# *Whatever happened to assault boat crossing ?*

by CPT Frank S. Weston, Jr.

When a brigade or division executes a deliberate river crossing, the first phase is an assault across the river. The preferred forms of transportation for the assault troops are helicopters and amphibious vehicles (while not true amphibians, M113, M2/3, and the ACE are included). What if these are not available? At night or in bad weather conditions, helicopters are often grounded. Tracked vehicles are slow, noisy and vulnerable while in the water, and hard to get out of the water on the far bank. Problems with swimming tracks are also well documented in safety bulletins and regulations prohibiting tracks from swimming during training. If we can't swim tracks during training, how do we train for the assault crossing? The only back-up for helicopters or amphibious vehicles is the old reliable 15-man assault boat (RB-15).

To execute the RB-15 assault crossing successfully, the crossing unit must make a detailed plan and conduct good rehearsals. The Egyptians, during their assault crossing of the Suez Canal in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, had planned their operation for several years and rehearsed hundreds of times. They divided their assault force into waves, while maintaining unit integrity. Commanders were with each wave. So detailed was their plan, that they'd stretched colored ropes across the Canal to ensure that each assaulting unit landed at the right spot on the far bank. They were successful. Because of this need for detailed planning to ensure success, we cannot perform the assault boat crossing as an afterthought, once the helicopters are grounded or the tracks cannot swim. Engineers are the experts in assault boat crossing and should have the training and expertise to plan the operation. But what has happened to the assault boat crossing in current Army doctrine? We seem to have forgotten to include it in our "how to" manuals. FM 90-13, *River Crossing Operations*; TM 5-210, *Military Float Bridge Equipment*; and FC 90-13, *Counterobstacle and River Crossing Operations*, tell us to expect to do an RB-15 crossing, but not how to sucessfully execute it.

When presented with the task of writing how to organize and execute an assault boat crossing, rather than "reinventing the wheel", we decided to find historical examples of successful assault crossings, using World War II as the primary source. ST 5-260-1B, *Military River Crossing Equipment*, 1959, found in the U.S. Army Engineer School Library, provided this excerpt:

*Boats are unloaded from transportation by the engineer crews and located either in the attack position or at an intermediate boat area between the attack position and the river. The ideal attack position will be accessible to trucks or carrying parties bringing up the assault boats, concealed from hostile ground fire and aerial observation, connected to the river's edge by numerous clearly defined foot routes, close to the river to reduce hand-carrying by infantry to a minimum, and easy to identify at night.*

*Guides from the engineer assault boat teams meet infantry units as they enter the attack positions and guide them to their respective boats. Assault boats are hand-carried by the infantry-engineer teams to the river over concealed routes.*

*At the designated time, the first assault wave moves forward to cross the line of departure at H-hour. Assault boats promptly return to the near bank when each trip is completed, and the crossing of subsequent waves proceeds as soon as the boats are loaded. Boats leave from the same near-bank area and proceed to the same far-bank area on each trip.*

*Close cooperation between infantry and engineers in the assault is essential. The senior infantryman in each boat team is responsible for all the technical aspects of loading, crossing, and unloading his boat. He is also responsible for assisting the boat commander in these operations. When the far bank is reached, infantry boat teams disembark promptly, deploy, and move forward into the attack or to a rallying area where units quickly reorganize and advance to their objective.*

Another manual, ROTC ST 45-5, *River Crossing Operation*, 1953, featured diagrams showing how companies move from the battalion assembly area into attack positions, where they are separated into waves.

All of the information from the 1953 and 1959 manuals still applies to the modern day AirLand battlefield. To get this information back into our manuals, we need make only small changes to reflect modern organizations. In bringing back the "how to" for assault boat crossings, we have looked to the past to provide for the future.

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