THE CONCEPT OF THE *"HUNTER-KILLER"* PLATOON AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION WITHIN MARINE INFANTRY FORCES FOR COASTAL DEFENCE IN THE DANUBE DELTA AND THE RAZELM-SINOE LAGOON COMPLEX (I)

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The security environment in the Black Sea region is characterised by instability, strategic competition and increased risks of hybrid and conventional military actions. In the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, the ability to rapidly detect, decide efficiently and strike accurately has become essential for the defence of the coastal areas in the Danube Delta and the Razelm-Sinoe lagoon complex. Naval infantry, as a manoeuvre force operating in a riverine environment (delta and lagoon areas), must be adapted for distributed, mobile and low-signature operations. The implementation of the "Hunter-Killer" Platoon concept responds to these requirements by integrating reconnaissance, command and control and strike elements into a flexible tactical structure. This concept enables the rapid transformation of intelligence into target effects through the use of modern sensors, communication networks and distributed firepower. The article analyses how the "Hunter-Killer" Platoon concept can be adapted and integrated at the level of the Romanian Naval Infantry units for coastal defence operations in the Danube Delta.

Keywords: "Hunter-Killer" Platoon; coastal defence; riverine environment; FPV attack micro-UAS; loitering munitions;

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of hybrid warfare, coastal defence has evolved beyond the traditional concept of fixed maritime anti-landing defence positions reinforced with permanent fortification systems (bunkers) and supported by coastal artillery, naval minefields and coastal naval patrols. As a rule, this concept is often applicable to coastal defence in large sectors of sandy beaches favourable to the landing of potential enemy amphibious forces.

Much more complicated, complex, discontinuous and heterogeneous is the unique operational environment of the Danube Delta and the Razelm-Sinoe lagoon complex. It presents both strategic advantages and major vulnerabilities in the context of a potential combined aggression originating from the Black Sea and its northern coastal sector, through amphibious assault, riverine incursions or even by offensive river crossings conducted by forces dispersed across a wide front, which makes the paradigm of coastal defence in this area require a different type of approach.

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The adoption within the Naval Infantry of an advanced reconnaissance and strike model, only partially described in allied doctrinal publications – namely the *"Hunter-Killer"* concept or *"Hunter-Killer" Platoon* – can transform these terrain characteristics into defensive advantages by combining persistent target acquisition, decentralised tactical decision-making and the distributed application of precision fires.

To strengthen deterrence and defence capabilities in the Danube Delta and the Razelm-Sinoe Lagoon Complex, the Naval Infantry could adopt the *"Hunter-Killer" Platoon* concept – initially employed by both in the US Marine Corps and the US Army, adapting it to the specific riverine (delta and lagoon) environment. This article analytically explores how such a doctrinal adaptation could improve Romania's defensive posture in these critical areas.

THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE DANUBE DELTA AND THE RAZELM-SINOE LAGOON COMPLEX

The Danube Delta, the second-largest delta in Europe, is a complex labyrinth of canals and an alluvial plain consisting of marshes, islands, sandy ridges covered with dense vegetation (reedbeds and forests), offering both concealment opportunities and a series of constraints for coastal defence forces.

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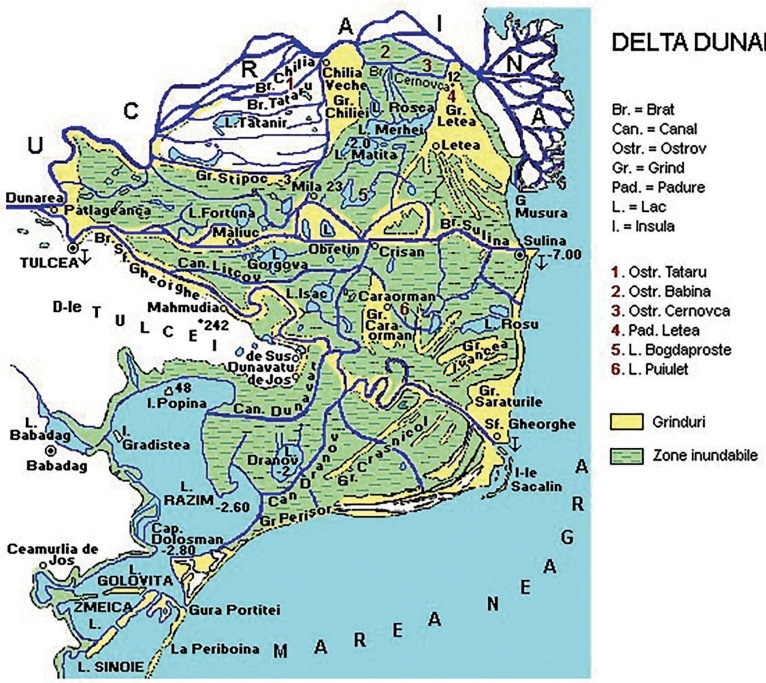

Figure 1: Danube Delta and Razelm – Sinoe Lagoon Complex
(https://roteaprofu.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/delta.jpg)

Although the geomorphologic configuration of the Danube Delta (including the Razelm-Sinoe Lagoon Complex) makes a large-scale mechanised invasion extremely difficult, it nevertheless provides a number of potential infiltration routes for small specialised enemy detachments (riverine, amphibious or airborne), Special Operations Forces, ISR groups or unmanned systems (aerial/UAS, surface/USV or submarine/UUV), launched from the northern or northwestern coast of the Black Sea or even from the occupied Crimean Peninsula.

The Razelm-Sinoe Lagoon Complex consists of a system of large, semi-enclosed, shallow lagoons (littoral lakes) connected to the Black Sea and the Danube Delta through canals; depths are typically shallow (often below 4 meters), while the hydrological conditions vary depending on the season and freshwater inflow. These physical constraints severely limit the mobility of large combat systems and mechanised units (large units), while favouring the mobility of small craft, amphibious forces, and unmanned systems – precisely the platforms that both defenders and an potential adversaries would use in a localised incursion.

The Danube Delta's maze-like of combat systems and islands further enhances concealment opportunities and complicates large-scale military operations, facilitating a highly applicable, sensor-based *distributed* defence.

Lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war – which combines reconnaissance, electronic warfare, artillery/land-based missiles, irregular troops movements and the widespread use of FPV reconnaissance-strike drones – make these areas particularly vulnerable if insufficiently defended.

RECENT HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

Lessons learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war – which combines reconnaissance, electronic warfare, artillery/land-based missiles, irregular troops movements and the widespread use of FPV reconnaissance-strike drones – make these areas particularly vulnerable if insufficiently defended. In this regard, two recent examples are especially relevant to the nature of combat in a riverine environment and provide an appropriate transition to the subject of this article: *the battle for the Krynky bridgehead* and *the battle of Siverskyi-Donets near Bilohorivka*. These areas in Ukraine display geomorphologic similarities to the Danube Delta area and the Razelm-Sinoe Lagoon Complex.

Lesson Learned no. 1 (Ukrainian): the Russian victory in the battle for the Krynky bridgehead (October 2023-June 2024) on the eastern bank of the Dnieper River, where Ukrainian Marines (supported

by territorial defence forces), attempted to secure a bridgehead through a riverine amphibious operation. The objective aimed to redirect Russian efforts from Donbas to the southern front by disrupting Russian logistical support along the M-14 highway and opening an offensive direction for access toward the Crimean Peninsula. The Ukrainian forces suffered a severe defeat, regarded as one of the most difficult chapters of the war. The terrain in the Kherson-Nova Kakhovka River sector of the Dnieper shares many similarities with that of the Danube Delta and the Razelm-Sinoe Lagoon Complex. Military analysts and frontline reports highlighted several lessons relevant to riverine warfare:

- *high-cost static attrition is the main lesson learned* – namely, the extreme human cost of capturing and holding a *"symbolic"* bridgehead without the means to expand it. Ukrainian Marines were frequently subjected to intense and protracted fire while operating in an environment with very limited space of manoeuvre. Survivors and analysts noted that the ultimate goal of penetrating deep into occupied territory (up to 80 km) was almost impossible to achieve under such conditions *(figure 2)*.

Figure 2: The concept and probable intent of the Ukrainian Marines operations at Krynky to seize and secure a bridgehead in support of subsequent operations
(https://www.nzz.ch/english/is-the-ukrainian-army-preparing-a-breakthrough-strike-ld.1770483
https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/1b4nun6/battle_for_krynky_kherson_oblast_ukraine/#lightbox)

- *vulnerability of riverine logistics* – amphibious operations conducted across a major river such as the Dnieper face extreme risks of *"blocking effect"*; first of all – riverine supply lines – Ukrainian amphibious landings relied on small craft operations, which became constant targets for Russian FPV drones and artillery; also, medical evacuation operations were also severely affected due to the extreme risks involved, often resulting in *"countless casualties"* among elite units, such as the Ukrainian 126th Territorial Defence Brigade and 35th Marine Brigade;
- *the role of riverine interdiction operations conducted by Russian forces with drones* – the battle of Krynky demonstrated that modern electronic warfare systems and drone saturation can neutralise traditional amphibious/riverine advantages. Although Ukrainian drones initially helped neutralise Russian armoured forces defending the eastern bank, the absence of Ukrainian heavy support equipment on the eastern bank often left Ukrainian Marines *"stuck"* to a small operational footprint. By June 2024, the bridgehead had become untenable after Russian forces intensified combined and protracted fire, destroying most Ukrainian defensive positions within the bridgehead. In July 2024, Ukrainian forces officially withdrew from the Krynky area after the positions were deemed destroyed and impossible to sustain *(figure 3).*

Figure 3: After about nine months of fighting, the Krynky bridgehead had been transformed into a completely devastated area.
(https://english.nv.ua/russian-war/ukrainian-marines-secret-dnipro-landing-exposed-chaos-heroism-and-unfinished-goals-50520483.html)

Lesson Learned no. 2 (Russian): the blocking and destruction of the Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) from the 74th Mechanised Brigade during its attempted crossing the Siverskyi-Donets River[1] *(figure 4)*; on 11 May 2022, Ukrainian forces from the 79th Air Assault Brigade succeeded in destroying a Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) attempting to cross the strategically important Siverskyi-Donets River in the Donbas region. Employing forces, supported by artillery (27th Artillery Brigade, including Uragan multiple-launch rocket systems – MLRSs), reconnaissance drones and Switchblade-300 (anti-personnel)/ and Switchblade-600 (anti-tank) loitering munitions, Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian pontoon bridge together with at least six tanks, 14 BMP infantry fighting vehicles, seven MT-LB amphibious vehicles, a tugboat and five other armoured vehicles during the crossing. This effectively neutralised the entire Russian Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) at the moment of maximum vulnerability, when forces were concentrated both in on the staging areas near the crossing point and during the crossing (moving on the pontoon bridge), with insufficient security measures for crossing operations.

Historically, the Naval Infantry Regiment within the Naval Forces remains the only unit organised, trained and experienced as an amphibious assault force intended for riverine and amphibious operations in the coastal environment, possessing both doctrinal expertise and practical operational experience in the defence of riverine sectors of the coastal area.

It should also be emphasised that the terrain in the Siverskyi-Donets River crossing sector shares many geomorphologic similarities with the Danube Delta terrain.

Historically, the Naval Infantry Regiment within the Naval Forces remains the only unit organised, trained and experienced as an amphibious assault force intended for riverine and amphibious operations in the coastal environment, possessing both doctrinal expertise and practical operational experience in the defence of riverine sectors of the coastal area. The transformation of this institutional base into a modern set of "Hunter-Killer" Platoons requires doctrinal adjustments (with an emphasis on decentralised mission command), organisational transformations (through the creation of small mixed reconnaissance-strike teams), specialised training and investments in critical equipment, such as: drones of different categories (micro/mini-UAS), loitering munitions, portable anti-tank guided missile – ATGM

[1] Digital Forensic Research Group, *Russian War Report: Drone Footage Confirms Failed Russian Military Pontoon Crossing*, Atlantic Council, 13 May 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-drone-footage-confirms-failed-russian-military-pontoon-crossing/.

systems (optimised for riverine and littoral operations), MANPADS and C-UAS systems, portable Electronic Warfare systems, encrypted tactical communications and information solutions, ultra-light tactical vehicles and fast riverine patrol crafts.

Figure 4: The crossing point over the Siverskyi-Donets River footage after Russian BTG was neutralised by Ukrainian artillery.
(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-drone-footage-confirms-failed-russian-military-pontoon-crossing/; https://dupuyinstitute.org/2022/06/09/the-severskii-donets-river-crossing-operation/)

The unit's existing focus on riverine and littoral areas provides a solid basis for such a transformation.

(The second part of the article will be published in the next issue.)

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