

Equipping Marines for Combat In the Next Century

by Gen A.M. Gray

On 14 April, the Commandant testified before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Force Projection on several programs of particular concern to the Marine Corps. The following is a distillation of his written and oral remarks, with emphasis on three areas—amphibious shipping, the AV-8B Harrier, and the MV-22 Osprey.

Let me begin by making clear that not all the goals I envision for this Commandancy will be attained on my watch. The target in our sight picture is the Marine Corps at the turn of the century. We think our plans will take us where we should be 10 years from now. They are measured and deliberate, however, so that as we change, we will not limit our ability to respond. We are the Nation's dedicated expeditionary force, ready to go on moment's notice, by any means, to any place on the globe where we are needed.

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Amphibious shipping is this country's only means of sustainable power projection. Amphibious ships provide us the capability of forcible entry. We do not, today, have enough of them. The requirement is to have enough to lift two Marine expeditionary forces (MEFs)—one in the Atlantic and one in the Pacific. The Navy and the Marine Corps realize that the two-MEF lift goal, because of fiscal constraints, cannot be an immediate objective. So, as a stepping stone to that end, and in accord with the defense guidance, we have set an interim goal of enough ships to lift the assault echelons of a MEF and a Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB) by the middle of the next decade. We now have the ability to lift but one MEF.

Block obsolescence becomes a problem in 1996 when we begin to retire the LPH class ships. Forty-seven of the 63 amphibious ships in service today will reach the end of their 35-year service lives between 2000 and 2008. The capacity of these ships represents about 50 percent of the troop lift, 60 percent of the vehicle square lift, 40 percent of the cargo cube lift, 25 percent of the vertical takeoff and landing aircraft lift, and 30 percent of the air cushion landing craft (LCAC) lift required to support the MEF and MEB requirement.

The Department of the Navy Long Term Amphibious Lift Requirement and Optimum Ship Mix Study Validation of 1987 has a plan to respond to this problem. It would extend the life of 3 LPHs by 2 years; deliver the first 6 LHDs by 1998 and an additional LHD every other year until 10 are in commission in 2006; and deliver the first 9

LSD-41s (cargo variant) by 2000 with an additional ship each year until 12 are in commission in 2003. Also, about 20 LXs—a new class of amphibious ship to replace the LKA, LST, and LPD—would be delivered between 2001 and 2008. The design and capabilities of the LX are under development. The lead ship in this new class should be funded in FY96.

The lift study mentioned here not only provides a plan for meeting our lift requirements, it also restates specifically what those requirements are. We view the current requirements in each category—troops, square, cube, deck spots—as constraints on the design of our forces. Before buying new equipment, we analyze its effect on the amphibious lift "fingerprint." If it will add to the aggregate lift requirement, we either modify it, don't buy it, or decide what current equipment will provide the offset. In other words, we are aiming at a fixed target.

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Light expeditionary forces—your Marines—need close air support to supplement ground firepower; hence, our aircraft must be configured for expeditionary service. We have, in my judgment, the very best close air support aircraft in the world in the AV-8B. It can fly twice as many sorties as any other fighter/attack aircraft the world knows. And it's the only aircraft in the world that can fly from deck spots on ships, from dirt roads, from fields, from basically anywhere the aircraft will fit. In 1990, the AV-8B night attack variant will be added to the Fleet Marine Force. Just last week, this variant provided night close air support, without illumination, from a North Carolina road. No other aircraft in the world can do that.

When you look at our global commitments, we have a requirement for 13 AV-8B squadrons to support our 3 MEFs, the maritime pre-positioned force brigades and the Norway pre-positioned capability. Because we have lived in a constrained envelope for many, many years, we have planned for 8 AV-8B squadrons, a total of 328 aircraft. Without FY89 procurement levels, we would be able to equip only six squadrons and would probably have to



cancel the night attack program. Also, without further procurement, our six squadrons would also erode, through aircraft attrition, to about four by the end of the 1990s.

There is a school of thought that says you do not need 328 aircraft for 8 squadrons. I don't know where that comes from except perhaps from people who count deck spots on amphibious ships and things like that. You don't fight wars with deck spots. You fight wars with men and materiel. The AV-8Bs that can't operate off amphibious shipping and the like can fly anywhere in the world, Pacific or Atlantic, and be employed. On a routine basis, we fly 30 to 40 AV-8Bs to northern Europe, and 54 hours from the time the aircraft leave Cherry Point, NC, they are operating in northern Norway. Warfighting commanders cannot get enough of the AV-8B.

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Key to retaining—and greatly improving—our capabilities is the MV-22 tiltrotor aircraft. It will replace the CH-46 helicopter, which is older than most of the Marines and Sailors it must carry into combat and many of the pilots who must fly it. The MV-22, with its greater speed and range, much improved survivability, and night navigation system, will provide the aviation component of our fledgling over-the-horizon amphibious assault capability.

I am concerned why others do not share our enthusiasm for tiltrotor technology. Even with the British blade and other upgrades, you can only achieve so much with helicopter technology. With tiltrotor technology you have a whole new regime that can take you into the next century. Regrettably, not all believe this.

If we are to get better profiles for the AV-8B and MV-22 in the FY90 budget, then you must support the FY89 budget before you now. Any sign of waiver may kill off the MV-22 for all time and will put such a dent in the capability of the AV-8B that it will force serious review for the outyears.

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I would like to add one short postscript on the general principles guiding your Marine Corps during these leaner days. We will tell you up front what we need and why we need it. We will then take what you give us, combine it with what we have, make the most possible out of it, and do whatever the Nation asks us to do and more.

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