

How to Win Friends and Influence Shipbuilding

Marine Corps modernization and the amphibious Navy

by Maj Eric S. Hovey

There has been no shortage of discussion about the importance of amphibious shipbuilding in the Marine Corps' future since the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* was published in 2019. Not only did Gen Berger highlight the criticality of the amphibious fleet and littoral maneuver craft to ensure Marines have a combat-credible force within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command but he also challenged Navy and Marine Corps leaders to reconsider future amphibious ship capabilities, including developing more survivable and risk-worthy platforms.¹ The guidance remains: the Marine Corps needs smaller, more affordable naval platforms to ensure littoral maneuver, and also needs to explore the creation of new tactical formations to employ these new warships, "in full partnership with the Navy."² Yet, three years later, clear challenges to this vision are present. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Navy budget funds the Light Amphibious Warship (a proposed smaller, more affordable vessel than traditional L-class amphibs) in 2025 and ends the San Antonio-class amphibious ship production line to facilitate funding for higher priority programs.³

The Marine Corps' modernization efforts are thus in a challenging situation. Though the organization has moved quickly to adapt in light of the threat posed by long-range fires from the pacing threat (China), including the fielding of a new Marine Littoral Regiment and two more scheduled by

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2030, the progress to date has been uneven.⁴ The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Smith, noted that the Marine Littoral Regiments need four capabilities: long-range fires, the MQ-9A Reaper (for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), the AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR), and "organic mobility" through Light Amphibious Warships and other larger amphibious

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ous platforms.⁵ Though the Marines have moved quickly to demonstrate the capabilities of comparable long-range, expeditionary fire systems like the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) and to procure MQ-9A and Ground/Air Task Oriented Radars, the mix of platforms that will support Marine Littoral Regiment mobility by 2030 is uncertain.⁶ Absent the

development of both smaller, more risk worthy littoral maneuver platforms—in addition to existing L-class amphibious ships—the Navy and Marine Corps' ability to effectively execute expeditionary advanced naval base operations is in jeopardy.

Though senior Marine Corps leaders have clearly identified that amphibious transport is a critical component of the Marine Corps' *Force Design 2030* modernization efforts, it is less certain how the Marines can most effectively work with the Navy to influence the shipbuilding process. Identifying key players that impact shipbuilding is important because, while the Commandant's guidance to specific Marine Corps sub-organizations has been remarkably clear (designation of III MEF as the main focus-of-effort, for example) there are many entities beyond the Marine Corps' direct influence that dictate shipbuilding profiles. Thus, the Marine Corps can move fast to divest and invest in *green* programs that are exclusively its purview, but shipbuilding is a different story because most of the funding comes through *blue in support of green* dollars from Navy accounts.⁷ Moreover, the design and acquisition of ships take longer than other military programs because they are larger and

more complex, which is why even the procurement money for shipbuilding has a unique five-year availability, distinct from all other three-year procurement funding.⁸ The Navy and Marine Corps are different organizations, with different Service cultures, and it is not always clear who the right people are to talk to within each organization, an even more complicated reality when external stakeholders are factored into the equation. Given these challenges, the purpose of this article is to help clarify some of these roles and responsibilities for amphibious shipbuilding to reduce friction in the execution of *Force Design 2030*.

Acquisitions Background

To frame the conversation of Navy and Marine Corps entities that impact amphibious shipbuilding, it is necessary to first establish a common baseline of the major acquisitions processes that facilitate the construction of new ships. The three main systems to understand for the purposes of this article are Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE), the DOD Acquisition Process, and the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS). Though distinct, these processes have various touchpoints and intersections, which means they cannot be understood in isolation. There is no such thing as a free ship, so a good starting point is PPBE, a calendar-driven, 1960s-era process that is designed to allocate resources across the different service branches, captured in the form of a Program Objective Memorandum (POM) for major platforms and activities.⁹ It is complex and burdensome, so much so, that Congress put specific language in its most recent National Defense Authorization Act to reform PPBE.¹⁰ The Navy and Marine Corps submit a single (Department of the Navy) POM that encompasses the needs of both Service chiefs, the CMC and the Chief of Naval Operations. In contrast to PPBE, the DOD Acquisition Process and JCIDS are both event-based, consisting of a series of milestones and reviews from the beginning to the end of a program. The DOD Acquisition Process is governed by *DOD Instruction*

5000.02 and outlines the policies and principles for how all DOD programs (here, ships) are procured and developed.¹¹ Lastly, the JCIDS process is how the Services document, review, and validate capability requirements across different service branches. If the Marine Corps says that it has a requirement for “x” amphibious capability, this requirement has to be formally captured through the JCIDS process. The interplay and execution of these three processes—PPBE, the DoD Acquisition Process, and JCIDS—constitutes the Defense Acquisition System (DAS).¹² Knowing which organizations impact different aspects of the DAS can help expedite the development of amphibious ships.

Marine Corps Key Roles Responsibilities

Since this article focuses on shipbuilding, it should come as no surprise that the Navy is the lead for many of the key processes. Nonetheless, there are several Marine Corps entities that help inform the Navy’s production of amphibious ships. From a requirements standpoint, Combat Development and Integration (CD&I) supports the development of requirements for amphibious ships, including formal inputs to

vice. Within CD&I too, it should be noted that the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab is responsible for not only the wargaming and analysis that undergirds new amphibious fleet design but some of the assessment of new technologies such as the contracted Stern Landing Vessel, which will support live-force experimentation and inform future fleet design.¹³

Beyond CD&I and Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, two other Marine Corps entities help shape amphibious ship development: the future operations branch within the Plans, Policies, and Operations, operations division, and the Marine Liaison Element at Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA). As concerns the former, future operations runs a weekly “blue-green” sync that brings together Navy and Marine Corps stakeholders from across various warfighting domains to discuss issues of common interest concerning amphibious shipping. They track the readiness of the amphibious fleet and help communicate issues between the fleet and various supporting establishment equities as concerns amphibious vessels. Similarly, though not as robust as the full O-6 command at Naval Air Systems Command, the NAVSEA Marine Liaison Element consists of a series of

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JCIDS. CD&I is a large organization, so for most broad requirements (ship numbers, capabilities, etc.), the branch that deals with amphibious vessels is the Maritime Expeditionary Warfare Division. Other sub-branches within Maritime Expeditionary Warfare deal with more nuanced amphibious requirements—afloat command and control systems and connector vessels, for example—but the important takeaway is that CD&I owns the formal generation of amphibious requirements for the Ser-

liaison officers who support the various Navy program offices that field ships of particular interest to the Marines, such as the Amphibious Assault Ship (LHA), Amphibious Transport Dock (LPD), Expeditionary Sea Base (ESB), etc. This group is traditionally headed by a ground or air acquisitions colonel and the liaison officers serve as intermediaries between the fleet and various support establishment equities that have issues/concerns about naval shipping and their respective program offices.

While neither the NAVSEA Marine Liaison Element nor Plans, Policies, and Operations directly control the funding or requirements for amphibious vessels, they are nonetheless useful touchpoints for situational awareness between the fleet and program offices as concerns the execution of the DAS.

Navy Key Roles and Responsibilities

One critical touchpoint is the resource sponsor for Expeditionary Warfare (OPNAV N95), the branch within the Chief of Naval Operations staff that advocates for the amphibious warfare community. Given the outsized role that Marines play in executing amphibious assaults, it should not come as a surprise that Congress mandated that the OPNAV N95 Director be chosen from a list of Marine Corps general officers (BGen Odom, at time of writing).¹⁴ OPNAV N95 defines the amphibious warfighting requirements and plans and programs the budget to support those requirements. They not only impact the requirements and POM processes for all Navy/Marine Corps amphibious programs but also maintain a close relationship with the type commander for Navy Expeditionary Combat Command, which informs the admin, personnel, and operational training functions for amphibious warfare.¹⁵ Since OPNAV N95 articulates both the requirements and funding for amphibious shipping, it plays a key role in articulating the amphibious ship requirement.

In addition to OPNAV N95, two other critical organizations are OPNAV N81 and OPNAV N80. The former is the Navy's Assessment Division and, in this capacity, is perhaps most closely related to CD&I's Operations Analysis Directorate. OPNAV N81 is impactful because of its mandate to assess the capabilities and plans of all Navy program sponsors in the broader context of fleet warfighting activities and advise leadership on priorities and trade-offs.¹⁶ Thus, given a hypothetical scenario where Navy leadership wanted to weigh the relative merits of investing in "x" billions of dollars for LHAs or allocating those funds to new destroyers instead, the cost-benefit analysis of OPNAV N81 would be an essential part

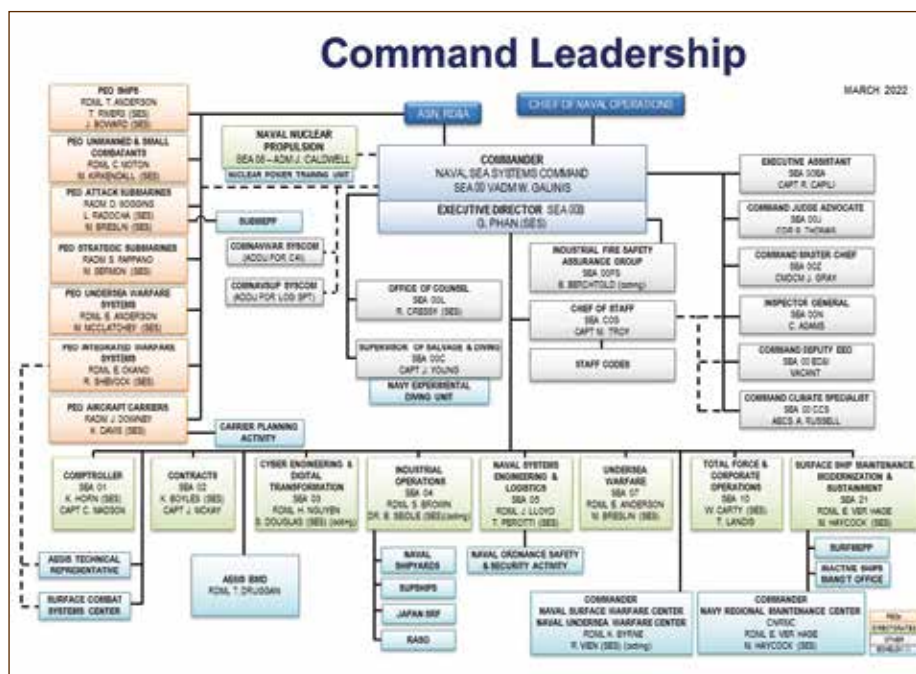


Figure 1. NAVSEA organization chart.²⁰ (Figure provided by author.)

of the debate. Separately, OPNAV N80 is responsible for preparing the overall Navy's POM, which they accomplish using both information from program sponsors, as well as planning and assessment documents provided by N81. To ensure both Navy and Marine Corps equities are prioritized appropriately, N80 will ideally have regular interaction with both Navy and Marine Corps stakeholders during the programming phase of the budget.¹⁷

Ultimately, the responsibility for aggregating the various viewpoints into a cohesive message—especially one that can be translated into budgeting priorities through the POM cycle—is the responsibility of the warfare systems sponsor or N9.¹⁸ As such, action officers and requirements officers for amphibious programs work closely with not only the N80, and N81, but the N9's Warfare Integration Directorate (N9I), as well. This is because the N9I is charged with generating a coherent POM narrative for the N9, across all Navy platforms. Marine Corps stakeholders looking to advocate for amphibious capabilities thus need to have early and often cross-talk between not only the relevant warfare systems sponsors (N9) but the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Integration of Capa-

bilities and Resources (N8) as well to ensure the alignment of resources to desired amphibious programs. Failure to solicit support from the appropriate N9/N8 entities can mean delays or nonoccurrence, which jeopardize the PPBE-funding of desired amphibious programs.

After the OPNAV staff shapes the funding and requirements for ship production, it is important to understand who plans and executes the budget allocations to meet the Navy and Marine Corps requirements. NAVSEA fills this critical role and, as the largest of the Navy's five system commands and with an annual budget of nearly \$30 billion, it ensures the designing, building, delivering, and maintaining of ships for the Navy and Marine Corps.¹⁹ This sprawling command of more than 80,000 civilian and military personnel is comprised of a command staff, affiliated Program Executive Offices (PEOs), and numerous field activities.

NAVSEA's five affiliated program offices—of which PEO Ships is most relevant to this article since it encompasses all manned amphibious platforms—have a dual reporting chain to both the NAVSEA commander and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition (ASN

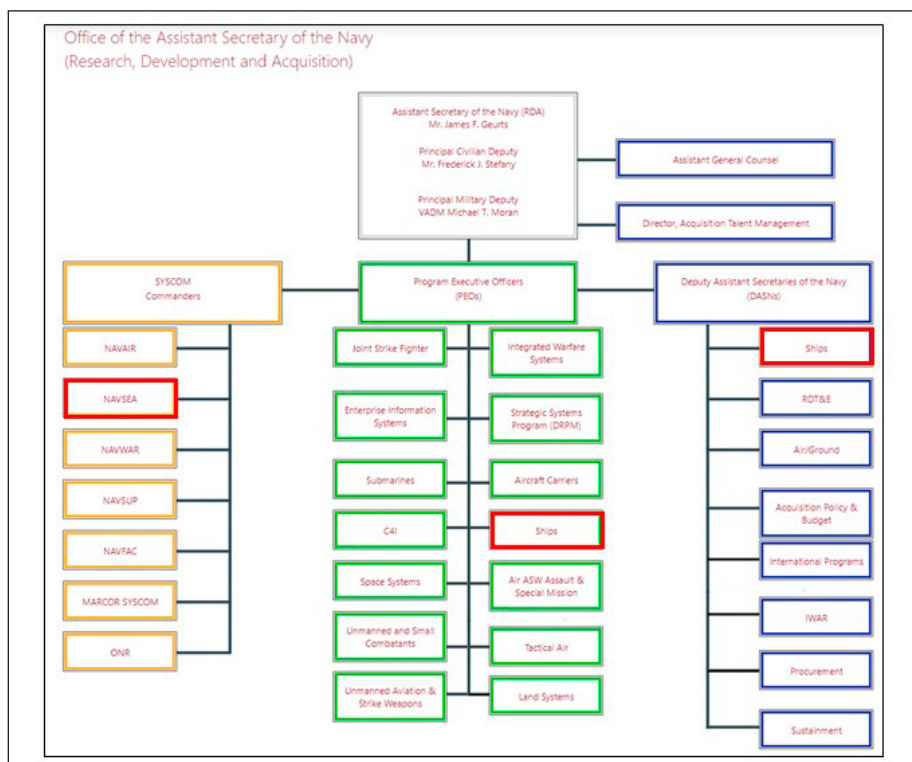


Figure 2. ASN (RDA) organization chart.²⁴ (Figure provided by author.)

[RDA]). For planning and matters concerning the execution of in-service ship support, NAVSEA is consulted, whereas all other acquisition-related matters go through the ASN (RDA) chain.²¹ PEO Ships is thus a critical touchpoint as concerns any of the discussions about the larger numbers of amphibious platforms required for *Force Design 2030* because its subordinate program offices maintain “cradle to grave” responsibility for all aspects of the program’s lifecycle, including research, development, acquisition, and construction.²² The program offices within PEO Ships manage the acquisitions lifecycle from program initiation to delivery to the fleet. Maintenance and modernization of these non-nuclear vessels fall under Surface Ship Maintenance, Modernization, and Sustainment, also known as SEA 21.

Lastly, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Ship Programs (DASN Ships) is impactful because they provide the ASN (RDA) with insight on issues involving all surface ships and programs supported by NAVSEA and PEO Ships.²³ Additionally, DASN Ships executes independent studies re-

garding the shipbuilding industry’s capacity for ship production and provides recommendations to ASN (RDA) about the full lifecycle of ship acquisition support, including ship disposal, donation, and diving and salvage. Figure 2 helps breakout the complex interfaces between SYSCOM commanders (NAVSEA), Program Executive Officers

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(PEO Ships), and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy (DASN Ships), all of whom have engagement with the ASN (RDA). Thus, not only is the physical engineering of ships complex and time-consuming; one sees that there is a correspondingly complex chain of individuals and organizations that im-

part the acquisitions process of ships as well!

External Key Players

While this article has focused predominantly on the relevant Navy and Marine Corps organizations that impact amphibious shipbuilding, it would be incomplete if it did not also touch on three external stakeholders: the Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE) within the Office of Secretary of Defense, Congress, and industry. CAPE’s perspective is essential because, like OPNAV N81, they provide an independent and objective analysis of DOD programs to ensure that the allocation of resources within PPBE is aligned to the best capabilities for the defense of the nation.²⁵ Thus, even if the Navy and Marine Corps leadership wanted to field a new capability and were confident in wargaming-driven analysis that its support to Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations was in the best interest of the Joint Force, a negative assessment from CAPE to the contrary could delay the program. This is because CAPE is the main gatekeeper during the programming phase of PPBE, reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, and is the primary review authority for department POMs.²⁶

As for Congress and industry, both are necessary partners for the funding and fielding of any U.S. military ship. Congress plays a key role in all DOD acquisitions because of its role as the keeper of the budgetary “purse strings.”²⁷ This is the reason that service chiefs and combatant commanders provide annual testimony to Congress and why Congressional leaders draft questions to the DOD during each National Defense Authorization Act with a request for a formal response from the relevant Service. For shipbuilding, Congressional leaders weigh not only the demands of national defense but also the desire to protect key industrial base capabilities in their districts.²⁸ Given a marked decline in the U.S. commercial shipping industry since the end of World War II, any new ship effort cannot be considered in a vacuum and requires input about what industry can support.²⁹ For example, there are a

finite number of U.S. Tier 1 shipyards that can build major surface combatant vessels and amphibious assault ships, so simply increasing funding for more ships does not necessarily mean that industry can surge production in the short term if ship numbers are larger than shipyard capacity.³⁰ Thus, one should not assume that procurement funding increases can overcome inherent limitations in the industrial base that sustains the DAS—shipbuilding priorities across various domains must therefore be discussed and deconflicted with industry.

Conclusion

This article has endeavored to empower and inform leaders within the Navy and Marine Corps about some of the more relevant actors that impact amphibious shipbuilding. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* clearly outlined the fact that long-range precision fires will preclude maneuver by traditional large-signature amphibious platforms, such as LHAs and LPDs, and so alternate platforms for littoral mobility are required.³¹ What has been less clear, however, are some of the key roles and actors that can inform and influence the processes by which the Navy and Marine Corps team pursues new amphibious ship development. Designing, fielding, and sustaining the ships needed to make *Force Design 2030* a successful reality is very much a team effort and one that goes beyond a “whole of government” approach, insofar as it concerns integration and coordination with industry as well. By outlining some of the relevant agencies and organizations that impact this process, the goal of this article is to bring Navy and Marine Corps leaders one step closer to building a resilient, lethal force that can serve the best interests of the U.S. national defense.

Notes

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