

Realignment puts Navy's land forces under one command

BY LOUIS HANSEN
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NORFOLK — Recognizing a growing need for sailors trained in close combat and security, the Navy has realigned and plans to expand its land-based forces under a single command.

The Naval Expeditionary Combat Command was established last month and will eventually encompass 40,000 sailors around the world. Their headquarters will be at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base.

After months of study and debate, the Navy moved forward with plans to bolster its land-based operations while leaving infantry tasks to the Marines.

"The Marines are the naval infantry," said Rear Adm. Donald C. Bullard, deputy chief of staff for operational readiness and training for Fleet Forces.

Still, he said, "we're inextricably linked in this battle space."

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The Navy also will re-establish a riverine combat force to close a gap in providing force and protection along rivers in hostile countries. The "brown water Navy" has not been widespread since swift boats fought in Vietnam, although Navy SEALs perform specialized river operations.

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The new Naval Expeditionary Combat Command will be based at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Virginia Beach, above.

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Command: No budget set for new force

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Bullard expects a force of more than 700 sailors to fill three units of river combat forces, with the first unit to become operational in 2007.

He said the riverine force could be used around the globe, particularly in Niger and Colombia. A homeport or ports for the new force has not been decided.

The forces also could be used to secure ports after the facilities have been seized by Marines or SEALs. Bullard insisted the force would be used to supplement but not supplant the work of the infantry.

No firm budget has been set for the new force, which is expected to need more watercraft to begin its mission, Bullard said.

Bob Work, a senior defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said

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the new structure would not replace the Marines' traditional role.

He said it reflects the sea service's willingness to adapt to changing threats.

"It's another indication that the Navy is getting over the Cold War and is really trying to adjust," Work said. "It makes a lot of sense."

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At a news conference last month, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael G. Mullen said that studying the need for additional naval expeditionary forces brought repeated questions from his Marine counterpart.

Mullen and other top Navy officials sought to downplay the seeming conflict. New forces, they said, would be used largely for security and defensive operations.

"The Marines need not be overly concerned about the Navy displacing the Marine Corps' mission," Mullen said in October. "That is not the intent."

Marine Spokeswoman Col. Jenny M. Holbert said this week the Atlantic Marine Corps forces fully supported the plan and would cooperate as the new Navy command develops.

The new Naval Expeditionary Combat Command also will include the Naval Construction Forces Command, or Seabees, Naval Expeditionary Logistics Support Force, Maritime Force Protection Command and the Master at Arms force. Bullard, a naval aviator and former skipper of the aircraft carrier Constellation will initially lead the new group.

Bullard said the reorganization would make training more efficient. For example, naval coastal warfare operations and Seabees have had separate training facilities, although they play similar roles.

"They all have their own training infrastructure," Bullard said. "But they do similar things, and they can be combined."

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