



PH3 Joseph Tepas photo

An unidentified Marine mans an M-60 machine gun on the Flight Deck of USS Boxer (LHD 4) during a recent Force Protection Exercise. The Marine is a part of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit attached to the USS Boxer Amphibious Ready Group presently on a Western Pacific Deployment. The exercise was held to prepare the Boxer ARG and MEU for their time on station in the Arabian Gulf.

Boxer Amphibious Ready Group put to the test

By J01 Scott Curtis

USS BOXER (LHD 4) PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Usama bin Laden. Timothy McVeigh. Khobar Towers. USS Cole. These are the names and the places, the incidents and the constructors of terror that can provoke strong emotions in American servicemen and women today.

Many Sailors would agree that being deployed at sea is an inherently dangerous occupation. Sailors and Marines have trained to fight fires or sail into harm's way for as long as there has been a modern Navy. These are the real risks for which they prepare.

Terrorism is the unseen risk that Sailors and Marines, such as those in the USS Boxer Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) Special Operations Capable (SOC), now also have to prepare for while deployed.

With the USS Cole (DDG 67) tragedy fresh on the minds of Sailors and Marines around the world, commands now focus on putting hard defenses into place and making sure crewmembers know what to do in the event of a terrorist attack. Learning from the tragic events of the past few years, and establishing measures to provide better protection for our forces is a top priority for Navy leadership.

In 1996, former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, said, "One of the missions for all of our operations is force protection. Every military plan must make this a priority. Sometimes force protection is a relatively easy task, but it must never be taken lightly, no matter how benign the environment."

When the Boxer ARG and 11th MEU (SOC) pulled into Pearl Harbor, March 20, the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force Special Operations Training Group (SOTG) from Camp Pendleton, Calif., did their best to create a challenging atmosphere for the three warships, USS Boxer (LHD 4), USS Harpers Ferry (LSD 49) and USS Cleveland (LPD 7), with the goal of giving the Sailors and Marines the knowledge and skills to handle a possible terrorist attack.

In the March 20 scenario, things got interesting right away for the ARG and MEU when a group of civilians clustered outside of the gate to the pier protesting the ships arrival. These protestors, actually local Sailors and Marines stationed in Pearl Harbor, soon caused the Boxer ARG Sailors and Marines to immediately go to Threat Condition (THREATCON) Charlie, which is the second highest alert condition for ships and units in the military. Boxer ARG Sailors and Marines quickly set up armed positions on and around the ship and on the pier.

They, in effect, created a hard outer presence, or a shell to protect the ship and crew. The Marines and Sailors responded well, saying the protestors gave them a definitive start to the exercise and the immediate feeling that someone was out there.

The evaluators from SOTG tried to throw everything at the ARG and MEU, including: the protestors; various surveillance posts; small boat and air attacks; swimmers, and a truck bomb.

"The aggressors played it to the hilt, they were really good. But every time

they had somebody looking at us, we spotted them. We knew where they were, and they knew we were looking at them. We were ready," said Aviation Ordnanceman First Class (AW) James Santillano, from Sacramento, Calif., Boxer's coordinator of the Ship's Self Defense Force (SSDF).

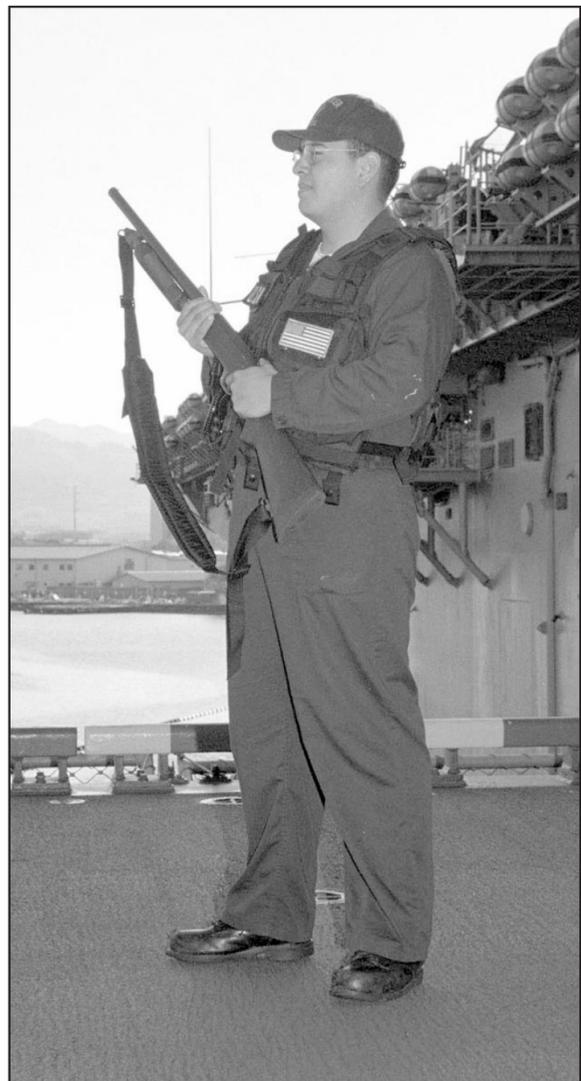
"Our response was the best I've seen, ever. The exercise showed everybody that it could be very real. We're not playing anymore. They (the ship's SSDF team) responded and reacted just like they were supposed to," Santillano said.

Marine Lt. Colonel Patrick Malay, the exercise coordinator from SOTG echoed Santillano's observation; "When I talked to Sailors about how familiar they are with their weapon and how much they have shot, every single one of those Sailors wants to shoot more. The Sailors are very receptive to this type of training."

Capt. Stuart Markey, the Commodore of the ARG and commander of Amphibious Squadron Seven, summed up the entire exercise by calling it a very large step in the right direction.

"Our level of knowledge has increased dramatically across the board. We've got a way to go, but we are working toward getting more training and making this part of our culture in the Navy," Markey said.

"We have to have our head in the game at every level, from the commanding officer all the way down to the Sailor and Marine standing the watch, and I think we did in this exercise. This is important work, and it isn't going to go away, but I think we're on the right track."



PH3 Ruth Winsted photo

Electronics Technician 3rd Class Jorge Vaguerano from Laredo, Texas, stands guard on the quarterdeck of USS Boxer during a recent Forces Protection Exercise. Vaguerano is part of the USS Boxer Amphibious Ready Group presently on a Western Pacific Deployment.



PH3 Joseph Tepas photo

A group of Marines prepare to stand guard during a recent Force Protection Exercise. The Marines are part of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit attached to the USS Boxer Amphibious Ready Group presently on a Western Pacific Deployment.



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Electronics Technician 1st Class Michael Hensley of Concho, Ariz., and Aviation Ordnanceman Apprentice Jeremy Macan from Kansas City, Kansas, stand watch on board USS Boxer (LHD 4) during a recent Forces Protection Exercise.