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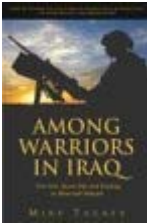
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The U.S. Navy officially took possession of the first of a new class of ships; a Littoral Surface Craft (LSC) called "Sea Fighter" (FSF-1). This ship was originally intended as an experimental ship, to test out a number of new technologies. But the sea trials were so successful, that pressure is building to put this class into mass production. That won't be hard to do. Sea Fighter took only twenty months to build, and cost only \$50 million. Ships like this are meant for a new force, the "brown wa (coastal) navy." The "brown water sailors," who are agitating for more emphasis on small ships, and operations in coastal waters, are no longer considered a fringe group. This is mainly because a larger brown water force would get the navy more involved with the war on terror. The navy has largely been left out of the war on terror, because of their emphasis on carriers and nuclear subs. Despite the usefulness of carrier aviation in Afghanistan, the navy hasn't had a lot to do since September 11 2001. The army is getting most of the work, and a growing proportion of the defense budget. With the cost of traditional warships skyrocketing, the LCS (3,000 ton, \$250 million Littoral Combat Ship) and the LSC look a lot more attractive. New destroyers will cost \$2.5 billion each. That gets you ten LCSs, or fifty LSCs. New carriers cost over \$8 billion each, which could build a fleet of brown water ships.

What's so hot about the LSC? It's a 1,600 ton (full load) catamaran that is 262 feet long, 72 feet wide and can operate in as little as 12 feet of water. Top speed is about 90 kilometers an hour, which is a unique capability for U.S. navy ships (especially of this size) and a major advantage in coastal operations. Even in rough seas (with up to seven foot waves), the ship can do about 70 kilometers an hour. This is partly the result of using a T shaped hydrofoil. The Sea Fighter has a crew of only 26, a room below and on the deck for twelve cargo containers. These containers can be called "mission modules" and hold weapons, electronics or robotic air, surface or undersea vehicles for jobs like mine clearing, anti-submarine warfare, destroying surface ships or delivering commandoes. The deck is broad enough to handle two helicopters. There is a dock in the rear for launching boats. The ship can stay at sea about eight days at a time. Cruising at 36 kilometers an hour, it can travel 7,200 kilometers using its diesel engines. The high speed comes from two LM-2500 gas turbine engines (generating 33,600 horsepower each). Inside, it looks more like a space ship, than a seagoing one. The ship is highly automated, and equipped to keep an eye on large chunks of coastline, and perform many different missions. The LSC hasn't got a lot of staying power, but it's the kind of ship that can get things done in the war on terror. So can the larger LCS, and both can be kept at sea for months, getting refueled and resupplied at sea.

It remains to be seen if the other "unions" in the navy (carriers, subs or conventional surface ships) will be willing to give up one or more of their new ships to get the "brown water" force of LSCs and LCSs going. People higher up in the Department of Defense may get the job done, as well as Congress itself, which has the last word on which ships get built. Congress has noted the navy's inability to do much along the coasts, despite navy calls for more capability in those areas. The brown water sailor have been letting Congress know about the new ship designs, and a bitter budget battle is looming.

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