

The Day I Learned That *CK*

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By Capt. Joe Cleary

The skies were blue, the beach was empty, and the surf was up—another tough day at work. The local news stations had been broadcasting a heavy surf advisory for the week. Like surfers, amtrackers look forward to testing their skills in big surf. An AAV platoon was in luck; they were going to the field that week. The platoon leaders planned a day of surf passages followed by a day of embarking and launching from the ship.

During the last launch of the day, the sun was setting. AAV engines rumbled as the amtrackers, with their faces painted, readied to launch from the well deck and return home. The ship's crew also planned to return to homeport that night.

Shortly before sunset (2045), the platoon splashed. The 2,000-yard swim toward the beach was easily done. "The ocean was like glass," one Marine said. But, when they reached the surf zone, the calmness disappeared. One of the staff sergeants exclaimed,

"When we hit the surf zone, all hell broke loose." The waves had reached 8 feet, with nearly 100 percent plunging-surf. This was the toughest surf most of the Marines ever had seen, let alone negotiated.

Seven AAVs made it through the surf and onto the beach. However, one had ended up upside down in the surf zone. A large wave had lifted its stern. The driver reacted like he had learned: He let off the accelerator pedal, hoping to counter the effects of the wave. Mother Nature was too strong, though; the bow hit the sand bar, and another large wave lifted the stern high enough to flip the AAV onto its back. It and the crew lay helpless as the surf battered them. The amtrackers on the beach were stunned at the sight, and they didn't know what to do.

The situation inside the AAV was chaotic. The driver landed on the halon bottle (part of the fire-suppression system), which began discharging. Unsecured tools, gear and cargo became instant projectiles, striking the rear crewman. Meanwhile, the weapons station was



Change

The Mother of All Risks

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flooding, and the crew chief was trapped in it. The crew chief had traversed the weapons station to the rear before entering the surf. As a result, its cage blocked him from escaping to the troop compartment.

Two of the Marines were nearing unconsciousness as halon filled the vehicle. Two long minutes later, a large wave righted the vehicle. The crew chief opened the hatch and began evacuating his crew topside. One of the Marines was unconscious. The crew chief signaled for help, and the platoon quickly rescued everyone. The crew members were taken to the hospital, where two of them stayed for several days because of halon poisoning.

The platoon was relatively inexperienced. This exercise was the first fleet-amphibious experience for 17 of the 29 Marines, including the driver and platoon commander. The platoon leaders had recognized this problem and had held surf-passage training the day before to better prepare the crews.

What went wrong? The surf conditions had wors-

ened, and the platoon leaders didn't know it. They conducted a surf report at 0700 but didn't do another one. Fourteen hours elapsed between the initial report and the incident. No one was on the beach to report that the surf had risen to 8 feet by sunset. Eight-foot surf, with nine seconds between each wave, was authorized, since it gives an AAV enough time to recover after the first wave hits it.

My platoon and I were a kilometer down the beach at the time of the incident. Standing at the high water mark, my staff sergeant pointed out to me the unusually big waves that were crashing. I had seen big waves many times before, but something caught my attention: The time between the waves was very short—at three to four seconds (beyond the limits of the SOP). We had no idea an AAV unit was about to land and face these tough conditions. The height of the wave, combined with the short interval and 100 percent plunging surf, made this situation dangerous for any platoon.



On the day of the incident, the radio station reported a significant breaker height at 5 feet, with a maximum of 7 feet. At high tide, the maximum breaker height could be 8 feet. It is unknown whether the leaders knew the forecast for the day.

Earlier in the day, the platoon had landed on the beach at about 1500 with some midshipmen. Many of the Marines, including the leaders, noticed that the surf was a little rough, but the sea state was calm. One section leader said it wasn't anything he hadn't seen before. After a hasty evaluation of the surf, the leaders decided it was OK to splash back to the ship. Little did they know that the conditions were slowly getting worse. With no eyes on the beach, they were in for a surprise six hours later.

The *Joint Surf Manual*¹ requires a surf report to be done three times daily or when significant changes occur in the surf conditions. By its very nature, the ocean is constantly changing. The heavy-surf warning for the week, coupled with the constantly changing ocean, should have alarmed the platoon leaders.

This mishap could have been worse. Imagine what would have happened if the vehicle had not righted itself. What if the midshipmen had gone along for the final landing?

Having a recon unit on the beach to monitor the surf is not always a reality. As a substitute, your unit can have a Marine on the beach to provide a surf update by radio. He can ride in the safety vehicle on the beach. During training, can't you afford these control measures—especially with an inexperienced platoon? 🌊*

Why Change Is the Mother of All Risks

As Marines, we know the plan often changes once we are in the field. It's not unusual for the weather to worsen, the equipment to break, or the Marines to become fatigued. Sometimes the mission expands in size, or the time in which to do it shortens. Despite these challenges, we still have to get the job done. The traditional Marine way is to improvise, overcome and adapt. We're taught to thrive in a rapidly changing and chaotic environment, but there's a better way to deal with change.

Changes produce new hazards and greater risks. Leaders must take time to assess the situation and implement control measures. It doesn't take long for a situation to tumble out of control.

Using traditional leadership and planning techniques (e.g. METT-TS&L, BAMCIS, KOKOA-W), along with ORM, can mean the difference between getting your Marines to the fight as a whole or losing them along the way unnecessarily. 🌊*

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¹ COMNAVSURFLANT/PACINST 3840.1B, *Joint Surf Manual*, 02 Jan 1987