Expeditionary Warfare Director: ‘We’re Going to Do Sea Control in Different Ways’

WASHINGTON – The Marine general in charge of the Navy’s expeditionary warfare programs said his mission was not just “reinvigorating expeditionary warfare,” but to get Marines “back to naval warfighting” after two decades of primarily land combat.

Maj. Gen. David Coffman sketched out a plan to institute a program to strengthen and modernize mine warfare, which he called “an historically under-resourced and neglected capability,” then focusing on increasing the size and lethality of the amphibious fleet to enable the naval expeditionary forces “to go anywhere, anytime, and take what we need with us.”

Addressing a forum at the Hudson Institute, Coffman, director of expeditionary warfare on the Navy staff, said: “We need a next-generation expeditionary warfare that can operate across the range of military operations.” That means the ability to “fight tonight, fight tomorrow,” across all domains, combatant commands and the full range of military operations.

“Our goal is to reinvigorate naval expeditionary forces” to meet the “enduring need for power projection,” which will require the ability to gain sea control by new means including the historic Marine mission of seizing and defending expeditionary advanced bases, he said.

He also cited efforts to arm amphibious ships and to deploy on them Marine weapons that could help the naval forces fight through adversary’s defenses.

“We’re going to do sea control in different ways,” he said.

Coffman said he would be focusing on the mine warfare programs this year, which apparently referred to fiscal 2019, and turning next year to “the maturation of the amphibious force,” addressing “what makes that part of the Navy more lethal, more capable.”

He said history shows that since World War II the Navy has tended to neglect its mine warfare capabilities until it periodically “comes up and bites you,” citing the frustrated amphibious landing at Wonsan during the Korean War and the two Navy ships damaged by mines during Operation Desert Storm.

Coffman said his office was working a mine warfare master plan that would seek to sustain the legacy mine countermeasure (MCM) force of Avenger-class MCM ships and MH-53E helicopters, while developing future MCM capabilities that could keep up with evolving technology.

That future force would not have single-mission MCM ships, but would use Littoral Combat Ships and other platforms to deploy unmanned air, surface and undersea vehicles to find and neutralize mines, he said. The MH-53s would be replaced by MH-60s and the MQ-8 UAVs.

Turning to the amphibious force, Coffman said, “we have a great path to 38 amphibious ships,” which is the goal in the Navy’s plan for a 355-ship battle fleet. That amphibious force would include 12 “big-deck” amphibious assault ships of the Wasp and America classes, the 13 San Antonio-class amphibious transport docks, and the modified version that will replace the aged dock landing ships.

“My personal belief is, we have the right hulls,” he said, while conceding the path to 38 amphibs was clouded by “fiscal trade space” challenges, a reference to the Navy’s shipbuilding priorities that put amphibious ships below submarines, carrier and surface warships.

Coffman also complained that inadequate command and control technology on the older amphibs, particularly the big decks, prevents the embarked Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) from taking full advantage of its capabilities, such as the F-35B strike fighter with its fifth-generation sensors and data processing capabilities.

“We have to embark a fifth-generation MAGTF on a fourth-generation ship,” he said.

Due to the growing threat that Russia, China and maybe Iran could use long-range defenses to keep naval expeditionary forces away from a crisis zone, Coffman said there were considerations of putting more defensive and offensive weapons on the amphibs and the Marines employing their own long-range weapons from the ships or from expeditionary bases to help in the sea control fight. He did not provide any details.