

# Amphibious Forces for a New Naval Era

## A shifting paradigm

by Col Clifford J. Weinstein, LtCol John C. Berry, USMC(Ret) & Capt Karl E. Fisher

It is an exciting time for the Navy and Marine Corps—we are in the midst of a naval renaissance, one born of new challenges. The 21st century has emerged as “a new naval era” in which increasing competition within the maritime domain has reinvigorated Navy-Marine Corps innovation. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has publicly stated that the United States is confronted by five key challenges: Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations.<sup>1</sup>

There is a “near seas”<sup>2</sup> component to each of these challenges, and it is evident from open-source reporting that Russia and China are pursuing robust sea denial capabilities *and capacities* that may challenge the United States in their near seas. In the future, some competitors may decide to expand beyond sea denial into the sea-control realm.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, much of our recent naval innovation has focused on the seaborne sensors and weapons (whether manned or unmanned) that might negate the capabilities being fielded by potential adversaries. Additionally, there are a number of fleet architecture studies, each with a different planning horizon, currently underway. These are all essential efforts, but they require context. Development of a fleet architecture and the associated suite of sensors and weap-

***“The era of uncontested maritime superiority is fading. New competitors are challenging us in a variety of ways. As emphasized in A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority, we must develop new concepts and capabilities to succeed against emerging threats. We must then test and refine those concepts through focused wargaming, modeling, and simulations and validate the underlying ideas through fleet exercises, unit training and certification. As underscored in the Marine Corps Operating Concept, the ability to think critically, innovate smartly, and adapt to complex environments and adaptive enemies has always been the key factor we rely on to win in any clime and place.”***

***—Gen Robert B. Neller & ADM John M. Richardson,  
Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment,  
27 February 2017***

ons must be predicated upon a solid understanding of competing strategic objectives as well as a comprehensive approach that focuses on defeating each potential adversary’s *strategy* rather than merely his systems.

Defeating a strategy drives us into thinking about campaign design. Campaign design forces us to think about logistics, operational reach, and geography. These considerations point us toward designing a fleet and all things thereunto pertaining—like Marine Corps forces, expeditionary logistics, and land-based support to sea control—with an eye toward *controlling and exploiting key maritime terrain as well as denying the same to our opponents*. While forcible entry operations are often thought of exclusively in terms of

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There will be a call for more amphibious shipping. (Photo by Cpl Jeremy Tucker.)

initiating a continental campaign, an application some analysts assume to be unlikely, it may be more probable in the 21st century that they are conducted as part of a joint campaign that is *maritime* in character. It ought to be self-evident from looking at a map that military competition in the near seas will involve an amphibious component—to include amphibious assault when and where required.

Of course, the mere mention of “amphibious assault” will give some critics heart palpitations, as their frame of reference is likely limited to recent movies and television programs, such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Pacific*. Both productions did an exceptional job portraying the heroism of the World War II generation, but they also helped perpetuate the mistaken belief that we still conduct amphibious operations as we did in World War II. Quite frankly, a film about a modern amphibious operation would likely be quite boring, as there would be no dramatic scenes of large units fighting their way across a heavily defended beach. That’s because, over the past 70 years, the Navy and Marine Corps have been evolving the means for more indirect approaches. The fruit of that labor is exemplified by the operations of Task Force 58—an integrated Navy-Marine Corps formation commanded by then-BGen James N. Mattis—in 2001, when it projected

multiple maneuver elements of a landing force 350 miles inland to seize a desert airstrip south of Kandahar. That airstrip, renamed Forward Operating Base Rhino, served as a lodgment that facilitated the introduction of additional forces, eventually leading to the isolation and seizure of the city. By definition, that operation constituted “forcible entry,” even though it bore no resemblance to the invasion of Normandy.

As Task Force 58 illustrated, the Navy-Marine Corps Team had not been resting on its laurels waiting to reprise its old routines, nor has it been idle since. Rather, we’ve continually been assessing the strategic environment, and we are cognizant of the fact that the post-Cold War era of presumptive maritime superiority was an anomaly. Landward threats to access are on the rise, and both state and non-state actors now have the ability to contest their near seas. As noted by Naval Postgraduate School professor emeritus and retired Navy CAPT Wayne Hughes,

Land-sea missile attacks have added to the already prevalent strikes by aircraft ... to blur the tactical distinction between sea and land combat. The most instructive modern naval engagements for control of coastal regions have been fought by land, sea, and air forces acting in concert, with missiles as the principle weapons.<sup>5</sup>

In the recently signed *LOCE (Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment)*

concept,<sup>6</sup> the CNO (Chief of Naval Operations) and CMC (Commandant of the Marine Corps) have called for an increased level of integration so that our respective Service capabilities can be applied in a cohesive manner similar to that advocated by CAPT Hughes. The CNO and CMC have also called for a renewed focus on warfighting—particularly in applying both Navy and Marine Corps capabilities in a fight for sea control via operations at sea, from the sea, and *from the land to the sea*. Toward that end, Gen Neller has strongly endorsed the notion that Marines, whether employed from the sea or the land, will play an important role in the sea control/sea denial fight. That role will likely include amphibious operations to neutralize land-based threats to seaborne traffic as well as controlling key maritime terrain. With regard to the latter, the Navy and Marine Corps are currently working on a supporting concept to *LOCE*, expeditionary advanced base operations.

Our Navy-Marine Corps Team has already made great strides toward addressing the new paradigm. In recent years, the Naval Board was established to provide a monthly forum for senior Navy and Marine Corps officers to consider naval policy and develop unified guidance. The Board addresses issues selected by the CNO and CMC—who normally attend on a quarterly basis—as well as those submitted by commanders in the Operating Forces. The focus of the Board is on improving naval warfighting effectiveness through operational mission analysis, integration of strategic planning guidance, development of naval concepts/concepts of operations to meet mission needs, experimentation, and the coordination of capability development processes.

The naval team understands that what some are calling an A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) threat is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is a modern manifestation of what has historically been called a “sea denial” strategy. We also understand that potential adversaries will employ a sea-denial strategy that is unique to their own situation. Each of these strategies needs to be understood and then overcome in a man-

ner that accomplishes U.S. objectives. There is no “silver bullet” capability that will solve these problems. Rather, our force development activities must apply sound operational art in employing a combination of capabilities, current and envisioned, in order to generate the naval forces capable of achieving the desired outcomes. That approach is already being implemented via a series of wargames directed by the Naval Board. Additionally, the Ship-to-Shore Maneuver Exploration and Experimentation Task Force is partnering with industry, academia, and government research and development organizations to explore the operational utility of emerging technologies and engineering innovations. That work is being supported by a series of advanced naval technical experiments. Furthermore, the Marine Corps’ Rapid Capabilities Office is ensuring that we can quickly move forward with emergent and disruptive technology to rapidly develop and deliver operational

prototypes that increase our Operating Forces’ survivability and lethality.

Meanwhile, in the Operating Forces, a multitude of new capabilities is being fielded. These include the versatile USS *San Antonio* class amphibious ships and new aircraft like the MV-22 that greatly extend the operational reach of the embarked MAGTF. In the not too distant future, the CH-53K will provide a complementary long-range, heavy lift capability. We are also integrating F-35B Marine aircraft aboard amphibious assault ships to support not only MAGTF operations but fleet operations writ large. The amphibious combat vehicle program appears to be progressing on schedule. We are making great strides, but much work remains to be done.

Expanding and refining the Marine Corps contribution to the naval team must be our highest priority. On any given day at Quantico, our people are involved in a wide variety of force development, training, and education tasks.

We often execute those tasks in coordination with a diverse array of partners from the Joint Staff, the other Services, U.S. Special Operations Command, and our allies. All of these partners are important, but the Marine Corps is part of the naval Service, and it must be understood that our partnership with the U.S. Navy takes precedence. Our force development, training, and education activities must prioritize equipping and preparing Marines to fulfill our Title 10 responsibility “for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.” While that law also tasks us to “perform such other duties as the President may direct,” which often results in our employment alongside the Army for sustained operations ashore, it also states that “these additional duties may not detract from or interfere with the operations for which the Marine

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The annual MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest invites articles that challenge conventional wisdom by proposing change to a current Marine Corps directive, policy, custom, or practice. To qualify, entries must propose and argue for a new and better way of “doing business” in the Marine Corps. Authors must have strength in their convictions and be prepared for criticism from those who would defend the status quo. That is why the prizes are called Boldness and Daring Awards.

Prizes include \$3,000 and an engraved plaque for first place, \$1,500 and an engraved plaque for second place, and \$500 for honorable mention. All entries are eligible for publication.

### **\* Instructions \***

The contest is open to all Marines on active duty and to members of the Marine Corps Reserve. Electronically submitted entries are preferred. Attach the entry as a file and send to [gazette@mca-marines.org](mailto:gazette@mca-marines.org). A cover page should be included, identifying the manuscript as a Chase Prize Essay Contest entry and including the title of the essay and the author’s name. Repeat the title on the first page, but the author’s name should not appear anywhere but on the cover page. Manuscripts are accepted, but please include a disk in Microsoft Word format with the manuscript. The *Gazette* Editorial Advisory Panel will judge the contest in June and notify all entrants as to the outcome shortly thereafter. Multiple entries are allowed; however, only one entry will receive an award.

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**Amphibious landings will be conducted where and when needed but may be more maritime in character.** (Photo by Sgt Aaron Patterson.)

Corps is primarily organized.” As we go about our daily duties, we have to be mindful of how we, as part of the naval team, are contributing to overcoming the five challenges identified by the Chairman in accordance with our statutory responsibilities.

Given the foregoing, when queried about what we need the most, the average Marine officer engaged in force development will likely respond, “more amphibious ships.” Some will go beyond that and say, “a bigger fleet,” a goal which appears to be gaining traction within influential corners of Washington. While it may be tempting to leverage this situation by just expanding the number of existing ship types, such an approach may be imprudent in the long run. The number and type of amphibious ships needs to be determined in the context of overall fleet composition and how we will operate to address the Chairman’s five challenges. Since the vast majority of our current fleet will be with us for years to come, we must consider how each ship type might be used differently as well as what new ship designs, technologies, capabilities, capacities, and operational approaches might complement our current force structure and methods. This type of analysis needs to be conducted with a focus on building a fleet—and a fleet Marine force—capable of succeeding in the most demanding joint campaign that is maritime in character.

We also appear to be approaching a technology inflection point, particularly with respect to robotics and autonomy, which may allow us to increase resiliency in a manner that is exponentially greater than just increasing the number of ships. Imagine, for example, the ability to use unmanned systems to locate and clear mines and obstacles. Consider how the existing family of boats operated by the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command might be adapted to provide Marines a high-speed, long-range surface littoral maneuver capability in support of amphibious advance force operations and raids. Effective surface maneuver options, combined with our existing vertical maneuver capabilities, would provide the ability to project multiple elements of a landing force into numerous, widely dispersed entry points in order to confuse an adversary, complicate his targeting, and force him to dissipate his defensive forces over a wider area. Think about how ultra-light vehicles and robotic cargo systems might allow us to support and sustain those landing force units over extended distances. These, and a host of other initiatives, are currently under various stages of experimentation and development to put the next generation of amphibious capabilities within our grasp.

In summary, the Navy-Marine Corps Team is vigorously engaged in developing the uniquely naval solutions needed

to effectively address the strategic challenges identified by the Chairman. We have a real opportunity here, not just to provide the forces with the capabilities needed to fight and win in a new naval era but to concurrently provide the forward presence and strategic mobility necessary to respond to emerging crises, deter *fait accompli* gambits by state actors, and hunt down and destroy violent extremists. We need to seize that opportunity.

>Editor’s Note: For more information on Task Force 58, see “Task Force 58: A Higher Level of Naval Operation,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Online: August 2011), available at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.

#### Notes

1. Gen Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., “Remarks and Q&A at the Center for Strategic and International Studies,” *Joint Chiefs of Staff*; (Online: Undated), available at <http://www.jcs.mil>.
2. This article uses “near seas” in reference to those continuous bodies of salt water that are partially enclosed by land, to include non-contiguous land such as island chains.
3. Sea denial is defined in Navy doctrine as, “Partially or completely denying the adversary the use of the sea with a force that may be insufficient to ensure the use of the sea by one’s own forces.” See Department of Defense, *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment*, (Washington, DC: September 2017).
4. Sea control is defined in Navy doctrine as, “The condition in which one has freedom of action to use the sea for one’s own purposes in specified areas and for specified periods of time and, where necessary, to deny or limit its use to the enemy. Sea control includes the airspace above the surface and water volume and seabed below.” See *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment*.
5. CAPT Wayne P. Hughes, Jr., USN (Ret), *Fleet Tactics and Coastal Combat*, 2nd edition, (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2000).
6. The unclassified edition of *LOCE* is available at <https://marinecorpsconceptsandprograms.com>.

