

# Tomorrow's Maritime Prepositioning Force

Navy and Marine Corps decision point

by Col Aaron A. Angell

**T**he strength of today's United States military is the ability to project power globally. The Navy and Marine Corps Team continues to refine the myriad of maritime concepts to support global power projection. The recent *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, July 2019), emphasizes the realistic challenges of projecting a force in a globally contested environment and, more specifically, tasks the Marine Corps to "rethink the future of the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF)."

Below are two stories to illustrate the future of the Navy and Marine Corps Team in employing the MPF to achieve national defense objectives. One story presents a retrospective look by two historians in the future who are questioning how the Marine Corps failed to close the force that was necessary to accomplish the mission. The second story presents a potentially new operating concept, and provides some thoughts for how to make an abrupt transition to this new concept. While reading these vignettes, both the Navy and Marine Corps Teams must consider the path that is right to meet national defense objectives. This is not exclusively a Marine Corps analysis and decision. The decision is for the integrated Navy and Marine Corps Team to make together.

## Vignette 1: Blunder of Korea: A Failed Campaign Dissected

"Now I understand how the Marine Corps lost its relevance as the maritime ready force," exclaimed John Bourque, an Army historian, to Tony Giorgio, a Marine Corps historian. John recognized this after digging through the

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**The Marines were going to rely on MPF resupply of the landing force. (Photo by LCpl Roxanna Ortiz.)**

Marine Corps archives in preparation to redesign the Army's prepositioning program. John continued, "I just completed my review of the Marines' actions in trying to get ashore during the Second Korean War. I emphasize, 'trying to get ashore,' because that is where they failed, and it is all because of their reliance on their MPF and the assumption of at least a semi-permissive environment."

Tony retorted, "Yeah, back then the Marines had been talking about the challenges of employing MPF in a contested environment, but it was all talk.

There was not much action to make a difference before it was too late." Tony sighed briefly and continued, "In 2020, the U.S. was thrust quickly into global crisis response on the Korean peninsula. The world's guard was down, although there was momentum toward a more stable peace, removal of the North Korean nuclear threat, and potential unification across the Korean peninsula. North Korean forces acted suddenly and seized Seoul and then Inchon. By this time U.S. forces had drastically reduced their military footprint in South Korea, all part of a multinational agreement.

The immediate task for the United States and contributing partners was to return to the peninsula with enough military force to prevent further incursion by North Korea. The Marines were tasked appropriately and postured to be ready. Two MEUs and a full MPF Squadron were in the Western Pacific ready to pounce. The call came. The landing site was Pohang to avoid the noncombatant evacuation and heavy maritime industry traffic at Busan.”

John chimed in, “That was fortunate, because after Inchon, the next major action by North Korea was a mixture of special force operations and cyber activity that seems to have shut down the seaport and created massive chaos that would have been a mess for massive ship offload.”

Tony nodded in agreement and continued, “All along Marines expected the seaports and airports to be soft targets for the North Koreans. So, they planned an amphibious landing across beaches north of Pohang, with early objectives being the seaport and airport to the south. The amphibious landing was not too contested, at least initially. Getting to Pohang, however, was a chore. The Marines drew in the one MPF ship with the largest in-stream offload lighterage capability to enable an offload across the beach for reinforcement. They also pulled in an expeditionary transport dock to enable selective offload of specific equipment to bring ashore only what Marines needed.”

John jumped in eagerly, “Oh, that is when the surface missile hit, right?”

Tony grunted. He paused thoughtfully and replied, “It is embarrassing to think how overconfident the Marines were. The ship was hit and disastrously went down fast. The Marine Corps lost a lot of good men and women, and critical equipment. That was a heartbreaker for our Marines ashore who were anxious for combat replacement equipment and supply replenishment. What was even more operationally significant was the loss of a majority of the squadron’s lighterage. A beach offload was now next to impossible.”

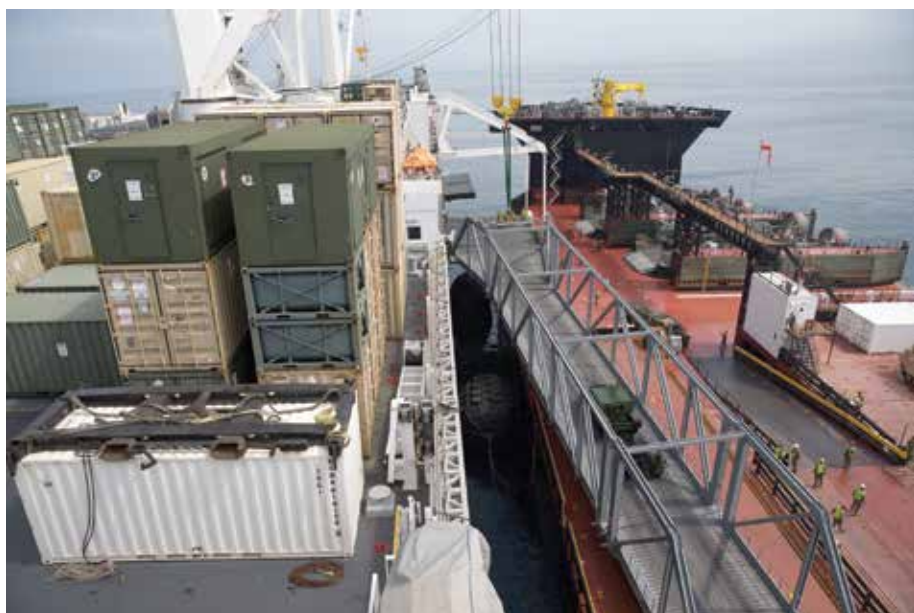
Tony paused and then continued, “Since a beach offload was no longer possible, the Marines considered Option

2, a port offload. However, the Marines needed a secure seaport. With both MEUs ashore and supported heavily by bomber support, after three more weeks of combat, the Marines secured the Pohang seaport and airport. While working to repair the airfield, one MPF ship came pier side, and another was preparing to enter the harbor when disaster struck a second and third time, near simultaneously. A covert North Korean element disguised as stevedores and other port enablers disabled every crane, set off multiple explosions at key deck transition points aboard the ship, and swarmed unmanned kamikaze aerial vehicles to decimate topside containers and ship’s command and control systems. In the end, a few weapons systems and some limited supplies were salvaged from the ship, but definitely not all that was needed by the Marines ashore. The other ship heading into port was swarmed by ten unmanned fast attack boats stacked with explosives. It sank to the point of grounding in the port, blocking the port from further traffic. All of these actions seem unbelievable, but with the limited lodgment of Marine presence primarily around Pohang, the narrowing focus on seizing ports to enable larger force projection, and the necessity to contract local services without the ability to conduct

thorough vetting, we walked into an operational-level ambush.

John interrupted with a question, “But the history books say that three ships made it through eventually. How did they do it?”

Tony replied, “Yes, three ships got through, but too late. After the failure of in-stream and pier side offloads at Pohang, the Marine Corps pulled back, took stock of the situation, and developed another plan. They brought in two additional MPF ships from Diego Garcia and moved additional forces from I MEF in California to generate the force in theater. They unloaded all equipment in Okinawa and then combat-loaded seven amphibious ships and four MPF ships to support a MEB-level amphibious operation—this time at Busan. Two months later, the force made it ashore, but only because North Korea allowed the landing. At that point, North Korea had attained the position of strength. Through negotiation with the United Nations, North Korea allowed the MEB to come ashore as part of a multinational peace force. The Marines had landed, but only with permission of the enemy for peace operations.” Tony added sadly, “That ended the legacy of the Marine Corps as a maritime *fighting* force and being ‘First to Fight.’”



**Four post-command lieutenant colonels had been task with developing a new operational employment concept using MPF ships. (Photo by Sgt Rodion Zabolotniy.)**





**The plan called for using LCAC to move equipment between ships. (Photo by LCpl Roxanna Ortiz.)**

John ended the discussion with, “Now the Marine Corps is back to just guarding forward Navy bases, providing local security for deployed ships in port, and protecting Navy nuclear weapons. It was good for the Army. We definitely have grown since. Although, now we, as the Army, are trying to figure out how to become more effective as a fighting force from the sea.”

### **Vignette 2: Blunder of Korea: A Failed Campaign Dissected**

“Request permission to come aboard, Sir,” stated an excited LtCol Alex Woodard as he stepped aboard the USNS *1st Lt Jack Lummus*, one of the roll-on/roll-off ships within the MPF.

“Permission granted. Welcome aboard, Alex. It is good to finally have you on board after all the work we have been doing over the past year,” said Navy Captain Earl Jacobs, Commanding Officer of the *Lummus*.

Marine LtCol Alex Woodard dropped his salute with a snap, “Sir, this past year has been quite a journey, and now we get to see how our planning, simulation, and wargaming plays out in reality.”

One year earlier, Alex began a special program that pulled four post-command lieutenant colonels from both Marine Corps War College and Naval War College to develop a new operational

employment concept using MPF ships. This team of eight was given the challenge of transforming the employment of the MPF fleet of ships to increase global responsiveness for dynamic force employment, with particular focus on distributed operations and expeditionary advanced base operations. These eight Marines capitalized on academic, simulation, and wargaming resources of the two schools to gain historical background, innovatively develop a variety of naval integration opportunities, and then wargame the ideas in realistic simulated environments. Additionally, the team of eight visited Blount Island Command, Norway, Kuwait (to experience forward positioned equipment sites), and multiple training areas in the Western Pacific to observe various MPF exercises and experiments. The analytical venture resulted in a newly designed employment concept where eight MPF ships would be used as independent deployers with agile command relationships to support MEUs, Marine force theater component commanders, and even carrier strike groups based on the operational needs.

Now, one year later, Alex and the other seven lieutenant colonels were each assigned to eight different MPF ships and tasked to promptly put their concept into action. The operational arena selected was the Western Pacific.

ic. The Marine Corps chose this area specifically to orient toward two of the priority threats identified in the *National Defense Strategy*, namely China and North Korea. Through the concept development, the team of eight also coordinated and synchronized several exercises and operations throughout the theater aligned with strategic opportunities to influence global competitors as well as allies and partners. The intent: immediately employ this new operating concept for greatest strategic effect.

Captain Jacobs said, “Alex, don’t get too comfortable unpacking your gear. We have a secure video teleconference (SVTC) in 30 minutes with Marine Forces Pacific Command, 7th Fleet, 31st MEU, and the Amphibious Squadron 11.”

Alex followed with, “That is quite a lineup of senior leaders. Good thing we wargamed the command and support relationships and identified the imperative for transparency and integration across the entire Naval team in theater.”

Captain Jacobs said excitedly, “Yes, we’ll see if Carrier Strike Groups come into play, as well.”

The 7th Fleet Operations Director (N-3) opens the discussion. “LtCol Woodard, as expected, the strategic context just changed, and that is driving us to change the exercise that you Marines were planning to execute next week in Thailand. China has been increasing threats against foreign ships in the South China Sea with increased posturing in forward island bases, as well as more frequent interdiction of small craft transiting in the area. Our routine response is a freedom of navigation operation, although that message is getting watered down and losing effectiveness. We are going to marry you up with the USS *Wasp* (LHD-1), to conduct a rapid forward projection demonstration in vicinity of Scarborough Shoal. The intent is to demonstrate our ability to expand force posture beyond the capability and capacity of just the LHD.”

“Sir, is there a specific capability set that you would like us to make ready,” said Alex.

The 31st MEU CO chimes in, “Alex, just as we simulated a few months ago, let’s go with the raid reinforcement

package. Obviously, we won't be going ashore, but we will have the expeditionary transfer dock on-site. As we conduct vertical assault demonstrations, you can offload the package onto the transfer dock."

The Amphibious Squadron CO adds, "We'll also get the LCACs in motion, and we can move equipment between ships. We also have coordinated for a cruiser/destroyer team to be on-site to provide maritime security."

This employment is not like an exercise planned several months in advance, with multiple rehearsals within a training area and minimal movement of actual units. This operation is intentionally designed to strengthen to resolve of Pacific partners by emphasizing the ability of the U.S. force to project anywhere, any time, and without having to use robust ports.

Hours before execution of the Scarborough Shoal operation, Captain Jacobs sent a runner down to LtCol Woodard who was working with the ship's crew to ready the capability sets with the selected configuration for the force projection demonstration. Alex comes up to the bridge.

Captain Jacobs explains, "Plans just changed. A typhoon just hit Guam. We have been re-missioned to provide air-field recovery support and potentially limited humanitarian assistance. More specifics to come in the next few hours,

but what I can say is that we are now steaming toward Guam. We will have time to reconfigure equipment on the move. We won't be needing the raid reinforcement package any time soon."

"Thank you, Captain Jacobs. I'll push the menu of capability configurations to 7th Fleet and MARFORPAC and ask which packages or modifications they want. We'll work out the support relationships, too. I'll also reach out to LtCol Dan Fields, on the *Bobo* and confirm what capability sets and habitability sets they have on-board for possible in-theater cross-decking. As of yesterday, they were steaming north, but still in range to potentially do some swapping of sets. That could give us more capability to sustain recovery ops at Guam, while the *Bobo* swings up for their exercise off South Korea in two weeks."

"One thing is for sure," said Captain Jacobs, "this new MPF operational concept is making us move around a lot more. This is going to come with some additional costs to support more steaming time, but it definitely puts us more in play."

### Conclusion

The challenges that the Navy and Marine Corps face in employing today's MPF in a contested environment are significant. The Commandant has directed a review of the today's MPF,

with intent to challenge operational employment assumptions. Realistically, tomorrow's MPF must be more agile and flexible. Agility will provide the opportunity to adjust capability on the move and shift operational direction to achieve various missions. Flexibility will provide the opportunity to expand and contrast in scale to balance effectiveness with efficiency. The efficiency will be critical as the DOD maintains global presence to enable global responsiveness under fiscal limitations. Vignettes like the above should help us to visualize what we want to avoid, and how we can innovatively adjust our employment concepts. These will inform programmatic investment and adjust plans to achieve success across the series of strategic scenarios. This is not just a Marine Corps decision, particularly considering the partnership with the Navy through Military Sealift Command, lighterage, and ship-to-shore connectors, as well as beach and port enablers. The path forward is a decision for the integrated Navy and Marine Corps Team.

