MLRS Needs Robust Liaison Section

Major E. L. Hughes, in his article "Army MLRS Support for the Marines" (February 1995), mentioned the need for a robust liaison section in the MLRS [multiple-launch rocket system] table of organization and equipment. I agree.

From 8 to 31 March 1995, the 6th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery (6-27 FA), an MLRS battalion in III Corps Artillery, from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, participated in the 11th Marine Regiment's premiere Desert Firing Exercise (DESFIREX) 2-95. DESFIREX is the regiment's semiannual training exercise conducted at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California.

Training with the Marines provided 6-27 FA an excellent opportunity to work with joint service elements and maneuver the battalion over doctrinal distances, the latter an opportunity not afforded to us here at Fort Sill. DESFIREX was particularly rewarding for our liaison section as we were able to perform our doctrinal mission.

While supporting the 11th Marines, our mission was threefold. First, we had to maintain continual communications link (24 hours a day) between the reinforced unit and 6-27 FA's tactical operations center (TOC). We also had to provide unit capabilities information to the reinforced unit's S3, in this case, the Marines. And third, our mission was to validate 6-27 FA's liaison portion of the tactical standing operational procedures (TACSOP) operations annex.

6-27 FA conducts air reload operations at 29 Palms.

Maintain Continual Communications. We succeeded in maintaining continual communications between the reinforced unit and the 6-27 FA TOC throughout the exercise. We accomplished this using two methods of communication: secure voice and secure digital frequencies. We experienced few problems maintaining voice communications. When we did have problems, the system was quickly troubleshot and the problem fixed by the liaison section (liaison officer or the liaison sergeant) or the Marines. "Quick," of course, is relative as the distance between the remote and our vehicle was never less than 300 meters (and, it seemed, always uphill).

The Marines provided all digital communications. They assisted us by conducting command post exercises (CPXs) every evening. We found the CPXs gave the Marines and the 6-27 FA TOC the opportunity to conduct rehearsals and work out any fire planning issues.

Open communications weren't limited to ground operations. Prior to the final exercise, our mission was to take to the air with the commander and operations officer of the 39th Marine Air Group to help synchronize an MLRS platoon time-on-target (TOT) mission into the 1st Marine Division (1st MarDiv) battlefield shaping exercise. 1st MarDiv's mission was to prep the battlefield with MLRS fires followed immediately by fast movers and rotary-wing aircraft. Our part was to have a man in the air who knew the "artillery lingo" and could trigger the TOT with our Alpha "Steel Rain" Battery.

Provide Unit Capabilities Information to the Reinforced Unit's S3. We found that bringing a "Smartbook" on MLRS was extremely useful. It was based around the five requirements for accurate predicted fire as they apply to MLRS. We also included a section on controlled supply rates, required supply rates and rates of march. Using the Smartbook, we helped the Marines plan all phases of the exercise. Major issues were MAXORD [maximum ordinate] (when establishing air corridors) and land management, especially when MLRS had a reinforcing mission.

Additionally, we brought along the MLRS Platoon Leader's Handbook, a reference that was quite useful for future operations planning. Because safety was paramount, we helped the Marines with airspace coordination areas [ACAs] and fire support coordination lines [FSCL] by computing safety boxes and determining MAXORDs.

Validate the Liaison Annex of the 6-27 FA TACSOP. The Marines' logistical support was stellar. They provided all classes of supplies as we needed them. One exception was fuel; the Marines don't fuel their HMMWVs [high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles] with JP-8.

We alleviated frequent trips to the battalion by carrying two five-gallon fuel cans along. We prevented a fuel shortage by timing our refuels (exchanging of fuel cans) with trips to the battalion or with the battalion commander or chaplain visits. We experienced no vehicle maintenance problems, even though we traveled 800 miles over rugged terrain. This can be attributed to excellent preventive maintenance performed by the liaison sergeant—Staff Sergeant Russell E. Coble, Chemical Corps, the battalion NBC [Nuclear, Biological and Chemical] NCO. (Although a liaison specialist is authorized, we didn't have one.)

We brought along all the equipment to perform our mission. Most of it we used. A lesson learned: it is essential that the liaison section bring along a minimum of 300 to 400 meters of WD-1 wire. The Marines exercise the "antenna hill" concept; they run all their remoted antennae into a junction box on a hill, then run a cable to the combat operations center (COC). Even though your vehicle is on the same hill, it may be a few hundred meters from the junction box. When we did have a maintenance problem with our AN/GRA-39, the Marines provided a spare. Again, the Marine logistical support was stellar.

DESFIREX 2-95 was indeed a premiere exercise. By continually moving, communicating and providing capabilities information, we succeeded by achieving all our objectives during this very demanding joint operations exercise.

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