No Time for Boats

Subject Area Warfighting

EWS 2006

No Time for Boats
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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7 February 2006

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2006		**00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
No Time for Boats	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **United States Marine Corps, Command Staff College Marine Corps,University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat ,Development Command,Quantico,VA,22134-5068**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**11**	

Since the Marine Corps adopted the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Special Operations Capable (SOC) concept in 1987, Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) have deployed with the capability to conduct a small boat raid. The small boat raid mission is currently tasked to one of the rifle companies from the Battalion Landing Team (BLT). When weighed against the likelihood of executing the mission, the amount of time devoted to training to execute a small boat raid cannot be justified. Therefore, the Marine Corps should no longer train an infantry company from the BLT of a MEU(SOC) to conduct small boat raids. It is not a viable mission for an infantry company and the time dedicated to training for it would be better spent training for more likely contingencies.

CRRC Limitations

An infantry small-boat company can insert up to one hundred forty-four Marines using the eighteen Combat Rubber Reconnaissance Craft (CRRC) in a MEU(SOC) boat suite. The CRRC was fielded in 1993 to fill the Marine Corps' requirement for a “small, lightweight, inflatable, rugged boat for use in performing various raid, reconnaissance, and riverine missions.”[1] Although developed for open-ocean use, the CRRC was never designed to move conventional forces from over the horizon (OTH).[2]

Additionally, Zodiac of North America, the manufacturer of the CRRC, designed the transom of the boat to support a short shaft engine. Despite this, after trying several different engine configurations, the Marine Corps adopted a long shaft engine. In response, stiffening kits were retrofitted to prevent damage to the transom resulting from the additional power of the long shaft engine. Zodiac has subsequently designed a stronger transom and incorporated it into the CRRC models fielded most recently.

Furthermore, to provide more rigidity to the boat during open ocean transits and while operating in the surf zone, infantry small boat companies have adopted longer stringers for the floor of the boat. The longer stringers lock all four aluminum deck plates in place vice allowing the forward deck plate to pivot according to its design. In doing so, the distribution of forces created by movement through the water against the deck of the boat have been altered. Forces that were designed to be withstood by the thrustboard and forward deck plate are now applied to the thrustboard alone. This has resulted in more broken thrustboards in CRRCs used by infantry small boat companies than in CRRCs used by other units.[3]

Modifying the CRRC from its original design and using it to transport an infantry small-boat company ashore from over the horizon has resulted in reduced reliability. The *Initial Capabilities Document for the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Small Craft Capability (SCC)* states that:

> CRRCs require multiple redundancies because of their inherent unreliability. If one boat goes down, as is often the case, the force must utilize a bump plan resulting in the wrong force ratio ashore, or the force becomes bogged down as one boat attempts to tow another to shore, thus slowing the entire operation immeasurably.[4]

The unreliability of the CRRC when employed to transport an infantry small-boat company ashore prevents the small-boat raid mission from being a viable option for a MEU commander. *Draft Shortcomings of Existing Systems for the Light Strike Craft* states that, “because of current CRRC system deficiencies, small boat OTH operations are often simply neither suitable, nor feasible, and rarely merit the operational risk incurred by employing a CRRC equipped force from OTH.”[5]

Rarely employed

MEU(SOC)s have been deploying with small boat companies since 1986. In the nearly twenty years that the small boat raid has been an option to MEU(SOC) commanders, an infantry small boat

company has been used to conduct an operation akin to a raid only once. On 9 December 1992, the 15th MEU(SOC) inserted Company F, BLT 2/9 into the New Port at Mogadishu, Somalia.[6] The operation cannot be characterized as a raid because it did not incorporate a planned withdrawal; nevertheless, the force was successfully transported ashore for subsequent operations. The few examples of a MEU(SOC) commander choosing to utilize small boats illustrate the limited utility of small boats.

The primary reason why the small boat raid mission has never been executed is because of the inherent risks. Numerous threats could spell disaster for a small boat raid force. The presence of coastal patrol aircraft, patrol boats, indigenous boats, coastal radar, or forces in the vicinity of the beach landing site (BLS) eliminates the possibility of executing the clandestine landing and withdrawal (CLW) required for a small boat raid. According to the *Draft Current and Projected Threat for the Light Strike Craft (LSC)*, the greatest threats to Marine forces include: small patrol craft with medium to heavy machineguns; intense, direct, small-arms fire at close range from ashore; and aircraft.[7] The threat from patrol boats and indigenous boats can be mitigated by acquiring a boat with a navigation system that would allow it to avoid other waterborne

craft; however, there is no way to eliminate the threats posed by coastal patrol aircraft, coastal radar, or forces on the BLS.

The small boat raid mission has always been an extremely risky proposition. The 2nd Raider Battalion learned that on Makin in 1942 and subsequent technological advances in watercraft have done little to reduce the risk. If anything, the proliferation of technology has increased the risk as it becomes easier to acquire systems to counter the threat posed by small boats. This trend will continue in the future, and the viability of the small boat raid mission will continue to diminish.

Training time

To remedy the problems associated with using CRRCs to transport an infantry small boat company ashore would require the development of a more robust small boat, a process already in development by Marine Corps Systems Command. The *Initial Capabilities Document for the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Small Craft Capability (SCC)* seeks to develop a boat that has greater operational range, force protection (e.g. firepower), sea state operability, payload capacity, navigational capability, speed, communication capability, and operational reliability than the CRRC.[8] Although improving the aforementioned capabilities, such a boat would also create some

problems – specifically, embark space and training time. Additional capabilities require additional training.

It currently takes seven weeks to train an infantry company to conduct a small boat raid. The following training is required:

Course	Training Days	Personnel
Basic Scout Swimmer	13	16
Coxswain Skills (CRRC)	20	28
Maritime Navigation	12	12
Small Boat Company Raid	10	108-144
SOTG Boat Raid	5	108-144

Note: Basic Scout Swimmer, Coxswain Skills (CRRC), and Maritime Navigation are conducted concurrently.

While the entire company is not involved in all training, sufficient personnel are involved to preclude the conduct of any other company-level training. After the initial seven weeks of training, the infantry small boat company is only trained to a basic level. Proficiency in small boat operations requires additional training time.

The operational tempo of all units since the beginning of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has increased significantly. Packages such as Mojave Viper, Enhanced Marksmanship Course, and Combat Aidsman Course Time occupy time that was previously available for company-level training. These programs are necessary and relate directly to the threats that an infantry unit is likely to encounter while forward deployed. The same is

not true of small boat training. Training to execute a small boat raid is time intensive and does not represent the optimal use of limited time and resources.

The time allocated for training to execute the infantry small-boat raid mission would be better spent preparing for operations that are more likely to be executed. Units do not currently have, nor will they ever have, time to train for missions that they will not execute. Since GWOT began, some deploying MEU commanders have elected to forego small boat training. They did this because they knew that their MEU would be executing operations ashore in Iraq.

Conclusions

There should be a balance between the amount of time spent training for a mission and the likelihood of executing that mission. That balance does not exist with the small boat raid mission. An infantry small boat company spends an exorbitant amount of time training to conduct a mission that they will likely never execute. *Draft Shortcomings of Existing Systems for the Light Strike Craft* states that, "infantry small boat companies are rarely selected as the force of choice in training or contingency missions because they do not represent a viable option for a MEU(SOC) commander."[9] For this reason, the Marine

Corps should no longer devote time, personnel, and equipment to training infantry companies to conduct small boat raids.

Word count – 1,429

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Notes

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