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Gators, Leathernecks, and Full Spectrum Operations: A Review Essay

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Gary J. Ohls, *Somalia... From the Sea* (Newport Paper #34), The Naval War College Press, Newport RI, 2009. 249 pp. appendix, notes, glossary, bibliography, available for [free download here](#).

Much like the country of Iraq, the United States has faced the challenge of Somalia for two decades. Long before today's concerns about piracy and terrorist support, as the United States military built up its presence in the region during Operation Desert Shield, Somalia insisted that some of that capability be dedicated to its own problems. An alert was sent to Central Command warning them that internal clan conflict had the potential to endanger American citizens, and the embassy in Mogadishu. From that message the United States became involved in Somalia for four years of operations. Those operations involved urban warfare, population security, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, infrastructure reconstruction, joint and interagency work with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and American military involvement with internal politics. The series of Somalia operations are a veritable menu of the kinds of missions that have become central to the U.S. approach to counterinsurgency a decade later in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gary Ohls' book *Somalia... From the Sea*, published by The Naval War College Press, offers a comprehensive and well considered account of U.S. operations in Somalia in the early 1990's. The mission was centered on the capability of the United States Navy and Marine Corps to conduct global expeditionary operations and provides an important illustration of amphibious forces. The account, nearly 250 pages long, is broken up into nine chapters and several appendices which are structured around the five separate operations which the Americans and United Nations carried out in Somalia. The appendices are very helpful, with explanations of abbreviations as well as short explanations of strategic concepts. Colonel Ohls, USMC (Ret), has a PhD in history from Texas Christian University and the research demonstrates the academic rigor of his background using original sources, reports, interviews of participants, as well as news coverage.

U.S. involvement started with Operation Eastern Exit, which was a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) conducted to move Americans, westerners, and U.S. embassy staff out of

Mogadishu when the civil war in Somalia and clan warfare began to deteriorate in early 1991. Ohls account is full of detail, at sea, in the air, and on the ground as the Navy/Marine Corps team conducted a challenging but highly successful NEO. Eastern Exit was followed by Operation Provide Relief, which resulted from the humanitarian crisis that developed in 1992 when Somalis began to suffer from drought and famine. Provide Relief was marked by one of the largest airlifts of food and supplies since the Berlin Airlift, and required significant cooperation between the U.S., U.N., African nations, and NGO's to get food into the refugee camps that spread across Somalia and its neighbors.

Operation Restore Hope followed. As global news sources played pictures and video of starving Somali children and clan militias standing in the way of food distribution, President George H.W. Bush ordered a larger American presence. The United States Marine Corps took the lead, landing a Marine Expeditionary Unit and conducting convoy and security operations to ensure that humanitarian aid was not intercepted by clan militias in and around Mogadishu. It was during Restore Hope that the U.S. presence in Somalia began to move from a purely humanitarian mission to a theater where U.S. forces would face combat operations. After the famine broke in the region the U.S. withdrew the majority of forces, leading to Operation Continue Hope where U.S. forces supported the U.N. mission in Somalia. It was during Operation Continue Hope that Task Force Ranger was established and the operations made famous by the book and movie *Black Hawk Down* took place. The final U.S. mission in Somalia was Operation United Shield, where the Navy and Marine Corps provided protection for the withdrawal of U.N. forces from Somalia in 1995.

Colonel Ohls account of the details of these missions is excellent, and any attempt to recount them here will not do them or the book justice. It is more valuable to highlight some of the concepts that are discussed in the book. The civil war that wracked Somalia had all the hallmarks of the militia and clan warfare that today's forces have experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of the missions conducted by the U.S. in Somalia are the same missions being carried out across the globe today from Afghanistan to Haiti. The operations in Somalia also provide insight into a military capability that has come under a great deal of consideration recently: amphibious and expeditionary warfare.

The involvement in Somalia was full of joint-interagency cooperation. During Provide Comfort Brigadier General Frank Libutti (USMC) commanded an effort that was coordinated with the State Department, the U.N., African nations, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The operations were truly joint, with Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps units involved throughout. During Operation Restore Hope the establishment of the U.S. Liaison Office under Ambassador Charles Oakley proved to be a key element to success. Oakley was a former Ambassador to Somalia who coordinated with all the parties; from the U.S. military and U.N. leadership, to international business concerns, to local warlords and politicians. He knew many of the players personally and the diplomatic role provided by State Department involvement was an important element of success. The relationship with the leadership of the U.N. and the Peacekeepers during Continue Hope proved challenging, but a central task of the mission. The proper role of the State Department in American foreign policy, diplomacy, and military operations has become a point of discussion in the debates about current conflicts. Studying the

American experience in Somalia demonstrates the vital role that diplomacy and interagency partnerships, as well as international and coalition relationships, play in both success and failure.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief have become core missions of today's American military. As a result of disaster recovery at home in Hurricane Katrina, abroad in the case of the Haiti Earthquake, and during the rebuilding of war damaged Iraq and Afghanistan the U.S. military has "rediscovered" these tasks and their challenges. The experience in Somalia offers many lessons for future operations. As reporters and members of the media questioned the need for "security" during the 2009 mission in Haiti, nobody discussed the chaos and deaths that resulted from the deterioration of security in Somalia. Ohls lays out the events in Somalia evenly, resulting in a clear understanding and view of what some have called "mission creep." Somalia demonstrates the decision making processes that can lead to changing roles and missions, and the book provides an understanding of potential pitfalls in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions.

As today's United States and other western powers have entered a time of "austere budgetary environments" there has been debate over the role and value of amphibious forces. Both the costs of the U.S. Navy's amphibious fleet and the need for the United States Marine Corps to maintain its amphibious equipment and capability have been questioned at the most senior levels of the military and government. *Somalia... From the Sea* helps to answer those doubts.

From the moment the CH-53E's launched from the deck of USS Guam, to evacuate Americans from a violent and dangerous Mogadishu, to the arrival of the last units aboard USS Belleau Wood when the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit provided cover and security for the withdrawal of the last U.N. Peacekeepers, the Navy/Marine Corps Team were the lynchpin that made operations in Somalia possible. Amphibious forces conducted numerous landings, both across the beach and heliborne assaults inland. U.S. and U.N. forces in-country knew that the Navy and Marine Corps had units offshore to provide support and reinforcement throughout the mission, events which took place more than once. As Ohls explains, the doctrine developed by the Marine Corps and the Navy, including the concepts of global expeditionary operations and operational maneuver from the sea, proved themselves invaluable to the Somalia operations. There is potential for the conditions that were experienced in Somalia to reappear elsewhere in the world. This very real possibility demonstrates an important reason that amphibious forces are the wrong places to cut in today's uncertain global environment. *Somalia...From the Sea* offers a good primer on amphibious doctrinal concepts as well as the real world application of the expeditionary mindset, a mindset that is vital to America's place in the world.

Somalia...From the Sea is a book that offers much to today's military officers and readers. The piracy and counter-terrorist challenges in Somalia today have deep and heavy roots, which include America's involvement in the country in the early 1990's. Gary Ohls' book explains much of that legacy and helps to illuminate the challenges faced today. Readers of *Black Hawk Down* must read this book for, as Paul Harvey said, *the rest of the story*. Colonel Ohls also demonstrates important lessons for humanitarian operations, counterinsurgency warfare and peacekeeping, and the value of the concepts of amphibious warfare. The world has been characterized as being full of "wicked," "complex," or "hybrid" challenges. The U.S. involvement in Somalia is just one example of how Amphibious Ready Groups and Marine

Expeditionary Units are an experienced and resourced capability that has addressed full spectrum operations for decades. It is also a good reminder that, despite the army-centric narrative from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the sea services have played a central role in America's small wars for over two centuries.

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