

Making Bold Adjustments:
The AAV in Enhanced Company Operations

Captain K. C. Brenize

Submitted to Maj R. Leaman, CG 9

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With the potential cancelation of the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV) program and the development of the Marine Personnel Carrier (MPC) program, the Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAV) community finds itself looking for a relevant mission at the tip of the spear. Fixed somewhere among the latest round of upgrades and the MPC, the AAV community must maintain its core capability and adapt to the changing operating environment. The AAV community needs to demonstrate that it can be multi-mission capable. After all, the capability of the AAV is what separates the Marine Corps from its sister service. The AAV has the potential to be effectively employed in enhanced company operations and still provide the Marine Corps with a forcible entry from the sea capability. The AAV still has the ability to give the ground combat element (GCE) commander the flexibility, maneuverability, lethality, survivability, and range to operate in the counterinsurgency fight and enable enhanced company operations in irregular warfare.

Background

The current posture and organization of the Marine Corps and the AAV community focuses on conventional warfare: nation-state versus nation-state. Unfortunately the enemy does not

fight according to any nation's established rules of war. The dynamic has changed. The enemy is no longer looking to engage American forces in a head to head fight, but would rather use a hybrid strategy of unconventional guerilla tactics and conventional force-on-force tactics. Skilled insurgents will adjust their tactics based on their numbers, their training, and their weapons. The engaged commander needs to be prepared to confront all types of challenges. The AAV is one more tool in his combined arms toolbox, to enable the prosecution of targets, to influence populations with greater ease and flexibility, and to minimize challenges.

The AAV provides the Marine Corps with more capability than it is currently being employed for. Not only does the AAV provide a ship to objective maneuver platform, it also gives a maneuver unit the means in which to sustain itself ashore at great distances.

In his "Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025," the Commandant maintains the Marine Corps' fourth core capability as, "The Corps conducts joint forcible entry operations from the sea and develops amphibious landing force capabilities and doctrine."¹ However, he also states as the Marine Corps' second core capability, "The Corps employs integrated combined arms

¹James T. Conway, "Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025," Washington, DC, June 18, 2008. Pg 9.

across the range of military operations..."² The AAV is an integral member of this combined arms team which is going to achieve victory in the war on terror. Maintaining and growing this capability is vital to the success of the Corps in the future.

To that end, history has set the example for the future of the Marine Corps in counterinsurgency and irregular warfare. To demonstrate the AAV's capability across the spectrum of conflict, one needs to look no further back in history than Iraq. During the last eight years in Iraq, the AAV has operated successfully across the spectrum of conflict. It has conducted every mission from full combat operations to humanitarian assistance.

Enhanced Company Operations

Operations

The AAV community is comfortable operating in small independent units. Platoons routinely operate autonomously from their parent company. The AAV platoon commander is trained to be an independent thinker and to support his respective infantry company; likewise, each section leader and vehicle commander is trained similarly. The AAV community must continue this trend and begin operating in sections independently from each other

²James T. Conway, "Marine Corps Vision & Strategy 2025," pg 9.

and the platoon commander and at greater distances. The AAV platoon commander must become more comfortable with exchanging control with command. If the community is to play a role in current counterinsurgency operations or Enhanced Company Operations it must be bold. AAV commanders at all levels must become comfortable allowing their section leaders and vehicle commanders to operate without continuous orders and supervision.

These section leaders and vehicle commanders need to understand command relationships (direct support (DS), general support (GS), and attached) and the necessity to cultivate positive command relationships with infantry unit commanders. The AAV platoon commander's and section leader's bid for success is knowing his unit's capabilities and limitations, understanding combined arms warfare, and possessing the tactical maturity and leadership to operate out of his comfort zone. This knowledge and understanding coupled with maturity and strong leadership will establish credibility with the supported unit and create a foundation for establishing solid standard operating procedures (SOPs) for enhanced company operations. They, as well as their infantry counterparts, need to be well-trained and well-educated in AAV/infantry integration.

Maneuver

During the last several years, the Marine Corps has acquired vehicles that can withstand the blast of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These vehicles limit a units maneuver space and canalize it to the roads. Because of the wheels on the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, they have very limited tactical off-road capability keeping Marines on the main supply routes (MSRs), where insurgents want them.³ This restriction to the roads has made Marines predictable and has provided the enemy with easy targets.

Afghanistan, for example, is a country where the roads on which these vehicles travel are few and widely separated. Very few are paved. Maneuver space is significantly reduced in this environment. To return to being unpredictable and to enable Enhanced Company Operations several operating procedures will need to change, least of all is the Marine Corps' choice of mobility.

The very definition of Enhanced Company Operations implies the need for greater movement capability. To shrink the battle space and enable units to operate across hundreds of kilometers requires the commitment of additional resources. Vehicles that can move without improved infrastructure and roads best meet this requirement. Tracked vehicles such as the AAV give operating units the flexibility to travel where the roads are

³ Michael Hanson, "COIN Perspectives From On Point: Lessons Learned in Iraq," *Small Wars Journal*, November 2008, 3.

not. An after-action report from 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, recently deployed to Southern Afghanistan, supports this assertion.

We should have brought this capability [mechanized assets] to Afghanistan for the same reason it was assigned in the task organization. We could employ mechanized vehicles throughout southern Afghanistan, often in places that wheeled vehicles could not go. ... British mechanized vehicles were employed in the area of operations. They were very effective because of their ability to maneuver through the desert sand dune areas without getting stuck. The BLT's [battalion landing team's] HMMWVs and LAV [light armored vehicle] encountered significant no-go terrain in the areas that British mechanized vehicles maneuvered.⁴

Maneuver across open terrain without roads will not only shorten distances created by winding roads, it will also, in many cases, increase the speed at which maneuver units can move. The ability to travel without roads not only shrinks the battlespace, it keeps the Marines unpredictable and gives the enemy a hard target.

⁴After-action reports from 1st Battalion, 6th Marines.

Firesupport

Each AAVP7A1 (personnel variant) is equipped with an Upped Guns Weapons Station consisting of one M2 heavy-barrel, caliber .50 machine gun, and one MK-19 model 3, 40-millimeter machine gun.⁵ The four-vehicle section would give an infantry platoon more direct and indirect fire capability than is organic to the entire infantry unit itself. This capability would be equally well employed on patrols or at the FOB in a security/quick reaction force (QRF) role. Again, the Marines of 1st Battalion, 6th Marines assert that, "...the AAV provide[s] significant and robust...firepower that would have been employed..."⁶

Communications

Each AAVP7A1 is equipped with two AN/VRC-89D SINCGARS radio sets. The AN/VRC-89D consists of two RT-1523 VHF radios. Each AN/VRC-89D is capable of transmitting one high-power and one low-power radio signal to give the infantry platoon commander and the AAV unit leader four radio nets per vehicle. If each deployed AAV platoon is also task organized and equipped with the AAVC7A1 (communication variant) it would significantly increase the communications between the infantry company and the infantry platoon. The AAVC7A1 is equipped with one AN/VRC-89D

⁵MCWP 3-13 w_Chg 1 Employment of Amphibious Assault Vehicles, B-6.

⁶After-action reports from 1st Battalion, 6th Marines.

consisting of one long-range radio and one short-range radio; one AN/PRC-104 radio set for HF communications; one AN/VRC-83 radio set for UHF communications; and two AN/VRC-92D SINCGARS VHF radio sets, each set consisting of two long-range radios.⁷ The AAVC7A1 has also been recently upgraded to use the PRC-117 for VHF, UHF, and SATCOM communications, and the PRC-150 for HF communications.

This robust communications package would enhance any infantry platoon's capability to communicate with adjacent units and higher headquarters at greater distances. Recent after action reports from 1st Battalion, 6th Marines states that "...the AAV provide[s] significant and robust communication capability...that would have been employed..."⁸ The current communications package organic to an infantry platoon pales in comparison.

Logistics

You will be weighed down with body armor, rations, extra ammunition, communications gear, and a thousand other things. The enemy will carry a rifle or RPG, a *shemagh* and a water bottle if he is lucky. Unless you ruthlessly lighten your load and enforce a culture of speed and mobility, the insurgents will consistently

⁷MCWP 3-13 w_Chg 1, pg 10-2 and 10-3.

⁸After-action reports from 1st Battalion, 6th Marines

out-run and out-maneuver you. But in lightening your load, make sure you can always “reach back” to call for firepower or heavy support if needed.⁹

--David Kilcullen

With a load capacity of 10,000 pounds of cargo, in a logistical role the AAV can be employed to accompany patrols carrying additional water, ammunition, medical supplies, food, and other supplies. They can also provide armored ambulance support, as each vehicle can be outfitted with litters to carry six personnel on stretchers. The benefits of this logistical lift would far outweigh the additional requirements to keep these vehicles operational.

The majority of self-sustaining logistical lift would be done within the AAV unit itself. The AAV platoon commander is traditionally the AAV liaison to the infantry company commander and is best suited to coordinate the logistical requirements to operate at greater distances. Contrary to current operating procedures, coordinating these requirements will require the AAV platoon commander to spend less time in the turret and more time ensuring that his sections have the requisite parts and fluids to maintain operational tempos. Likewise, with an AAVP7A1 and AAVR7A1 (recovery variant) the AAV platoon sergeant can push

⁹David Kilcullen, 28 Articles, Fundamentals of Company Level Counterinsurgency

supplies to the sections as needed. Additional maintenance Marines are task organized to the AAV platoon to provide organic maintenance support and offer a significant maintenance capability to the infantry platoon.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, AAV Platoons supported infantry companies, operating at extended distances, while the AAV company commander maintained the maintenance and logistical requirements and coordinated with the supported infantry battalion for AAV related classes of supply. The infantry company commander tactically employed the vehicles while the AAV company commander provided the necessary maintenance and logistical link to the infantry battalion.¹⁰ It works at the company level and it will work at the platoon level.

Conclusion

AAVs are employed in MOOTW [Military Operations Other Than War] missions for their distinct logistical capability; mobility, firepower, and armor protection; amphibious capability; and shock/intimidation value.¹¹

--MCWP 3-13

¹⁰ From the author's personal experience.

¹¹ MCWP 3-13 w_Chg 1, pg 7-10.

With its flexibility, maneuverability, lethality, survivability, and range the AAV is the weapon of choice to operate in the counterinsurgency fight and enable enhanced company operations in irregular warfare. AAVs were designed for employment as offensive weapons systems with an amphibious nature. They provide the ground unit commander the ability to maneuver from the ship to the objective and provide him the capability to operate at great distances from adjacent units while ashore. The counterinsurgency fight demands that units become smaller and more dispersed. It is essential that the Marine Corps incorporate all elements of the Marine Air Ground Task Force. The AAV is a force multiplier in counterinsurgency operations and will enable successful enhanced company operations. The versatility and lethality of the AAV make it the perfect compliment to the infantry Marine in the fight.

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