

Maritime Prepositioning Force: Is It Time To Expand The Capability?

by Maj James J. Hill, Jr.

Current plans are leading us to a force structure more duplicative and expensive than warranted by current threats. Here's why . . .

The Navy-Marine Corps team operates 13 maritime prepositioning ships (MPSs) organized into three squadrons (MPSRons), each loaded with the equipment and supplies for a Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) of brigade size. The MPSRons are strategically deployed around the world, ready to support the needs of commanders-in-chief (CinCs) of the unified commands. When linked with their air-delivered MAGTF personnel, the total maritime prepositioning force (MPF) represents the most capable rapid response force available to the United States—a force that can either serve in an enabling force role, standing alone for as long as 30 days, or as an augmenting force in support of a MAGTF already in theater.

In light of the lessons learned from DESERT STORM and RESTORE HOPE and a continuing need to provide a variety of force packages (i.e., crisis action modules) for different scenarios, it is time to consider what MPF currently provides to the CinCs and what enhancements are required across the spectrum of conflict. As discussions continue inside the Beltway regarding the development of a similar capability for use by the Army, it may also be time to consider what level of redundancy is required to meet the needs of both Services . . .

Perhaps the first question to be asked in the wake of DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM is, "Are the current MPSs adequate?" Many will argue that they are not, and they could find support within the congressionally mandated Mobility Requirements Study (MRS). The study, which was completed in January 1992, noted a lack of heavy armor forces for scenarios like the one encountered in Southwest

Asia (SWA). Although there are 90 MIA1 tanks now prepositioned, 30 per MPSRon, the study's analysis determined that about 120 are required. In fact, while another DESERT STORM-type war may not appear for some time to come, this type of scenario was the baseline for the MRS. As it may be the most difficult to support logically, analysis and preparation is required now.

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With the MPS program serving as nearly three-fifths of Marine amphibious deployment capability (three Marine expeditionary brigades, or MEBs, of MPSs and two and one-half MEBs of amphibious shipping), the scenarios that require heavy mechanized forces are only one concern. There are many other, more likely scenarios that MPS must also be prepared to support and which, if also reviewed now, may be found wanting in some regard due to the lack of space aboard the 13 available ships. This lack of space translates directly to a lack of required equipment and a lack of capability.

Although combat is the necessary focus, future missions may also include humanitarian relief, security assistance, and the protection of U.S. citizens abroad. These missions will require

highly ready, rapidly deliverable, and largely self-sufficient forces that are capable of adaptive planning, forward presence, and conflict resolution. This mixture of possible missions clearly indicates the need for maritime forces in general, and MPF-type forces in particular, properly configured to ensure their usefulness over a range of operations. Does the current MPS load support this mission mix? Based on experience to date, the answer seems to be, "not completely." In addition to armor deficiencies, specific shortfalls include:

- Shortage of heavy construction capability for improving/enhancing airfields and port facilities.
- Lack of container-handling equipment.
- Insufficient equipment to enhance mobility/countermobility operations.
- Some shortage of items needed for sustainment over the full 30-day period (spare parts, ammunition, food, etc.).

The Gulf War experience is not entirely adequate as a guide to these needs. It may be a long time until we again have the use of facilities as modern, and the support of host nations as able and willing, as those found in Southwest Asia. In most geographic locations where the United States will send its forces, the facilities available are apt to be particularly sparse. Current operations in Somalia bear this out. Combining the limited equipment mix aboard each MPSRon with the limited technical engineering expertise of the Marine engineer support battalions, the first forces to arrive may not have the capability needed to complete requirements for major horizontal/vertical construction, soil analysis, or rapid runway repair. These requirements are better supported by naval construction force (NCF) elements that are an integral part of the MAGTF, but the NCF has no equipment in the prepositioning program.

While the focus of the MPS equipment load is properly toward combat capability, a self-sustaining logistics capability must also be present. Movement of supplies is essential throughout the operation, and it is this need that led to a reduction of seven-and-one-half-ton cranes to make room for two additional rough terrain container handlers. Some say these additions are still insufficient to meet the logis-

tical needs of the force.

Finally, sustainment must be addressed. Most people agree that the MAGTF is in good shape from a fuel perspective. But, from ammunition to repair parts to food, there may be causes for concern. Although commanders can tailor their fly-in echelon as they see fit, there remain critical shortfalls that may well go unanswered throughout an MPF operation. In short, any MPF capability needs continual review and adjustment; as this process has occurred in the Marine Corps, the need for some expanded capability has become apparent.

Considering the above, we might next ask, "How should we provide the Nation a greater prepositioning capability?" The answer found within the MRS is to have the Army begin a prepositioning program. While an argument can be made that the four ships on which the Army currently keeps sustainment items constitutes a prepositioning program, there is, unarguably, nothing close to MPF anywhere else in the world. With another MPS success being logged by the Marines in Somalia, and Department of Defense competition being what it is, additional momentum within the Army for a prepositioning capability is clearly increasing.

Currently, the Army envisions a "fully supported heavy combat brigade" on the ground by C+4 with a division following by C+12. To support this brigade, all equipment and supplies to sustain this force will be prepositioned afloat. Currently, the Marine Corps program envisions beginning the fly-in by C+4 and having combat ready units by C+10.

This leads us to the next questions. How much prepositioned rapid response capability does the Nation need? How much should it pay for this capability? In reviewing how much capability is required, planners and programmers must first determine their desired outcomes. In combat, our ultimate requirement as a military is to destroy an enemy force. In order to do so, we must evaluate the threat and counter accordingly. The MRS estimates the worst case enemy force to be one that requires 120 tanks to counter it. What weight these calculations give to air or other alternative systems is not clear. Nevertheless, we can call this our acceptable "level of vulnerability." If all three MPSRons responded to a threat of this type (with their 90

tanks) they would fall short of the MRS requirement. That is, the deploying forces remain vulnerable since they have 30 tanks less than the minimum requirement. This shortfall should be the focus of prepositioning enhancement.

The number of tanks available is one part of the equation. The second part is when they are available. Currently, the Nation must rely on these 90 tanks until the arrival of follow-on support on C+30. The MRS says that waiting until this time is too long. The force will be vulnerable through the entire period of the MPF operation (the first 30 days).

Next question: "How much will fixing this shortfall cost?" That depends on the fix. With the Army's proposal comes the need for considerable expenditure. First, if we discount their four existing sustainment ships, the Army has no prepositioning program. Starting one would translate to people and facilities at an unknown cost. Second, there are no ships. MRS estimates that 9 are needed for Army prepositioning and 11 are required for follow-on support. If we approximate the cost of each ship to be \$300 million (probably a low estimate), that is \$6 billion. Third, there is the need for a maintenance facility (similar to the Marine Corps facility at Blount Island, Florida). A new facility will be very expensive and will probably require considerable military construction work. A closing naval base might serve as an alternative, but facility modifications will still be required. This cost is difficult to estimate, but a figure of \$100 million seems conservative. The fourth is equipment. Force reductions will support most of these needs, so the cost should be negligible. The total cost will be about \$6.5 billion.

and this does not include an equipment maintenance contract.

On the other hand, if the Marine Corps remains the focus of effort for maritime prepositioning and the tank battalion is increased to either a full battalion per MPF (58 x 3) or three battalions (-) (44 x 3), the only major costs will be those incurred with the purchase of one additional ship per squadron. At \$300 million per ship, the total ship outlay is \$900 million. These fixed costs, when added to the current MPF capability, reduce the period of vulnerability by up to 20 days by placing the desired force on the ground at C+10 vice C+30. Besides the additional tank capability, it is expected that the additional ships will have a great deal of space in which to load additional equipment useful in other more likely humanitarian or crisis situations. In this way we may be able to answer a number of shortfall with one fix.

The tanks and any additional supplies and equipment to be prepositioned under this proposal can be provided via the Army's force reductions. There will be other costs that will require attention such as repair parts and equipment, but these costs will exist no matter which Service is assigned responsibility for the prepositioning enhancement. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss a detailed breakdown of these costs, but the additions may mean spending a total close to \$1 billion, one-seventh of the Army cost without considering command/personnel infrastructure overhead.

Presuming for a moment that an Army prepositioning program becomes a reality, we should ask, "What will be the philosophy of employment?" As the MRS has already identified the



Military equipment is off-loaded from MV PFC James Anderson, Jr. at Mogadishu, Somalia in December 1992.

threat level and suggested an amount of force required, the specific question may be, "How will this force fit in?" Strategic airlift will now be required to move the personnel of two forces during the same period. Once on the ground there will be a need for tactical air support. This seems to suggest that both Marine and Air Force squadrons may be competing for limited facilities. Finally, we need to return to the total force requirement. With both Marine MPF and the Army's early entry corps on the ground this will be well exceeded, and the Nation will be maintaining more rapid response forces than warranted by the threat. The puzzle begins to get very complicated.

While these two proposals may be "good" for their respective Services, we must ask, in the words of Senator Nunn on 2 July of last year, "Are they (both) good for America?" Considering the Senator's concerns over redundancy and duplication, the answer seems clear. If the goal is to get over an identified level of vulnerability, do we get over it by a little or a lot? Regardless, the threat is effectively countered. Rather than ask, "How much over the risk threshold do we need to build up forces?", we might more appropriately ask, "How far over the threshold do we

need to spend?" If MRS says the need is 120 tanks, should we put 240 on the ground? Sensible force sequencing must play a role as we determine our needs and assess funding realities. The question becomes, "Do we need to spend \$6 billion to duplicate a current capability?"

As has been widely recognized, the guiding philosophy in today's environment must be complementary, not duplicative, forces. We must do more than pay lip service to this philosophy. For \$1 billion the Nation keeps its enabling capability within the Marine Corps. It keeps afloat prepositioning in the Service that has built the capability through 12 years of growing pains, experience, and success. It also keeps roles and functions within a traditional framework of Service functions. These pluses allow the Nation to improve the strategic sealift support truly required by the Army for moving its heavy follow-on forces. The unnecessary duplication that results in supporting two prepositioning programs may also result in both initiatives having fiscal "holes." Addressing current shortfalls as complementary requirements may allow both to succeed.

In today's fiscally constrained environment, each Service will be asked to

slice their requirements thinly. Many needs will go unanswered, and many initiatives will fall short. As we move farther into a military future that has jointness as its horizon, inter-Service battles have the propensity to result in many lose-lose propositions. Maritime forces with their flexibility and timeliness are essential to the future. So are follow-on forces. Jointness in requirements integration, as well as in combat, will lead to win-win opportunities in support of these forces.

As the Marine Corps enters the 21st century, although smaller in size, it will remain the national force-in-readiness. With the requirement remaining for versatile, expeditionary, and combat ready forces, the tasks it will be asked to carry out will become more dependent upon a rapid force buildup through a combination of all available assets. A clear understanding of what is needed and the proper separation and sequencing of forces will allow us to have the strength we need and live within realistic budget constraints, but only if Service efforts are focused on the proper and complementary objectives.



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