

26th MEU Communicators Shoot for the Sky

by GySgt Bryce Piper, 26th MEU Public Affairs
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CAMP BUEHRING, Kuwait - Approximately 20 Marines from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit took an opportunity here this week to learn about a new tool to extend the range of deployed communications.

The Combat SkySat High Altitude Operational Payload system could allow Marines in the near future to extend the range of some communications by more than 100 times, said Arizona Air National Guard Detachment 2 Commander Lt. Col. Patty Tuttle. The Marines attended a class explaining the system Jan. 12 and got hands-on with it during the next several days.

SkySat merges modern high-tech communications equipment with technology hundreds of years old: balloons. By floating relay equipment as high as 80,000 feet on a helium balloon, SkySat can extend the range of military radios like the handheld PRC-148 from a traditional three to four miles up to 500 miles.

By elevating the system by balloon, SkySat also allows communicators to overcome terrain features like mountains and valleys by changing the operator's line of sight, which could be of particular benefit to Marines in rough terrain like Afghanistan, said Tuttle.

"This is such a tactical mission enabler," she said. "It can really add to a commander's abilities. It can help troops on the ground, it can help pilots in the air – anyone who needs communications. We're excited to get it out and with (the Marines) and get it deployed," she said.

Given the ranges SkySat makes possible, communications are little affected by wind direction, according to Tuttle. Still, the system can be somewhat directed with the use of vents and ballast. It's also portable; the entire system is mobile and fits in the bed of a pickup truck, allowing commanders to extend communications at will in almost any area.

SkySat's equipment payload is expendable, according to Tuttle. After use, controllers on the ground command the balloon to release the communications equipment, which floats to the ground by parachute. No secret or classified equipment is housed in the payload, so it doesn't have to be recovered after deployment. If it is recovered, it can be sent back to the manufacturer to be reset for future use.

Currently the system is used only by the Air Force. But the tactical benefits were not overlooked by 26th MEU leaders.

"A commander's ability to extend long-range communications on the ground is key," said 26th MEU Executive Officer Lt. Col. Wes Capdepon. "And this is an asset that will allow us to extend communications over nearly any terrain and distance. This is a viable means to extend comm."

Increased communications will multiply the MEU's ability to perform missions with accuracy and control, Capdepon said.

"Clear communications is one of the most important things for leaders in the field," he stated. "But it's also important for their commanders. Without good comm, the commander's message to his Marines in the field could get lost, inferences could be lost. As such, the commander's intent could be lost."

"This gives the MEU a unique capability to provide long-range communications," said Maj. Roman Vitkovitsky, the MEU's communications officer. Several of Vitkovitsky's Marines attended the course along with Marines from all the MEU's Major Subordinate Elements. With the ability to extend classified and unclassified voice and data, Vitkovitsky and his Marines agreed SkySat is a true force multiplier.



Arizona Air National Guard MSgt Jake Martinez shows the SkySat payload to 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit Command Office Col. Mark Desens and 26th MEU Operations Officer Lt. Col. Walter Sopp as the SkySat balloon inflates behind them. SkySat could one day help Marines in the field with handheld radios communicate as far as 500 miles, regardless of terrain. 26th MEU Marines learned about the system Jan. 12 and got hands-on with the gear during the next several days. (Official USMC photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper)

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS:



Arizona Air National Guard MSgt. Jake Martinez and Tech. Sgt. Craig Armstrong attach the payload to SkySat's latex balloon. SkySat could one day help Marines in the field with handheld radios communicate as far as 500 miles, regardless of terrain. 26th MEU Marines learned about the system Jan. 12 and got hands-on with the gear during the next several days. (Official USMC photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper)



Arizona Air National Guard MSgt. Jake Martinez and Tech. Sgt. Craig Armstrong release the SkySat High Altitude Operational Payload system while leaders from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit observe the launch. SkySat could one day help Marines in the field with handheld radios communicate as far as 500 miles, regardless of terrain. 26th MEU Marines learned about the system Jan. 12 and got hands-on with the gear during the next several days. (Official USMC photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper)



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