The MOC’s role in the Composite Warfare organization

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The purpose of this article is to highlight the potential role of the fleet commander in implementing the composite warfare structure within his maritime forces.

Since the end of the cold war the US Navy has been involved in numerous maritime operations and the issue of Officer in Tactical Command/ Composite Warfare Commander (OTC/CWC) responsibilities has not been a major factor in the success of those operations. This lack of impact is in large part due to the nonexistent maritime threat facing our current maritime forces. Naval forces operating off shore face almost no threat and their entire focus is often on supporting operations ashore. However with the resurgence of the Russia maritime threat and an increasingly aggressive China, the US and allies could find themselves fighting in a contested maritime environment and well inside the adversary’s threat envelop while still far out at sea. In this threat environment the protection of high value units would be a constant concern. For these reasons the fleet staffs need to again focus on the composite warfare structure and how it is implemented within their force.

The composite warfare concept was developed in part to create a maneuvering defensive bastion from which to project power and exercise sea control. The concept includes deliberate distribution of control and delegation of authorities to accelerate the speed of command and allow continued decision making even with degraded communications. In the composite warfare concept the coordinated defense of the force occurs with minimal communication between warfare commanders and the OTC.

The default position on many fleet staffs is to assign the Carrier Strike Group (CSG) Commander as the Officer in Tactical Command (OTC) duties with little additional guidance. In normal and routine operations (Phase 0) where the CSG self-defense is the main effort of the maritime force this is a logical decision. However, when multiple carrier and amphibious strike groups are supporting maritime operations the fleet commander must carefully consider the implications of alternative composite warfare structures. The OTC has overall responsibility for accomplishing the mission of the force and ensuring its defense. In many cases the OTC responsibility should go to the CSG with the most experience in the region but at other times the numbered fleet commander should consider maintaining OTC. The fleet commander should consider whether to have one or multiple OTCs in the maritime areas of operation to support multiple mission sets. If an amphibious operation is the main effort of the maritime forces, the fleet commander should carefully evaluate how the amphibious forces are being protected and
the role of the composite warfare structure in affording that protection. How the composite warfare structure is implemented will ultimately depend on the mission of the maritime force but there should be no default option.

The details of the composite warfare concept are well covered in NWP 3-56. While strike groups frequently train and exercise the composite warfare structure there is not the same focus at the fleet staffs. In phase 0 this lack of focus may not be an issue, however, in phase 1 the fleet staffs as a JFMCC may need to assume OTC duties. Some fleet command centers are not equipped with the radios and data link terminals to monitor the maritime fight and apply a negate order when needed. Not all MOC staffs have the expertise in warfare areas like AAW, ASW and ASUW needed to closely control tactical forces. In general, maritime warfare equipment capabilities and skills have atrophied at fleet command centers. This problem must be addressed before the fleet staff is faced with a crisis that requires the staff to assume OTC duties.

One of the biggest challenges for naval forces operating in a contested environment will be degraded communications effecting command and control. The ‘command by negation’ process within the composite warfare structure was developed to support operations in a fast paced warfare environment and takes on critical importance in an intermittent communications environment. In a degraded communications environment where friendly tactical forces are engaging inbound enemy aircraft or submarines, the guidance given those forces prior to tactical actions is critical. Many MOC watch standers are unfamiliar with the OPTASKs and OPTASK supplements promulgated by the OTC. These documents provide the guidance tactical forces will use to decide how to engage inbound contacts. The MOC staff should ensure these OPTASKs are in line with the fleet commander’s guidance.

Years of fighting land wars has shifted the focus of fleet staffs away from composite warfare and fighting in a contested maritime environment. To be prepared to operate in a hostile maritime environment fleet staffs must understand the composite warfare doctrine and be prepared to assume OTC responsibilities. MOC watch standers must be familiar with the OPTASKs and ensure those OPTASKs match the current commander’s guidance. Finally, staffs must understand CWC concepts like ‘command by negation’ and understand the authorities given tactical forces to use firepower.

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