

Force Recon Marines and sailors periodically deploy to Curacao to train with Royal Netherlands Marines as the area's jungle, mountains and ocean provide an optimal environment.

COURTESY OF FORCE RECON CO, II MEF

# FORCE RECONNAISSANCE

## The Commander's Eyes and Ears

By Stewart Nusbaumer

**T**he weather report promised a rainy and chilly day. So Marine Force Reconnaissance issued its own weather report. Sure enough, the next day white clouds floated across a mostly blue sky; the temperature was springtime delightful; and the humidity was ideal. The world's premier deep-reconnaissance unit performs death-defying heliborne and waterborne insertions-extractions, conducts lightning-fast raids, shapes battlefields from the conventional to the unconventional, and evidently shapes the weather.

On May 16 at Courthouse Bay, Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., in front of the Force Reconnaissance Company offices, the Stars and Stripes fluttered above a formation of Force Recon Marines. Lieutenant General John M. Paxton, commanding general for II Marine Expeditionary Force, had arrived. The II MEF band was seated, and 100 or so visitors stood on the

sides in quiet anticipation.

"The purpose of this event," announced Major Bradford Carr, Commanding Officer, Force Recon Co, II MEF, "is to recognize the ultimate sacrifice the members of Force Reconnaissance have made in far-off lands in an effort to ensure their

country will be a better place."

At the base of the flagstaff stands a polished black marble monument. On the top, painted in white letters is the force recon insignia: jump wings with scuba diver and pathfinder torch, circled by the words "2D Force Reconnaissance Co. II



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**A Force Recon Co leatherneck conducts diver propulsion device (DPD) combined combatant dive operations off the coast of Curacao with Dutch Marines from Camp Suffisant.**



MEF.” The back wall contains the Recon creed: “Realizing it is my choice and my choice alone to be a Reconnaissance Marine, I accept all challenges. ...” The front wall has 14 brass plaques in memory of those who made the recon choice and gave the ultimate sacrifice.

“It’s wonderful that we were invited to this rededication,” said Force Reconnaissance Association member Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jim Doner, USMC (Ret), who traveled from Arizona. From 1961 to 1963, when Doner was a corporal, he served in 2d Force Recon. “What I feel today is pride in the company. I’m very satisfied in the Marine Corps, particularly Force Recon.”

When the monument originally was unveiled in 2007, 2d Force Recon Co had been stood down for a year, and most Force Recon Marines had transferred to the newly established 2d Marine Special Operations Battalion. The monument was placed at the headquarters of 2d Marine Special Operations Bn. The following year, however, Force Recon Co, II MEF was brought back, and the 7,600-pound stone was moved to the Force Recon Co, II MEF location.

That was not the first time in its nearly 70-year history that force-level reconnaissance was deactivated and then reactivated. Like the legendary phoenix, Force Recon has been reborn numerous times.

The patriarch of Marine Corps force reconnaissance, the Amphibious Reconnaissance Bn, was activated during World War II and performed nearly 200 beach and littoral reconnaissance missions in the island-hopping Pacific campaign. After the war, the Fleet Marine Force’s first force reconnaissance unit was stood down. Four years later during the Korean War, the 1st and 2d Amphibious Recon companies were activated but not deployed. There were numerous reasons, including specialized units need to be highly trained, but that training takes considerable time.

Despite the armistice on the Korean Peninsula, the Cold War remained intense. Marine Corps Test Unit 1, Recon Platoon was created to develop new operational methods using both parachute and submerged submarine for the insertion and extraction of reconnaissance personnel deep behind enemy lines. The precursor of a new force reconnaissance unit, that experimental platoon was the bridge between the Amphibious Recon Bn of WW II and the Force Recon companies of the Vietnam War.

In 1957, 1st Force Recon Co was stood up and in 1958, 2d Force Recon Co. In less than a decade, 1st Force Recon, followed by a nascent 3d Force Recon, deployed

**The monument located just outside the Force Recon Co office at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., was rededicated in May 2011. It honors the Marines of the unit who have paid the ultimate sacrifice over the past 50 years.**



to Vietnam where direct action became a major mission: springing ambushes, executing raids and, the most deadly, direct-firing support. For the new Force Recon, engaging the enemy often overshadowed the stealth intelligence-gathering missions. After the war, Force Recon was reduced from three stand-alone companies to one and finally to none.

In post-war drawdowns, specialized units often are deactivated, reduced or absorbed into other units. Highly trained personnel and costly equipment are expensive. Further, the Marine Corps has a cyclical uneasiness about elite units, believing all Marines and their units are elite. Toward the end of WW II, the Marine Raiders and paramarines were deactivated, and after the war so was the Amphibious Recon Bn. In the aftermath of Vietnam, both the Combined Action

Program (CAP) and Force Recon companies were deactivated.

To compensate for the deactivation of Force Recon, deep reconnaissance “D” companies were formed with former Force Recon Co Marines in the Division Recon Bns. Nevertheless, Force Recon and Division Recon perform different missions for different commanders. Force Recon specializes in deep reconnaissance and is the “eyes and ears” of MEF commanders, while Battalion Recon performs close reconnaissance for division and subordinate commanders.

“The guys are different here,” explained Cpl James O’Neal, who recently made the transition from Division to Force. “More senior people here, and their attitude is different. Actually, Force is totally different from Battalion.”

The 1970s through the 1980s was a



**A Force Recon Co team conducts combined combatant dive operations with Dutch Marines off the coast of Curacao.**

time of low-intensity conflicts with a rise in terrorist attacks. Former Force Recon Marines in Division Recon were active in the Middle East and Southeast Asia with evacuations and rescues and missions ranging from platform raids to peacekeeping. The '80s also increased focus and funding for special operations, and by the end of the decade Force Recon again had two stand-alone companies, along with additional platoons with enhanced training.

Although specialized units' importance is devalued during peacetime, during times of war and times of growing insecurity, they often are brought back and even strengthened.

In 1991, at the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, a combined force of Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs stormed the abandoned U.S. Embassy in Kuwait City, which had been occupied by the invading Iraqi army. The Special Operations troops were stunned to see a small American flag flying on the embassy flagstaff. Marine Force Recon already had been there. A decade later, in response to the 9/11 attack on America, the first large contingent of U.S. infantry troops to enter Afghanistan was a Marine expeditionary unit (special operations capable). Deep, or way out front, were Force Recon Marines, as usual, at the tip of the Marine spear.



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Five years later both 1st and 2d Force Recon companies were stood down for a new highly trained specialized unit, with Force Marines forming the nucleus of the 1st and 2d Marine Special Operations battalions. The companies were not deactivated after a war but during a war to form another special operations unit.

The activated Marine Special Operations operators and the deactivated Force Recon Marines were similar. Both were physically and mentally tough, highly

trained and proficient in deep reconnaissance and a range of special operations tasks, but there was a major difference. They had different commanders and not simply different Marine commanders.

The Marine Special Operations operators were under the operational control of the U.S. Special Operations Command, and when SOCOM reassigned its Marine operators, the MEUs lost their special operations capable personnel. That is a long-held fear for the Marine Corps. If

**A Dutch Marine coxswain speeds Force Recon Co leathernecks toward the beach during bilateral amphibious reconnaissance training in Curacao. (Photo courtesy of Force Recon Co, II MEF)**



specially trained Marines are not under the Corps' direct operational control, the Corps could lose them.

The Marine Corps reactivated two Force Recon companies. The MEUs again became special operations capable when recon elements were attached, and the recon capabilities were back under the Corps' command. "Force Recon Marines Return to MEUs," blared headlines. Consequently, the 2d Force Recon monument was moved from the 2d Marine Special Operations Bn to Force Recon Co, II MEF.

The Force Recon community is small, only two active and two Reserve companies with approximately 450 Marines and sailors. The fundamental operating unit is the six-man team. Small, yet Force Recon has a large mission. As the eyes and ears for Marine operations, it performs the full spectrum of deep operations with daring and demanding operations. It can dip into a whole toolbox of special operations tasks. Small in number yet large in mission, Force Recon is highly selective in personnel.

The commanding officer, a platoon sergeant and a corporal from Force Recon Co, II MEF were asked what attributes a Marine needs to be in Force Recon.

"You must be able to operate independently. You must be smart, mentally and physically tough and good at decision-making. Multitasking is essential. You definitely need an A-type personality," said Maj Carr.

"Self-motivated. The tempo of training and schools requires this. Those are the guys that do exceptional in this job," Gunnery Sergeant John Cox, Platoon Sergeant, said, describing a potential candidate.

Cpl James O'Neal, newest member of 2d Force Recon, said, "You need to be hard working and dedicated and ready to make sacrifices. We're on patrol for days or weeks, and we travel light. And your family has to be willing to understand."

A potential Force Recon Marine first must meet the preliminary requirements: minimum scores of 115 in the General Technical (GT) test and 275 on the Physical Fitness Test (PFT), vision correctable to 20/20, a graduate of the infantry course at ITB (infantry training battalion), 1st class swim qualification, good evaluations on Proficiency and Conduct Reports, no service record page 12 entries, a minimum of 18 months remaining (after completion of the Basic Recon Course) on current enlistment and no obstacles for obtaining a "Top Secret" security clearance.

Selection is a grueling 48-hour event held each month at either Camp Lejeune or Camp Pendleton, Calif. Day 1 generally begins with combat water aerobics in the

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pool, which can include retrieving and swimming with a cinder block, then the tower jump with full combat gear, more water combat skills and finally a physical fitness test. Day 2 includes running the Obstacle Course several times and an 18-mile "rucksack" run with a field pack containing a 50-pound sandbag.

Those who fail the physical test can retake it at a later date; it often takes three or four attempts to pass. For those who pass, a psychological screening is next, followed by an interview. Officers are interviewed by the company commander, and enlisted applicants meet with the sergeant major and other staff noncommissioned officers. Beyond that hurdle, there is a fork in the pipeline.

Candidates coming from a Division Recon Bn and possessing the military occupational specialty, 0321, Reconnaissance Man (about three-quarters of the candidates) proceed to a Force Recon Co and begin working toward MOS 0326, Reconnaissance Man, Parachutist/Combatant Diver Qualified. That MOS is necessary for the deep-insertion missions. Those not already qualified as Reconnaissance Man (most are 03 infantry, a few have other MOSs) go to the Marines Awaiting Recon Training (MART) Platoon to prepare for their upcoming Basic Recon-

naissance Course (BRC).

Rigorous and demanding, BRC lasts for 65 days and covers the core areas of communications, supporting arms, land navigation and amphibious and ground reconnaissance. Upon completion, the Marines graduate with MOS 0321 and are assigned to a force company to begin the sequence of courses for MOS 0326.

While candidates are in the accession pipeline, Force Recon Marines are engaged in their own heavy tempo of training. With limited personnel, multitasking is essential, which demands nearly constant training.

The Mission Training Plan is the company's framework for training. The first phase is Individual Training. For six months, individual Force Recon Marines attend specialized schools, progressing to more advanced schools, which are often interservice. Advanced schools include the U.S. Army Recon and Surveillance Leaders Course; Low-Level Static Line/Military Free Fall Jumpmaster School; Mountain Leaders Course at the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center Bridgeport, Calif.; Scout Sniper Course; and Dive Supervisor Course. Each Marine builds an extensive skills set.

The second segment is Unit Training, a six-month platoon workout to shape the





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**Conducting military free fall (high-altitude, low-opening—HALO) parachute operations from an MV-22 Osprey maintains another critical skill for the leathernecks in Force Recon Co.**

platoon into a cohesive unit. The platoon training packages include Amphibious Reconnaissance, Desert Patrolling, Mountain Patrolling, Weapons and Tactics, Combat Trauma and Force Fires. Training can be with the Diver Propulsion Device (DPD) for underwater movement, the Laser Acquisition Marker (SOFLAM) to “paint” targets for close air support and naval gun surface fire, satellite communications, and HAHO (high-altitude, high-opening) parachuting.

The third phase is MEU (SOC) Training, conducted by the Special Operations Training Group and focused on direct action and special-task skills. Training is in Close Quarters Battle, GOPLAT (gas/oil platform) and VBSS (visit, board, search, seizure) platform and ship assaults, and humanitarian operations. That stage culminates in all the MEU elements uniting for a SOCEX (the Special Operations Certification Exercise) to certify the MEU is Special Operations Capable, or MEU (SOC).

The final phase is deployment, whether afloat or land-based, and continued heavy training when available. There can be live-fire training on a ship’s deck, physical fitness training, joint exercises with foreign militaries and humanitarian missions.

On Sept. 8, 2010, in the Gulf of Aden the German-owned commercial ship *Ma-*

*gellan Star* was boarded by Somali pirates. Task Force 151 (the international counterpiracy task force) received a distress call, and USS *Dubuque* (LPD-8) steamed to the scene. A platoon of Force Recon Marines, embarked into inflatable rigid-hull boats from *Dubuque*, approached *Magellan Star*, boarded and promptly subdued the pirates and freed the crew. Flawlessly.

When the Marine Corps Special Operations elements were pulled from the MEUs, Force Recon Marines were brought back to fill the void. The *Magellan Star* operation, as well as operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere, demonstrates the void has been filled. The world’s premier “soldiers of the sea” are back. The Marine Corps with the Navy is working on expanding the antipiracy mission.

When the ceremony to rededicate the 2d Force monument ended, a few active and prior Force Reconnaissance Marines lingered, swapped stories and read names on the polished black monument. Maj Carr said, “Now is a very interesting time to be in Force Reconnaissance. There is Afghanistan, VBSS missions, deep reconnaissance, the capability for raids, parachuting, UAVs, the Overseas Theater Cooperation Program when we train with foreign units with similar capabilities, the Dutch, the French. There’s a lot going on.”

Throughout the history of Marine Corps force-level reconnaissance, it often has been a very interesting time with “a lot going on.” During WWII, Recon Marines paddled in small rubber boats to enemy-held beaches, explored the terrain inland and calculated the strength of enemy troops while in the midst of the enemy troops. Throughout the Cold War, Marines jumped out of the sky and bolted from submerged submarines like never before, laying the foundation for a new force reconnaissance.

In Southeast Asia, small teams deep in enemy-held territory switched from “Keyhole” intelligence to “Stingray,” directing fire support for devastating effects. The enemy nicknamed those Recon Marines the “Green Ghosts.” In the era of small conflicts and a downsized Force Recon, more direct action with bold raids and risky operations was possible. In the Gulf War, the traditional deep reconnaissance behind enemy lines was stretched even deeper.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, detachments have served a smorgasbord of missions, shaping battlefields with direct and indirect fire, reconnoitering enemy positions, covering advancing Marine grunts and squeezing off sniper rounds. It should not be forgotten, there is always a cost.

“There is a big need for what we do,” Maj Carr said, walking toward the Force Recon offices. “Yes, the MEF has UAVs, satellites, remote access, electronic capacities, but there will always be a need for a Marine on the deck.”

All battalion, regiment and division forces need a highly trained, dedicated unit for intelligence gathering and special missions. Although deactivated after wars, submerged in other units when there are no wars or replaced, force-level reconnaissance always returns. The MEF commanders need their “eyes and ears.” The MEUs need special-operations-capable Marines. The Marine air-ground task force needs specialized yet versatile small teams.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, the Marine Corps will downsize from approximately 202,000 Marines to 187,000 or less. Instead of being deactivated or scaled back, each Force company is scheduled to add a platoon. There’s a lot going on. There is a big need for more Force Recon Marines on the deck.

*Editor’s note: Stewart Nusbaumer is an “Amgrunt,” as amphibian tractor Marines organized into infantry companies in Vietnam were called. Wounded in action, he was medically retired as a corporal. He has embedded with numerous Marine units in Iraq and Afghanistan.*

