

# REFLECTIONS ON THE CORPS

## **Ships and Marines: At the Tip of the Spear**

by Gen Carl E. Mundy, Jr.

*The Commandant makes a compelling argument for forward presence.*

*Tripoli, 1801: President Thomas Jefferson, in the first year of his Presidency, faces one of the first major international tests for the United States. Pirates are harassing U.S. merchantmen in the Mediterranean. The decision: Send ships and Marines. The result: For the next 4 years, these forward-deployed naval units conducted numerous operations, both afloat and ashore. Indicative of their service were the exploits of Marine Lt Presley O'Bannon. With a force of Marines and nearly 400 local mercenaries and tribesmen, he conducted a 600-mile trek through the Libyan desert to strike the port of Derna.*

Although the international security environment has been marked by constant change over the past 200 years, the major goals of U.S. national security strategy continue to be the deterrence of threats to U.S. interests and the maintenance of stable regional military balances by deterring states that might seek regional domination. To achieve these goals, the United States must be in a position to demonstrate its commitment, lend credibility to its alliances, and provide a rapid crisis-response capability that promotes stability and protects U.S. influence and access in areas of vital interest.

History records considerable unpredictability in the nature, duration, location, and scope of crises that threaten U.S. interests. Some crises were minor; others more serious. Some were quickly resolved; others dragged on for months. Some were resolved peacefully; others required the threatened use of force. What is predictable is that the United States will continue to face threats to its interests around the world and, at times, will be required to use military forces to prevent and contain crises. While technology has provided the means for moving forces

quickly to deal with these threats, deterrence-from-a-distance remains, at best, a response of limited utility. Rather, it is forward presence forces that, by their nature, offer capabilities uniquely suited to facing the uncertainties of the future.

Forward presence is not an argument for force structure. Forward presence is a national requirement, integral to our geographical heritage. As a maritime nation, the United States has always relied on its naval forces to play a central role in the defense of its overseas interests. This was clearly recognized by the Founding Fathers and is reflected in the Constitutional language that charged the Congress with "raising and supporting Armies" as necessity dictated and "to provide and maintain a Navy." The Cold War era enhanced the importance of continental forces, primarily in response to the massive Soviet threat to central Europe. During this period, though, the utility of naval forces did not decline, responding as they did to over 200 crisis or contingency situations. Further, as we now know, the threat to Soviet littorals provided by U.S. amphibious forces tied down coastal defense forces and complicated their defense calculus. With the end of the bipolar era and a refocusing on regional threats and instabilities, U.S. forward presence in the littoral regions of the world remains a pressing requirement. This, coupled with domestic imperatives for a substantially reduced military budget, validates the investment in naval forces as the most cost effective means of defending U.S. interests abroad.

Naval forces are a relevant instrument of foreign policy short of armed conflict, but one with the ability to fight. They provide a unique ability to

demonstrate U.S. resolve because they can deploy to an area and loiter, portraying a visible threat without being committed. Of the naval responses since World War II, in nearly two-thirds of the cases, no direct military intervention resulted. The visible demonstration of U.S. commitment embodied in on-scene naval forces was sufficient.

The disappearance of the Soviet threat has returned us to our maritime heritage. As the new national military strategy shifts from open-ocean warfighting on the sea toward joint operations conducted from the sea, the Naval Service must capitalize upon its traditional expeditionary roles and capabilities, focusing on littoral operations and the conduct of maneuver from the sea. As the force drawdown and overseas base closures continue, and as forward-based soldiers and airmen return to the United States, Marines and Sailors will leave home as forward-deployed naval expeditionary forces to maintain a credible forward presence.

*Bangladesh, 1991: A tropical cyclone slams into the coast of Bangladesh, killing 138,000 and rendering 2.7 million people homeless. The decision: Send ships and Marines. The result: Within 24 hours of a request for support from the Government of Bangladesh, advance teams from the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) were in country making initial liaison. Over the next month nearly two million people were assisted.*

The Marine Corps provides two distinct types of forward presence forces. III MEF, located on the "amphibious platform" of Okinawa, provides a versatile range of capabilities in the Pacific, with a return on U.S. investment greatly enhanced by substantial Japanese burden-sharing. As a forward-based force-in-readiness, III MEF can be rapidly transported by a combination of air and sea lift to deal with potential crises. This has been further augmented by the recent homeporting in Japan of USS *Belleau Wood* (LHA 3), which has enabled the stand-up of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit in III MEF, providing an additional responsive, in-theater, forward-deployed capability. As a forward logistics base, III MEF provides in-theater sustainment for forward-deployed forces. This presence is of particular importance due to the geopolitical and economic interests of the United States throughout the Pacific Rim. III MEF provides a visible reminder to Asian allies of

long-term U.S. commitment to Pacific security interests and an enduring and stabilizing influence in a region that is increasingly vital to the United States.

The most frequently employed Marine force, indeed the focal point of Marine forward presence forces, is the one which is routinely forward-deployed—the Marine expeditionary unit. This combined arms, air-ground force consisting of approximately 2,000 Marines and Sailors embarked in an amphibious ready group of 3 to 5 ships is a versatile force capable of responding rapidly to a wide range of forward presence and stability missions.

The historical relevance and utility to the Nation of Marine expeditionary forces is clear. From 1985–1991, Ma-

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**“Forward presence is a national requirement, integral to our geographical heritage.”**

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ines participated in 61 percent of U.S. military crisis responses, and in 71 percent of U.S. naval crisis responses. Recent employment of Marine forward presence forces has covered the entire spectrum of response, ranging from combat operations in Southwest Asia, humanitarian assistance to the Kurds in northern Iraq, and disaster relief in Bangladesh and in the Philippines to the current presence and stability missions off the coasts of Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. This employment pattern reinforces the need for forces that are mobile, flexible, readily available, have endurance, and possess the capability to accomplish a wide range of missions of significant size, scope, and risk.

*Liberia 1990: Increasing internal unrest threatens U.S. diplomats and civilians. The decision: Send ships and Marines. The result: Elements of a Mediterranean amphibious ready group provided support to the U.S. Embassy and stood by to evacuate American citizens from 2 June to 5 August. Between 5 August and 9 January 1991, a total of 2,609 people were evacuated.*

*Somalia 1991: In late December 1990, rebels experience sudden great success against government troops and unexpectedly threaten the capital, placing U.S. diplomats in an in-extremis situation. The decision: Send ships and Marines. The result: On 2 January, naval expeditionary forces committed to Operation DESERT STORM in the North Arabia Sea*

*were ordered to evacuate the U.S. Embassy. On the night of 4–5 January, helicopters flew 466 miles, with aerial refuelings en route, and evacuated 281 people.*

Due to their completely self-contained sustainment and the "diplomatic immunity" bestowed on them by their naval character, Marine expeditionary forces can loiter indefinitely in an area and are unconstrained by such limitations as overflight and landing rights. If required, however, they can respond rapidly to crisis taskings. This strategic and operational flexibility, which a forward-deployed Marine force provides, is well known to national and theater decisionmakers and has been demonstrated on numerous occasions. During the 1990 crisis in Liberia, an amphibious ready group arrived on 2 June, but was not called on to conduct a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) until 5 August. Indeed, amphibious forces remained on-station through 9 January 1991. At the other end of the decision-time spectrum, the Somalia evacuation in 1991 was demonstrative of the ability of forward-deployed Marine forces to react to a crisis that demanded immediate response. The point is that there was no need to stage and deploy forces from out of theater. Forward-deployed Marine expeditionary forces were on-scene, quickly responsive, and capable of handling situations that took months to develop, but went to full crisis within hours.

*Location to be determined, 19XX: President Clinton faces one of the first national security challenges of his administration. U.S. interests/citizens are threatened in a rapidly developing crisis. The decision: Send ships and Marines.*

Just as they did in 1801, Marine forward presence forces, both forward-based and forward-deployed, provide the Nation with the flexible, capable and relevant force required to deal with the security challenges of the future. As units with an organization, concept of employment, doctrine, technology, and support that have been forged and tested by real-world contingencies, they provide a "tool kit" of capabilities with which to respond to uncertainty; they possess a comprehensive readiness for the unknown. Marines have built a long tradition of service at the "tip of the spear" and will continue to be the force of choice to meet the Nation's requirement for forward presence well into the future.

