

Top Marine Combat Development Officer: Corps Seeks Families of Unmanned Systems

The Marine Corps' top combat development officer told an unmanned systems forum that the Corps is looking for families of unmanned systems that will allow small units to persist and survive inside an enemy's weapons-engagement zone, such as those China is creating in the Western Pacific.

One of the key systems the Marines want is an unmanned long-range surface vessel that could link up with amphibious or support ships far from the threat zone and move personnel or supplies to Marines conducting Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), Lt. Gen. Eric M. Smith said Aug. 20. The service also is still pursuing a large Group Five unmanned aircraft under the Marine Air Ground Task Force UAS Expeditionary (MUX) program.

"The goal is for us to be able to persist inside that weapons engagement zone of any adversary, to create problems and challenges, to make that adversary change his behavior or change the course of actions they are intending to pursue," said Smith, who is commander of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command.

Smith told the AUVSI Unmanned Systems forum that the Marines

were interested in all types of unmanned platforms – surface, subsurface, aviation and ground. But they are looking for relatively inexpensive families of systems that can be fielded in significant numbers, “because there is a quality in quantity.”

Smith, who recently took the MCCDC post after commanding the Okinawa-based III Marine Expeditionary Force, said everything they buy “has to have range to get us out in the Pacific ... because the ranges are stunning. ... It is stunningly difficult to maneuver and to get around in the Pacific.”

The general urged the industry representatives in the audience to read the planning guidance released last month by Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David H. Berger because it sets the path the Corps is to follow. That future will include conducting EABO missions, which he likened to “a raid. We’re going to go in, grab a piece of terrain, to do some refueling, perhaps launch a few long-range precision missiles, and then we’re coming out. When I say coming out, we’re not leaving the engagement zone, we’re just moving. ... I need systems that allow me to get in, get out. Whether it’s moving people or things.”

“If we can persist ... inside that weapons engagement zone at a company, platoon level,” they could “be more than a nuisance. We can be a lethal force, that causes an enemy to divert their course of action.”

Smith said he recently observed a simulation of the long-range surface vessel that the Corps is considering. In response to a *Seapower* question, he said evaluators were using an 11-meter rigid inflatable boat with unmanned controls to test the concept. "What we're looking for is a long-range vessel that has the ability to do resupply, to move personnel, or cargo, that can move over long distances" in the kind of sea states prevalent in the Western Pacific.

"We need things that will link up with ships to offload things that we bring" and move them independently in and out of the EABO site. Asked about the MUX, which has gone through several changes in required capabilities, Smith said he was making a trip to the West Coast with Maj. Gen. Steven Rudder, the deputy commandant for aviation, to review the latest ideas for it.