

Rebuilding Capability

Assault amphibians and infantry return to the deep blue

by Majs Justin D. Davis & Neal T. Jones

On 30 July 2020, a tragic incident occurred off the coast of San Clemente Island, CA.¹ An Assault Amphibious Vehicle (AAV) conducting routine training rapidly sank, taking with it the lives of eight Marines and one sailor while several others sustained recoverable injuries. While many of the specific facts and circumstances regarding this event remain under investigation, one fact is clear: shortly following the incident the Marine Corps ceased waterborne operations, leaving assault amphibians sidelined.

This article does not dispute the decision to cease waterborne operations after the mishap or question the validity of current directives. Rather, this article asks the Marine Corps' most senior leaders to take a moment and reflect on the implications of an amphibious force that is currently unable to conduct amphibious operations. In addition, this article calls for both assault amphibian and infantry battalion-level leaders to unite and take action by specifically refocusing their unit's training in meaningful ways that rebuild amphibious capability and then leading their respective unit through plans of action that will help contribute to a safe and efficient return of the Marine Corps' Service-defining capability.

Historical Context and the Operational Pause

Over the past two decades, twenty AAVs—excluding the most recent incident—have sank during training exercises or equipment testing.² Prior to the July incident, two Marines—both assault amphibians—died in two separate incidents.³ Further analysis revealed that sixteen vehicles sank because of human error and four vehicles sank because of a mechanical issue.⁴ Unques-

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tionably, a single non-combat related death is one too many. However, when compared to the frequency in which Marines are embarked on AAVs for waterborne operations, the likelihood that a Marine or Sailor is killed aboard an AAV is exceedingly rare. In comparison, when examining Class A aviation mishaps, far more Marines have died in aviation-related incidents and at the hands of their own munitions than in waterborne AAV operations. Aircraft accidents alone have killed 62 Marines in the last 6 years.⁵

Following most major mishaps, it is common for senior leaders to direct a pause in operations—rightfully so. Pauses in operations are viewed as a responsible way to afford unit leaders the time to review best practices and procedures so their units remain capable, safe, and prepared. However, extended operational pauses have detrimental effects on the overall readiness of the force. For example, the current operational pause in waterborne operations—currently seven months at the time of this writing—negatively affects L-class ship training and certification. From the Navy's well deck teams to the designated radar operators who track AAVs in the boat lane, skills across the combined naval team continue to atrophy. Also, the operational pause resulted in four of the most recent MEUs deploying without embarked AAVs—a gap in capability in which we can bet our adversaries are keenly aware.

When viewed through the lens of perishability, the technical expertise requisite throughout the aircraft community are not that dissimilar from technical assault amphibian expertise required to safely conduct waterborne operations. Yet, given the aforementioned Class A aviation mishap data, we challenge readers to find an example where the Marine Corps sidelined an aviation platform for seven months—and counting—following a training incident that involved loss of life.

How We Got Here and Why It Is Time to Reconnect

Assault amphibians carrying infantry ashore certainly contributes to the Marine Corps' brand. In reality, however, assault amphibians have not conducted a major amphibious invasion since the landing at Inchon during the Korean War. In fact, it is far more common to find today's senior assault amphibians recounting the times they served as provisional infantry or as an Individual Augment during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM than the times they supported a MEU in a traditional assault amphibian role. Arguably, as a result, assault amphibian's requisite waterborne skills have atrophied. Beginning with the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, unless assigned to support MEU operations, assault amphibians continually found themselves in a perpetual cycle of pre-deployment training and subsequent



The infantry-assault amphibian team must evolve beyond nostalgic ideas of massed assaults against defended beaches. (Photo by Maj Justin Davis.)

deployments to the Middle East and Southwest Asia, going years without executing waterborne operations. To make matters worse, following Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, the assault amphibian community did not conduct a deliberate reset of their waterborne skills, nor did they conduct a combined reset in conjunction with the infantry. Perhaps, this factor largely contributed to the thirteen vehicles that sank as a result of human error between 2003 and 2012—at a minimum, it is safe to suggest that assault amphibians were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with their MOS.⁶

Second and third order effects from the past two decades of protracted land warfare have contributed to infantry and assault amphibians becoming increasingly disconnected from each other. For example, with the exception of an Integrated Training Exercise, Infantry Officers Course, select Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluations (MCCRE), select Service-level training exercises or units slated to support a MEU, it is uncommon to find infantry who train alongside assault amphibians. This is understandable given the need to prioritize assault amphibian resources for infantry deploying in support of a MEU. However, infantry and assault amphibians slated for a MEU deploy-

ment regularly complete an Expeditionary Operations Training Group raid package without ever even conducting waterborne operations.

Often, it is not until Sea Trials or a MEU CERTEX that infantry will conduct waterborne operations alongside assault amphibians. This should raise eyebrows because the assault amphibian requirement to support a MEU is only a platoon; there is plenty of capacity left within the assault amphibian battalions to support integrated infantry training at most times. At a glance, this can be attributed to inadequate time within an infantry unit's pre-deployment training program to conduct the required mandatory safety training (i.e., Submerged Vehicle Egress Trainer [SVET]) before waterborne operations. While this is understandable, senior leaders should find this extremely concerning because a lack of combined training in waterborne operations also presents more pressing issues when viewed through the perspective of cohesion and trust between infantry and assault amphibians—both of which detract from combat readiness.

Currently, minimal and unrealistic combined training between infantry and assault amphibians permeates a lack of mutual understanding for each other's roles, responsibilities, capabilities, and limitations. For example,

despite clear delineation in doctrinal publications and the assault amphibian community standard operating procedures (SOP), it is common for infantry company commanders and assault amphibian platoon commanders to disagree on who controls unit movements of the mechanized force.⁷ Furthermore, minimal and unrealistic combined training limits opportunities for leaders within both communities to generate consistent dialogue, interact, debate, listen, and expand their professional networks.

From a GCE perspective, meeting future challenges in contested domains will require infantry and assault amphibians that are truly connected, possessing a mutual understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities and having developed relationships grounded in trust—and it must start long before we are inside the first island chain. For example, dispersed infantry units operating within the littorals must implicitly trust that their assault amphibian counterparts will understand and properly advise infantry unit leaders on their logistical requirements, weapons employment considerations, and sensor capabilities. Also, given the new ACV's increased size and communications capability when compared to the legacy AAV, infantry must work with assault amphibians to determine how best to conceal the vehicle in relation to the prevailing threat—on both the visual and electromagnetic spectrum.

We CANNOT be the Landing Force of Yesteryear

The combined infantry and assault amphibian team must be much more than what their forbearers brought to the Pacific in World War II. To do so, assault amphibians and infantry must combine their capabilities and devise tactics, techniques, and procedures that best serve a fleet commander's needs in the future fight. In a recent interview with the *U.S. Naval Proceedings Podcast*, the commandant challenged his audience to reassess their fundamental understanding of EABO.⁸ In keeping with the commandant's direction, it is time for those at the tactical level to think of ways in which a mechanized force fits

into EABO—meanwhile, letting go of any nostalgic images of storming fortified beaches. Perhaps the mechanized force is tasked to move personnel and equipment around the littorals in order to support a FARP, use the increased mobility and firepower of the ACV to quickly raid a landbased target of opportunity in order to facilitate the safe passage of naval vessels in constricted maritime terrain, or conduct shore-to-shore maneuver throughout island littorals thus eliminating the need for L-Class shipping. It is not hard to imagine a scenario that calls for infantry and assault amphibians to combine their respective equipment into an enhanced sensor-enabled platform with data collection capabilities designed to inform naval commanders of enemy movement. While the aforementioned tasks are theoretical in nature, any scenario will require that infantry and assault amphibians know each other's doctrinal language, SOPs, and have the foresight to anticipate each other's actions.

Plan of Action: What Should It Look Like?

Step 1: Water Safety Training

Before complex training occurs, standard water survival skills must be mastered by both the assault amphibians and their embarked infantry. Both

communities must ensure all personnel conducting waterborne operations maintain a Water Survival-Intermediate (assault amphibians and any MOS assigned to a rifle company T/O) or Basic (all other embarked personnel regardless of MOS). Moreover, SVET training must include mastery of the SRU-43 Submerged Egress Breathing

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Device. Additional unit-level training with the LPU-41 (i.e., an individual life jacket) is required to establish the user's confidence in the system. This should come in the form of treading water for extended periods of time while using the LPU-41—a recommended three hours—at any one of an installation's training tanks. Following swim qualification and initial water confidence training in a controlled training tank,

both assault amphibian and infantry must participate in a water survival evolution commonly known in the assault amphibian community as a "surf qualification." This evolution consists of egressing an AAV/ACV and entering the open ocean, a scenario meant to simulate egressing an AAV/ACV that is in danger of sinking. After entering the ocean, all personnel then conduct an 800m swim to shore. It is important that all aforementioned water survival tasks are conducted in both day and night conditions. The goal of this training continuum is to make personnel comfortable in the water—for hours if necessary—while awaiting rescue.

Step 2: Crawl, Walk, and then Run!

Once individual water survival confidence is achieved, amphibious vehicles can be reintroduced to waterborne training. Specifically, for assault amphibians—infantry are encouraged but not required to attend—this includes classroom instruction provided by operational senior-enlisted leaders within the community that will re-teach basic waterborne vehicle manipulation skills, recovery, evacuation, and egress procedures. Additionally, senior leaders will present case studies of vehicle sinking scenarios that help assault amphibians understand the root cause of each event. Finally, there will be an in-depth study and assessment aspect of training that covers risk mitigation procedures and tests assault amphibian unit leaders on their understanding of SOPs. Upon completion of classroom instruction and satisfactory performance on all administrative examinations, practical application can commence. Assault amphibians alone will rehearse on land; embarked troop briefs, emergency procedures to include egress and evacuation, troop transfer drills, and recovery of a disabled vehicle will reacquaint them with commonly used waterborne skills. Once these are thoroughly rehearsed on land, a transition to the water can commence. Each assault amphibian crewmember will demonstrate water driving proficiency in both protected waters and open ocean; this will occur during both day and night conditions. While also in the water, they will execute disabled



Water safety training must be a "non-negotiable" foundation for all subsequent infantry-assault amphibian training. (Photo by Maj Justin Davis.)



Future infantry-assault amphibian teaming will also involve full integration with the Navy.
(Photo by LCpl Drake Nickels.)

vehicle towing and troop transfer drills. Once all aforementioned tasks are completed to the standards set forth and approved by the assault amphibian T&R manual, the infantry will be introduced.

The infantry will first conduct rehearsals on land, with a focus on understanding an assault amphibian's tasks while waterborne and during an emergency situation. Infantry will demonstrate an understanding of all safety apparatuses on the vehicle, conduct egress and evacuation drills, and execute troop transfer. Once proficient, infantry will embark aboard AAVs/ACVs and conduct the same drills in the water. In a protected waterway while conducting egress and evacuation drills, embarked troops will swim to the nearest safe haven (i.e., a protected beach). Then, infantry will conduct troop transfer to another vehicle in protected waters followed by open ocean. As a culminating event and final test, either a shore-to-shore or a ship-to-shore (dependent on availability of shipping) tactical scenario will be conducted. The crawl, walk, then run training continuum outlined above serves many purposes. However, perhaps the most valuable purpose of the training continuum is that it helps optimize relationships between assault amphibians and infantry.

Step 3: Sustainment

Optimizing relationships between infantry and assault amphibians is one

small step for the GCE and one giant leap for the Marine Corps. To do so, both communities should focus their efforts in two key areas. First, combined and realistic training events between assault amphibians and infantry should become the norm. This includes SVET, swim training/surf qualifications, live fire ranges, and full mission profiles containing waterborne operations. Although infantry units preparing for deployment will have priority for combined training events, this should not dissuade all other infantry units from seeking opportunities to train alongside assault amphibians. For example, infantry conducting a MCCRE should proactively engage the assault amphibian battalion assigned to their respective division and determine how best to incorporate waterborne operations into their evaluation. Second, both infantry and assault amphibians should foster cultures that promote consistent dialogue and inclusion between the two communities, with a specific focus on linking key leaders together long before training events or operations commence. Leaders could foster this culture through a strict adherence to quarterly PMEs. In doing so, unit leaders can discuss employment considerations, learn about each other's TTPs and develop professional relationships. Also, division-level leaders should mandate that all MCCREs and Expeditionary Operations Training Group

raids courses incorporate waterborne operations even when amphibious shipping is unavailable.

Conclusion

The loss of life that occurred on 30 July 2020 was tragic and must not fade from our memories. However, the negative implications and continued atrophy of waterborne skills that develop while assault amphibians remain sidelined make returning to waterborne operations more dangerous with each passing day. Rebuilding the Corps' amphibious capability will come through a continuum of education and training—dialogue, study, demonstration, practical application, and then sustainment. Without a doubt, the process for returning assault amphibians and embarked infantry to waterborne operations must be calculated, poised, and deliberate, but it cannot wait any longer—lest we want to create seams for our adversaries to exploit. It will take leadership at all levels of both communities to prioritize their training efforts and then *lead* their Marines throughout the process. The time for leaders to act is now!

Notes

1. Staff, "Cursory Study of AAV Sinking's Since 1989," (Norfolk, VA: Naval Safety Center, August 2020).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Marine Aviation Deaths Are Six Times The Navy's," *Breaking Defense*, (September 2017), available at <https://breakingdefense.com>.
6. Ibid.
7. Kevin A. Norton, "Unnecessary Friction Inside the Marine Corps' Mechanized Infantry Companies," (master's thesis, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2005).
8. Staff, "Proceedings Podcast Episode 198-Commandant of the Marine Corps on Marines Fighting Subs," *Proceedings Podcast*, (December 2020), available at <https://www.usni.org>.

