

Manhunting...from the Sea

Chris Rawley

Although once considered little more than a nuisance and a force protection issue for overseas troops, terrorism will remain the top priority of our national security strategy for the foreseeable future. Regardless of the form in which a terrorist threat manifest itself, be it a state-sponsored global group, decentralized extremist cells, or just rogue individuals, Americans can no longer ignore stateless actors who have the ability to inflict serious harm on our citizens and economy. As the lethality and effectiveness of individual terrorist attacks grows, the ability to take down individual leaders or their networks becomes an increasingly urgent mission set for the military. Manhunting – finding and neutralizing high value individual targets – is now an integral part of irregular warfare operations supporting the Global War on Terrorism. These types of precision terrorist targeting operations, combined with sound counterinsurgency techniques, have proven effective in ongoing campaigns against the FARC in Colombia, Islamic insurgents in the Philippines, and Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Terrorists seek refuge in terrain that allows them to stay undercover from conventional targeting methods. These under-governed areas may include rugged mountainous, jungle, and coastal environments, or urban terrain where they can hide among the population. Over half of the terrorist safe havens listed in the 2008 State Department Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism Country Reports are in coastal countries or littoral areas. The Sinjar Records, a declassified database of Al-Qa'ida documents captured by coalition forces in October 2007 in Iraq provide another data set indicating terrorist proximity to the sea. All of the 328 individuals in those records who traveled to Iraq to fight against coalition forces or engage in suicide bombing missions originated from just seven different Middle East countries with coastlines of various lengths.¹ Given the nomadic nature of terrorists and the proximity of many potential targets to the sea, distributed maritime forces are a natural player in manhunting efforts.

The navy has hundreds of ships and aircraft and thousands of special operations trigger pullers who can put ordnance on a target to finish off a terrorist. But getting those shooters to exactly the right place and time is a significantly more complex and time-consuming endeavor than capturing or killing a terrorist. Find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze (F3EA) is a targeting model that facilitates the integration of operations and intelligence to counter terrorist networks and the primary framework for today's manhunting operations.²

Counterterrorism has been a ground-centric mission area of Naval Special Warfare for years, but there is a growing realization that maritime forces writ large are strategic enablers to manhunting, and naval assets are fully capable of conducting the full-spectrum F3EA cycle alone or in conjunction with other friendly forces. Naval platforms combine operational and tactical mobility to deliver counterterrorism operators near a dynamic enemy, the ability to sustain persistent intelligence collection and monitoring to find and fix the terrorists, and the ability to finish them with rapid and precise fires.

Maritime Forces – A Firm Foundation for Counterterrorism

Naval forces bring an adaptive set of capabilities to move and sustain manhunting assets and staging special operations and other manhunting assets from the sea provides operational flexibility and strategic surprise. For example, ships used as afloat forward staging bases can support special operators, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, and smaller tactical Naval Special Warfare craft for long periods. A high speed vessel, amphibious or military sealift ship provides a robust operating base in a low visibility manner that avoids a large US footprint on the ground. In addition to staging tactical platforms, these afloat bases can provide extended logistical, maintenance, and medical sustainment for special operators on the ground and sea.

Finishing is the piece of manhunting that the US Navy traditionally does best. The ability to put precision ordnance on a time sensitive target is critical to counterterrorism operations. The wealth of finishing capabilities that organic naval forces bring to the fight is impressive, ranging from precision deep strike assets such as Tomahawk cruise missiles and tactical aviation, to more responsive but shorter-range offensive punch such as naval gunfire or SEALs conducting direct action. The ability to operate safely and quietly well offshore is also an advantage of naval fires in a counterterrorism role.

Although finish operations most often occur in a limited time window, high value targets require time to fix; forces operating independently on the ocean provide persistence for this mission. Current and future demand for intelligence collection resources in support of manhunting such as full motion video greatly outstrips supply. Naval forces can provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms that are both persistent and clandestine to meet some of this demand. Examples of these capabilities include land-based maritime patrol aircraft such as the EP-3 Aries, an increasing variety of ground and sea-launched unmanned aerial systems, submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles, and of course naval special warfare operators who can collect intelligence in the water or on the ground.

A lesson learned from counterterrorism operations is that integrating the find, fix, and finish capabilities onto a single platforms offers speed and flexibility of action. Consequently, armed Predator unmanned aircraft are one of the most high demand platforms in Afghanistan and Iraq. For decades now, the Navy has possessed a similar integrated capability in our multipurpose combatants with a wide combination of sensors and weaponry so it makes sense to utilize them for manhunting. However, to augment current and planned maritime patrol aircraft, the Navy must invest in a robust fleet of

man (and boat) portable, ship-launched, and ground-based unmanned air systems – including armed variants – lest naval airborne intelligence gathering be rendered obsolete from recent innovations in this area.

Enhancing Navy Manhunting Capabilities

Naval leadership should recognize the importance that maritime forces can bring to the counterterrorism fight and resource those areas accordingly. Although operators must be involved in the entire F3EA cycle, intelligence experts perform an equally important role. Manhunting requires us to close the longstanding gap between naval operations and intelligence. Collection platforms are only one part of the equation needed for intelligence in support of a counterterrorism campaign. Processing, exploitation, and dissemination of the collected information are critical components of an overall intelligence capability, and require a combination of both systems and trained personnel. When adequate naval intelligence analysts and translators are not available, we should actively seek out joint, interagency, or even contractor personnel to embark ships, subs, and aircraft conducting counterterrorism missions.

Exploitation and analysis are the main effort in counterterrorism targeting because they create opportunities for follow-on targets and develop insight towards effectively neutralizing terrorist networks. Because manhunting finish opportunities can be fleeting, the targeting cycle must be executed as quickly as possible. Recent counterterrorism operations have proven that forward deployed exploitation and analysis efforts are more effective than “reach-back” intelligence support. And as demonstrated by the Sinjar records, counterterrorism raids often result in the recovery of large volumes of documents and computer media that require translation and analysis. Accordingly, the Navy should consider the creation of afloat document exploitation cells and biometrics collection and sharing systems. At-sea intelligence processing would put analysis support in proximity with the operators where it is most effective, without requiring a footprint in sensitive or denied operational areas.

Training is the final component necessary to produce a proficient naval capability to support manhunting. Units identified to participate in these operations should liaison and train with the other organizations and platforms they will be working with *before* they deploy down range. The Navy doesn’t send crews to launch missiles or board suspect ships without having thoroughly trained and practiced the missions; counterterrorism operations should be no different.

Some may wonder why the Navy should invest effort and money developing such a niche capability that only appears applicable in the current conflict. This thinking is shortsighted in a number of ways. First, super-empowered non-state actors with the ability to inflict significant damage on American interests at home and abroad are not going away any time soon. The Internet and globalization have enabled small networks of like-minded individuals – whether religiously or otherwise motivated – to collaborate violently against nation states. The ability to attack these networks precisely and rapidly will remain an enduring mission for the United States military and maritime forces

provide an operational advantage not present in other forms. Of greater importance than any new technologies we may procure are the long-term dividends to be gained by developing unconventional thinking skills required for this type of fighting. Moreover, the closer integration of intelligence with operations in order to shorten the kill chain is vital to any future conventional or asymmetric maritime campaign against a thinking and innovative enemy.

Commander Chris Rawley, US Navy, is a surface warfare officer serving in the special operations community. He has a BS in political science from Texas A&M University, an MBA from George Washington University, and is a graduate of the US Naval War College.

¹ “Al Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records,” US Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 19 December 2007,

<http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>

² For an introduction to F3EA see Michael T. Flynn, Rich Juergens and Thomas Cantrell, “Employing ISR: SOF Best Practices” *Armed Forces Journal*, 3rd Quarter 2008,

http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i50/jfq50.pdf

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