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## Amphibs in Sea Control and Power Projection

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The Navy must move toward a real 'Single Naval Battle' concept

When the U.S. Marine Corps unveiled its concept of “Single Naval Battle” in 2012, it was received with a yawn. The U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force Air-Sea Battle concept still hogged the limelight, although it soon would be smothered by jointness. Most defense analysts dismissed Single Naval Battle as the Corps’ effort to remind the Navy that—despite its fixation on defeating long-range antiaccess/area-denial strategies—the Marine Corps was its true, permanent partner in conducting the full range of maritime operations.<sup>1</sup> With section headings such as “The Marines cannot succeed without the Navy. The Navy cannot succeed without the Marines,” there seemed ample evidence that the skepticism about the concept’s strategic value was valid.<sup>2</sup> By 2017, the Marine Corps had replaced Single Naval Battle with Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) as a naval operating concept, which—while using some of the ideas

argued under Single Naval Battle—focuses less on integrating traditional Marine operations with the blue-water naval fight. This shift is a missed opportunity for both services, given the National Defense Strategy’s renewed focus on potential major power conflicts.

Like so many Marine Corps projects (V-22 Osprey, for example), the Single Naval Battle concept can be useful in ways never imagined by its drafters at Headquarters, Marine Corps. Given the Navy concepts of distributed lethality and distributed maritime operations (in which LOCE will play a role), it is time to accept that naval engagements are combined-arms battles in which every element of the maritime services must contribute to all missions it is capable of supporting.

With modest innovations in aircraft, weapons loads, and operational concepts, the amphibious force can play a significant role in sea control and strike/power-projection missions. Amphibious warships can fill the gaps in the United States’ sea control requirements, multiplying its war-at-sea capabilities more cheaply and quickly than other proposed solutions. Waiting for a 355-ship Navy to solve the numbers problem will not be as effective as multipurposing amphibious warships. To do this, the Navy Department must take four steps.



## Break With Tradition

Ever since then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Army five-star General Omar Bradley stated in 1949 congressional testimony, “I predict that large-scale amphibious operations will never occur again. And I speak as an expert,” the Marines have known their existence hinges on recognition that naval expeditionary/amphibious warfare capability is a core requirement for U.S. military strategy.<sup>3</sup> Following up on Bradley’s statement, then-Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson asserted more bluntly: “General Bradley tells me that amphibious operations are a thing of the past. We’ll never have any more amphibious operations. That does away with the Marine Corps.”<sup>4</sup>

It was another five-star Army general, Douglas MacArthur, who proved Bradley and Johnson wrong 11 months later at Inchon—thereby saving the nation of South Korea.

Since then, there have been numerous amphibious operations—not opposed assaults at the level of World War II, but critical operations that could not be performed another way. Yet, Bradley’s view has retained an echo that gains volume until the next amphibious operation is required. As late as 2009, then-Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, at a speech at the U.S. Naval War College, remarked: “We have to take a hard look at where it would be necessary or sensible to launch another amphibious action again. In the 21st century, how much amphibious capability do we need?”<sup>5</sup>

As a result of this questioning, the Marine Corps gets testy if it is suggested that amphibious warships be assigned to missions other than expeditionary warfare. Testiness and resistance to new ideas need to be jettisoned, however, if U.S. joint forces are to win in a major engagement at sea. The U.S. Navy does not have enough ships to prevail in warfighting scenarios envisioned by the Office of the Secretary of Defense. There also has been no money allocated to get to a 355-ship Navy in the lifetimes of current admirals. And let no one forget that an amphibious assault against a near-peer competitor cannot happen if the fleet cannot get there.

The Navy is just as guilty of parochialism, treating the gator navy as an awkward annex to the “real” fleet of destroyers, cruisers, and carriers. Expeditionary warfare always has been considered a follow-on mission. The logic of that thinking during the Cold War cannot be denied; the blue-water Navy needed to defeat Soviet submarines, long-range naval bombers, and a growing surface fleet before getting close enough to conduct an expeditionary landing. The Navy prevented the Soviets from bringing more missiles into Cuba during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, but it did not land any Marines to take the missiles that were there. Amphibious operations were conducted in Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, and elsewhere, but they were done in the absence of a confrontation with the Soviets or any other capable navy.

During the fights in Afghanistan and Iraq, amphibious capabilities (except transport) were not required because Afghanistan is landlocked and because U.S. land forces had been on Iraq’s desert borders for more than a decade. Today, the Navy’s focus has returned to sea control in the face of an emerging Chinese and reemerging Russian oceangoing fleet. In the blue view, expeditionary warfare is once again in the backwater.

## **Recognize the Opportunity**

Right now, circumstances are aligned for transforming the amphibious fleet from expeditionary-only to multimission combatants: the top defense leaders of the Trump administration—Secretary of Defense General James Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford—both are Marines (as is the President’s chief of staff). They have the power, stature, creativity, and experience to make Single Naval Battle a reality. At the same time, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson is a submariner who is not wedded to the “destroyers are the only real surface ships” tradition.

Although Secretary Mattis has not ruled out the possibility of a 355-ship Navy, he has admitted that fiscal realities make a fleet of that size difficult to obtain. A more important priority, he told Congress, is readiness: “We’ve got to get the fleet we have now back to sea.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) is putting increasing numbers of ships to sea, all of which can be concentrated in the Pacific. The PLAN also is tightening its hold on the Spratly reefs and artificial islands to achieve sovereignty over the South China Sea. If the Navy focuses the surface combatant force on waters claimed by China (or areas threatened by Russia), what ships will remain to take up the deterrence and sea control missions in other regions? Marines—with the cooperation of an enlightened Navy leadership—can come to the rescue in this situation, not just operationally, but also through acquisition of additional capabilities for the amphibs.

The Pentagon’s leadership should be true to another Marine Corps tradition. Ironically, the Marines’ relentless and parochial acquisitions often produce weapons with unforeseen uses outside the Corps, satisfying the requirements of other services. Consider two of the oddest aircraft ever shoehorned into defense procurement budgets, courtesy of relentless lobbying by Marines in the face of great resistance—the V22 and the F-35B Lightning II. The V-22 now is being used by special operations forces, will be used by the Navy for its carrier onboard delivery needs, and is being exported to Japan and other international clients. The F-35B Lightning II is making its way into the fleet before the Navy’s conventional carrier-based “C” version. If the Navy needs the unique sensor fusion capability of a fifth-generation fighter in the near future—whether for strike or sea control—it will be flown by Marines.

The service should consider the gator navy in the same spirit. Like the V-22 and F-35, amphibious warships should be employed in ways not initially envisioned. Tying these ships solely to amphibious assault will paralyze an enormous



portion of what could be the United States' future forward-deployed combat power.



### **Put Missiles, USVs, and UUVs on Amphibs**

When the concept of distributed lethality was unveiled, some naval analysts thought the easiest way to operationalize the concept was to missile-arm the amphibs so they could have a role in the sea control battle. With the exception of some recent experimentation, this has not been pursued. Whether Single Naval Battle or LOCE, the concept of operations can be developed with the use of legacy systems: box launchers, canister tubes, and fire control systems cannibalized from mothballed ships or retained somewhere in the supply systems.

An alternative, as suggested by comments from Marine Corps Commandant General Robert Neller, is to use truck/mobile launchers (such as high-mobility artillery rocket systems [HIMARS]) tied down on dock landing ship (LSD) decks in the spots usually reserved for Marine vehicles.<sup>7</sup> LSDs often deploy with one of two flight decks loaded with vehicles. In November 2017, the Marine Corps tested a HIMARS from a road-mobile launcher gripped to the deck of USS Anchorage (LSD-49) against a land target. General Neller also observed that HIMARS potentially could be equipped with antiship missiles for use on both land and sea.

Future “small boy” amphibious warships (LSDs, LPDs, and equivalents) should be designed with vertical launch systems and adequate command and control for sea control and power projection, as well as missile fire support for amphibious operations. If the Navy is going to have a networked distributed fleet, long-range sensors would not be needed if these missiles could be controlled in flight by destroyers or E-2C or F-35 aircraft. The amphibious warships would provide the number of necessary missile “tubes” the surface force lacks. With the size and capacity for a lot of dedicated electrical generation, smaller amphibs could be the best platforms for directed-energy weapons, when available.

It also is time to start experimenting with the launch and recovery (and mission control) of unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) and unmanned undersea vehicles (UUVs) from the well decks of the smaller amphibs. Many Navy documents suggest the future fleet will include multiple unmanned combat platforms of a variety of sizes. How will these unmanned platforms get from homeport to the potential fight? The options currently discussed include forward homeporting, where they could be vulnerable in any major conflict, and self-deployment from Pearl Harbor, San Diego, Norfolk, or Mayport, which would take time and energy from the missions. However, amphibious warships are eminently suited for the

deploying and controlling of USVs and UUVs, given their ability to ballast down for launch, ample vehicle stowage areas, and well-practiced skills in boat, landing craft air cushion, and amphibious assault vehicle handling.

### **Consider the Marines' Aircraft Carrier**

The future USS Tripoli (LHA-7)—second in the America class—has been launched. It is big, beautiful, and at approximately \$3.4 billion (of an overall \$10 billion program for three ships), very expensive.<sup>8</sup> LHAs/LHDs are the flagships of the gator navy. The problem is that the Marines care deeply about them but do not have a real use for them under many current warfighting scenarios. The Navy has a real use for them but does not care about them.

The America (LHA-6) and Tripoli do not have well decks, something the Marines are lobbying hard to change in future iterations of the class. The result is what any other navy would call an aircraft carrier. At 844 feet long and 45,000 tons displacement, the America class is slightly smaller than the Russian-made Varyag now in Chinese service as Liaoning and significantly larger than the French carrier Charles de Gaulle (neither of which has a well deck). Only the Navy would consider the Tripoli “light.”

In 2016, Congress required the Navy to provide three independent studies on the appropriate architecture of the future fleet: one from a Navy study team, one from a federally funded research institute, and one from an independent think-tank. All three studies concluded that the future Navy required light aircraft carriers (CVLs) to carry out assigned missions.

For example, the report of the independent Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) recommends a high/low mix of traditional carriers and new, more agile smaller carriers. Its recommendation is that “in the near-term existing LHA/LHD amphibious assault ships would be employed as CVLs.”<sup>8</sup> However, it suggests that “over the next five years, the Navy should begin transitioning from large deck amphibious ships into smaller aircraft carriers [with catapults and arresting gear] with the goal of delivering the first such ship in the mid-2030s.”

But instead of transitioning to a new ship type, a more cost-effective solution would be to incorporate multimission capabilities into the hulls and air wings of existing and future LHAs/LHDs. Should the LHAs be taken away from the Marine Corps? No. Should the Marine Corps F-35Bs be configured for the sea control mission when needed and Marine pilots trained for it? Yes. If the F-35 is the common aircraft as claimed, then the only hindrance to adapting F-35Bs to sea control would be the weapons load capacity affected by its short take-off capability.

### **A 'Single Battle' Naval Surface Fleet**

In its amphibious fleet, the United States has a capability that no other nation can duplicate. Nations take great note any time there are 3,000 angry Marines miles off their coast. However, the amphibs can provide even more of a deterrent effect if they meet their multimission potential.

Besides (1) doctrinal tradition, (2) the Marine Corps' fear for its existence, and (3) the blue-water Navy's fear of “smaller decks” as an alternative to supercarriers, there are no overwhelming costs or risks involved in arming and experimenting with amphibious warships in sea control and long-range power projection roles. Admittedly, the suggested modification to LSDs could impact their ability to perform other missions. However, these fears and risks can be managed and their causes mitigated through realistic policies and innovative tactics.

There is no reason to wait to achieve true distributed lethality. Warships optimized for surface warfare—such as large-deck aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers—could concentrate on “high-end” sea control and missions such as ballistic-missile defense, while the now multipurpose amphibs provide fire support for the high end and focused support for “small war” sea control. On the other hand, the “up-gunned” amphibs also could support strike missions in contested theaters as an adjunct to the battle force. In either case, it will take significant experimentation and training, much of it theater specific, but it is time the naval services make the investment and put in the effort.

Marines are a proud bunch. And they should take pride in working toward a future single naval battle by “sharing” the amphibious force and pushing the Navy to provide sea control and power-projection capabilities to amphibious warships. In return, the Navy must accept that it already operates a cost-effective “solution” to increased sea control capability and lethality. When such occurs, we will truly have a unified, single battle fleet.

1. The Ellis Group, “ U.S. Amphibious Forces: Indispensable Elements of American Seapower <sup>[3]</sup> ,” Small Wars Journal (27 August 2012).
2. Ibid.
3. There are a number of versions of that quote. The relevant Report of Investigation on Unification and Strategy Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 1 March 1950, does not include the exact wording. A reading of Bradley’s first ghost-written memoir, *A Soldier’s Story* (New York: Harold Holt, 1951), and his posthumous “autobiography” coauthored by Clay Blair, *A General’s Life* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983), would indicate the general was not quite an amphibious expert. The amphibious operations in which he participated were planned by others, and he focused on how to maneuver the land forces once ashore.
4. Robert D. Heinl, “Inchon, 1950,” in Merrill L. Bartlett, ed., *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 337.
5. John Keenan, “Editorial: The Review of the Corps and Its Mission,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2009, 3.
6. John Grady, “ Congress Presses SECDEF Mattis on U.S. Navy Path to 355 Ships <sup>[4]</sup> ,” USNI News, 13 June 2017.
7. Hope Hodge Seck, “ Top Marine Wants to Fire Anti-Ship Missiles from HIMARS Launcher <sup>[5]</sup> ,” Kit Up! (military.com), 14 December 2016.
8. Government Accountability Office, “Defense Acquisition: Assessment of Selected Programs,” March 2017, [www.gao.gov/assets/690/683838.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/690/683838.pdf) <sup>[6]</sup> .
9. Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Bryan McGrath, Craig Hooper, Jesse Sloman, and Timothy A. Walton, *Restoring Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (2017), 72.

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