

## **O-4 Sea Tour LHA AIMD Officer**

By LCDR Fred "HepMO" Hepler

Your O-4 sea tour is critical to your success in the AMDO journey. It has been my observation that most AMDO's are not fully aware of the awesome opportunity to fill a Commander (O-5) billet as a Department Head on an LHA as the AIMD Officer. The purpose of this article is to better inform you of a great opportunity for your O-4 sea tour.

My previous sea tours have always been involved with riding on an aircraft carrier until this current tour on an LHA. While serving as USS PELELIU (LHA 5) AIMD Officer, I can say with confidence that this tour has been a welcome change, most intriguing and a very fascinating experience. I recently completed a six month Western Pacific/Arabian Gulf (to include operations off of East Timor, Indonesia) deployment. Without question ... this tour has been the most professionally rewarding and positive experience of all sea duty assignments.

Serving on an LHA will possibly provide you the unique experience of working with other branches of service and nations. Do the words "interoperability" and "jointness" ring a bell?

An interesting comment from CINCPACFLT (Admiral Fargo) during a recent dinner speech at the Island Club at NAS North Island ... "The greatest Navy success story this past year was the Amphib involvement in East Timor, Indonesia". Both LHA 3 and LHA 5 were involved in heavy lift logistics and multilateral support with the Royal Australian Army. The United States and Australia worked as a team in providing humanitarian relief services to East Timor that resulted in peace and stability being restored in a troubled area of the world.

On the LHA platform ... the Amphibious Readiness Group (ARG) Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Operations Capable (MEU/SOC) gets involved with a multitude of critical and discrete missions. Several are amphibious in nature, such as the Marine Corps' time tested amphibious raid. Others are contingency response missions like evacuations and rescues. Several more are combat related maritime special operations missions (security operations and reinforcement operations, specialized demolitions operations, and military operations in urban terrain). Others include "stability" missions such as civic action operations that provide dental, medical, and/or engineering support and mobile training teams that teach basic weapons, maneuver, and maintenance skills. Intelligence, counterintelligence, and tactical deception operations are another mission subset.

The embarked MEU/SOC is comprised of over 2000 Marines. This Marine unit is built around an Airwing known as the Aviation Combat Element (ACE), a Marine Infantry Battalion Landing Team (BLT) known as the Ground Combat Element (GCE) and the Combat Service Support Element (CSSE). This triad represents the "pointy end of the spear" in America's foreign policy.

It is absolutely amazing and most impressive as to how many moving parts there are while an LHA is simultaneously conducting flight deck operations and amphibious movement via well deck operations with landing and assault craft. The intense coordination amongst the Navy and Marine Corps team is breathtaking.

As I converse with our senior AMDO's who have previously served on an LHA and were later selected for Major AIMD to serve as a CV/CVN AIMDO, the stories match that a lot of the Department Head perks enjoyed on the CV/CVN are equally enjoyed on the LHA. The main difference - the LHA AIMD has a smaller population of people (130) and there's less embarked aircraft (31). The current LHA airwing consists of 12 CH-46E Frogs, 4 CH-53E Sea Stallions, 4 AH-1W Attack Cobras, 3 UH-1N Hueys, 2 HH-46D SAR Birds and 6 AV-8B Harrier Jets.

The LHA AIMD Officer is the senior maintainer onboard and wears three hats while deployed (AIMDO, ARGIMA coordinator and nearly a CAGMO). Three O-6's (ship's CO, embarked Staff Commodore and MEU/SOC CO) utilize the AIMDO as the "go to" person for all high visibility aviation maintenance and logistics issues. The AIMD team consists of a CWO AMO and CWO MMCO. CPO's serve in the QAO and Production Division Officer billets (IM-2, IM-3, IM-4).

The maintenance department has 70 Sailors and 60 Marines. As the coordinator for the ARG Intermediate Maintenance Activity (ARGIMA) the responsibility is similar to what is known on the CV/CVN as the Battle Force Intermediate Maintenance Activity (BFIMA) coordinator. On an LHA the embarked ACE does not have a "full time" dedicated maintenance professional MO as we enjoy in the role of a CAGMO on a CV/CVN. The ACE Aircraft Maintenance Officer is actually a CH-46E pilot who is exceptionally busy flying most of the time and taking care of the daily administrative burdens. He will lean heavily on the AIMDO for "O" and "I" level maintenance guidance, which presents a leadership opportunity for significant aircraft maintenance (nearly CAGMO) involvement with the ACE.

As you survey the future of Navy/Marine Corps Aviation, keep in mind that the newest aircraft and weapon systems are heading to the LHA (V-22 Osprey, CH-60 and eventually the Joint Strike Fighter aircraft). Additionally, NAVAIR PMA-260 is currently in work to outfit the LHA AIMD with CASS and associated Test Program Sets. If you are interested in maintaining and playing with the newest toys in the Navy and Marine Corps' ... the LHA AIMDO billet might be your best path to take to live your dream in a fun ticket.

If you already have a good mix of "O" and "I" level experience on the CV/CVN and you are interested in becoming the "total package" Naval Officer ... the LHA AIMD Officer billet will certainly give you exposure to a whole new world of opportunities. Imagine getting additional experience with the Surface Gator Navy that includes numerous ARG MEU/SOC missions, which will very soon involve the newest aircraft and logistics support in Navy/Marine Corp Aviation.

I encourage you to seize this incredible opportunity and I welcome any inquiries if you desire further information on serving in an exciting Commander (O-5) billet during your O-4 sea tour.