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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**THE ROLE OF THE EXPEDITIONARY STRIKE GROUP
IN THE NEW MARITIME STRATEGY**

by

Brett Hershman

LCDR, USN

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

10 October 2006

Abstract

The Navy-Marine Corps team continues to face new challenges in the 21st century. While traditional threats remain, the rise of transnational terrorism, trafficking in personnel, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, pandemics, natural disasters, and piracy represent some of the worldwide issues which impact global safety and economic stability. The international community relies on the sea for commerce and trade, and the U.S. Navy's vision of the "1000 Ship Navy" is a demonstration of how global cooperation by maritime nations can help secure the world's oceans for all. Striking a balance in the ability to cooperate across vast distances with global partners while still maintaining the ability to mass forces and project power in response to traditional threats to our National Security interests is critical in the development of the Navy's new Maritime Strategy.

This paper examines the role the Expeditionary Strike Group has played in maritime operations in the post-9/11 world and demonstrates how its inherent strengths naturally lend themselves to the needs of the Navy's new vision. It will discuss the General Officer / Flag Officer staff leadership model and the potential such expertise brings to the joint and coalition operating environments of the future. Additionally, it will highlight areas for improvement as the concept is solidified based on lessons learned over the past four years of operational deployments. This analysis intends to show that the Expeditionary Strike Group can play a critical role in the long-term future and merits significant consideration in the development of the new Maritime Strategy.

We live on the cusp of a new era. It is an era plagued by uncertainty and change and unrestricted warfare, an era of shifting global threats and challenging new opportunities. It is an era that calls for new skill sets, deeper partnerships, mutual understanding and – with the great majority of international commerce still moving on the world’s oceans – a firm commitment to the incredible power resident in the sea itself.¹

Admiral Michael Mullen

Introduction

In his guidance for 2006, Chief of Naval Operations Michael Mullen provides his vision for future naval operations. In a world where the long war and global military challenges remain at the forefront of joint force planning, the demands faced by the U.S. Navy and the future Maritime Strategy are clearly stated:

- 1) The ability to aggregate and disaggregate forces quickly;
- 2) Highly sophisticated networks, connectivity and stealth;
- 3) Better joint, allied, and coalition interoperability;
- 4) A new fleet of ships, aircraft and submarines to wield
that power across the spectrum of conflict.²

However, as we enter into this new era, the Navy is faced with the same real-world challenges we have always found in times of change. How do we fight and defeat the enemy we are currently engaged with while planning for an uncertain future? What sacrifices must we make in today’s forces in order to ensure the fleet of tomorrow is properly manned, equipped, and trained to support the National Security and Military Strategies? How can we

¹ ADM Michael Mullen, CNO Guidance for 2006: Meeting the Challenge of a New Era (Washington, DC: 14 October 2005), 1.

² Ibid.

accomplish all this while remaining transformational – developing a maritime force which will encompass the needs of today while capitalizing on the technology and advantages of tomorrow? And what capabilities will this force provide to the Geographic Combatant Commanders at the operational level of warfare in terms of adaptability, mobility, power projection and lethality across the broad range of military operations (in today’s mission sets and those yet to be defined)?

This paper will argue that the Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) concept fielded by the Navy and Marine Corps over the past four years meets the needs put forth by the CNO as well as those of the Geographic Combatant Commanders. It will demonstrate how well-suited the ESG is to the full spectrum of maritime missions we face today while possessing the inherent flexibility to meet future challenges, therefore earning significant consideration in the development of the new Maritime Strategy. Furthermore, it will make recommendations regarding a single command structure which would best suit future joint and coalition operations.

Evolution of the ESG

The ESG concept was first fielded in 2002 in order to demonstrate a more robust capability centered around a traditional Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG/MEU). The concept was proposed to better support the National Military Strategy by providing more independent striking groups than Aircraft Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) alone.³ The three-ship ARG/MEU consisted of one large-deck amphibious assault ship (LHA or LHD), and two smaller landing ships (one LPD and one LSD) with an embarked MEU spread across the three ships.

³ Kim Deal, ESG Assessment (Alexandria, VA: April 2005): 5.

The ESG model consists of the same ARG/MEU centerpiece, with the addition of two AEGIS surface combatants (CG or DDG), a third surface combatant (FFG or WHEC), one fast attack submarine (SSN) and additional staffing.⁴ The desire was to provide the Combatant Commander more “flexible and responsive options to a range of situations broader than the range appropriate for an ARG/MEU.”⁵ Initial implications also foresaw the ESG being employed as an integrated group.⁶ How the strike groups were actually employed across a broad range of military operations – primarily in the Central Command Area of Responsibility (CENTCOM AOR) – will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

In order to evaluate different command and control structures, two models were used simultaneously. West coast based ESGs were led by a one star general officer or flag officer (GO/FO), while east coast based ESGs continued to utilize the traditional dual-O6 model where the MEU and Amphibious Squadron (Phibron) commanders were co-equals in a doctrinal supported/supporting command relationship. The command models not only varied from coast to coast, but also between ESGs on the same coast. Each ESG commander tailored command structures differently in order to test a variety of models, utilizing the Composite Warfare Commander concept as a guide, but delegating warfare commander tasks and staff duties differently. While this produced several models for comparison, much of the manning was done ad hoc by the commanders, bringing together staff officers who may not have had a specific skill set (i.e., Strike Warfare or Air Defense) and requiring them to learn

⁴ U.S. Fleet Forces Command, TACMEMO 3-02.1-02: Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) Operations (Norfolk, VA: 12 November 2002): 6.

⁵ Deal: 6.

⁶ U.S. Fleet Forces Command: 9.

on the job, attend last-minute training sessions, or rely on other staff members or ships' company.⁷

Staff Manning Comparison of First Three ESGs⁸

| | Model | Officers O5 & up | Upgrades a. | Total new billets |
|-------|--------------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| ESG 1 | FO led staff | 12 | 2 | 33+9 b. |
| ESG 2 | Two O6s | 3 | 4 | 11 |
| ESG 3 | GO led staff | 11 | 0 | 35 c. |

- a. Billets that were filled by officers with more experience than planned.
- b. ESG 1 FO led staff numbered 33 and the PHIBRON had nine additional augments.
- c. ESG 3 core staff comprised 35 new billets and six TAD/LNO billets for a total of 41.

Figure 1

A number of post-deployment studies have been published, analyzing the single major variable of each ESG: command structure. All support the similar conclusion that a single, codified command structure is needed in order to facilitate forward progress in the transition of the ESG concept to doctrine.^{9 10 11 12 13} Specific possibilities will be discussed in the recommendations portion of this paper.

Today's ESG: Meeting the Global Mission

For the past four years, regardless of command structure, one thing has remained constant: All ESGs have executed all of their assigned missions during a time of war, leading the Navy to conclude that the concept is indeed a success.¹⁴ Throughout the Global War on

⁷ William Kemple, et al, Field Observations of an Expeditionary Strike Group: A Prerequisite to Model-driven Experimentation of Adaptive C2 Processes (Monterey, CA: September 2006): 5-9.

⁸ Deal, 11.

⁹ Deal, 19.

¹⁰ Kim Deal and David J. Zvijac, Refining the ESG concept – interim report 1 (Alexandria, VA: May 2005).

¹¹ Kim Deal and Suzanna Schulze, Amphibious Squadron One as sea combat commander: JTFEX 05-4 quick look (Alexandria, VA: July 2005), 5.

¹² Susan Hutchins, et al, Expeditionary Strike Group: Command Structure Design Support (Monterey, CA: Summer 2005), 5, 11.

¹³ Kemple, 5-9.

¹⁴ Deal, 21.

Terror (GWOT), ESGs have deployed to CENTCOM, European Command (EUCOM) and Pacific Command (PACOM) AORs, supporting the Navy's 3/1 Strategy (Figure 2).¹⁵

3/1 Strategy Key Themes

Ability to aggregate/disaggregate combat power.

§ Deploy as a group.

§ Distribute the group into smaller 1 or 2 ship units for increased forward presence and maritime awareness.

§ Pull the groups back together for larger threats.

§ Mass multiple groups for major combat.

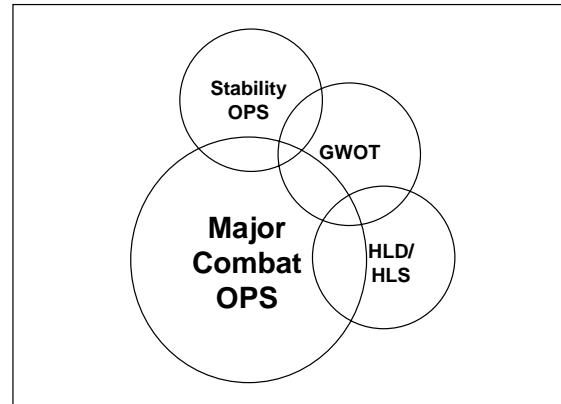


Figure 2¹⁶

All ESGs have executed the Navy's 3/1 strategy during their deployment cycles. Each ESG trained as a unit under 2nd or 3rd Fleet, deployed as a group, split into smaller units or groups upon arrival in theater to support missions as directed by the Combatant Commander (COCOM), and reconstituted when necessary for larger operations.¹⁷ This was not done intentionally to prove the concept, rather it came to pass through the inherent nature of maritime forces and the specific capabilities and flexibility found in the ESGs themselves.¹⁸ A post-deployment snapshot of operations conducted includes everything from full-scale combat operations in a joint/coalition environment to low-intensity, distributed operations with units acting alone or in small task units:^{19 20}

¹⁵ Deal, 7.

¹⁶ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, The United States Navy's 3/1 Strategy (Washington, DC), <www.onr.navy.mil/about/conferences/rd_partner/2005/docs/past/2005/0507_mangold_navys_31_strategy.pdf> [17 September 2006].

¹⁷ Deal, 11.

¹⁸ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval Doctrinal Publication 1, Naval Warfare (Washington, DC: 28 March 1994), 6.

¹⁹ John Goetke, ESG-1 post-deployment lessons learned (Alexandria, VA: January 2005).

²⁰ Annemarie Randazzo, ESG-3 post-deployment report (Alexandria, VA: January 2005).

ESG Operations

- Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan
- Maritime Interdiction Operations
- Anti-Piracy Operations
- Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq
- Maritime Security Operations
- Amphibious Operations

As stated previously, all ESGs executed all assigned tasks during their deployments. However, this does not mean that all ESGs are created equal. Interviews with senior leadership have given the Navy valuable insight on how the different command models were viewed at the operational level of war, ultimately impacting how different ESGs were employed, particularly in the CENTCOM AOR. To date, the majority of ESG employment has been in support of CENTCOM and Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet (NAVCENT), therefore most data available reflects a CENTCOM view.

The employment of the first three ESGs in CENTCOM revealed some particular theater-level command relationships for comparison:

ESG-1 deployed in August 2003 and consisted of *USS Peleliu (LHA 5)*, *USS Germantown (LSD 42)*, *USS Ogden (LPD 5)*, *USS Port Royal (CG 73)*, *USS Jarrett (FFG 33)*, *USS Decatur (DDG 73)*, and *USS Greenville (SSN 772)* as well as the Marines of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable).²¹ Operations were conducted throughout the CENTCOM AOR, including the Northern Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and Horn of Africa, with the strike group assuming Tactical Control (TACON) of a variety of non-ESG units in the course of those operations.²²

²¹ JO2(SW) Jason Heavner and LT Chris Davis, "Navy's First Trained Expeditionary Strike Group Deploys from San Diego," *Navy News website* (San Diego, CA: 26 August 2003), https://navcms.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=9213.

²² Goetke: 13.

As ESG-1 was the first ESG to deploy to CENTCOM, much of the staff's time was focused not only on operational planning, but on educating the theater leadership on the capabilities the ESG brought to theater compared with prior ARG/MEUs. Analysts have noted that the Strike Group Commander, a one star admiral, had access to key theater leadership (at CENTCOM and NAVCENT), which enhanced command relationships, mission planning and execution.²³

ESG-2 deployed in February 2004 and consisted of *USS Wasp (LHD 1)*, *USS Shreveport (LPD 12)*, *USS Whidbey Island (LSD 41)*, *USS Leyte Gulf (CG 55)*, *USS Yorktown (CG 48)*, *USS McFaul (DDG 74)*, and *USS Connecticut (SSN 22)*, as well as the Marines of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Group (Special Operations Capable).²⁴ The ESG conducted operations throughout Sixth Fleet and CENTCOM AORs – including ground operations in Afghanistan – however, the strike group commander, a Navy captain, received TACON of fewer non-ESG assets from NAVCENT, and ESG-2's assets were more widely dispersed throughout the CENTCOM AOR during the majority of time in theater. He also had limited access to key theater leadership compared to ESG-1.²⁵

ESG-3 deployed in May 2004 and consisted of *USS Belleau Wood (LHA 3)*, *USS Denver (LPD 9)*, *USS Comstock (LSD 45)*, *USS Mobile Bay (CG 53)*, *USS Preble (DDG 88)*, *USS Hopper (DDG 70)*, and *USS Charlotte (SSN 766)*, as well as the Marines of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable).²⁶ The ESG was the first led by a Marine one star general and conducted extensive Maritime Security Operations (MSO) in the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Commander, U.S. 2nd Fleet Public Affairs, "Wasp ESG Ships Return from Deployment," Navy News website (Norfolk, VA: 18 September 2004), http://www.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=15195.

²⁵ Deal, 14.

²⁶ JO3 Cynthia R. Smith, "USS Belleau Wood ESG Deploys," Navy News website (San Diego, CA: 1 June 2004), https://navcms.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=13560.

Northern Arabian Gulf – including security for the Iraqi oil platforms at Al Basrah Oil Terminal (ABOT) & Khawr Al Amaya Oil Terminal (KAAOT) – after putting the MEU ashore for ground operations in Iraq. ESG-3 was given TACON of numerous forces in support of MSO operations, including U.S. Coast Guard Island-class patrol boats, British and Australian frigates, a Naval Special Warfare team, a Maritime Special Purpose Force team, and a Navy Special Boat Unit. Like ESG-1’s admiral, ESG-3’s commanding general had significant access to key theater leadership in CENTCOM.²⁷

These examples demonstrate the flexibility of the ESG to satisfy a broad range of missions as dictated by the theater commander. It also sheds light into how the GO/FO-led model is viewed and employed by commanders compared to its O6-led counterpart.

Observations on Operational Leadership

Interviews with COMUSNAVCENT noted that theater leadership felt a flag officer- (or general officer-) led ESG is more capable than one led by an O6 and would therefore be tasked differently.²⁸ This was evidenced in the post-deployment studies of the first three ESGs, discussed above, and was recently validated during the 2005 deployment of ESG-1 onboard *USS Tarawa (LHA 1)* and 2006 deployment of ESG-3 onboard *USS Peleliu (LHA 3)*.

ESG-1’s 2005 deployment was commanded by RDML Michael LeFever and was comprised of similar forces to previous ESGs. Immediately upon arrival in CENTCOM, ESG-1 was sent to Egypt to participate in the multi-national exercise Bright Star 2005 with units from Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands,

²⁷ Randazzo, 17.

²⁸ Deal, 23.

Pakistan, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.²⁹ The remainder of the deployment saw ESG-1 assets utilized throughout the theater for joint and coalition missions (MIO, MSO, anti-piracy operations, and Maritime Domain Awareness) aggregating and disaggregating forces as necessary.

Even with forces (including non-ESG units under TACON to ESG-1) conducting distributed operations in multiple regions of the CENTCOM AOR across hundreds of miles, the ESG watchstanders were able to maintain comprehensive command and control (C2) and a Common Operational Picture (COP) through the extensive use of C2 technology. Satellite Tactical Data Links (TADIL), Global Command and Control System Maritime (GCCS-M), and secure voice and computer communications allowed the staff watch officers to monitor their forces conducting MSO missions in the Northern Arabian Gulf, even while the flagship was operating off Egypt in the Mediterranean Sea.³⁰ CAPT David Clopp, ESG-1's Operations Officer observed, "We were in four different places, doing four different missions at the same time (at one point). It definitely shows the agility of the ESG. We are able to conduct multiple missions at once."³¹

Most significantly, in October 2005, RDML LeFever and members of his core staff were sent to Pakistan as coordinators of the Combined Disaster Relief Center following a major earthquake in the region. Having a flag-led staff available in theater for immediate employment was a force multiplier for CENTCOM.³²

²⁹ JO3 David Perea, "Tarawa Participates in Bright Star 2005," Navy News website (San Diego, CA: 4 October 2005), http://www.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=20434.

³⁰ LCDR Brett Hershman, Assistant Operations Officer, *USS Tarawa (LHA 1)*, ESG-1 2005 deployment.

³¹ CAPT David Clopp in William Kemple, Field Observations of an Expeditionary Strike Group: A Prerequisite to Model-driven Experimentation of Adaptive C2 Processes (Monterey, CA: September 2006).

³² Kemple, 20.

RDML LeFever noted, “Having a flag embarked has some terrific advantages. First and foremost, you are forward deployed in theater and engaged. Whether you are embarked or not isn’t necessarily a big issue. But if you are not there when the incident occurs, you are too late. If you are not forward deployed, you risk being called too late to the fight. Your absence early on can create a lack of synergy in the ESG team and you lack the relationships that will be very important when required in conflict or disaster.”³³

As Vego observes, the operational responsibilities of leadership lend themselves to the argument that ESG leaders need to be well-informed, knowledgeable, and engaged in theater in order to facilitate effective planning. The added forces and operational range of an ESG compared to a traditional ARG/MEU, combined with the potential for more distributed operations throughout a theater, embarked staffs are finding themselves faced with greater involvement in making operational decisions and requiring access to key theater leadership.

According to Vego, “In crisis or regional conflict, the operational level of command is directly responsible for planning and conduct of operational deployment and redeployment of one’s forces in the respective theater of operations. The major responsibility of the operational level of command is sequencing and synchronization of operational functions. Operational command and control is exercised through authority over subordinate forces and theater-wide infrastructure in planning, preparing, and employing military and nonmilitary sources of power for the accomplishment of the assigned military objectives. The operational level of command employs operational command and control warfare (C2W) in peacetime and in war.”³⁴

ESG-3, the New Command Model and CJTF Lebanon

The latest Navy-Marine Corps decision regarding ESG leadership culminated in the deployment of ESG-3 onboard *USS Peleliu (LHA 5)* in February 2006.³⁵ BGEN Carl Jensen

³³ RDML Michael LeFever, Interview with author, September 2006.

³⁴ Dr. Milan N. Vego, *NWC 1004: Operational Warfare* (Newport, RI: Naval War College), 22.

³⁵ PH2(AW) Regina L. Brown and JO2 Zack Baddorf, “ESG 3 Deploys in Support of Global War on Terrorism,” *Navy News website*, (San Diego, CA: 15 February 2006), <http://www.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=22247>.

and his staff completed pre-deployment training and deployed in the same fashion as previous west coast ESGs. However, prior to ESG-3 returning to home port, the general and his staff disembarked and stood up a permanently-forward-deployed ESG staff (CTF-59: Commander Expeditionary Forces Fifth Fleet / Commander Contingency Forces Fifth Fleet) at NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain.³⁶ This concept includes the Marine Corps' input to the ESG lessons learned process that an embarked GO/FO-led staff may not always be the "best fit" for all situations, and having a permanent GO/FO staff in 5th Fleet would maintain situational awareness in a critical theater with the ability to embark whenever and wherever necessary.³⁷

Under the new plan, ESGs will now deploy with the east coast O6 command model, with the ability to embark a GO/FO staff when necessary, as demonstrated in September 2006 when ESG-5 deployed from San Diego and Hawaii under the command of CAPT David Angood, the embarked amphibious squadron commander.³⁸

CTF-59 got its first test in July 2006 when BGEN Jensen and his staff deployed to Akrotiri Air Base on Cyprus to prepare for Lebanon Contingency Operations (non-combatant evacuation operations) following the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon. CTF-59 remained on Cyprus as forces from the *Iwo Jima* ESG and other forces from 5th and 6th Fleet flowed into the eastern Mediterranean. Having been in CENTCOM prior to operations in Lebanon, CTF-59 had strong situational awareness and was able to rapidly establish its headquarters on Cyprus, lending itself to close coordination with British and French forces, as well as several International Government Organizations and Non

³⁶ CDR Erik Ross, interview by author, Email interview, Newport, RI, September-October 2006.

³⁷ Deal, 22.

³⁸ MCSA Shannon K. Cassidy, "ESG-5 Departs for 2006 Deployment," Navy News website, (San Diego, CA: 14 September 2006), <http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=25570>.

Governmental Organizations (IGOs and NGOs). Once the evacuation was complete, CTF-59 turned responsibilities for CJTF Lebanon over to Sixth Fleet and redeployed to Bahrain.³⁹

This first use of the forward deployed GO/FO ESG concept appears to have been a success; however, only time will tell if having a theater-based staff that is not embarked and trained with its own forces is the final solution. Regardless of where the ESG commander establishes his/her headquarters, the opinions of leadership who have been involved with the ESG process over the past four years tend to agree that the GO/FO-led model brings a higher level of competency and the capability to act as a CJTF enabler from the onset of operations.⁴⁰

As BGEN Medina observed, “An ESG Flag-led staff provides the Coalition Force Maritime Component Commander a more experienced and senior Staff afloat. A Flag-led staff also bridges the operational and tactical levels and avoids task saturation at the CTG level. The Flag-led ESG is centered on looking ahead to transform littoral warfare doctrine and force structure. Other advantages offered by a Flag-led ESG include: a Flag-led ESG is more effective when coordinating with Flag-led coalition Units; a Flag-led ESG achieves parity with a Carrier Strike Group — a significant advantage once in theater (and for procuring resources during work ups). A Flag-led ESG is essential for conducting Regional Engagements, particularly in the CENTCOM area of operations.”⁴¹

ESG-3 / Task Force 58 Post-Deployment Brief, 11 January 2005

These recent, time-critical crises demonstrate the powerful and flexible response options the ESG brought to CENTCOM leadership. Whether embarked or ashore, the GO/FO-led ESG staff gave CENTCOM a JTF-enabling force that was immediately available and deployable with the requisite situational awareness to promptly commence operations in a complex joint and coalition environment.

³⁹ Ross.

⁴⁰ LeFever.

⁴¹ Hutchins, 11.

Future of the ESG: A Potent Role in the 1000 Ship Navy

The Chief of Naval Operations has made it clear that the Navy of the future must be greater than the sum of its parts if it is to remain relevant in the 21st century. Global commerce and national economies rely on the sea, and a secure maritime environment is critical to the world economy. It requires a collective effort by all those who have a stake in the future. Naval forces will need to be able to perform a wide variety of missions collectively, as individual units or small task groups, and more often than not as part of a coalition. This broad network of nations, navies, ships, and associated forces will become the backbone of the CNO’s “1000 Ship Navy” (figure 3,).⁴²

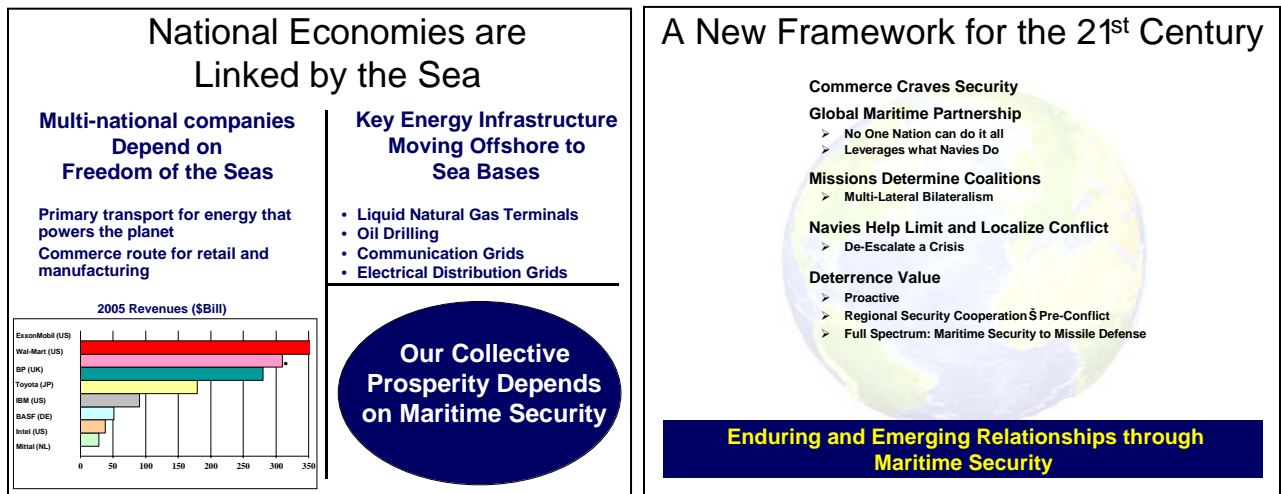


Figure 3, from CNO’s “1000 Ship Navy” brief⁴³

As previously demonstrated, the ESG is well-suited to the task of executing a broad range of military operations both as a unified force and through distributed operations across a large geographic space. While each ESG has trained and deployed as a group, prepared to

⁴² Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, The “1000 Ship Navy” Global Maritime Partnerships, Senior Leadership brief, (Washington, DC: 14 August 2006).

⁴³ Ibid.

establish maritime superiority in a littoral area in support of coastal and near-coastal objectives, they have routinely been disaggregated in order to best support multiple needs of the theater commander. Many of these operations have been conducted in conjunction with host-nation and coalition partners⁴⁴ and are at the heart of the CNO's new strategy:

- Counter Proliferation Operations
- Theater Security Cooperation
- Strategic Communications Activities
- Counter Narco-Trafficking
- Unit-Level Training
- Maritime Domain Awareness
- Maritime Presence & Deterrence
- Multi-Lateral Bilateralism⁴⁵

Since their inception, and by their inherent design, ESGs have been meeting the security challenges of the post-9/11 world – yet have still retained their core ability to mass forces in support of expeditionary operations centered around the MEU. This is a core competency expressed by the CNO for FY 2007: “Use the Navy-Marine Corps Team to aggressively prosecute the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).”⁴⁶

The evolution of the ARG/MEU into the ESG is a demonstrated force multiplier.⁴⁷ As the new Maritime Strategy is formed, the ESG should be considered a key component of the 1000 Ship Navy of the future. The fleet will require strong, experienced leadership in joint and coalition environments, well-suited for the GO/FO-led ESG model. Additionally, the concept has the potential to evolve even further with the procurement programs already in place: MV-22 Osprey, Advanced Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAAV), Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), *San Antonio* Class Landing Platform Dock (LPD 17), LHA-R Amphibious Assault Ship, and advanced communications and data systems. Each will bring greater

⁴⁴ Deal, 7.

⁴⁵ Office of the Chief of Naval Operations.

⁴⁶ Mullen, 1.

⁴⁷ LeFever.

capabilities which will allow the ESG to perform as a more powerful force, while allowing even greater distribution of assets throughout the theater in support of wide-spread maritime security and stability with partner nations.

Recommendations and Conclusion

While the ESG concept has many positive qualities in the development of the new Maritime Strategy, there are several considerations which merit discussion. First and foremost is the role of the MEU as the centerpiece of the strike group.

In the ARG/MEU construct, the primary mission was to embark the MEU in ARG shipping and remain forward deployed and prepared to employ the MEU when tasked by higher headquarters. While these capabilities remain within the ESG construct, they are now sharing Mission Essential Tasks and training hours with the additional naval assets of the strike group.⁴⁸ This can become a planning issue over apparently simple issues, such as flight hours for the Air Combat Element (ACE) versus alternate tasking for the ships, which may preclude an open flight deck, ultimately impacting pilot readiness.⁴⁹ It can also raise concerns when strike group shipping is disaggregated to support several missions within the theater of operations. Can the MEU commander support splitting his Marines embarked across three amphibious ships? Are there troops or supplies on one ship that are necessary for operations that may be conducted by another? These are examples of the day-to-day concerns that must be taken into consideration by embarked planners as well as theater-level staffs.

One solution may be to refine the MEU mission sets to better align with the Mission Essential Tasks of the ESG. Commander Fleet Forces Command (CFFC) has been tasked

⁴⁸ Hutchins, 16.

⁴⁹ Deal, 9.

with creating new Required Operational Capabilities and Projected Operating Environment (ROC/POE) documentation for the ESG concept, as well as an OPNAV Instruction better defining the ESG overall. To date, neither has been published.⁵⁰ Another solution may be to develop new MEU embarkation tables which allow greater flexibility in support of broader, distributed operations. Future ship classes and designs must also be considered, as they will provide for different load configurations and cargo/vehicle capacity.

The GO/FO-led model has the potential to help solve these concerns as well. “The Navy and Marine Corps need to clearly articulate the command relationships. The ESG commander is not part of a supported or supporting relationship, it is a higher headquarters. The MEU, Phibron, and other elements have those relationships, but clearly the ESG GO/FO is in charge and in command, exercising authority over all forces to optimize effects of all for the accomplishment of the mission and it may require a break-up of traditional roles.”⁵¹

Another consideration for future ESGs is the codification of staff manning and key billets. As previously discussed, staff manning throughout the ESG experimentation phase was different every time. Some of this was an attempt to discover the “proper fit” while some was a restriction based on sheer availability of personnel and living space on the flagship. The result was a varying level of expertise from ESG to ESG.⁵² As the mission sets, Mission Essential Tasks and ROC/POE become clearer, it should follow that staff manning can be better defined and trained to.

The defined operating environment(s) of the ESG also requires further clarification. The Navy currently describes the ESG operating environment as “limited non-permissive”⁵³

⁵⁰ Deal, 14-15.

⁵¹ LeFever.

⁵² Kemple, 10.

⁵³ Deal, 8.

and assumes a certain level of risk to forces. It also assumes that air and maritime defensive capabilities would continue to be provided by Aircraft Carrier Strike Group assets.⁵⁴ Future employment considerations should include the inherent level of force protection ESGs have added as the post-9/11 maritime threat has become more evident and the role of the CSG in securing the deep-water operating environment and conducting deep-strike operations while the ESG remains the dominant force in the littorals.⁵⁵

Finally, the ESG's role in the new Maritime Strategy cannot be developed in a vacuum. Seabasing developments, the creation of the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC), the optimization of Naval Special Warfare forces, and the implementation of the Marine Corps Special Operations Command are all key Navy objectives for the future.⁵⁶ These forces will share operating environments, mission objectives, platforms and command and control assets – not only amongst themselves, but in joint and coalition operations as well – which will require a high level of interoperability and coordination. These programs should be developed in parallel to ensure the creation of an overall force which can operate in synch over the entire range of military options we will face in the future.

Over the past four years the ESG concept has proven itself a valid and powerful asset for the Navy-Marine Corps team. It already possesses the ability to execute a wide range of missions vital to our National Security while demonstrating the flexibility to adapt to the changing demands of the new maritime operating environment, and future force developments will serve to further enhance these abilities. As demonstrated in this paper, the ESG's potential to fulfill the needs of the CNO's 1000 Ship Navy vision, combined with

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ LeFever.

⁵⁶ Mullen, 1.

joint leadership at the GO/FO level, merit continued study and consideration for a role in the new Maritime Strategy.

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