

Greater riverine role Command to include 3 squadrons

By Andrew Scutro
Times staff writer

Norfolk, Va. — The Navy will have three deployment-ready riverine squadrons operational by early 2007, and more than 700 sailors will man the new 36-boat brown-water fleet.

The river raiders will be a key element of the Norfolk-based Navy Expeditionary Combat Command, which stood up Oct. 14. The type-command status of the NECC signals a growing demand for naval expeditionary forces and puts it on the level of the service's air, surface and submarine forces.

Headed by Rear Adm. Don Bullard, the NECC will unify and align existing forces as well as create capabilities like the proposed riverine forces.

Units of the current Maritime Force Protection Command — which include explosive ordnance disposal groups and naval coastal warfare groups on both coasts — will be rolled together under the NECC along with Seabee forces and the Expeditionary Logistics Support Force.

In addition to the existing forces, the command will include sailors in so-called "in-lieu-of" forces for detainee operations, law enforcement, foreign military training and civil operations support.

The goal is to provide maritime combat support forces to combatant commanders worldwide. Since those forces will be sourced by one command headed by a flag officer, NECC officials say the response can be faster, more flexible and, hopefully, more capable.

Those forces typically will follow on behind larger expeditionary operations. In addition, NECC forces will be involved in "phase zero" operations where military units strive to prevent conflict before it begins. Ongoing joint task force operations trying to prevent terrorism from gaining a foothold on the Horn of Africa are one example.

And, as recent events at home and abroad have shown, naval expeditionary forces can also be used for myriad humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, too.

"This is what we do. The Navy has always been expeditionary," said Bullard, an aviator and former skipper of the amphibious transport dock New Orleans and aircraft carrier Constellation. "This is an extension of our relevancy today and this command will better support our sailors who have to do this."

Bullard, recently a deputy for operational readiness and training at Fleet Forces Command, said the formation of the 40,000-strong NECC goes beyond simple realignment of existing forces.

Although the command's early movements are admittedly administrative, Bullard said more significant shifts could be pending.

"For the sailor, hopefully most of this will be transparent, initially," Bullard said. "When we do some reorganization down the road, will there be some movement? Yeah. Am I talking PCS movement? No. Am I talking reorganization of the way we do things, instead of just a bunch of people attached to a command [who] all become a company now? Yeah."

But of high interest around the fleet will be the formation of a riverine force, or "brown-water Navy."

Riverine squadrons

By spring, NECC will identify the manning, equipment and training requirements for three riverine squadrons, Bullard said. By spring of 2007, those new units will be ready to deploy. Details on who can join the force and how command structures will be organized are uncertain, Bullard said. He did say lateral transfers from various commands and ratings likely will be required.

Bullard said NECC planners are working with the Marines, who have a Camp Lejeune-based small boat company patrolling the waterways of Iraq, to develop plans, policies and procedures for the Navy force.

The Corps recently disestablished its small boat companies in a move to free up more infantrymen for deployments, only to see that requirement surface again in Iraq. By spring 2007, the Navy plans to take over that mission, Bullard said.

"We're working with the U.S. Marine Corps very closely for the Navy to revamp this capability and replace their company in Iraq," Bullard said Nov. 3. "In fact, we're going to work with them on our initial training,

our initial outfitting and we're going to stay engaged because they become that combat arms force if we have to put them on a boat."

Current plans call for three squadrons of 12 boats each. The initial riverine force will total 700 sailors. Bullard could not say how boats will be manned or equipped, as the concept of operations remains under development. It is not known if the boats will be skippered by junior officers or chiefs.

The goal, however, will be to re-establish the Navy's ability to reach upriver from the littoral or coastal environment.

Although no decision has been made, Bullard's staff has been looking at several existing boats for riverine operations. The candidates include the Mark V, a large, fast special-operations boat currently in use; the Special Operations Craft-Riverine, in use by special boat units; an enhanced Small Unit Riverine Craft, an armored version of the boat used by Marine small boat units; and the Riverine Assault Craft, a heavily armed and armored fast-attack boat.

"And there are other boats out there," Bullard said. "Until we do the mission functions and tasks to determine what boat we need, we'll look at that."

As Bullard noted, Marines will be the Navy's "combat arms" force because the Navy will not train sailors as infantry to bolster the expeditionary command. That said, any sailor involved in the new command can expect to spend a lot of time at the weapons range and in the weight room.

"We're looking for physically fit sailors who will be in harm's way at times," he said.

Unlike the Cold War-era Navy structure in which the sailor mans the equipment, NECC requirements are to equip the man. "We're kind of the inverse of a [guided-missile destroyer]. All of our warfare requires human input. But a DDG has a high-end of technology and not as many people to create the capability. Ours has a high manpower input and lower technology."

The manpower-intensive nature of the NECC could lead to a new type of sailor with a rate to match. Already, the EOD and SEAL communities are heading toward a new rating. The NECC sailor of the future may not be far behind.

"Right now, there is no rate-structure change planned. But once we do the force analysis, will this be a community unto itself?" Bullard said. "That's a discussion and decision we'll have to take up to CNO."

Although the military as a whole has no desire to repeat the Vietnam experience, the Navy did have a riverine force then and will seek out brown-water navy veterans for counsel as it puts together the latest evolution.

"We'd like to get a riverine graybeard group together," he said. "This is an extension of something the Navy has always done. Everyone thinks this is something really new. But this is something we've been doing off and on for 230 years."