

Mr. John Berry Painted a Lasting Piece of Art

Growth of a concept and retiring from the Corps

by Col William Hughes (Ret)

“Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world. But, the Marines don’t have that problem.”

—President Ronald Reagan

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The old saw, “Success has 100 authors,” is relevant to the publication of the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept. The concept is responsible for the transformation underway throughout the Marine Corps and took center stage after the Commandant of the Marine Corp, Gen David Berger, issued his guidance to operationalize the concept with *Force Design 2030 (FD2030)*. LtCol John Berry (Ret) is one of the driving forces behind the writing and publication of the concept and the lead developer. John retired from the civil service in December 2021 after 47 years of service to the Marine Corps and federal service

John enlisted into the Marine Corps and was designated an illustrator. He then attended Boston College as an art major prior to his being commissioned and becoming an infantry officer. He retired as a lieutenant colonel and began his professional civilian career as



LtCol John Berry with one of his original paintings. (Photo by author.)

a contractor before joining the civil service in the Concepts Branch at the Combat Development and Integration (CD&I) Department. Later, the Concepts Branch became part of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory/Futures Directorate (MCWL/FD).

It was at MCWL where the EABO concept development work was initiated with many contributors working throughout the last decade with the Commandant's publication of *A Concept for Stand-In Forces*. John agreed to be interviewed to discuss the development of the concept.

In our first meeting, he highlighted several areas that needed to be understood and the key people and timing that influenced the original concept draft. During a second recorded interview, he covered a wide band of background details and thoughts underlying the concept.

Birth of the Concept

In 2011, the Pentagon was moving forward with the Air Sea Battle (ASB) concept. ASB had many detractors, not the least, the Navy and Marine Corps. The central opposition attributable to LtCol J. Noel Williams (Ret), a strategy advisor to the Marine Corps, was that exchanging missile salvos was unrealistic, prohibitively expensive, and doomed to failure.

The Naval Services recognized that operationalizing the concept by using chokepoints to contain an adversary's navy would be more effective and would not "eat the Pentagon budget," as one critique of ASB posited. Supporting this view, Naval War College professors Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, in "Asymmetric Warfare: American Style" wrote about creating a barrier using the First Island Chain. Following this, Naval Postgraduate School professor Jeffrey E. Kline and CAPT Wayne P. Hughes (Ret) wrote in the Naval War College Review "Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy." In this important article, the idea was to give diplomacy time to work by recognizing the maritime nature of the contest and doing such things as putting Marines on these islands.

Berry found this all interesting and gave it some thought. He sat with Col Doug King (Ret), the head of the Ellis Group in CD&I and MCWL, while working on an update to the Navy's *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* for the new Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Jonathan Greenert—an effort that was ultimately published in 2015 while the Marine Corps developed the *Expeditionary Force 21* concept. They began asking how expeditionary forces would be used in a fight with China. In response to the ASB criticism, how would we, the United States, defeat the China strategy instead of its forces and systems? LtCol John "Griz" Adams, ultimately the civilian head of the Plans Branch in MCWL's Concept & Plans Division, was working the Expeditionary Annex to ASB and raising the strategic questions of geography and logistics.

Further, Berry asked Col Art Corbett(Ret) to begin looking at the Marine Corps' roles and mission per Title 10 in the 21st century regarding seizing and defending advanced naval bases. It was important to defeat the immediate connotation of the word "base" from taking root when the intent was to use them as a "location from which operations are conducted or supported."

Corbett created a team that began thinking through the problem focused on strategy and not systems. Within the team, LtCol Jesse Janay was instrumental in crafting the first definition of an EAB versus an advanced naval base and published a small unclassified pamphlet describing the concept. This team included significant contributions from Maj's Adam Blanton, Andy Roberts, and Karl Fisher and were supported by contractor LtCol Gary Lehmann (Ret).

Partnering with the Navy

The Navy and the Marine Corps would rarely be accused of being of one mind. The 37th Commandant, Gen Robert Neller, once asked, "Why is the Navy so fixated on system versus system?" Berry told him simply, "Because that's the way they are raised." Acknowledging that, Berry said that it was important to not have the draft

signed as a formal concept until the Navy was fully invested in the subject which was proven later.

To that end, Berry, with King, had several Naval Warfare Development Command (NWDC) staff members supporting the development of the idea. In terms of fostering closer ties between the Marine Corps and Navy, on the advice of CDR Mark Hoffman of NWDC at a Marine Corps Museum tour, it became important to talk to the NWDC N3 and N5, and specifically CAPT Matt Dannehy.

During the first conversation when Berry and King met with him, Dannehy reacted badly to the idea when it was presented but ultimately came around when he and King started the Naval Board to examine issues of mutual interest and concern between the Naval Services.

Role of the Commandants: Putting Maritime back into the Navy-Marine Corps Lexicon

Rightfully, the 38th Commandant, Gen David Berger, is credited with operationalizing the concepts of Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) in his 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and *FD2030* program. These two documents, combined with the concepts, need to be recognized as being transformational to a maritime Service coming out of two decades of sustained land warfare. In another interview, the Director of the Capabilities Development Division, MajGen Eric Austin, said, "This is probably the biggest change, I'd argue, in maybe 70 years in the Marine Corps as an institution."¹

It should not be lost that Gen Berger delivered on advancements that coursed through a line of Commandants dating back to Gen Hagee in the 2006 *Naval Operating Concept*, which called for better integration between the Navy and Marine Corps. Next, the 35th commandant, Gen James Amos, was instrumental in pushing for a rapid update to the *Navy's Cooperative Strategy 21* in order to complete the Corps' complementary concept, *Expeditionary Force 21*.

While these concepts were implemented in the Corps, acceptance from senior leadership within both Services lagged until the 2015 Navy-Marine Corps Warfighter talks. This forum, set up by Mr. King and CAPT Dannehy, was attended by the 36th Commandant, Gen Joseph Dunford; Chief of Naval Operations, ADM Greenert; with then LtGen Robert Neller as MARFORCOM, ADM Scott Swift as PACFLT, and ADM Philip Davidson as Fleet Forces Command.

The watershed moment for the event and the advancement of the concept was when referring to the 2016 Amphibious Capabilities Working Group report, Gen Dunford asked, “Does the Navy buy into Single Naval Battle?” The answer to the question, coming from VADM Swift, was a surprising “No.”

This discussion helped spur the development of LOCE, which was deliberately written in the Navy concept format complete with a task list in order to ensure it was seen as a naval concept. One critical task in the list required the Navy to produce the Distributed Maritime Operations concept, which signaled the Navy buy-in to this modern relationship.

As the Distributed Maritime Operations and EABO concepts were developing within the Navy, MCWL, and CD&I, Gen Neller, as Commandant, recognized the importance of the LOCE concept and put out Program Objective Memorandum guidance saying, “Prioritize investment on LOCE.” This direction proved instrumental in advancing needed investments by several years and thus helped pave the way forward for Gen Berger in his *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* and *FD2030* initiatives.

Sustained Effort: The Importance of Continuity of Thought and Action

One of the fortunate turns, as Berry pointed out, is that many of the people involved started while they were on active duty and, after transitioning into contractor or civil service, were positioned to continue working the idea, such as Dannehy, Hoffman, King, Adams, and others. The consistency

in thought and sustained action moving forward was enhanced with new staff joining the team.

Mr. Corbett, who prematurely passed away in February 2021, began exploring how the Navy and Marine Corps worked operationally at venues such as VALIANT SHIELD, RIMPAC, and DAWN/PACIFIC BLITZ exercises over a period of four years. During these efforts, he would brief senior exercise staff and insert a related tactical problem to examine how to potentially solve the problem with contemporary assets serving as surrogates for future capabilities. The lessons learned at these venues contributed to the confidence in the efficacy of the developing concept and, indirectly, provided evidence of the Navy buy-in at the operational and tactical level.

Berry was emphatic in saying, “You can’t discount the importance of Doug King in this entire development.” Having established the Naval Board and the Navy-Marine Corps Warfighter Talks, King’s Ellis Group, later the MCWL G-35, initiated the detailed study of the strategy and the operational requirements to confront and defeat the adversary strategy. With the Naval research community, led by Space and Naval Warfare System Command’s Ms. Carly Jackson, SES, he spearheaded the Advanced Naval Technical Experiment process to generate the technological advancements necessary to support the strategy.

Over the last nearly four years, the sustained leadership of the MCWL Commanding General, BGen Benjamin Watson, and new CAP Division Directors, such as Col Michael Nakonieczny, later the Commanding Officer, 31st MEU, and BGen Anthony Henderson, now Deputy CG, II MEF/CG, 2d MEB, with LtCol Travis Hord took the concept further with the development and publication of the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

Moving Forward

Successful transformations are never without risk and everything related to *FD2030* and the successful execution of EABO is no exception. While the

concept was successfully developed and in the initial stages of being operationalized, ultimate success will remain an open question.

A critical personal concern for Mr. Berry—and he stresses that it is personal opinion only—is the ability of Department leadership to remain focused on the National Strategy that drives forward this program and the Marine Corps’ investments over the next decade.

The transformation continues advancing. *FD2030*-related efforts continue moving with the transition into its next phase—talent management—and the publication of the *Tentative Manual for Stand-In Forces*.

Farewell and Following Seas

John Berry departs MCWL after 47 years of federal service: Marine, Marine officer, contractor, and civil servant. At his farewell ceremony, the MCWL CG, BGen Benjamin Watson, summed up John’s contributions by saying:

Having first served with John Berry 30 years ago, it’s been an absolute honor for me to have the opportunity to do so again here at MCWL, and to continue to learn from him until the end of his truly impressive career. John’s intellect, passion, good humor, and extensive study of naval history have made him one of the Corps’ foremost thinkers and writers on naval strategy and the Marine Corps’ role in the national defense. We have been blessed to have him in our ranks, in and out of uniform, for nearly half a century. We wish him and Kathy the very best during a well-earned retirement.

John will take up residence in Ponte Vedra, FL, where he will pursue his passion for painting. He is one person who will not wake up questioning his ultimate contribution and impact as he departs having painted a bright future for the Marine Corps.

Note

1. Interview between Mr. David Ignatius, BGen Benjamin Watson, and BGen Austin on 21 December 2021.

