

U.S. Navy Awakens to Irregular Warfare
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For U.S. Navy Rear Adm. Carol Pottenger, Haiti was a wake-up call. In the aftermath of the Jan. 12 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people and left millions homeless on the island nation, the U.S. military deployed tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen to help with aid efforts. Pottenger, commander of the Navy's nearly four-year-old Naval Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC), which oversees coastal forces, realized that almost all her 10 divisions had sent people to Haiti.

"Every one of my capabilities has a piece of the action down there," Pottenger told World Politics Review. That includes fast-deploying logisticians, Navy construction workers and demolition divers, civil-affairs specialists, harbor and river patrollers and other niche naval forces. For the first time since NECC first stood up at a decrepit naval base in Little Creek, Va., Pottenger's forces were at the leading edge of Navy operations. They repaired ruined ports, handled food and medicine distribution and helped coordinate the activities of civilian aid groups.

This was an important development for a branch of the military that has struggled to define its role in an era seemingly dominated by the land-based insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rise of a charismatic, intellectual officer class, personified by Gen. David Petraeus, coincided with deep reforms in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, but not in the Navy, which by contrast appeared adrift.

Over the past nine years, the Army and Marines have evolved from the industrial-style forces that fought the Cold War and 1991's Operation Desert Storm, to become outfits more tailored to wage protracted counterinsurgencies involving significant humanitarian initiatives. That meant adding troops, mothballing heavy equipment and emphasizing language and cultural training. But while the Army and Marines transformed, the Navy hardly changed at all. Its centerpiece forces remained its large aircraft carriers.

Until now. The rise of Somali piracy, the growing popularity of "partnership" missions in Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific, and the naval response to the Haiti earthquake seem to have awoken the sea service to the importance of reform. A strategy document published in January underscores the Navy's growing commitment to waging "irregular warfare" alongside the Army and Marines. Pottenger's sailors represent the vanguard of a "new" Navy focused less on hardware and more on people.

In a January paper entitled, "The U.S. Navy's Vision for Confronting Irregular Challenges," Adm. Gary Roughead, the Navy's top officer, said he was committed to "making investments to ensure the agility, flexibility and adaptability necessary to address the range of emergent challenges to our national security." These challenges might include piracy, seaborne terrorism, transnational crime, economic collapse and natural disasters, according to the paper.

The paper's publication was timed to coincide with the release of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. That document called on the Navy to slowly contract the aircraft carrier force in favor of buying more than two-dozen cheap, fast transport vessels better suited for hauling sailors like Pottenger's to disaster areas, piracy zones and failing states. The QDR also directed Pottenger to add a new squadron of river boats to her command.

At Little Creek, Pottenger seemed emboldened by the growing emphasis on her forces. "The Navy has struggled to help people understand it has enormous irregular-warfare capabilities," she said. "The Navy, with NECC, provides the ability to be adaptive across all phases of war." These phases can include major humanitarian relief efforts.

But all that attention has not, as yet, improved what she described as a problematic budgetary picture. NECC was never integrated into the Navy's base budget. Instead, the 40,000-strong command is paid for year-to-year, by supplementary budgets. Roughead has just begun discussing a permanent funding stream for the command.

To boost its irregular-warfare skills, the Navy needs to boost NECC. But that means wider acceptance for the command's sailors, still widely seen as black sheep by traditional sailors who spend their careers at sea in large vessels. It took four years for one of Pottenger's officers to finally fill an instructor slot at the Navy's backbone surface-warfare school. Roughead's irregular-war "vision" runs headlong into the Navy's slow-to-change institutional culture. "I'm not naive," Pottenger said. Change, she admitted, will take time.

But Haiti has surely accelerated the pace of that change. On the devastated nation's beaches, a new kind of sailor is forging a new kind of Navy, one better-suited to a world where instability, rather than another navy, is the major opponent.