



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY

**USS ESSEX (LHD 2)
FLEET POST OFFICE
AP 96043-1661**

Rec'd 7/19/01
w/out disk

5750
Ser/NAV 166
06 JUN 01

From: Commanding Officer, USS ESSEX (LHD 2)
To: Director of Naval History (OP-09BH)

Subj: COMMAND HISTORY 2000

Ref: (a) OPNAVINST 5750.12E

Encl: (1) Command Composition and Organization
(2) Chronology Narratives from Departments
(3) Tours and Distinguished Visitors
(4) Supporting Documents

1. Enclosures (1) through (4) are forwarded per reference (a).
2. This Command History covers the period following the hull swap between USS ESSEX and USS BELLEAU WOOD on July 26, 2000.


S. A. BERG

COMMAND COMPOSITION AND ORGANIZATION

MISSION: The mission of the USS ESSEX (LHD 2) is to embark, deploy and land elements of a Marine landing force in an amphibious assault by aircraft, landing craft and amphibious vehicles. USS ESSEX' primary role is the flagship of an amphibious task group. USS ESSEX is the second ship of the WASP (LHD 1) class of multipurpose amphibious assault ships.

USS ESSEX is specifically designed to operate Landing Craft, Air Cushioned (LCAC) for waterborne assaults, carry Harrier II (AV-8B) jump jets for close-in air support of the assault force and a full range of helicopters for the deployment of troops and cargo. USS ESSEX load out consists of troops, tanks, trucks, armored vehicles, artillery, ammunition and supplies necessary to fully support an amphibious assault.

USS ESSEX is 844 feet long, with a beam of 106 feet. Two steam propulsion plants, capable of developing a combined 70,000 shaft horsepower, give the 40,500-ton ship the ability to sustain speeds in excess of 20 knots. USS ESSEX has more than 22,000 square feet of vehicle storage space and 100,000 cubic feet of cargo space. Living areas accommodate the 1,099 crewmembers and 1,961 embarked troops and aircrews. To support combat as well as humanitarian missions, ESSEX has six fully equipped operating rooms, four dental operating rooms and hospital facilities capable of caring for 600 patients. The ship is the largest forward-deployed medical platform. USS ESSEX is forward-deployed to Sasebo, Japan.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: COMPHIBGRU ONE
 COMPHIBRON ELEVEN

COMMANDING OFFICER: CAPT. SCOTT A. BERG, USN

Encl (1)

AIR DEPARTMENT

After completing the largest hull swap in U.S. Navy History from USS BELLEAU WOOD to USS ESSEX on July 26, 2000, the Air Department began preparing their new equipment and spaces for sea. In mid August, ESSEX was underway for eight days to Okinawa, where they provided an open flight deck for day and night landing qualifications for HMLA-367. This was a good low tempo tune-up for flight deck personnel who were launching and recovering aircraft on the ESSEX for the first time.

In September, after being chased by a typhoon for the better part of a week, ESSEX pulled back into Okinawa to load the 31st MEU/ACE for Blue/Green Workups and SOCEX. This was significant as it was the first SOCEX to be conducted in several years without the heavy lift capability of the H-53 helicopters or the close air support of the AV-8B Harrier jets. Due to the dynamic features of the LHD flight deck and its flexible planning and utilization by the Air Department, SOCEX again went smoothly despite having only H-46 helicopters available for troop lift and AH-1W and UH-1N helicopters for CAS.

SOCEX wrapped up in October and ESSEX, complete with the MEU/ACE, returned to Sasebo for a one-week home port liberty visit.

Encl (2)

On October 18, ESSEX held a change of command ceremony in which Captain Scott Berg relieved Captain Tom Parker. The event was held in the ESSEX hangar bay and Air Department personnel once again played a key role. From initial coordination, set-up and take-down, to providing a professional Ceremonial Color Guard, Air Department personnel gave a well deserving Commanding Officer the proper send off and welcomed the new Captain.

By October 20, ESSEX was back underway, this time for Korea and Exercise Foal Eagle 2000. Hampered by bad weather once again, the exercise got off to a slow start. However, the Air Department and the ACE were able to complete all required sorties for full mission accomplishment, despite the high winds, low visibility, and rough seas. The weather eventually improved, and the tempo of operations increased. ESSEX conducted the first ever LHD experimental fueling of a 5000 gallon D-Day refueling bladder aboard an embarked LCAC. The bladders were filled with JP-5 from the aviation fuel tanks aboard ESSEX and ferried to the beach for off-load to ROK Army and Navy assets. This evolution was carried out three times, with Air Department Fuels Division personnel involved from start to finish. A NEO exercise, in which the hangar deck was utilized as a staging area for the mock mass evacuation, was also incorporated into the Foal Eagle POA. Additionally, the Air Department opened the

flight deck to the ROK Navy for takeoffs and landings, logging over 40 deck evolutions for the foreign national helicopters.

With Foal Eagle completed on November 3, ESSEX was treated to a much deserved liberty port call in Hong Kong. During the four-day transit, the Air Department conducted flight operations for the ACE, enabling them to continue qualifying new pilots in shipboard operations and completing functional check flights on their aircraft. The Air Department continued to work even during the liberty port visit, providing an open deck to conduct the first ever landings by a Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region, People's Republic of China) Governmental Flying Service helicopter. The Chinese H-60 logged 12 landings and takeoffs during the special flight operations.

Returning home to Sasebo just before Thanksgiving, ESSEX Air Department set their sights on preparing for departmental work during the holiday stand-down. Although the ship got underway for a three-day trip to Pusan, Korea in the first week of December, the Air Department was well into preparations. By December 31 they had completed over 40 significant work packages, including the rehabilitation of 21 CO2/PKP fire bottles, 1400 linear feet of flight deck combing and drain scuppers. They also painted several of the Air Department spaces and removed 12 unused and unserviceable lockers on the starboard side of the island.

Significant Accomplishments from July 26, to December 31, 2000.

- Total flight deck landings:
 - Day 3574
 - Night 226 (unaided)
 - NVG 1734
- Landings for Blue/Green Workups and SOCEX:
 - Day 1736
 - Night 104 (unaided)
 - NVG 1146
- Landings for Foal Eagle:
 - Day 752
 - Night 24 (unaided)
 - NVG 54
- Delivered over 400,000 gallons of JP-5 to embarked aircraft, support equipment, small boats, LCAC's and ship's emergency diesel generators.
- Over 1000 aircraft refueling evolutions, including high tempo operations for SOCEX and Foal Eagle without any delays or mishaps.
- Conducted two in port and one underway fuel replenishment evolutions, receiving over 300,000 gallons of JP-5.

- Conducted over 900 safe aircraft moves on the flight deck, and over 90 on the hangar deck during both day and night flight operations.
- Reenlisted 21 Aviation Boatswain's Mates within the Air Department. The Aviation Fuels Division had the highest retention rate in the command, with six personnel reenlisting in December alone.
- Refurbished, cleaned, and maintained a 365 man troop berthing compartment for issue to and use by embarking Marines of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit during Blue/Green Work-ups and SOCEX '00-2, as well as Foal Eagle 2000.
- Promoted the first female ABH3 on the USS ESSEX from within the ranks. With the promotion, ABH3 [REDACTED] became the first female Petty Officer in the Air Department aboard the forward-deployed USS ESSEX.
- Promoted 16 personnel to Third Class Petty Officer, three to Second Class and two to First Class Petty Officer.
- Pinned 18 EAWS and 5 ESWS wings on Air Department personnel, including ABHAA [REDACTED] [REDACTED], who received her EAWS qualification within six months of her arrival on board ESSEX, her first duty station.

AIRCRAFT INTERMEDIATE MAINTENANCE DEPARTMENT

During CY 2000, USS ESSEX' Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Department (AIMD) provided naval aircraft maintenance, Amphibious Ready Group Intermediate-Level Maintenance (ARGIMA) and survival equipment support to the Air Combat Element (ACE) of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). ESSEX embarks 37 aircraft of various types including AH-1W, UH-1N, CH-46D, CH-46E and CH-53E. Organic aviation support capabilities include Naval Oil Analysis Program, Non-Destructive Inspection (NDI), welding, calibration, micro-miniature (2M) repair, aircraft and ship battery maintenance, hose and tubing manufacture, inspection and repair of Aircrew Life Support Systems, structural and hydraulic systems, aircraft engine and rotor systems, and electrical and electronic systems and related components. In addition, AIMD manages and maintains over 530 items of Aviation Support Equipment (ASE) and 35 items of Material Handling Equipment (MHE).

HULL SWAP -- JUL 2000

During the largest, most successful hull swap in Naval history between USS ESSEX (LHD 2) and USS BELLEAU WOOD (LHA 3), AIMD meticulously coordinated and executed the transfer and acceptance of numerous mission essential aeronautical equipment in just four weeks, half the originally-scheduled time.

SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENT INCLUDED:

- ◆ Flawlessly coordinated the smooth transfer of over 4,300 IMRL end items between two different class ships, worth over \$57 million dollars.
- ◆ Through close liaison with COMFAIRWESTPAC and COMNAVAIRPAC, AIMD resolved 30 existing Broad Arrows, maintaining aeronautical test equipment asset availability at an unprecedented 98 percent.
- ◆ Accurately reconciled the transfer of over 475 SE and MHE end items with a value of over \$77 million dollars between the two ships while maintaining a 96 percent SE availability rate.
- ◆ Blue Green Work-ups/SOCEX/EXERCISE FOAL EAGLE SEP-NOV 2000
During these arduous operations and exercises, AIMD was augmented with over sixty Marine personnel. The ESSEX-Marine team maintained an average 95% Mission Capable (MC) and 87% Fully Mission Capable (FMC) rates for embarked Navy and Marine aircraft, substantially exceeding the CNO's goals by 18 and 21 percent respectively. HMM 262, HMM-265 and HC-5 (REIN) average aviation readiness improved by 20% MC and 30% FMC while embarked.
- ◆ 1,792 aircraft components were processed during FY00/FY01.
- ◆ Returned 1,384 items to "Ready for Issue" (RFI) condition, while maintaining an unprecedented 89% RFI rate.

- ◆ Maintained 93% Support Equipment availability, which enabled Battalion Landing Team 2/4 to expeditiously onload and offload 1,162 tons of amphibious warfare vehicles and 256 tons of ammunition during SOCEX and FOAL EAGLE exercises.
- ◆ Work center 670 Calibration Lab processed over 1,200 pieces of shipboard temperature and pressure gauges and electronic equipment.
- ◆ AIMD documented over 67,718 man-hours, accomplishing intermediate level maintenance repairs on 1,792 aviation components and AVCAL assets, achieving an 89% Ready For Issue (RFI) rate, and performed an additional 2,398 non-aviation related jobs in support of the ARGIMA and ship's voyage repairs.
- ◆ ESSEX supported over 2,250 total flight hours during very demanding flight operations, which included 800 hours of mishap free "night time" flight operations.

COMBAT INFORMATION SYSTEMS DEPARTMENT

Since the summer's hull swap from USS BELLEAU WOOD to ESSEX, the CIS Department worked well preparing their spaces and equipment for sea. Underway to Okinawa for eight days in August, CIS provided complete communication support for the MEU. Communication personnel were able to train on ESSEX' communication assets for the first time.

In September, ESSEX pulled into Okinawa to load the 31st MEU/ACE/BLT/SEALS/ACU DET 5 and TACRON Twelve for Blue/Green Workups and SOCEX. This was the first time our communication assets were fully used by the new crew to provide communication support to the embarked staff. With outstanding preparation in communication planning and utilization, SOCEX again went off smoothly, proving the outstanding flexibility and efficiency of the CIS Department and the communication features of the LHD.

SOCEX wrapped up in mid October and ESSEX, along with the MEU and ACE, returned to Sasebo for a week to hold a change of command ceremony on October 18, in which Captain Scott Berg relieved Captain Tom Parker.

By October 20, ESSEX was back underway to Korea for Exercise Foal Eagle 2000. Despite bad weather and rough seas, the CIS Department established all required circuits, with the

exception of one UHF SATCOM circuit, with which Marines were unable to establish COMMS.

A Non-combatant Evacuation Order exercise was also incorporated into the Foal Eagle SOE, in which CIS personnel were utilized as data recorders for the mock mass evacuation.

On November 3, ESSEX pulled into Hong Kong. During the four-day transit back to Sasebo, CIS Department set up communications supported flight operations for the ACE, enabling them to communicate with the ship while qualifying new pilots in shipboard operations and conducting functional check flights.

Returning home to Sasebo just before Thanksgiving, ESSEX CIS Department set their sights on preparing for departmental work during the holiday stand-down. Though the ship got underway for a three-day trip to Pusan, Korea, in the first week of December, CIS Department was well into preparations. By December 31 they had completed rehabilitation and painting in several of CIS Department spaces.

CIS accomplishments from July 26 to December 31, 2000

- Communications for MEU EX: 06AUG-14AUG
- Communications for Blue/Green Workups and SOCEX: 16SEP-04OCT
- Communications for Foal Eagle: 12-22OCT00
- Communications for exercise POLO HAT: 18-19NOV00
- Communications for exercise FREQUENT HUNTER: 12-14DEC00

- Reenlisted 4 Information Systems Technicians within CIS Department.
- Refurbished, cleaned, and maintained a 59 man troop berthing compartment for issue to and use by embarking Female Marines of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit during Blue/Green Work-ups and SOCEX '00-2, as well as Foal Eagle 2000
- Promoted 6 personnel to Third Class Petty Officer, 11 to Second Class and 2 to First Class.
- Pinned 4 ESWS and 9 EAWS wings on CIS Department personnel.

COMBAT SYSTEMS DEPARTMENT

Accomplishments from July 26 to December 31, 2000

- 24 August and 29 September 2000- CIWS PAC Fires
 - 24AUG00- PAC fire on MT21, 22, 23 (total rounds expended: 900)
 - 29SEP00- PAC fire on MT21, 22

- 29 September 2000- TDU shoot MT21 (MT22 not used because drone was shot off chain on first run for MT21. Total rounds expended for PAC and TDU shoot: 500)

- Maintained Combat systems flight control radar which was essential to the safe conducting of over 2500 mishap free flight hours in support of SOCEX and SEVENTHFLT exercises.
 - Day landing qualifications for Republic of Korea Navy.
 - Day landing qualifications for the Hong Kong Government Flying Service (First on a U.S. warship since Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule).

- Aviation Assist Visit upgraded to a full Aviation Readiness Qualification just three days following the inspectors' arrival. Earned full qualification by

Aeronautical Shipboard Installation Representatives
shortly after labor intensive nine week SRA.

- 17 December 2000- Parameter Analysis Storage System (PASS) Upgrade. Systems were outfitted with Pentium computers, replacing the aging 486s that were in place since CIWS was installed.

MEDIA TOURS AND DISTINGUISHED VISITORS TO USS ESSEX

The Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Chief Technology Officer, Dr. Jim DeCorpo and seven other members of his entourage visited the USS ESSEX on September 20 and 21. They received briefings on ESSEX communications and command and control capabilities. They also received a tour of the ship and an LCAC ride. RADM Schultz, Commander CTF 76, accompanied them during the visit.

On September 21, four media members from the Ryukyu Shimpo in Okinawa received a tour of USS ESSEX. Originally, the tour had been planned for one reporter, requested through CFAO PAO and CTF 76 PAO. Upon arrival, the reporter, Iwasaki Midori and CFAO PAO asked for and received permission to have three other representatives from their newspaper receive the tour as well.

Ryukyu Shimpo representatives were given tours of the flight deck, hangar bay, ship gym, medical facilities, bridge, signal bridge, upper vehicle stowage and hangar bay.

Matsumoto Tsuyoshi, identified as the military affairs expert for the paper, asked the majority of questions about ESSEX through Iwasaki, who served as interpreter.

Encl (3)

Many of Matsumoto's questions were focused on the increased capabilities of ESSEX compared to BELLEAU WOOD, and why it replaced BELLEAU WOOD.

They were told that while ESSEX was a newer and more modern ship, its primary benefit to the Japan-based crew was an improvement in the Sailors' quality of life. It was also noted that ESSEX had three primary defensive weapon systems, Sea Sparrow, RAM and CIWS, and could carry 3 LCACs, while BELLEAU WOOD was capable of carrying four LCU's. It was also noted that ESSEX had about 100 additional sailors. The reporters were also told that the missions for both ships remained the same and that ESSEX would carry the same type and number of aircraft that BELLEAU WOOD carried. They learned that ESSEX replaced BELLEAU WOOD as part of the normal rotation of U.S. Ships in the Forward Deployed Naval Forces in Japan, and would undergo a lengthy maintenance period at some point in the future.

The crew of ESSEX was asked several questions about the USMC Osprey. Other than noting that ESSEX was used as a platform for Osprey tests, all questions about the aircraft were directed to the Marine Corps.

While the tour went well, it was obvious that the majority of Matsumoto's questions centered on the increased

operational capabilities of ESSEX compared to BELLEAU WOOD. There was also some translation difficulties, for several questions needed to be repeated.

On 18 October, ESSEX held a Change of Command ceremony in which Captain Scott Berg took command after relieving Captain Tom Parker. ESSEX hosted 16 local Japanese media representatives to cover the event. The local Stars & Stripes reporter and one military journalist (Sasebo AFN) were in attendance as well.

On 24 October, while in port Pohang, Korea, approximately 165 Korean military personnel toured Essex. The tour consisted of the Upper Vehicle Stowage area, Hangar Bay, Medical and the Flight Deck. The visiting units were broken up into smaller groups of about 25 people per tour, a tactic which worked very well.

On 25 October we expected two tours arriving at 1000 and 1200, both of which consisted of 200 Korean sailors and marines. While it was impossible to get an accurate count of the number of actual visitors, the approximate number of visiting Korean military personnel was estimated at 200 total, with the bulk of them arriving between 1000 and 1030. Another large group that easily exceeded the expected day's total of 400 arrived after 1300.

Change of Command 2000
JOCS (SW/AW) [REDACTED]
USS Essex (LHD 2) Public Affairs Office
October 18, 2000

PASSING THE TORCH

More than 400 crewmembers, American and Japanese military and civilian guests attended a change of command ceremony aboard *USS Essex* (LHD 2) at Fleet Activities Sasebo, Ja, October 18, 2000, when Captain Scott A. Berg became the ninth commanding officer of the Navy's only forward deployed Amphibious Assault Ship.

Berg took the helm of Essex from Captain Tom Parker, who became the ship's CO July 26 during an Exchange of Command Ceremony following completion of the U.S. Navy's largest historical crew exchange between Essex and *USS Belleau Wood* (LHA 3). Parker served as Belleau Wood's Commanding Officer for 15 months before swapping commands, and also as the ship's executive officer from July 1998 to April 1999.

The Change of Command's guest speaker, Rear Admiral Paul S. Schultz, Commander, Amphibious Force U.S. Seventh Fleet, noted that Parker's command received numerous awards and accolades, but said the greatest compliment for any commanding officer comes from his crew. "There is no better way for the crew to show Captain Parker his success as a leader than when Belleau Wood was awarded the Pacific Fleet's coveted 1999 Retention Excellence Award," he said. "It didn't matter that the crew had completed two no-notice deployments last year and spent more time at sea than any of their CONUS (Continental U.S. based) counterparts. They re-enlisted to serve with Captain Parker aboard Belleau Wood. Such an award solidifies him as the consummate leader and a supportive mentor," acknowledged Schultz.

During Parker's tenure aboard Belleau Wood as it's Executive Officer he was involved in several operational exercises throughout the East Asian Pacific and one short-notice deployment to the Arabian Gulf in November 1998 to support Operations Desert Thunder, Southern Watch, and Desert Fox. Preparations for that mission saw the ship off-load one full Marine Expeditionary Force and load another within 96 hours. The ship also won numerous awards in 1998, including the Battle Efficiency (E) Award, the Edward F. Ney Food Service Excellence (NEY) Award and Best Sales and Service Afloat Award.

After assuming command of the Tarawa Class warship in April 1999 Parker led his crew through several other exercises and it's second unexpected deployment off the coast of East Timor in support of the Australian led International Force in East Timor (INTERFET). Under Parker's leadership the ship won another Battle E, it's second consecutive NEY and numerous other awards for excellence.

After pointing out that he and his crew accomplished four primary goals he set during his tenure as CO, Parker delved into praise for his crew. "You know, I heard a lot of loose talk about who exactly has the best crew in the Navy," he recalled. "Hot flash, captain!" he emphasized. "I do, and you will in about 10 minutes.

"No one asks what we ask of this crew and no crew delivers what this crew delivers, year-in and year out," he continued. "With this crew, anything is possible. They have never let me or my five predecessors down. I had a detaching officer once tell me that there was something different about the FDNF (Forward Deployed Naval Force) Sailor. He wasn't exactly certain why, but they were different somehow and better than Sailors anywhere else in the Navy. At the end of my command tour, I can only

add that he's right," he declared. "This crew has done more in the past 18 months than most ships do in 5 years."

Schultz also had high praise for Berg, who came to Essex from *USS Pelilieu* (LHA 5), where he served as the ship's Executive Officer from 1998 - 2000.

"Captain Berg is one of the best, with an impressive operational background," declared Schultz. "He is superbly prepared to lead the Sailors of *USS Essex* through any challenge. He is an outstanding leader. A Surface Warfare Officer perfectly suited to the task ahead of him," stated Schultz.

A Navy ship's Change of Command is a celebration of a successful tour and a time-honored tradition of passing the torch to another accomplished Navy officer. Yet, Essex's Change of Command was also a time for solemn reflection as both Schultz and Parker reflected on a tragic event less than a week old.

"The happiness of this occasion is considerably tempered by the events of last week in Aden," said Parker about the explosion that killed 17 Sailors aboard *USS Cole* in Yemen. "Our thoughts and prayers go out today to our honored dead, their shipmates and families," he said. "Make no mistake," he continued. "They died in the service of their country and with as much honor as those who defended little Round Top at Gettysburg or the town of Bastogne at the Bulge. I honor them today."

Captain Parker's next assignment is in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he will serve on the staff of the Commander, U.S. Space Command.

31st MEU Deploys for SOCEX-00 II

More in store as Marines undertake multiple exercises aboard new vessel.

WHITE BEACH, OKINAWA, Japan (Sept. 22, 2000) -- The Marines and Sailors of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and the USS Essex (LPD-2) Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) deployed from the U.S. Naval Facility White Beach to conduct multiple exercises today.

The Marines and Sailors will participate in Blue/Green Workups, an Amphibious Ready Group Exercise (ARGEX), and a Special Operations Capable qualification Exercise (SOCEX).

In addition to these exercises, the Marines and Sailors will also participate in Exercise Foal Eagle 2000 in Korea.

The Blue/Green workups and ARGEX are training exercises designed to enhance fluidity and familiarization between the Marines of the MEU and the Sailors of the ARG. These evolutions are essential for maximizing the combined units' efficiency.

Each of these exercises will test the Marines and Sailors by having them conduct multiple, often simultaneous, exercises to earn the SOC-qual title. Qualifying as Special Operations Capable certifies the MEU's ability to respond to real-world contingencies, such as Amphibious Operations, Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HADR), Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP), and Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO).

Following SOC qualification embarked aboard the ARG's newest Flag Ship, the USS Essex, the MEU will sail to the Republic of Korea to participate in Exercise Foal Eagle 2000. The Essex is the largest amphibious ship in the ARG and replaced the USS Belleau Wood (LHA-3).

Foal Eagle is a combined-arms exercise conducted between the militaries of the Republic of Korea and the U.S. designed to enhance the interoperability of the two nation's forces. After the exercises, the Marines and Sailors plan a port visit to Hong Kong before returning to Okinawa in mid-November.

Marines conduct fast-rope training underway

OFF THE COAST OF OKINAWA, Japan (Sept 25, 2000) -- Marines with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted fast-rope training over the past few days while underway aboard the USS Essex (LHD-2) Amphibious Ready Group (ARG). The Marines and Sailors are currently preparing for the Special Operations Capable qualification Exercise (SOCEX) 2000 II.

"(Fast-roping is) a valuable tool that we have in the Marine Corps," said Cpl. [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] is a Helicopter Rope Suspension Training (HRST) Master with Weapons Co., 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, the Ground Combat Element of the 31st MEU.

"It's a way to insert combat troops into a landing zone that helos can't land in. And it inserts them quickly and efficiently," said [REDACTED].

When fast-roping, combat-loaded Marines slide down a thick rope to insert into a landing zone. Usually practiced from high towers on land, fast-roping presents unique opportunities to Marines training on ship.

"An advantage to fast-roping on ship is you get to do it out of a real helo," said [REDACTED]. "The Marines see what it's going to be like coming out of the helo before you actually go and do it. Some of the towers have simulated helos on them, but they're nothing like actually sitting in a real helo."

MEU Marines conducted the training aboard USS Juneau (LPD-10) and USS Essex. For the training, the Marines placed the tail end of a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter over the ships' huge, lowered hanger elevators. The Marines then fast-rope to the lower deck as if the helicopter were airborne. The training is as close to the real thing as possible without using an airborne helicopter.

Fast-roping is an insertion technique that can be used for a number of real-world missions, according to Hennessy, including Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP), reconnaissance and scout/sniper missions.

"TRAP is a second (billet) we have to be spun up on all the time," said [REDACTED].

But fast-roping is only one of many skills the Marines must be proficient in. Hennessy said the insertion technique "depends on the type of conflict and environment the Marines encounter. It's more likely to be used than (Special Patrol Insert Extract or SPIE) and rappelling. (But) in the desert environment, there's no use for it.

The only time we'd use it is in jungle environment or rooftop insertion, things like (Mission Oriented Urban Terrain or MOUT). This is extremely pertinent to the MEU, operating in jungle-thick Southeast Asia and fully prepared to execute missions in urban environments.

When fast-roping from land-based towers, the landing surface is usually mud, sawdust or sand. A ship's deck doesn't give quite that much play.

"The deck's hard," said [REDACTED]. "There's a higher risk of injury due to the hard surface ... but if you're going into a MOUT environment, the deck's going to be hard too, so it's a good thing because you get used to hitting the hard surface."

Despite what sounds like dangerous training, fast-roping is both simple and safe, according to [REDACTED]. "(Injuries) come out to maybe one in fifty," said [REDACTED]. "You'll get one in fifty just walking down the stairs." No one was hurt in the day's exercise.

"Fast roping is a fairly easy skill," [REDACTED] said. "It's a simple skill. It's signals, it's hands and feet on a rope and you slide down the rope. There's nothing to it. It's good to have your lock-out techniques down. Some people forget. That's the most common thing forgotten."

Fast-rope training is only one of the many skills the Marines maintain underway during the deployment as the MEU prepares for SOCEX. It's one of the simple, yet essential elements that keeps the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit prepared as the world's only permanently forward-deployed MEU.