

# The Corps should look to its small-wars past

BY MAX BOOT

The U.S. Marine Corps is nothing if not versatile. What explains the Corps' talent for metamorphosis and its ability to take on so many roles and missions was summed up by Marine Lt. Gen. Victor H. "Brute" Krulak, who wrote in 1957, "The United States does not need a Marine Corps." All of its missions could be performed by other services. It is, after all, essentially a "second army" with a small "second air force" attached. To justify its existence in the face of constant naysaying, the Corps has had to take on missions that no one else wanted, and it has had to perform them better than anyone else could. That has led the service to cultivate an unrivaled warrior ethos and a culture that places more emphasis on men and women than on machines. Marines are taught to think of themselves as Marines first and only secondarily as tank drivers or helicopter pilots or infantrymen. This helps to make them unusually adaptable and cohesive, but each major transformation has come with pain. In the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, there was considerable tension between Marines who wanted to emphasize small wars and those who thought the Corps' future lay in amphibious warfare.

That tension has persisted to the present day. For more than 70 years, the Corps' principal missions — imperial constabulary and amphibious assault force — have existed in uneasy conjunction. The Marine ethos has been mainly one of the "911 force" — break-the-door-down-and-waste-the-enemy shock troops — but in practice, its missions have usually had more to do with pacification and humanitarian assistance. It has excelled at those missions, from Vietnam to Somalia to Iraq, but I'm not sure the Corps has made the full mental leap to re-embrace its old role as imperial constabulary. That was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Marines became known as State Department troops for their service pacifying and running countries such as Haiti and Nicaragua. Out of this experience came the famous "Small Wars Manual," which continues to be widely cited.

Re-embracing that role is an urgent task because the future of warfare is looking more and more like the Marines' past. "Small wars" — encompassing counterinsurgency, nation-building, and peacekeeping — seem likely to be the major challenge for the U.S. as it fights the war on terror. The Marines are well-placed to play a leading role in this kind of irregular conflict, but to do so they will have to leave their glorious World War II heritage even further behind. That won't be easy to do.

I remember a few years ago visiting Camp Lejeune, N.C., the Marines' major East Coast operational base, and seeing a big demonstration of amphibious warfare — what the Corps now dubs "expeditionary maneuver warfare." Whatever you call it, the demonstration was impressive. All those amtracs and hovercraft and landing ships — what a spectacle! Watching from the stands, I thought it was glorious but also an anachronism, like watching a cavalry charge in the 1930s.

When was the last time the Corps has staged such a landing? If you discount smaller operations that took place against little or no opposition in the Dominican Republic (1965) and Grenada (1983), you really have to go back to the 1950 landing at Inchon for a full-scale amphibious assault against a defended shoreline. Such an operation was contemplated as part of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 but rejected on the grounds that it would be too costly — that modern America could not bear to suffer the kind of casualties the Marines took in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945. Thus the Marines were kept floating off Kuwait without ever being given the order to land. It was a successful feint that distracted Saddam Hussein from the main coalition assault, but this bluff by now is well known. A repeat would be unlikely to fool a savvy foe in the future.

This is by no means an argument for getting rid of amphibious assault capacity. The ability to land troops from the sea will continue to be critical in the future, especially given the increasing difficulty the U.S. has in securing transit and basing rights in foreign countries. Who knows? If a second Korean War were to occur, the U.S. might even have to stage another major landing on the Korean peninsula. But how high, realistically, are the odds of such an operation? And how critical is it for Marines to be able to fight their way ashore given the increasing lethality of long-range, precision-guided munitions that could pave the way for virtually uncontested troop landings? I would argue that the importance of such missions is not nearly as high as they appear to loom in naval and Marine thinking.

The Naval Amphibious Warfare Plan released in October by the chief of naval operations includes a list of "Essential Mission Tasks" for a Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable). (A MEU is a landing force of about 2,200 sailors and Marines that deploys aboard amphibious assault ships in an Expeditionary Strike Group.) The top four tasks? "1. Amphibious Assault. 2. Amphibious Raid. 3. Amphibious Demonstration. 4. Amphibious Withdrawal." This is followed by three other fairly traditional missions: "5. Direct Action Operations. 6. Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel. 7. Security Operations." It is not until we get to No. 8 on the list that "military operations other than war" make an appearance in the form of "Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief," followed at No. 9 by "Noncombatant Evacuation Operations."

Judging by this list, amphibious warfare remains a top priority. Yet how many amphibious assaults have MEUs carried out in recent years compared with humanitarian assistance or noncombatant evacuation operations? The latter missions happen all the time; for instance, following the Asian tsunami of 2004 and the Pakistan earthquake of 2005. The former are virtually unknown. The overland invasions of Kuwait in 1991 and Iraq in 2003 hardly qualify; the insertion of 1,000 Marines into Afghanistan in November 2001 does qualify, but it was of only marginal importance to the overall success of Operation Enduring Freedom. It is therefore surprising to see such low-frequency missions given such high priority.

Even odder is to find "peace operations" — arguably the Marines' top mission at the moment in Iraq and Afghanistan — relegated to a mere 10th place on the list of priorities. Perhaps this is simply because such missions typically require a force bigger than a MEU, but this is nevertheless a telling list of priorities, especially given the fact that service in MEUs is a rite of passage for most Marines and shapes their thinking about their service's missions.

The spending priorities of the Marine Corps also seem to reflect this tilt toward kinetic rather than stability operations. Three of the Marines' biggest acquisition programs at the moment are the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the V-22 Osprey and the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV) — all combat systems that would be more useful for refighting the island-hopping campaign of World War II than for policing western Iraq.

Granted, the Corps needs to replace aging equipment such as the AV-8B Harrier jump jet, the CH-46 Sea Knight and CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters, and the AAV7A1 Amphibious Assault Vehicle (amtrac), all of which have been in service for decades. But there is reason to wonder whether these expensive acquisitions programs are the way to go or whether cheaper alternatives might exist. The F-35 is the most justified of the lot, especially because the Corps did not acquire the F-18E/F Super Hornet in the 1990s. But while no other vertical/short take-off and landing

attack aircraft are available, there are cheaper alternatives to the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle and Osprey.

### VULNERABLE EFVS

The Corps plans to spend more than \$7 billion to buy more than 1,000 EFVs whose armor, land speed and cargo capacity do not represent a significant improvement over the amtracs they will replace. In fact, the EFV would carry fewer combat-loaded Marines than the existing AAV. The one area where the EFV is vastly superior — aside from the fact that it has air conditioning — is in its greater speed and range in the water. It is supposed to travel 25 miles or more from over the horizon to hit a beach at a top speed of 25 knots, or almost 29 mph — more than three times faster than today's amtracs. Yet even at this greater speed, it would remain vulnerable to numerous missiles and mines that have proliferated around the world, as well as to low-tech obstacles such as metal or concrete barriers.

Even greater problems occur when the EFV gets ashore, which is where the Marines spend most of their time today. Like its predecessor, the EFV's armor cannot stop a direct hit from anything heavier than a .50-caliber machine gun round. It would be a sitting duck for the kinds of powerful improvised explosive devices and even rocket-propelled grenades being used by Iraqi insurgents. Rather than invest so heavily in this vehicle, it might make more sense for the Marines to purchase more heavily armored vehicles that are available on the world market, such as the Israeli-made Rhino Runner or the South Carolina-produced Cougar. In the long term, the Corps could work with the Army to develop an amphibious assault vehicle as part of the Future Combat Systems.

As for the Osprey, the Pentagon has already spent more than \$18 billion and 25 years to develop this aircraft-helicopter hybrid — and not one has gone operational yet. Yet the Defense Department plans to spend another \$32 billion or so to acquire 360 V-22s for the Marine Corps and 48 each for the Navy and Air Force. Assuming that the tilt-rotor Osprey works as advertised, there is no question it would be a vast improvement over the Vietnam-era CH-46 that it would replace.

But is this really the right benchmark? The choice today isn't between the V-22 and the CH-46. It's between the V-22 and more modern helicopters such as the MH-60S Knight Hawk and H-92 Super Hawk, both based on the Sikorsky Black Hawk, which, unlike the V-22, has a proven record of reliability. The cost differential between these helicopters and the V-22 is steep. The Knight Hawk costs about \$25 million, whereas the unit cost of the Osprey is estimated at more than \$100 million by the Congressional Research Service. Is the Osprey really four times more valuable than the Knight Hawk? Probably not.

The Osprey's chief advantages, according to its supporters, are its longer unrefueled flight range (2,100 nautical miles), higher ceiling (25,000 feet) and higher top speed (316 mph). Advocates cite these advantages as crucial for moving infantrymen deep into enemy territory, where they are least expected. But while this is a core capability for special operations forces, which are acquiring a V-22 variant of their own (the CV-22), it is unclear how valuable it would be to land small numbers of Marines far away from their base without much transportation, armor, firepower or logistics.

Everything that the Marines would need to fight a serious enemy and sustain themselves would still have to be delivered from ships via cargo aircraft or truck. Thus a slightly shorter-range helicopter such as the MH-60S, which could be refueled in flight if necessary, might prove perfectly adequate.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the Corps could save \$6.1 billion over five years by purchasing a combination of the CH-53E, MH-60S and H-92 rather than the Osprey. Yet, thanks to decades of relentless lobbying, the Corps has finally managed to get the Osprey into production.

With its advocacy for the V-22, JSF and EFV, the Corps risks falling into some of the same traps that afflict its sister services, whose desire for flashy hardware (such as the F-22 and the Virginia-class submarine) can sometimes overwhelm rational judgment of strategic priorities. Money saved on some of the Marines' big-ticket procurement projects — admittedly they have far fewer of them than any other service — could go to the Corps' backbone, the humble rifleman, who deserves more attention than he normally gets.

Systems for training infantrymen still lag behind those for training more glamorous specialties. Why can't infantrymen get the same kind of high-tech simulators employed by fighter pilots? Also needed are better systems to get intelligence from higher headquarters to the tip of the spear. It would be of great value if, for instance, every Marine running a vehicle checkpoint in Iraq had access to a small, wireless computer akin to a Blackberry that could instantly tell him whether a car's driver happened to be a wanted terrorist.

The Corps cannot, by any means, get out of the conventional war-fighting business, but it must recognize that its future missions will more closely resemble the Marines' occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1933 than their invasion of Iwo Jima in 1944. The Corps' history and comfort level with low-intensity conflict should help it make the transition. As Lt. Gen. Jim Mattis told me: "It's manly to do this kind of stuff in the Marine Corps." Yet between the 1960s and the 1990s — between the Vietnam War and the occupation of Somalia — few Marines engaged in these tasks. The "small wars" competency withered and is only now being reborn.

### EXPANDING THE THREE-BLOCK WAR

Mattis, who made a name for himself commanding troops in Afghanistan and Iraq (actually several names — he's known to the troops as the "Warrior Monk" and "Mad Dog Mattis"), is leading this renaissance from his perch as deputy commandant for combat development and commander of Combat Development Command in Quantico, Va. He has expanded the concept of the "three-block war" promulgated by Gen. Charles Krulak (son of "Brute" Krulak) when he was commandant from 1995 to 1999.

Krulak realized that on the modern battlefield, Marines could be called upon to perform very different missions simultaneously. On one block they might be engaged in high-intensity combat, on the next block they might be handing out relief supplies and on the third block they might be separating warring factions. In an essay in the November issue of Naval Institute Proceedings, Mattis and his co-author, retired Col. Frank Hoffman, added a fourth block dealing with psychological warfare and information operations. These are especially important components in counterinsurgencies such as the one in Iraq. But to compete in the battle for hearts and minds with America's enemies, Marines will need to dramatically enhance their understanding of foreign cultures. Mattis has made that a top priority.

He began by creating a Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning at Quantico. So new that it's located in a rickety trailer in a parking lot next to some railroad tracks, the center is responsible for briefing Marine units about Afghan or Iraqi culture before they deploy. It also works to integrate cultural learning throughout the educational curriculum.

At the Basic School, all incoming second lieutenants are instructed that, in the words of one PowerPoint slide, "navigating cultural and human terrain is just as important as navigating geographic

terrain." Another slide says that "culture can be like a minefield" if Marines are ignorant of the languages and customs of the places where they operate. As an example, another slide warns students about the ramifications of entering an Iraqi home to search for weapons if there are no female Marines or male family members present. By not paying greater attention to such sensitivities, too many soldiers and Marines have made unnecessary enemies in Iraq.

An even more fundamental reorientation has occurred at the Marines' Command and Staff College, which trains some of the most promising majors. Col. John Toolan, a veteran of two stints in Iraq who took over the school in early 2005, junked the existing curriculum, which focused on Marine Air-Ground Task Forces, and introduced courses on how to deal with foreign cultures and with other U.S. government agencies — another form of cultural knowledge that too often has been lacking in Iraq. Toolan also introduced foreign language instruction for the first time, hiring eight instructors to teach Arabic.

Beyond such Culture 101 classes, Mattis wants all career officers and noncommissioned officers to specialize in a particular region of the world. His aides have compiled a list of the areas where Marines are most likely to be sent. A certain number of Marines will be assigned to study each region based on its probable importance. Thus, 25 percent of Marines may study Arabic, 10 percent Indonesian, 10 percent Mandarin Chinese and 6 percent Farsi, while only 2 percent would tackle Tagalog and another 2 percent Swahili. (The numbers are still in flux.)

The Corps is building language learning centers, including one I visited at the Expeditionary Warfare School at Quantico, where captains study Arabic by playing a sophisticated computer game complete with animated characters. The hope is that midlevel officers and NCOs will acquire the equivalent of about two years of college work relating to a foreign language and culture. No one is under the illusion that the average gunnery sergeant will become as proficient at Pashtu as at disassembling an M16, but even a little knowledge can make life easier in the next hot spot.

"We're on the right track now," said Jeff Bearor, a grizzled colonel who put off retirement to run the culture learning center. "I just wish we had done this 10 years ago."

### **SPECIAL OPS COMMITMENT**

Another long-overdue reform is the recent agreement, reached after years of bureaucratic haggling, to send a contingent of 2,600 Marines to work for the U.S. Special Operations Command. This runs counter to the egalitarian ethos of the Corps, which has always frowned on elite units, but it is a necessary step to help provide some badly needed manpower for the war on terror. Besides, Mattis said "Whatever command we fight under, Marines just like to fight."

As part of this new commitment, the Marines will not only take part in direct action missions, the traditional bailiwick of Army Rangers, but also in the kind of work with indigenous military forces that is the specialty of the Army Special Forces (the Green Berets). The Marines' new Foreign Military Training Unit, based at Camp Lejeune, will create its own version of Special Forces A-teams — units of 13 to 17 Marines schooled in local cultures who will be sent to train foreign armed forces.

This is a huge and important step forward. So is the reorientation of Marine training to emphasize urban operations and stability operations — a change most evident at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms and March Air Reserve Base in California, which have been turned into simulacra of Iraqi towns, complete with Iraqi-American role players. Instead of training simply for amphibious or armored assaults, Marines are finally getting education more suitable for their deployments in the war on terrorism.

But more could still be done to reorient the Corps for its future challenges. The service needs to beef up its ranks in such specialties as civil affairs, intelligence, military policing, psychological operations and foreign area operations. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the Marines have often found themselves relying on Army help because they don't have enough specialists in these areas — but the Army is also stretched thin in these high-demand specialties.

It is instructive to compare the Marines and Army in several key specialties. The Army is 2.7 times larger overall (478,971 active duty vs. 178,231 for the Marines). Yet there are 4,531 Army civil-affairs experts vs. 549 in the Marine Corps (8.3 times more). For intelligence work, it's 30,752 Army vs. 3,597 Marines (8.5 times more). For military policing, it's 42,175 Army vs. 4,701 Marines (9 times more). For foreign area officers, it's 1,077 Army vs. 321 Marines (3.4 times more). As these figures show, the Marines do not have nearly enough personnel trained in the work that's most needed in today's conflicts. The Corps is trying to address some of this deficiency by giving artillery units the secondary mission of serving as civil affairs specialists, but it seems doubtful this will be adequate to address a pressing shortfall, especially when the Corps doesn't have a school specially dedicated to civil affairs. (Why not open a School of Civil Affairs?)

### **MATURITY OVER YOUTH**

Stability operations require not only skills different from those needed for high-intensity combat — skills such as knowledge of foreign cultures — but also a higher degree of maturity, because in these types of missions, the kind of aggressiveness that is the Marines' hallmark can backfire. The challenge is to know when to shoot and when not to shoot. The Marine Corps is superb at turning 18-year-old mall rats into stone-cold killers; it's more difficult to turn them into goodwill ambassadors and intelligence analysts — both essential missions for troops engaged in stability work. It might help if the Corps got older.

Traditionally, the Marines have filled their ranks by recruiting 17-, 18- and 19-year-olds, sending them on one deployment abroad and then discharging them. This makes for a force younger and less-experienced than that of the other U.S. military services and many of America's allies. The median age of a Marine is 22; for an Army soldier, it's 27. Those five years can make a big difference in terms of maturity. It's interesting to note that in the Australian Army — a small force, but one that specializes in stability and counterinsurgency operations — most of the soldiers are 25 to 29 years old, and they have an average of almost 10 years of service. The British Army, another force that puts more emphasis on counterinsurgency work, has enlisted personnel who are an average of 26 years old; for the Royal Navy, the figure rises to 28. That's a model to aspire to because in stability, as opposed to amphibious assault operations, youth can be more of a hindrance than a help.

The Corps recognizes that its youthful makeup can be a problem, and the service is trying to address the issue by ensuring that infantry NCOs get more experience and training before they take over a squad of 11 Marines. In the future, all infantry squads will be led by sergeants who have at least five years' service and are on their second deployment; today, some squads are led by corporals who are still on their first deployment. But it would be worth going further and trying to slightly age the force overall.

A radical version of this idea would be to junk, or at least substantially modify, the Corps' — and perhaps the entire military's — up-or-out system. Why boot the vast majority of privates who don't become NCOs? Civil police departments have plenty of officers who spend their entire careers as patrolmen. Why can't the military have career privates? Of course, graying the Corps would incur higher payments for dependent, medical and retirement benefits, as well as for family infrastructure, but it would also save a lot on training and recruiting. More important, it would increase the

Corps' capability to deal with its core missions.

The final reform the Marines might contemplate is lengthening leathernecks' tours of duty in combat zones. Currently, the Corps sends units to a place such as Iraq for six or seven months at a time. For Marines who have not been to the area, it can take a significant portion of the tour simply to get acclimated and learn the lay of the land. By the time they've figured out what's going on, they are sent home. It might make sense for the Corps to go to one-year tours, like the Army, or at least to send units back to the same area they deployed to before.

No one doubts the need for the U.S. military to maintain its dominance at conventional warfare. But, as Mattis said, "We don't want to be dominant and irrelevant."

To be relevant in the years ahead, the Corps will have to go back to the future as it retools itself into a small-wars force.