

Plastic Squad-Assault Boats

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The idea of a small, light squad assault boat is addressed in the November 1941 Gazette.

With the advent of our two ocean navy, naturally came a two ocean Fleet Marine Force adequately dubbed the Atlantic Amphibious Force and Pacific Amphibious Force. These forces, whose membership should be an all Marine affair, are designed with the idea of Task Assignment Organization—thus deserting our previous rigid organization or trying to make the task fit the organization. In other words, the mustering of a properly constituted task force adequate to handle the job at hand.

We have all read of the difficulty the British experienced during the last war on the Gallipoli Peninsula with their type of landing boats. Also the limited number they had available and how in desperation they conceived a Trojan Sea Horse—The River Clyde, from which memberships of the British Landing Parties rushing for the beach were literally mowed down by the Turks. Up went the cry “too many eggs in one basket.” This catchy expression has been re-occurring constantly. It was used in connection with a cry for a decrease in size of our new aircraft carriers and we heard of it more recently in connection with the size of our new heavy bombers.

Our amphibious operations have long been rehearsed—stressing surfed beach conditions. This is natural as we have always figured in terms of capturing small islands in one of the oceans. Our history and in general history as well, there are numerous cases where landings have been necessary in quiet waters such as rivers and bayous where large or heavy landing boats would be difficult to employ in numbers. For years we have stressed the value of squad organization; the importance of smart squad leading, so much so that it is now traditional with us. This teaching is today as sound as it was thirty years ago. Even more so, in view of the necessity of facing modern infantry weapons fire. Then why not be consistent about it—adopt a smaller, lighter, faster landing boat—squad size, ten to fifteen men capacity, one that can be handled by the squad when it is grounded or capsized. One which will nest easily on transports—one which transport booms can handle easily—one which can ride the surf—one which can be handled in cramped water spaces—one which presents a smaller target and carries a smaller bow wave—one less expensive than our present types, which due to their cost and labor hours involved, are not available in numbers we need for both of our Amphibious Forces. Our major difficulty in procuring all forms of equipment is lack of skilled labor, so why not dodge this shortcoming and adopt an article which can be turned out quickly and at a definite reduced cost. Adopt not only a new type of landing boat but change its name. We need a new name for these boats such as a “Beach head Boat” an “Assault Boat” or “Combat Boat.” A name indicative of something more forceful than mere landing. We land to enter combat or to take up positions for combat.

Today the air industry is making laminated fabric plastic bodied planes—the automobile industry is figuring on doing likewise for their new products. Also we hear that the Army Engineers are experimenting with plastic pontoons with outboard motors, in connection with bridge building work.

Why not step out and purchase as a starter a hundred plastic boats, squad size? All necessary material for the manufacture of plastics can be secured in the U. S. A. or Mexico thus eliminating the necessity of relying on distant countries for materials. Flexibility in construction, strength of material, and non-splintering are the important features of this plastic material. Gliders will be made soon for the Army out of this material as experimentation is now being carried on for this purpose.

What happened to the British Landing Parties at Dunkirk? They landed unopposed—they unloaded tons of fine equipment and stores, but they failed to establish adequate beach head for its protection. They failed to provide available, sufficient and speedy boats for return to their transports. They were taught that only an advance inland would be their problem so they were caught napping not only with their pants down, but their shirts off. The result was one

of the costliest defeats of its kind in the history of the British Navy, one which has delayed additional landing operations for the past year; due to the fact British war industries could not replace the tons of equipment abandoned during the seaward retreat. So we see a shortage of small water craft was a vital charge against this disaster.

Had the British Expeditionary Force been equipped with small, stout, lightweight landing boats which could have remained nearby, the Dunkirk retreat would have been far less costly both in life and equipment.

News has reached us that Germany has long been experimenting with plastics for use in small boats and gliders.



A surf boat, or "whale boat," commonly used for amphibious landings during the interwar years.



Although rubber instead of plastic, the Corps' current squad assault boat is called the combat rubber raiding craft.

Plastic combat boats can be constructed to transport tanks, scout cars, engineer equipment, trucks and light artillery units. Holes can not be knocked into plastic as they can in wood and the material will not splinter. Protection against infantry weapon fire sinking the boat by punctures can be accomplished through the use of rubber to fill the bullet holes (self sealing) as now used for self sealing punctures in airplane gasoline tanks.

WHY WAIT UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE?

Now:

Go back 60 years to early 1941 and note the concern as the Marine Corps was adopting the M1 rifle. Capt Melvin Johnson explains to the *Gazette* readership how important it will be to embrace this powerful replacement for the trusty Springfield '03 rifle. Later in the year, Col J.C. Fegan recommends a buy of plastic boats through commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) acquisition.

These same issues swirl about us today. The April Focus has a series of articles on weapons and equipment, some of which we already have and some recommended for the inventory. Our current experts lay the groundwork for debate, as program managers and budgeteers wrestle with how much we should procure from design stages onward, and how much we should procure through the COTS process. Sixty years from now our successors will be doing the same thing with new evolutions of weapons and equipment. Maybe they will look back at us in 2001 to see how we were progressing.

Semper Fidelis