

1998 Chase Prize Essay Contest: Entry

Small Boats Within OMFTS

by Capt Douglas J. MacIntyre

Does the boat company have a future in the Corps? Could it be an expanding future as this author suggests?

It is the year 20xx. As a recent graduate of Amphibious Warfare School, you are assigned as the rifle company commander of the boat company within a battalion landing team (BLT). As you prepare to take the helm, several questions begin to form in your mind. Besides various special operations and amphibious raids, what is your unit's role in support of larger amphibious operations? Can a rifle company in rigid raider craft (RRCs) and combat rubber raiding craft (CRRCs) play a role in operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS)? Are you relegated to a second string player when compared to the capabilities of the mechanized company in advanced amphibious assault vehicles (AAAVs) or the helicopterborne company in MV-22s? Does your small boat force (SBF) truly possess an over-the-horizon (OTH) capability?

Since the first experiments with raid operations in the 1930s and the subsequent formation of provisional rubber boat companies and raider battalions in the 1940s, the Marine Corps has continually sought to exploit the capabilities that small craft can provide. Building upon lessons learned from as far back as the fateful Makin Island raid, today's Marine expeditionary unit (special operations capable) (MEU(SOC)) units advertise a viable small boat capability. Yet, in light of ever-increasing threat capabilities and the risks inherent to SBF employment, the Marine Corps must begin to question their future utility. Evolving doctrine, such as OMFTS and ship-to-objective maneu-

ver (STOM), challenges us to examine changes in organization, techniques, and tactics that will allow for the future employment of the Navy and Marine Corps team within the world's littorals. Using OMFTS as a framework for the future, a clear position regarding small boat operations is badly needed.

Why Now?

Many Marines with small boat experience would argue that the capability already exists within the boat company of a BLT to help support OMFTS and STOM. They would stress the unit's continued role, but highlight the dire

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need for equipment upgrades to achieve a true OTH capability. This would mean an OTH capability out to 45-60 nautical miles (nm) from the shoreline, as illustrated by the STOM examples. Others, however, would point out that the current return on a BLT's investment is small and the SBF's capabilities severely limited. When balanced against the costs, the time needed for specialized training, and actual employment constraints, the SBF seems a drain on already stretched assets. Still others would postulate that our MEUs must be reorganized to exploit the maneuverability triad of AAAVs, MV-22s, and LCACs in order to provide the necessary operational ca-

pabilities in the 21st century. Regardless of which position is taken, a decision is needed to resolve the debate, decide acquisition priorities, update doctrine, and focus future training before we reach OMFTS's vision without a plan for using the SBF.

Current Capability: The Small Boat Raid

The current capability that the SBF brings to the BLT centers around the amphibious raid mission profile: Raiding craft can bring 126 Marines clandestinely ashore in 18 CRRCs or RRCs on most shorelines worldwide. After leaving a security force at the beach landing site, the boat company has between 75-100 men available to actually conduct their mission.

The primary contributions of this unit are its ability to be employed from 20-25 nm from the shoreline; its ability to avoid detection by enemy sensors; the ease with which it can launch and recover from other small naval craft; and its potential to serve as a force enabler for follow-on forces or surface craft. The primary disadvantages of the SBF stem from its dependence on accurate, timely meteorological and surf data to operate within the raiding craft's functional constraints; the limited combat power available to the raid force once ashore; the extensive training time and resources it requires; the vulnerability and costs of the raiding craft themselves; and the maintenance burden inherent to the boats, engines, and other essential equipment.

Today's SBF spends the majority of its efforts training for a high-risk venture that can increasingly be executed with less risk through other strike options. A key tenet of all raid operations is the fact that a raid, whether successful or not, can have psychological and military results greater than the value of its tactical objective. A recent example highlights the cost/benefit realities of such small boat raid operations when capabilities didn't match the threat. It reaffirms the importance of reexamining the amphibious raid profile for the SBF.

On 4-5 Sept 1997, the Israeli Navy's elite commando unit, Flotilla 13, conducted a raid near Ansariya, Lebanon to ambush a meeting of Amal and Hezbollah leaders. Despite an undetected landing, the small raid force was ambushed, quickly routed, and the few survivors had to be extracted by a much larger helicopterborne force. The insertion of a rescue force not only greatly increased the footprint ashore, but presented additional risk to an already failed mission. With Hezbollah guerrillas displaying IDF equipment and the severed head of a commando to the world media the following day, the cost of failure was exponential in terms of lives lost and the morale of a nation.

As the lessons from this raid are examined and placed in the context of our own experience, the current MEU(SOC) program's focus on raid operations for the SBF must be balanced against its other capabilities to determine its applicability to future operations and, more appropriately, against the potential threats it may face.

Departure Point

Mission profiles within the OMFTS framework may include amphibious raids against enemy coastal defenses and antishipping missiles, but a more realistic approach is needed. If the goal of OMFTS is a focus on extensive use of the sea to gain operational objectives through rapid force projections, then missions, such as securing cushion landing zones (CLZs) for LCACs, beach reconnaissance, and securing intermediate objectives closer to shorelines, become important force enabling

missions that the SBF can quite effectively address. This adjusted focus will require a new approach to the tactical employment, training, and equipping of the SBF. No longer painted into a "raid-force-only" corner, the SBF will find that its abilities more realistically match its mission tasking. However, in order to reach this milestone, the Marine Corps must adjust its doctrine and organization accordingly.

The *Operational Maneuver From the Sea* concept paper describes a naval expeditionary force (NEF) establishing a littoral penetration area in support of an attack on Richmond, VA. The NEF establishes many littoral penetration points (LPPs) that air and surface means can use to reach assigned objectives without having to assault enemy strengths or conduct traditional beachhead operations. An examination of this plan in light of current assets available should cause us to ask if the NEF possesses enough reconnaissance assets to conduct the number of beach and hydrographic surveys required to support the number of primary and alternate LPPs. Present levels of SEAL, Marine reconnaissance, and allied or coalition assets would be hard pressed to accomplish all of these mission priorities. They also do not possess the ability to remain ashore for the longer durations required if the maneuver elements will be returning through the same LPPs or need alternate LPPs uncovered. The answer to this problem lies within a redefinition of the SBF mission profiles, an increase in their training and skill levels, and the creation of duty expertise.

Duty Experts

The training and evaluation of the SBF should be expanded to increase the focus on force enabling missions, such as LPP reconnaissance and securing CLZs, as well as operations within inland waterways and increased interoperability with follow-on combat service support units. This may diminish or even replace the aforementioned raid capability of the unit, but will provide the SBF with increased employment options within the sphere of our future amphibious doctrine.

Several questions remain regarding

the task organization and manning of this force. Does sourcing from within a BLT work best or would creating a new unit similar to 2d Marine Division's Small Boat Company to source the deploying BLTs with a small boat platoon and provide a stable cadre of experienced professionals? Clearly, a new procedure is required to reduce the learning curve of the BLTs and address the expanded and highly perishable skills needed by an SBF operating in support of broader OMFTS missions.

Recommendations Toward a Clear Vision

The SBF can remain a potent and viable force within the Marine Corps of the next century, but only if we realistically examine the opportunities and problems surrounding its current employment. Before accepting an OMFTS-based doctrine that fails to provide the SBF a realistic role, the Marine Corps must provide commanders, such as our boat company commander, a clear vision of their role within OMFTS, a role that expands its traditional MEU(SOC) raid profile.

An examination of SBF missions must be undertaken within the context of our evolving amphibious doctrine. This should be followed with a realistic look at upgrading the actual boats and equipment to provide a true OTH capability that does not totally degrade the combat capability of the SBF in transit. The final step should look at the creation of a cadre of duty experts in order to provide a stable and well-trained reinforcement to the BLT.

The challenges are many, but a clear course needs to be set before the Marine Corps finds itself attempting to maintain an increasingly irrelevant asset.

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