3

Benchmark Military Capabilities

Introduction

3.1 The Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade periodically reviews Defence procurement decisions and is briefed on future operating concepts. Many of these issues involve consideration of capabilities not yet in service with the ADF, such as large deck amphibious ships, or benchmarking against peer organisations in the British or US militaries. The committee members can and do observe some of these capabilities in action on such activities as Exercise Talisman Sabre. However members rarely have the opportunity for detailed discussion with the US owners of such capabilities about the strengths and weaknesses of the structures and systems.

3.2 During the delegation to the US the members sought to understand in more detail the large deck amphibious ship capability and the high readiness expeditionary capability fielded by the US Marine Corps.

1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF)

3.3 The delegation travelled to San Diego California to visit Camp Pendleton, home to I MEF. I MEF is a warfighting command comprising ground, air and logistics elements. It equates in size to the combined Australian Air Force and Army. It is a worthy benchmark for Australia as it operates similar equipment, has a similar military culture and frequently operates alongside Australian forces on exercises such as Tandem Thrust and Talisman Sabre. However, for its size the MEF offers a remarkably high

number of ready forces, able to be deployed at 96 hours or less throughout the Pacific region.

3.4 I MEF deploys and employs expeditionary, air-ground task forces in response to the requirements of the regional Combatant Commanders. At the time of the delegation visit the MEF was reconstituting forces which had been assigned to both Pacific and Central Commands.

3.5 I MEF took part in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991. In December 1992 through April 1993 I MEF participated in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, handing over the Baidoa Area to the Australian Task Force. I MEF returned to Somalia to facilitate the US withdrawal in early 1995. Most recently I MEF led the coalition advance from Kuwait to Baghdad in the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom, alongside the US Army V Corps. The advance was conducted over 800km from Kuwait to Baghdad and involved heavy fighting in almost every urban centre and river or canal crossing. Elements of I MEF have since returned to Iraq and were responsible for the recent defeat of insurgent forces in the regional capital of Fullujah.

3.6 There are three MEFs, strategically positioned for global coverage. I MEF, base in southern California at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, and III MEF, which is forward deployed on Okinawa Japan, and Hawaii, fall under the control of the Commander of Pacific Command. II MEF, located at bases in North and South Carolina, falls under the control of the Commander, Marine Forces Atlantic. All three are located near major naval bases and excellent airports, ensuring the rapid deployment of Marine combat power worldwide.

3.7 Normally commanded by a Lieutenant General, a MEF can include one or more divisions in its ground combat element, one or more aircraft wings in its air combat element, and one or more force service support groups in its combat service support element. The command element provides the command and control necessary for effective operational planning and execution.

3.8 I MEF is currently commanded by LTGEN John Sattler who, along with his complete senior staff, met with the delegation for an extended brief about the Marines and their high readiness expeditionary capability.

Figure 3.1 The delegation is briefed on the capabilities of I MEF by LTGEN John Sattler USMC

3.9 Before commencing their briefing about Marine capabilities the MEF staff described the importance to the Marines of the training opportunities presented by visits to Australia. The Marines are embarked aboard ships for extended periods so highly value opportunities to disembark elements for readiness of work up training exercises. The field exercise ranges in Australia are regarded as among the best in the world and the chances to work with similar Australian units provide an opportunity to increase interoperability and share knowledge on tactics, techniques and procedures.

3.10 In addition to the training component of visits the Marine leadership thanked the delegation for the hospitality directed toward their troops during leave ashore. In particular the Marine unit most recently returned from an extended deployment to Iraq and to Indonesia for disaster relief described a stop in Brisbane where they were made particularly welcome.

3.11 The Marine briefings covered an extensive range of topics. The delegation were particularly interested in the scaleable and self contained nature of Marine forces.

3.12 The MEF staff described Marine force packages, called Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) based on four components:

- A Command and Control capability which has the capacity to act as the headquarters of a Joint Task Force or the nucleus of a larger Marine task force that may follow into a theatre;
- A Ground Combat capability based on a combined arms grouping of infantry, armour, artillery and combat engineers;

- An Aviation element based on the mix of rotary wing transport needs of the force, integral fixed wing close air support and attack helicopter capabilities and C130 based transport and airborne refuelling capabilities. It is important to note that these elements are all Marine forces, dedicated to the protection and projection of their fellow Marines; and
- A Logistic element which consists of sufficient stocks to maintain the force for between 15 and 60 days depending on the size of the force.

3.13 The delegation were briefed on the Marine philosophy in which every member of the task force is trained as a Marine rifleman before he or she moves on to another speciality. This common cultural starting point ensures every part of the force is dedicated to working to support and protect the part of the force engaged in close combat. It also ensures that in a modern conflict where fronts and flanks are uncertain and combat can commence anywhere that every Marine can contribute to their own protection. This philosophy could be described as the ultimate level of joint behaviour.

3.14 The MAGTF of most interest to the delegation was the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) as MEUs equate to the combined arms battlegroups Australia is seeking to be able to embark using our next generation amphibious capability. The MEU is the highest readiness element of the Marine Corps and is regarded as the US military crisis response force for operations anywhere in the world. The Marine's described the MEU as follows:

- The MEU can be embarked on an amphibious task group of three ships and be sailing within 96 hours from call out.
- The MEU consists of all four elements of a MAGTF with a manpower requirement of ~ 2200 personnel.
- The MEU was a self sustaining package with the ability to operate without additional support for 15 days.
- The US Marine Corps has a standing requirement to form seven MEUs. These seven MEUs are deployed around the world to positions from which they can react to any hot spot within 6-10 days steaming time by ship.
- The tasks undertaken by the MEU are flexible and can range from humanitarian missions and training tasks to full combat missions.

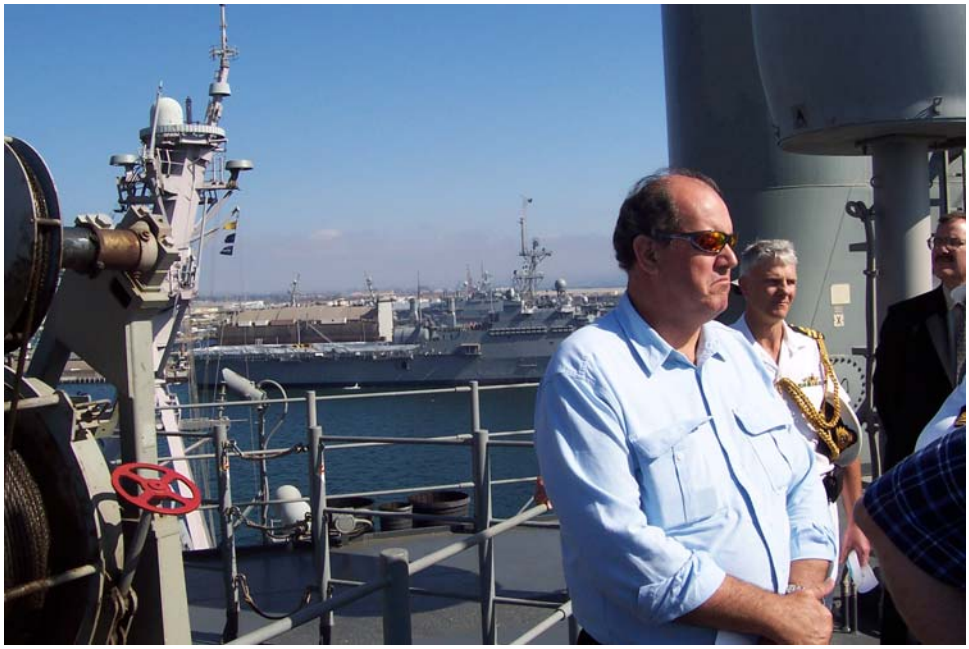
3.15 The delegation confirmed this level of capability is an important bench mark for the ADF. The delegation explored the deployment culture and the family and support structures in place to cope with the year on year off deployment cycle.

3.16 LTGEN Sattler concluded the briefing with a direct request to the members of the delegation to understand the operational tempo faced by US forces. His Marines were on a one is to one deployment cycle which involved a deployment for seven months to a year followed by the same time at home before deploying again. General Sattler concluded his brief by stating his appreciation for the deployment of Australian troops to Southern Iraq where they neighbour the Marines.

USS Bonhomme Richard

3.17 The USS Bonhomme Richard, a Wasp class amphibious assault ship, is one of the most modern and capable amphibious ships in the world. It is named after the famous warship of the revolutionary war with the British on which CAPT John Paul Jones responded to a British call to surrender by replying "I have not yet begun to fight!". Now anecdotally referred to as the Revolutionary Gator, Bonhomme Richard was designed to support amphibious assaults by embarked US Marine forces and provide a rapid build-up of combat power ashore in the face of opposition. The United States maintains the largest and most capable amphibious force in the world and is arguably the only force still capable of conducting an opposed amphibious landing onto a defended enemy beach.

Figure 3.2 Senator David Johnston observes the super structure aboard USS Bonhomme Richard



3.18 While the Bonhomme Richard at almost 42 000 metric tonnes is almost 30% bigger than the two amphibious designs short listed by the ADF,

many of the design features sought by the Australian Navy are represented on the US design.

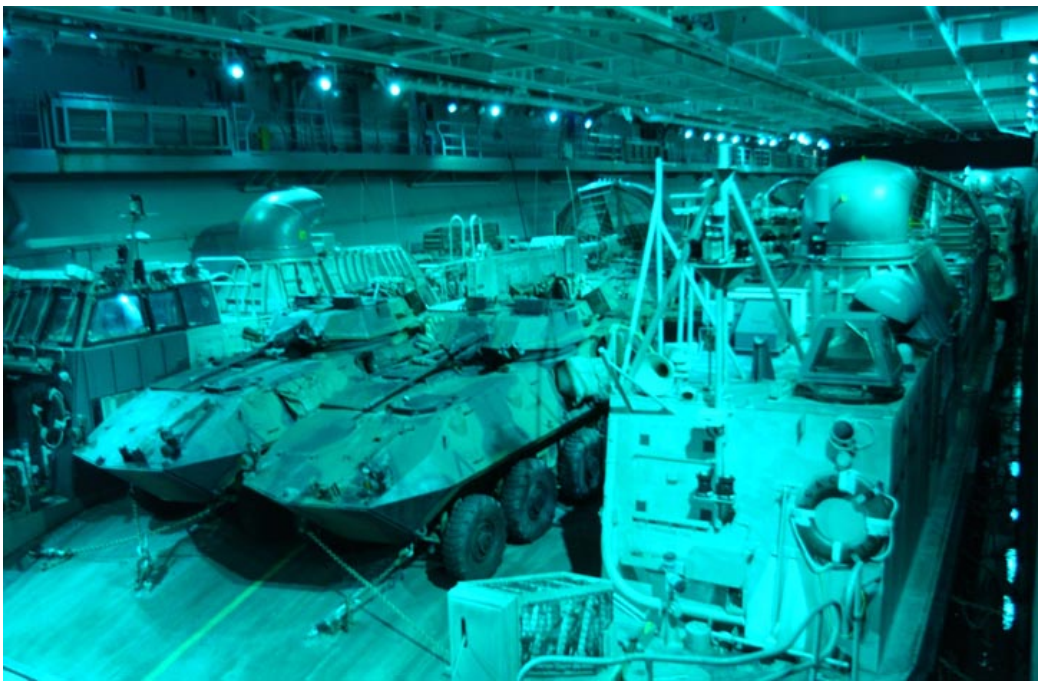
3.19 The Commanding Officer of the Bonhomme Richard, Captain Scott Jones (USN), escorted the delegation on an extensive tour of the ship. Captain Jones was nearing the end of his tenure as CO and had extensive experience operating the ship. His command encompassed a demanding period of operations which included combat operations supporting Marine forces in Iraq and humanitarian relief operations in Indonesia following the December 2004 Tsunami so he was in a good position to advise the delegation on the type of features they should support in the Australian ships.

3.20 Captain Jones advised that accepting a small increase in cost to build surplus cabling and processing capacity into the ship at launch would save significant cost and disruption to the capability down stream. His experience of two years in command of the Bonhomme Richard was that the capacity needed by the ship, as its Command and Control responsibilities expanded and the expanding needs of the crew for on line training and contact with home became clear, was double that of when it was launched.

3.21 The adoption of an integrated 'Ship Area Network' allowed all the Command and Control spaces to be modular, expanding to meet the needs of embarked forces or providing back up if a node was damaged or offline.

3.22 The Captain also described to the delegation the importance to the amphibious capability of the well deck, so named because the ship could take on ballast and lower itself in the water in order to flood an interior space. This interior space became a dock, protected from the elements, where landing craft could be rapidly loaded and sent ashore. He explained that his 46 helicopters could never have moved the tonnage of relief supplies taken ashore in Indonesia in just one load from each of his landing craft. The delegation was shown the importance of the deck space, or "meterage" leading away from the well deck for laying out the Marine vehicles and equipment for operations ashore.

Figure 3.3 The Well Deck of the USS Bonhomme Richard with US Marine combat vehicles ready to disembark



3.23 The most significant difference between the Wasp Class ships and the capability to be procured for the RAN is the number of deck landing spaces for helicopters and in the case of the US ships vertical take off jet aircraft. Size aside, the layout of the larger ship and the spaces necessary for maintenance relate directly to the type of design that will be chosen for the RAN.

3.24 At the end of the tour the delegates concluded that information supplied supported the ADF's choice of two large and capable amphibious ships over a larger number of smaller ships. The types of capabilities resident on the larger ships such as the well deck, space for numerous command and control nodes and the ability to launch and maintain a larger number of helicopters, are critical in the rapid delivery of forces ashore.