

Clean machine

It takes a lot of elbow grease to lubricate the 31st MEU

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ABOARD THE USS BELLEAU WOOD, off the coast of Okinawa -- The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is a highly-mobile Marine Air-Ground Task Force that conducted nine exercises and three real-world, no-notice deployments in the past 15 months.



More than 2,000 Marines and Sailors of the MEU rely on a plethora of vehicles and equipment to do their jobs. Without regular maintenance both ashore and afloat, the highly mobile 31st MEU would come to a grinding halt.

The use and abuse Marines put their gear through to get the mission accomplished -- whether air, land or sea vehicles that bring the Marines to the front, or weapons that reach out and touch the enemy from afar, or communications gear that helps coordinate every mission -- necessitates administering an equal amount of tender-loving-care to remain mission capable.

"If my technicians weren't doing their job," said Sgt. Homero M. Garza, communications technicians chief with 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (2/5), the Battalion Landing Team of the 31st MEU, "and we weren't getting gear up like we're supposed to, there would be no field ops. There would be no way to communicate. We'd probably run around with cans and strings.

It wouldn't work, basically." "If things weren't properly done," agreed Sgt. Gregg C. Bellucci, Motor Transport platoon sergeant with 2/5, "if my platoon didn't take care of things that needed to be done, vehicles would start breaking down, which

would force us to use more man hours, and cause more delays to fix all the gear. Things would slow down and eventually stop."



It is attitudes of motivation and dedication like these that enabled the MEU to maintain an aircraft mission-capable rate of 89 percent during the first two months of its no-notice, real-world deployment of the Arabian Gulf last year. With this figure higher than the Naval air goal for deployed units, the Marines still flew a fiscal quarter's worth of flight hours in the same time. In fact, during those

same two months, while supporting Operations Desert Fox and Southern Watch, the MEU boasted an average equipment-readiness rate of 95.5 percent.

With an operational tempo that's through the roof, Marines of the 31st MEU spend much of their time underway, aboard ship. The saltwater and salty sea air conspire to present new challenges to the Marines charged with keeping the MEU's gear ready.

"We do a lot of corrosion control," said Bellucci. "It starts from the basic wire brush and sandpaper to primer, paint and ... an oily material which is put over the whole vehicle to prevent rusting during time we're near salt water. While on ship, (we do) continuous bust-rust. And every time we get off a (Landing Craft Utility), the vehicles are sprayed down with fresh water and what they call salt-x, which goes over the metal parts and prevents the salt from corroding the metal material."

Water and humidity can wreak havoc with the delicate electronic equipment in communications gear, according to Garza.

"Waterproofing is a big deal for us, Garza said. "We had a lot of boat raids and that was one thing we had to really focus on," he said. "A lot of Devil Dogs (Marines) don't know how important it is until they see a radio go down."

"Preventive maintenance (pm) must be performed before embark, during stowage on ship and after debark," said 1st Lt. Andrew F. Meredith of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 262 (HMM-262), the 31st MEU's Air Combat Element.

"The salt water (and) air accelerates the corrosion process, so preventive maintenance and op checks must be conducted every other day.

"If pm and repairs are not conducted," Meredith continued, "the equipment will eventually break down, if not initially then most likely during a period when we need it most," he said.

Sergeant Jesus M. Nunez and Cpl. Kevin M. Day, both of MEU Service Support Group 31 (MSSG-31), the Service Support Group for the 31st MEU, are the Marines in charge of getting many needed parts and supplies to the MEU. They account for and embark more than 1,400 different types of parts and supplies. "We want to be deployable," said Day. "Say we were in (the Arabian Gulf), and we didn't have the parts right there. We'd have to go the whole way back to Okinawa to get the parts."

"Those days are lost," Nunez said. "In a real-world scenario, we need to be up at all times."

Nunez, Day, Meredith, Bellucci and Garza all praised their Marines, the Marines who get their hands dirty, the Marines who crawl under trucks, climb into the engine compartments of 5-ton vehicles, and pry apart the puzzles of communications gear in the name of keeping the MEU ready to roll.

These Marines, like PFC Shaun D. Harper, an artillery mechanic with K Battery, 2/5, who cares for what he calls his "six little babies" (six huge M198 Howitzer artillery pieces), are inspired by a clear bottom line -- saving Marines' lives.

Though their work is sometimes thankless and all-too-often taken for granted, these Marines turn the wrenches that ultimately keep the 31st MEU true to its name -- the Marine Corps' only permanently forward-deployed MEU.

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