



LCS Wargame Reveals New Tactics Amid Controversy

By Kris Osborn

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Navy leaders are refining their concepts of operations for the Littoral Combat Ship on the heels of wide ranging criticism that led to the decision to cut the ship's fleet size from 52 to 32, Navy leaders said.

At the same time, Navy leaders are exploring new mission possibilities for the controversial vessel in light of insights gained during a recent war game at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I.

The war game confirmed the LCS can bring additional protection, sensing and anti-submarine warfare advantages to carrier strike groups and guided missile destroyers engaged in conflict, Navy officials said.

"My initial impressions are that I think [the LCS] is going to play much more significantly in the open water than perhaps we had previously opined," said Rear Adm. Thomas Rowden, Navy's director of surface warfare.

The announcement of the wargame comes after watchdog groups, analysts and lawmakers have expressed concern that the LCS could not meet its mission requirements. Designed as a shallow water vessel, the LCS is intended to bring new littoral capabilities and mission-packages engineered for anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare and countermine missions.

However, in recent months, the Government Accountability Office and members of Congress have specifically questioned whether the platform is large and strong enough to thwart attackers and able to meet its intended mission.

One analyst cited survivability concerns with the platform, explaining that next-generation networking technology does not remove the need for protection.

"I don't think it has an obvious mission. It is too vulnerable to do a lot of things that it was envisioned to do. The main problem is survivability," said Benjamin Friedman, a defense research fellow in at the Cato Institute, a Washington D.C.-based think tank. "The LCS idea was predicated on this idea that if you can see enough of the enemy through surveillance systems and

communication with your platforms, then you can have a ship that is more vulnerable. It has turned out this is not the case.”

News of the potential to expand missions for LCS also arrives as the Navy concurrently begins its Small Surface Combatant Task Force duties engineered to come up with alternative proposals for the last 20 planned LCS purchases.

Citing the survivability concerns and other problems with the LCS, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced the planned purchase of the LCS would be truncated from 52 to 32 ships. He directed the Navy to come up with alternative proposals for the ship to possibly include a new platform or modifications to the LCS.

The current task force study is beginning to look at a range of options, including adding more armament and weaponry to the LCS, or designing a new platform able to accommodate more armor, weapons and vertical launch tubes for missiles, service officials said.

The wargame, which involved as many as 125 officers, commanders and warfighters from various locations across the U.S and globe, explored conflict scenarios focused on examining the missions and technologies of the LCS. Formal analysis of the results of the wargame is expected sometime in May.

The scenarios were designed to mirror the kinds of threats, tactics and weapons expected to be in existence and ready for conflict by the mid-2020s as a way to assess the ability of the LCS to operate in various threat environments.

A key insight from the wargame scenarios was that the presence of the LCS in the open water could bring key sensing and protective technologies to the carrier strike group, freeing up other assets essential to the conflict, Rowden explained.

“When we brought the Littoral Combat Ships in with the anti-submarine warfare, or ASW, package in support of the execution of support of carrier operations in a notional operating area, that freed up guided missile destroyers to go and do other things for the strike group commander because that ASW capability provided a significant boost. We could free up one guided missile destroyer to increase the lethality of the carrier strike group,” Rowden said.

Rowden also said that the LCS, configured with the ASW, integrates successfully with the towed array and hull-mounted sonar built on a guided missile destroyer.

“We are seeing remarkable capability demonstrated in our guided missile destroyers today when we take this system and pair it with our variable depth sonar that we will have on the Littoral Combat Ship. We see a significant increase in our ability to hunt submarines,” he added.

The concepts of operation and mission purview of the LCS is expected to continue expanding as new things are learned, Rowden explained. For example, the ships could wind up being configured for special operations or information dominance missions in the future, he added.

Survivability of the LCS was also improved by the ships ability to disperse in shallow waters, the wargame discovered.

The LCS class consists of two variants, the Freedom and Independence — designed and built by two industry teams, respectively led by Lockheed Martin and an Austal USA-led team. Contracts were awarded to Lockheed Martin and Austal USA on December 29, 2010, for the construction of up to 10 ships each.

So far, the first three LCS ships have been commissioned and the fourth, the USS Coronado, is slated for commissioning in April of this year, Naval Sea Systems Command officials said.

LCS 5 and 6 launched in December of last year, and ships 7 through 16 are in some stage of production, Leonard added. The Navy plans to wind up delivering 4 LCS ships per year.

”While we are very focused on getting the two classes of ships and the three mission packages to their initial operational capability and then driving through to full operational capability, there are a lot of additional things these ships can be used for. We are going to start to seek more for other things these ships can do,” Rowden said.