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## Guerrillas of the Sea

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By Lieutenant John Goff, U.S. Navy

### **A small combatant force should be resurrected for use in the South China Sea.**

Small combatants have always existed in America's Navy; from the gunboats of the Revolutionary War to the patrol craft (PCs) standing watch in the Arabian Gulf, they have allowed larger ships to operate out to sea. Captain Joseph Naman, the commander of Destroyer Squadron 50, stated that the "numbers of DDGs we have out here have declined over the past year. [PCs] are picking up a lot of the missions they were doing." <sup>1</sup>In an earlier essay, I argued for the need for a future small surface combatant. <sup>2</sup>By looking back on how the motor torpedo boats (MTBs) were used in the various theaters of operations during World War II, the best missions and methods can be derived for operating a modern counterpart. By specifically focusing on the South China Sea, I will show how missile patrol boats (MPBs) could further the U.S. mission by irregular and conventional warfare through the six phases of the continuum of military operations. <sup>3</sup>The focus will not only be on the surface combat mission, but the additional missions that these boats can conduct in order to reduce required deployments of larger assets. During World War II, these missions included shoreline/port strafing operations, noncombatant evacuation operation, search and rescue, intelligence gathering, escort operations, missions with special forces, and mine clearing. <sup>4</sup>Today's missions would include counterpiracy and maritime interdiction operations (MIO)/leadership interdiction operations (LIO).

Irregular warfare in naval situations involving state actors is a rare occurrence today. However, many nations have had issues with non-state actors, and a number of terrorist organizations have exploited maritime attacks, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Abu Sayyaf, al Qaeda, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). <sup>5</sup>On the seas, the "Sea Tigers" used small patrol boats to conduct attacks, both suicide and conventional, with larger transports for resupply. The Sri Lankan navy used its small, quick, offensive naval patrol boats as an effective counter to the

Sea Tigers. Many would argue that the combination of political will and strong counterterrorism at sea and on land was what ended the LTTE insurgency. Nonetheless, the LTTE showed how devastating the use of small boats and unconventional tactics could be against a larger and better equipped force.

Non-state actors are not the only users of irregular warfare. Throughout history, many countries have looked to irregular forces as an addition to their conventional forces. In World War II, nearly every country used them. They were widely deployed by U.S. forces in the Pacific theater in many capacities: the evacuation of General Douglas MacArthur from the Philippines by Lieutenant John D. Bulkeley, the Battle of the Philippines, Leyte Gulf, the D-Day invasion, in the Mediterranean, and many more.<sup>6</sup> American MTBs also served as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to locate and target submarines for aircraft and surface ships. The Germans depended on the S-boat to conduct missions such as antisubmarine warfare, antisurface warfare, mining, and submarine net clearing.<sup>7</sup> These examples show the flexibility and capabilities of the MTB/MPB as an addition to the conventional forces in a hybrid-type form of irregular warfare, similar to what was seen in the Pacific theater during World War II.

At that time, PT commands would forward-base from small islands. These bases would form in a similar fashion to the ones seen throughout the South Pacific—locations such as Tulagi, Green Island, Tufi, Woendi, the Northern Solomons, and other regional islands.<sup>8</sup> Often they were no more than what ground forces would refer to as forward operating bases (FOBs); these sea-FOBs would be quickly built by the Seabees or other combat engineering forces. Initially, these forces would be placed in multiple established locations. Currently, the U.S. Navy has the capability to build these bases; however, there are other aspects of the small surface combatant that must be developed.

A few assumptions must be made for the following scenario to work. First, the MPB must be designed and built in sufficient numbers. Envisioned here is a larger version (600–900 ton) of the M80 Stiletto or the Ambassador Mk-3; this is to allow for a longer endurance and the capability to carry eight surface-to-surface missiles. These boats also must be built to the initial specifications; they cannot become bigger and serve as a multimission platform. MPBs are not modular, they are surface combatants. Another assumption is a missile capable of causing significant damage to a larger ship; the missile can be affixed to the small craft. Two that come to mind are the naval strike missile or long range antiship missile; these missiles must be line-of-sight capable and allow for a line of bearing and estimated range for fire control. Finally, the nations in the South Pacific, where the bases are proposed, must allow these ships to operate from their ports.

## Phase Zero: Shape

*Various interagency activities are performed to dissuade or deter potential adversaries and to assure or solidify relationships with friends and allies.*<sup>9</sup>

During Phase Zero, these MPBs would be deployed to various strategic ports. Prepositioning the MPBs would show potential aggressors the United States' support for these countries, thus dissuading them from overt aggression. Placing U.S. forces in conflicted regions is nothing new; the United States stationed troops throughout Europe during the Cold War for similar reasons. During World War II, the MTBs were transported via cargo vessels, as they displaced around 50 tons. Today the MPBs, displacing much more (around 500 tons), may move from the United States to predetermined locations under their own power or through the use of the Military Sealift Command's heavy-lift ships. During this buildup of ships, the locating and outlining of potential sea-FOB locations and the establishment of plans for pre-staging logistics and Hydra placement would commence.<sup>10</sup> To ensure proper coverage, these bases should be located in Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Northern Australia, Japan, and possibly Guam and Thailand.

Due to the small size and limited footprint relative to the prospective firepower the MPB can bring, fishing, commercial, and military ports would be used in addition to the ad hoc sea-FOBS. The use of diesel engines as opposed to gas turbines would allow for parts to be easily accessed through commercial sources if necessary, or in the event of war some parts could be scavenged from the surrounding ships. Small crew sizes and the efficiency of diesel engines would reduce the need for large quantities of food and fuel, especially compared to destroyers or cruisers. These sea-FOBs would need to have supplies prepositioned to prevent initial disruption during the onset of hostilities. If conflict did break out, the supplies would be delivered to these FOBs by coastal freighters, warships, the Hydra system, or other MPBs and stockpiled for future use.

In 2013, a "significantly high number of [pirate] attacks again occurred in the South China Sea where 142 reports were made to the [International Maritime] Organization compared with the 90 incidents reported for 2012."<sup>11</sup> In

addition to operating in the South China Sea, MPBs would conduct counterpiracy operations in and around the Malacca Straits. The narrow channels, multiple islands, and proximity of shipping to shallow water allow the piracy operations to be executed with significant impunity. However, with a smaller, faster MPB fleet, these operations can be reduced and possibly eliminated. In the South China Sea the ability to blend in with the surrounding traffic would allow the MPB to operate effectively against piracy and in combat. MPBs would perform well conducting MIO/LIO operations against terror groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, and Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia. While these groups pose only a minimal threat to the United States, they could act against allied nations within the region, and after any conflict subsides, they could be a significant destabilization force. If the situation in the region deteriorates and combat operations are possible, the presence of the MPBs would serve as an initial deterrent.

### **Phase One: Deter**

*Deter undesirable adversary action by demonstrating the capabilities and resolve of the joint force.* <sup>12</sup>

As constructing a significant number of low-cost missile combatants would be required, the low cost of MPBs would allow for large numbers to be purchased, deployed, and sustained forward. The simplicity of design would facilitate a more rapid employment, thus putting more ships on station and increasing the deterrence effect. Crews would be drawn from the more “nontraditional” forces such as the Expeditionary (riverine) and PC communities. These ships would be used in a less conventional method than our current combatants, using hit-and-run tactics along with stealth and deception to gain advantage. The current blue-water surface-warfare “mindset” would have to adapt to new fighting methods, with a considerably different tactical outlook.

In addition to establishing basing requirements, relationships with these countries would be improved through the exchange of knowledge, as many of these nations use both inshore and offshore patrol vessels as the preponderance of their naval forces. Combined operations would bolster understanding of the capabilities and limitations of both forces. The possible benefits of basing MPBs in these countries, in addition to joint training, would be obvious—improving overall trade relations and military support for the United States.

MPBs would be used to conduct MIO/LIO operations and enforce weapon quarantines around potential adversary strongholds. On the Cyclone-class patrol craft, the VBSS crew consists of only a few crew members, and the craft itself often operates very close to the vessel being boarded. Using this technique, the MPB would conduct similar operations looking for contraband, weapons, and personnel. Additionally, they could also deploy special forces ashore or deploy in sea-FOBs to serve as forward observers and gather intelligence until returning to port. Prior to engagement, MPB groups would relieve each other on station to ensure the constant coverage of the patrol area.

### **Phase Two: Seize Initiative**

*Seize the initiative through the application of appropriate joint force capabilities.* <sup>13</sup>

Future Chinese aggression and acquisition of islands could closely resemble the actions of Japan in the South Pacific during World War II. The MPB, during actual combat, would be used predominantly as a surface-warfare asset, specifically targeting surface ships and ports. To engage hostile forces successfully, the MPBs would deploy in small hunter-killer groups. Once the order to engage was received, the groups would maneuver to intercept hostile contacts. Using only commercial radar, they would navigate to a specified patrol area. Communications would be limited to receiving targeting information and attack coordination. Low probability of intercept communications would be used to communicate (e.g., laser, semaphore, etc.).

These boats could disguise themselves as tugs, coastal freighters, fishing boats, and pleasure yachts by using lighting, canvas, wood, and other materials to change their profiles. The ships would be painted to match their operational environments. For example, in the South Pacific, blues, whites, and grays would be used; if beached, these craft would be covered with netting or foliage to deceive enemy optics.

### **Phase Three: Dominate**

*Breaking the enemy’s will for organized resistance or, in noncombat situations, control of the operational environment.* <sup>14</sup>

The tactical manual for PT boats gives the following advice to the operator:

He should use stealth in closing the range before being detected. He should seek a favorable attack course where the speed of his boats can best be used, taking into account the desirability of reducing spray. He should consider the direction of the wind for carrying sound and laying smoke. He should make use of sun glare to blind the enemy and moonlight to silhouette him, at the same time avoiding being blinded and silhouetted himself. <sup>15</sup>

The MPBs would use the same tactics, closing in within 6,000-10,000 yards, preferably from the area with the most clutter. Using islands, reefs, or other geographical features, fishing fleets, merchant traffic, and sea state would help mask the MPB from detection by radar. Proper electronic emission control, supported by a line-of-sight capable missile, would prevent detection. At night, the optimal time for MPBs to operate, deceptive lighting would mask movement until the last moment. If detected at night the boats would increase speed, closing to the preferred firing range; missiles would launch and the boats would turn away and depart at a high speed, seeking to obscure themselves within the clutter of littoral waters.

Running at high speed would allow the vessels to leave the area quickly or find concealment, thus reducing the effectiveness of enemy radar as the small size of the MPB reduces detectability and probability of engagement. Also, a quick egress limits the time for a counterattack by the targeted forces. The MPBs would attempt to return to port to rearm and refit; if they are unable to do so, they would move to a sea-FOB or other predetermined location to refuel. If required to engage without missiles, strafing fire from crew-served weapons would be used to assist in egress.

The MPBs would also be used to limit the replenishment capabilities of the enemy at sea and ashore. Using small-arms fire against lightly armed transports and supply ships initially would limit the available materials of the adversary. Large ships would be especially susceptible to high-speed attacks by MPBs. As the hostilities progressed, the enemy's use of combatants to defend these ships would take them away from other tasking, possibly weakening the enemy elsewhere. This would mean fewer air-defense ships for battle groups and amphibious forces.

Many of the nations in the Pacific region operate small missile corvettes and offshore patrol vessels, such as China's Type 022, 037, and 056, to name just a few. These ships increase the lethality of the Chinese fleet by providing more platforms that can fire antiship cruise missiles. This volume of fire can overwhelm a single ship and possibly a carrier strike group. Increasing the amount of U.S. "shooters" would help balance the numbers and force the Chinese to engage more targets and expend more missiles. The potential to take away numerical superiority before and after first engagement will be crucial to long-term success in the conflict.

If a beachhead is established or port captured, the MPB would be used to attack and harass. During World War II, MTBs would often strafe and conduct mortar attacks against Japanese port facilities in New Ireland, Bougainville, and Choiseul Bay. Modern-day MPBs would do the same with strafing operations or missile strikes (if the missile is capable) to disable or delay enemy fleets. The constant harassment and surprise attacks would wear the enemy down, reduce resolve, and limit overall effectiveness. Additionally, these boat attacks would take place alone or in conjunction with submarines or land-based aircraft. The noise levels produced by multiple MPBs in the same water space would confuse enemy submarine fire-control solutions and allow friendly submarines to enter the area undetected. Swarming in conjunction with air assets would improve the lethality of both. MPBs could be used in these various roles throughout the conflict. Their flexibility as a surface-specific combatant allows for the multimission ships to focus on tasks they are best at; strike, antisubmarine warfare, and anti-air warfare.

#### **Phases Four and Five: Stabilize and Enable**

*With the forming of a new government, or the rebuilding of the original government, joint forces may be required to support/contribute in assisting multinational, intergovernmental organization, nongovernmental organization, or federal agencies in support of a legitimate civil governance in theater. <sup>16</sup>*

The South China Sea provides significant trade routes, has large reserves of liquid natural gas, and has extensive fisheries—all of which are heavily contested among nations. It is estimated that in 2013, the United States exported \$79 billion and imported \$127 billion in goods to and from South China Sea region. <sup>17</sup> Throughout the South China Sea there are contested areas where Chinese companies are harvesting resources in territorial waters that don't belong to China. The resolution of conflict in the region could lead to a power vacuum; the role of the MPBs would be extensive during this time. These boats would provide coastal defense, exclusive economic zone security, law-enforcement support, counterpiracy, MIO/LIO, and sanction/quarantine enforcement.

The ability to defend an ally in the region during the rebuilding of its government is paramount. Allowing it to focus

more of the money it has on rebuilding the country and less on security should reduce the period of dependence. In the long run, this should reduce the United States' total investment in the country, which may, in turn, become more accessible in regard to trade, and may allow for future basing opportunities in the region.

Any degradation to the naval capabilities of both China and the regional powers would lead to a flourishing of piracy, mainly due to the limited number of patrol assets. This would require the United States to boost its presence in the region. Forward deploying of MPBs would be extremely important to counter any post-conflict piracy threat—as it would threaten commerce and the transportation of rebuilding supplies, and increase the possibility of smuggling contraband and personnel.

After the conflict, strict sanctions would most likely be placed on China. These could be enforced using the MPBs in lieu of more costly assets such as carriers and destroyers. The ability to deploy a larger number of these surface vessels would ensure a wider coverage, and, in turn, the seizure of more contraband.

The MTBs of World War II performed well, inflicting moderate casualties on enemy forces in regions such as the South China Sea; often the malfunctioning of torpedoes stole away kills, and a lack of parts and materials reduced their performance. In the future, the MPBs would successfully operate in the same regions, overcoming the limitations faced in World War II. It was the fighting spirit of the sailors who served on board these boats that made them dangerous. One of the “six cornerstones” of maritime warfare is to “fire effectively first,” through deception, stealth, and speed; MPBs could place the enemy immediately on the defensive.<sup>18</sup> Through the improvement in weapons, construction, and electronics, these boats should once again be presented as a significant threat to our adversaries.

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