MV-22 operations]. We're thinking through how best to do it. We're looking at putting a gun on the MV-22; probably a ramp gun. It's just too expensive to put it in the nose. But a new aircraft [for armed escort]? No, I don't see that at all.

Are you still behind sea basing?

HAGEE: I am totally behind it because of the capability that it gives the nation. I see access becoming more and more of a problem in the future.

One thing we should talk about is the capability that sea basing [the concept to quickly project U.S. forces and equipment from an offshore squadron of ships, thus eliminating the need for port facilities and a massive on-shore logistical footprint] is going to give us on the lower end [of the Marine Corps' spectrum of missions]. Tsunami relief is a classic example. We could use a large-deck carrier for tsunami relief. But that's probably not the best platform to use in that particular environment. With a sea basing concept, we would be able to scale the capability for tsunami relief or earthquake relief.

I don't know of any nation that wants us to come in, establish a new permanent base and run up the stars and stripes. There are a lot of nations that want to engage with us — to do joint exercises. What better way than for a platform to come in and be off the coast. We project just the capability that's needed ashore to do the training, the medical services, the engineering. We work with them, maintaining a very small footprint. All the logistics are at sea to use as needed. When the exercise is over, we're back out to sea and we're gone.

What do you hope to accomplish on your trip to Iraq in light of allegations that Marines were involved in killing Iraqi civilians?

HAGEE: Recent serious allegations concerning actions of Marines in combat have caused me concern. I would like to review the importance of our core values. The nature of this war with its ruthless enemies, and its complex and dangerous battlefield, will continue to challenge us in the commitment to our core values. We must be strong and help one another to measure up.

The war will also test our commitment to our belief in the rule of law. We do not employ force just for the sake of employing force. We use lethal force only when justified, proportional and, most importantly, lawful.

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