The Navy’s Shrinking Patrol Boat Force



The new PB(X) patrol boat will be based on the 40-foot Defiant boat, built by Metal Shark. *METAL SHARK*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy has been reducing its patrol boat force in recent years and proposes to continue that trend by retiring its rather new Mark VI patrol boats under the fiscal 2022 budget, after having retired its entire riverine force.

As the Navy pivots to reshape its force to focus on high-end capabilities to counter China and Russia, the relatively flat 2022 budget is demanding some sacrifices, and the Navy chose to inactivate its fleet of 12 Mark VI PBs.

Last year the Navy changed the names of the units that had operated the 78-foot-long Mark VI PBs and the smaller coastal and harbor — and previously riverine — patrol boats. The Coastal Riverine Force is now known as the Maritime Expeditionary Security Force.

“Riverine warfare is no longer an assigned mission area for the United States Navy, and the legacy name no longer captures the roles and missions of our force,” said Lt. Cmdr. Amber Lewis, a spokeswoman for Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC). “The new name captures the Maritime Expeditionary Security Force’s (MESF’s) growing green and blue-water fleet integration and contributions to the high-end fight in an era of great power competition, which are more robust than the legacy riverine roles.”

The change is significant. The Navy has operated riverine forces off and on over the decades, most recently restoring the capability during the Iraq War, assuming the role from the Marine Corps. The Navy built and sustained an impressive

riverine capability during the Vietnam War, but most of that capability was turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy as the United States ended its in-country force presence in South Vietnam. (The Navy Special Operations Command retains some small boat coastal and riverine capability for insertion and extraction of SEALs and other special operations forces.)

In May 2012, the Navy selected a SAFE Boats International design for the Mark VI, eventually procuring 12 boats. Other Mark VI PBs are being procured by Ukraine. The first Mark VI PBs were delivered to the Navy on Aug. 27, 2014, and were delivered to NECC in September 2015. Some of the PBs have been deployed to the Persian Gulf and to Guam.

The Mark VI is the largest craft in the MESF. It can patrol shallow littoral waters beyond sheltered harbors and bays. The PBs are used for maritime intercept; escort; infrastructure protection; theater security cooperation; security force assistance; and visit, board, search and seizure operations. They can launch UAVs and UUVs. The PBs are armed with Mk38 25mm guns and .50-caliber machine guns and feature integrated workstations, shock-mitigating seats, a galley and a shower.

In addition to the Mark VI PBs, the MESF operates 164 patrol craft. These include 117 SeaArk 34-foot Dauntless-class patrol boats and 17 SAFE Boats 25-foot Oswald-class patrol boats. The riverine assault craft, riverine command boats and riverine patrol boats all have been retired and stored. The single Coastal Command Boat, a smaller predecessor to the Mark VI that was deployed to the 5th Fleet, was transferred to a test role in 2018.

Intelligence Specialist 1st Class Petty Officer William Woodley, assigned to Task Group 68.6 (TG-68.6), stands watch as a crewman onboard a 34ft SeaArk patrol boat upon completion of a mission with the USNS Alan Shepard, Sept. 18, 2018. *U.S. NAVY / Quartermaster 2nd Class Ashley Taylor*

The current mainstay of the MESF, the SeaArk 34-foot patrol

boat, performs the roles of high-value escort, port and harbor defense, and port security. The 34-foot boats are scheduled for replacement, beginning in June 2021 when the first new 40-foot patrol boats arrive, Lewis said.

In October 2017, the Navy awarded a contract to Metal Shark for a new patrol boat, PB(X), to replace the service's Oswald- and Dauntless-class tactical craft. Metal Shark's 40-foot Defiant design actually is a 43-foot-long welded aluminum boat powered by twin diesel inboard engines. The boats have a wide-waterplane, sharp-entry hull capable of attaining 40 knots and enhanced handling at cruise speeds of 10 to 15 knots. The boats offer ballistic protection; an armored, climate-controlled pilothouse; five whole-body isolation suspension seats and an advanced communications, navigation and situational awareness suite.

"Metal Shark Boats currently has 54 40-foot Patrol Boats [PBs] under contract, with two delivered for a total of 56," said the Support Ships, Boats and Craft program office of the Program Executive Office – Ships. "To date, two boats have been delivered and 10 boats are in production and scheduled to be delivered in [fiscal 2021]. The current plan is to procure a total of 120 40-foot PBs over the next 10 years [to replace the 34-foot and 25-foot PBs]."

The Navy also has ordered 24 Force Protection-Medium (FP-M) patrol boats from Lake Assault Boats LLC, which was awarded a contract for up to 119 FP-Ms in February 2020. The 33-foot-long aluminum V-hull boats will be used for harbor and waterway patrols, interrogation of other waterborne assets and escorting large vessels in and out of ports in various weather and water conditions. The first was scheduled for delivery this spring.