CLB AAVR7s and Crew

Reallocate the personnel back to assault amphibian battalions

by Capt William M. Lambuth

The purpose of this article is to communicate the need for transferring all assault amphibious vehicle (AAV) recovery variants (AAVR7) and crews from combat logistics battalions (CLBs) that support MEUs back to the assault amphibian battalions to provide MOS-specific training, selective staffing, and improved personnel and material readiness. Marine Corps commanders have an inherent responsibility to place the best trained and most qualified Marines and equipment on MEUs as the theater reserve. East Coast and West Coast AA battalions are tasked with supporting a fourteen-vehicle platoon, consisting of thirteen AAV personnel variants (AAVP7) and one AAV communication variant (AAVC7), to deploy on MEUs. Subsequently, CLBs are tasked with providing an AAVR7 and crew to the same deployment. In most cases, the AAVR7 is employed in conjunction with the battalion landing team's (BLT's) mechanized company, despite being a CLB asset. The MEU utilizes the AAVR7 and crew for recovery and repair on the AAV family of vehicles (FOV), including third and limited fourth echelons of maintenance. Some time ago, the table of organization and equipment (T/O&E) for seven AAVR7s and crew were pulled from AA battalions and task organized to CLBs; this means three AAV mechanics (2141) and one AAVR7 were permanently assigned to each CLB. Because of the isolation of crews and equipment from the AA community, reoccurring problems continue to happen with personnel readiness, material readiness, training, and employment capability to the MEU commander.

Personnel Readiness

AA battalions are tasked with providing an AA platoon to support the MEU, typically forming 365 days prior to MEU composition (also known as change of operational command or CHOP), and then stabilizes 155 days later. All AA platoons assigned to MEUs have "hand-selected" platoon commanders, platoon sergeants, and section leaders; they also have AAV crew chiefs who recently returned from a unit deployment program (UDP). These platoons are deliberately manned with the most experienced Marines within the battalion. Between forming and CHOP, the platoon prioritizes PME, annual training requirements, and 1000–4000-level Training and Readiness (T&R) Standards. This time allows the platoon to build SOPs, practice tac-

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Realign the AAVR7s to the AA battlalions. *(Photo provided by author.)*

tics, techniques, and procedures (TTP), and form unit cohesion. By the time an AA platoon CHOPs to the BLT, they have formed the best trained and most qualified Marines along with the best available equipment in the battalion.

The three 2141 AAV mechanics within a CLB are comprised of one sergeant, one corporal, and one lance corporal. The primary tasks for the AAVR7 crew are recovery, third echelon maintenance, and limited fourth echelon maintenance. These Marines typically arrive at CLB immediately after graduating Basic Vehicle Repairmen Course. Without Fleet Marine Force (FMF) experience and attendance at the Intermediate Maintenance Course (IMC), these crews are not proficient in their skill set and are unable to fully contribute to the mission. In many cases, after serving four years in a CLB and deploying once on a MEU, Marines are assigned to a special duty assignment, promoted to staff sergeant, then returned to the FMF. Unfortunately, when these Marines return to the FMF, they have difficulty competing with their peers who served in an AA battalion because of their lack of experience with the community. At a CLB, these Marines are not exposed to all facets of second echelon maintenance on FOV, which is more robust than maintenance specific to AAVR7 capabilities. Furthermore, with only three Marines task organized to the unit, CLB has little to no flexibility for employment, considering there is a requirement for three qualified crewmembers to conduct waterborne operations. This plays a large factor in managing PME and annual training requirements. Ultimately, the Marines are not set up for success.

The vast majority of these Marines' peers reside within AA battalions. The AA battalions are task organized with 170 2141 AAV mechanics, 5 2149 AAV maintenance chiefs, and equipped with 7 AAVR7s. Unlike CLB, once mechanics graduate from Basic Vehicle Repairmen Course and are assigned to an AA battalion, they are immediately sent to a deploying AA company for a UDP rotation. They will spend their first 18 months in the FMF conducting second echelon maintenance on 43 AAVP7s, 2 AAVC7s, and 1 AAVR7 (the T/E for an AA company)—learning from senior 2141 and 2149 maintainers. After returning from their first deployment on UDP, the top performing mechanics are selected to join a MEU platoon. MEU platoons are comprised of one staff sergeant maintenance chief and five mechanics. The 2141 Marines permanently assigned to a CLB are unable to receive the same level of training and education in all facets of maintenance.

Material Readiness

The AAVR7 requires expertise to manage the constant maintenance upkeep in support of GCE operations. On several occasions, CLBs elect to leave their AAVR7 parked on AA battalion ramps upon returning from deployment. The intention is to leave the vehicle in the most advantageous location for the next time support is required; however, the reality has led to a vehicle remaining locked and parked until the next MEU composites while the AAVR7 crew returns to CLB to perform in ancillary billets. The result of this has made direct impacts on material readiness with overdue program office mandated modifications, late services, missing or unserviceable Stock List 3, and overall vehicle readiness. Taking a sample size of three AAVR7s owned by CLBs from Total Life Cycle Management Tool, one vehicle has been ran deadline or operationally degraded 41 percent of the time since 2014, another 25 percent of the time since 2014, and another 44 percent of the time since 2015. Considering the AAVR7 serves no purpose for the CLB other than supporting AAV operations, maintenance and accountability are easy things to unintentionally neglect when the unit is not supporting a MEU. If owned by an AA battalion, these Marines and equipment would stay heavily employed in the battalion's training schedule.

Another contributing factor of the material readiness is the lack of 2141 or 2149 leadership within the CLB T/O. The absence of a senior AAV representative poses issues with program office liaison. Over the past year, the program office released seven mandated modifications that are applicable to the AAVR7, along with several safety of use messages affecting the entire FOV. Without a 2149 in the chain of command, CLB does not have the subject matter expertise to properly manage these requirements and communicate with program office representatives, ultimately leading to unnecessary risk. AA battalions remain in constant communication with program office representatives and closely track all existing and soon-to-come modifications that will affect safety and readiness.

While deployed on the MEU, CLB maintains a Class IX and Secondary Repairable parts block. Given the complexity of maintaining a 40-year-old platform, AA platoons deploy with a demand supported item block that adds to the capability of the Class IX and Secondary Repairable blocks. More often than not, when the AAVR7 becomes operationally degraded or deadline on deployment, the AA platoon provides repair parts from their demand supported item to CLB. Although both units are trying to achieve the same mission and the correct decision is to always look out for one another, it becomes difficult to ignore the fact that "supported" and "supporting" roles are reversed.

Training

The MEU CLBs are task organized with one AAVR7 and three 2141 AAV mechanics. Since the primary task for the three Marines and AAVR7 is to support AAV operations on a MEU, these Marines are unable to train until the MEU composites approximately 180 days prior to deployment. The result of this creates an off-balanced capability when the MEU composites. An experienced AA platoon will begin mechanized infantry training and accomplishing 5000–7000-level T&R events while the AAVR7 and Marines supported by CLB are still in the midst of forming a crew. This poses significant risks as the AAVR7 is employed with the AA platoon.

The task within the CLB mission statement that aligns to vehicle recovery states, "provide or coordinate ground vehicle recovery and evacuation, beyond the organic capabilities of the supported unit." In order to do this, CLB must

train to 2141 recovery T&R standards located in the Navy Marine Corps form (NAVMCs) 3500.2. *NAVMC 3500.2, Assault Amphibious Vehicle Training and Readiness Manual*, (Washington, DC: March 2017); *NAVMC 32500.27, Logistics Training and Readiness Manual*, (Washington, DC: February 2019). This document is specific to AA community training and readiness for both operators and maintainers. The *NAVMCs 3500.27* contains the vast majority of CLB mission essential tasks and T&R standards; however, none of these standards or tasks align to AAV recovery or operations. This fact raises the following questions: How does CLB evaluate training and readiness for the AAVR7 crew? If CLB is tracing T&R standards back to the *NAVMC 3500.2*, are they also training to the 1833 1000-2000-level tasks? Since the mechanics crew the AAVR7, the 1833 individual and crew-level T&R standards must be trained and sustained. CLB does not have an AAV operator or maintainer higher than the sergeant crew chief. Therefore, no one in the battalion has the subject matter expertise to evaluate coded T&R standards (many of which have sustainment intervals of six months).

If re-aligned to an AA battalion, these Marines would have direct and layered oversight from ordnance officers and ordnance chiefs. These are the Marines who are most qualified to train and evaluate maintenance and recovery. In an AA battalion, these mechanics would also gain more exposure to all maintenance processes and procedures for procurement and disposition. AA battalions also provide exposure and licensing on the Mk-154 kit, Ordnance Chief's Course, and Intermediate Maintainers Course, which are vital to the career development of AAV mechanics.

Recommendations for Employment

The CLB T/O&E for all 2141 mechanics and AAVR7s should be realigned to the AA battalions, and the AA battalions should be tasked with providing the AAVR7 to the MEU along with the rest of the AA platoon. Taking this capability away from CLB would not detract from their task to "provide or coordinate ground vehicle recovery and evacuation, beyond the organic capabilities of the supported unit." Rather than providing AAVR7 support to the BLT and MEU, CLB would provide assistance once all AAV capabilities are exhausted. Examples of CLB support include: coordinating surface connector support when a deadlined AAV is unable to return to ship on its own power, coordinating or providing M88 support when AAVR7 capabilities are unable to accomplish the task, and providing trailer lift support with M870E when mobility prevents an AAV from being towed. Conversely, the AAVR7 could easily support the CLB and MEU in the isolated cases where the AAVR7 is needed; the tasking authority would remain with the MEU S-4.

In an AA battalion, the AAVR7 and crew would form 365 days prior to MEU composition along with the rest of the AA platoon, which affords them the much needed time to stay up to date on PME, annual training, and build TTP and SOPs with the rest of the platoon. The necessity to complete individual and crew-level training prior to MEU composition is vital to the success of an AA platoon during a MEU pre-deployment training plan. Prior to CHOP, an AA platoon tasked with deploying on a MEU conducted multiple ship operations in support of well-deck certifications, gunnery tables I-XII in the Gunnery Skills Tables, and several hours of section- and platoon-level field exercises without embarked infantry. Once fully integrated into a BLT, AA platoons are expected to begin training to 5000–7000-level tasks. Without time to train prior to CHOP, crews assigned to CLBs will be unable to perform to the levels of expectation and no longer be considered force multipliers. An AAVR7 crew sourced from an AA battalion would be included in all of this training.

Conclusion

The AAVR7 is organic to both an AA battalion and AA company; this capability does not belong in a CLB. The AA battalions are best suited for sourcing and sustaining the most reliable equipment to support the MEUs. In addition, the AA battalion's current plan of sourcing 2141s to UDP companies and then selecting the most qualified to deploy on MEUs would nest with sourcing the most trained and qualified AAVR7 crew to the MEU. Marines assigned to the AAVR7 would be hand selected by the battalion maintenance officer and maintenance chief with the criteria to have experience in a UDP rotation, AAV section mechanic during a MEU deployment, and IMC complete. Furthermore, these Marines would be well-versed in all aspects of maintenance management setting them up for greater success as they promote through the ranks, vice being isolated at a CLB away from amphibious maintenance, training, and mentorship. Realignment of all AAVR7s and 2141 AAV mechanics from CLBs back to AA battalions would ultimately contribute to better material readiness, personnel readiness, and capability provided to MEU commanders.

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