

or phone call. Sometimes these letters and conversations can be somewhat awkward because of the manner and nature of the discharge, but nonetheless, they are grateful for our care and concern. They typically cannot say enough about what it means to them and their son or daughter to hear from us. In fact, recently I had a Marine who was given a Bad Conduct Discharge, who with his parents went out of their way during their travels to pay the command a visit. They came to thank us for the manner and dignity in which the command handled the circumstances surrounding his discharge and for the restoration of his self-esteem our phone calls made, and to show us that he is indeed doing well now.

They all had nothing but good things to say about the Marine Corps. This may not have been the case without having taken this added final step.

Furthermore, it promotes a positive image of the Corps, reinforcing the motto "Marines take care of their own." As a result, it is a great

networking gives the Marine Corps exposure it would not normally get. Implementing such a practice requires breaking another paradigm. It is a logical new final step in taking care of our own—seeing to it that they remain with their sights on target. It costs us very little in time and money relative to what the Marine and the Marine Corps receives in return. Most importantly, it's the right thing to do.

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recruiting tool. These former Marines, their parents, relatives, and friends will no doubt share with others the positive experiences they have heard about or experienced firsthand with the Marine Corps. The resulting indirect

MEU(SOC)s

Small Boat Operations: Coming Down to Reality

by Capt Christopher C. Carolan

Raids are not the only mission for the boat company.

Since the beginning of the Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable), or MEU(SOC), Program, the primary mission of the boat company has been the point destruction amphibious raid conducted with combat rubber raiding craft (CRRCs). With the increasing ability of night vision devices, sensors, precision guided munitions, and the command and control technology to employ these systems, the risk involved in sending a 75- to 100-man light infantry raiding force to destroy targets such as radar or missile sites continues to grow. In addition, the withdrawal phase of a small boat raid, surf zone or no surf zone, puts

the unit in a highly vulnerable state.

A typical profile for this mission follows these lines: The raid force is launched from over the horizon in 12 to 18 CRRCs. It transits to just off the coast and drops off scout swimmers to do a reconnaissance of the beach landing site (BLS). On signal, the raid force lands, moves its boats to above the high-water mark, and assembles. Coxswains, scout swimmers, and sometimes a security element remain at the BLS while the rest of the raid force moves inland to conduct the mission. The raid force conducts the actions on the objective and then with as much speed as possible returns to the BLS. Here the

raid force reforms into boat teams, and when the surf is right they launch. After all boats have successfully cleared the surf zone the raid force returns to amphibious ready group (ARG) shipping, and once all boats are safely aboard the mission is complete. The operation is simple to describe, but it stands as one of the most difficult and vulnerable evolutions we ask Marines to perform.

Although there are a number of areas in the small boat community that pose serious problems—e.g., boat loads, training cycle, and mechanical readiness—the one that requires the greatest attention is how the Marine Corps plans to use this

capability in the future. Many argue that we need to get rid of the boat companies because they are impractical and not able to do the training in more conventional operations that are still the mainstay of the battalion landing team. The focus on the highly specialized and relatively unconventional skills required of small boat operators is viewed by many as wasted time and money. There are, however, a number of far more practical missions that a boat company can carry out.

In order to make the small boat company a more practical and useful force, a number of changes must be made to the way we perceive its role. We must organize and train it to be a small boat force (SBF) rather than a raid force. The boat company is not able to bring all of its personnel ashore by means of a single wave of CRRCs. There are only 126 boat spaces in the 18 CRRCs assigned a company. If you take away the coxswains and scout swimmers you end up with 100 effectives ashore. Even this is a maximum, idealized number that should not be used for planning. Boats and motors become inoperative. A more realistic number, especially if the boats are going to be sent away after dropping off their riders, is 75 Marines ashore. This being the case, what has been done in the past is that the company has stripped its platoons of all their best Marines. The raid force gets its standard command, security, covering, and assault elements, and these tasks were usually matched up with platoons. The end product is a top heavy raid force in which nearly every leader above the rank of corporal goes on the mission while the rest of the company remains behind basically as a leaderless mob. With the enormous complexities of a small boat raid it is no wonder that this is the case, but there is a better answer.

Another way to look at organizing an SBF is to use only two platoons and keep the third platoon and most of weapons platoon intact as a cohesive unit capable of doing other missions. This small force could be un-

der the command of the company executive officer and do a number of different tasks. One such task could be to provide the SBF with an in-house Sparrow Hawk. The complexities of a reinforcing effort joining a force already engaged are often "fairy-dusted" away, but in reality this is an evolution that has a high probability of disaster. By keeping the forces internal and rehearsing, we can make a lot of progress toward a more effective Sparrow Hawk capability. There are a number of other missions this force could be used for, but the main thing to remember is that the boat company ought to keep this unit a viable organization with the leadership in place to conduct missions independent of its parent organization. From a morale and leadership point of view, this is also a more practical model. Most companies end up with varsity and junior varsity teams—a practice that wastes assets, creates unnecessary problems, and degrades combat readiness.

“If we continue to fool ourselves into believing that the boat raid is the end-all of small boats then their future is doomed.”

The biggest problem with small boat operations involving more than five CRRCs is that it is highly unlikely that the force will be able to leave the beach in a tactical manner. It is usually practical to have a couple of reconnaissance teams cache their boats, move in, conduct surveillance, and then return to ARG shipping. It is quite another to try and cache 18 boats, provide security for the BLS, move to a target, blow it up, get into a firefight, disengage, return to the BLS, and get 18 CRRCs through a surf zone. The idea of returning to the BLS with a large raid force and then negotiating a surf zone is best left for Hollywood. This is great adventure training for the Marines, but it is simply not a practical means of getting two platoons worth of Marines off a hostile shore. We need to remember that these boats are made of rubber, and any weapon invented since the Stone Age can disable them.

With all this said it may seem that there is little use for the CRRC and the small boat company. If we continue to fool ourselves into believing that the boat raid is the end-all of small boats then their future is doomed. But there are missions for which the SBF is well suited—some for which they are uniquely qualified. Before looking at these possibilities, it is important to identify exactly what capabilities the SBF does have and develop a mission profile to exploit them.

A boat company is capable of launching from over the horizon from either a ship (LPD is the ship best suited) or an LCU. The use of the LCU allows the SBF to conduct operations while the ARG is still well away from the coast. A SBF can put ashore 75 Marines in a clandestine landing and there are few beaches in the world that they can't use. This may not seem like a powerful force, but used properly it could be a great asset. Another key aspect of the boat

community is that it is familiar with operating from over the horizon. If operational maneuver from the sea is going to be our future, all Marines will need to learn the lessons of

over-the-horizon (OTH) operations.

A more realistic mission profile for the boat company is far less dynamic and colorful than its current one. The first part of the profile would remain basically the same as it is now. The SBF would be launched from OTH and use scout swimmers to confirm the beach. Next, the SBF lands by wave, the riders disembark and turn the craft around before moving to their assigned position. Once all boats have landed the coxswains and assistant coxswains take the boats back out through the surf zone. The scout swimmers are used to guide the boats past the initial breakers and do not release or board the boat until the coxswain has the engine running and is in control of the craft. Meanwhile the SBF is providing security at the BLS and making preparations for its movement inland. Once all boats are past the surf zone they begin to transit back to ARG shipping. The SBF is

now ashore and ready to conduct its mission without a vulnerable BLS to worry about.

This is where the idea of how to use the boat company changes. A raid mission is still an option. The main difference is that it would require a helicopter extract. There may be some advantages to doing a raid in this manner and it provides another option for planners to consider. But getting away from the raid theme, there are other missions that are well suited for the SBF. Many of these are pre-H-hour operations that could greatly enhance the probability of success in future operations.

Craft landing zone (CLZ) security is something rarely addressed, but lack of it could prove fatal in a real-world situation. The capabilities of the air cushion landing craft (LCAC) are well advertised, and few question that it brings a new and powerful force to the modern beachhead. Still its limitations and vulnerabilities cannot be ignored. Many planners look at the possibility of using the LCAC to deliver light armored vehicles and

HMMWVs to separate beaches where they can debark and execute a screening or point interdiction mission. These bold and dynamic tactics, however, could easily be stopped by an alert sentry with an AK-47. Providing security for an LCAC landing, therefore, becomes a practical and important mission for a boat company. After conducting a clandestine landing the company could move by night to the CLZ where it would remain hidden and prepared to protect the site from curious local inhabitants or enemy forces alerted by the noise of the LCACs. Once the LCACs have landed and dropped off their cargo, the SBF moves to a designated area and links up with its remaining elements and starts conventional operations ashore or withdraws aboard the LCACs if not needed ashore. Many in the MEU(SOC) boat community may cringe at such a mundane and conventional mission, but it is a much more realistic evolution than the boat raid scenario.

CLZ security is just an example of one type of mission the boat compa-

ny could be assigned. Other examples include helicopter landing zone security, setting up blocking positions to cover the beaches, holding key terrain such as bridges until larger forces can arrive, etc. The possibilities for the employment of an SBF are many. The "raid mentality" that has tended to focus the boat companies on only one function has done a lot of damage. The sooner we start looking at CRRCs as simply a means of delivering infantry to the shore in a clandestine manner, the more we will benefit from this unique capability.

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>Capt Carolan is a recent graduate of Amphibious Warfare School and wrote this article as a student requirement.

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