



[David Wood](#)

Senior Military Correspondent, The Huffington Post

As Obama Promises 'No Boots on the Ground,' U.S. Military Trains for Just That Scenario

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"Once a conflict starts, the statesmen lose control." ~ Former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates

"No matter how a war starts, it ends in mud. It has to be slugged out -- there are no trick solutions or cheap shortcuts." ~ Attributed to Gen. "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell, WWII Commander

"Only someone who has served in uniform understands how thoroughly a military operation can get screwed up -- and how quickly." ~ Lt. Gen. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.)

As President Barack Obama gives a national address Wednesday evening on how he intends to destroy the Islamic State (ISIS) without putting American "boots on the ground," a potent force of 2,500 combat Marines, backed by attack helicopters and jet strike fighters, is aboard warships trolling off the U.S. East Coast. Training to deploy later this year to the Middle East, the Marines are practicing a long-distance evacuation of a U.S. embassy, high-speed stealth raids and the rescue of an American pilot shot down in hostile territory.

Separately, a company of U.S. Army Rangers, special operations soldiers who specialize in close combat, is preparing to swarm onto an airfield in Louisiana after several thousand paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team have conducted a nighttime tactical jump to seize the airfield and set up an expanded defensive perimeter. From there, the Rangers and paratroopers will coordinate a series of raids and other combat exercises this month.

And at Fort Benning, Georgia, the Army's most experienced infantry commanders have gathered to brainstorm on how to confront a dangerous, cunning and ruthless enemy like the Islamic State -- recognizing, as an official conference briefing paper [explains](#), that air strikes alone "could not deliver rapid or decisive victories against determined, adaptive enemies."

Lest there be any mistake as to whom they're talking about, an assessment by the Army's training and doctrine command describes hypothetical future enemies in terms that sound just like the Jihadists who are running rampant across a swath of Iraq and Syria. The paper warns that U.S. adversaries will blunt the effectiveness of air power by dispersing and "intermingling with civilian populations to defeat or avoid the intelligence, surveillance and precision fires of U.S. forces." They "will use mines, IEDs and anti-tank guided missiles" to counter the U.S. advantage in tanks and armored vehicles, as Hamas did against Israeli forces this summer in Gaza. They "will employ suicide attacks and mass murder to instill fear and intimidation, elicit provocative responses, perpetuate continual conflict, and undermine public will among U.S. and friendly populations ..."

Not especially a fight to look forward to. And as Brent Scowcroft suggests, even a narrowly defined military mission -- say, a quick air strike on targets in Syria -- might go wrong quickly, if a U.S. pilot is shot down. A remote possibility, perhaps. But it happened in Bosnia a decade ago, during the U.S.-led air campaign over that country, when U.S. Marines conducted a long-distance [rescue](#) of Capt. Scott O'Grady after his F-16 fighter was shot down. That's precisely the mission, called a TRAP (Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel), that the Marines of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit are practicing along the East Coast. And given the proliferation of cheap but effective shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles in Iraq and Syria, it's a skill that the Marines must have as they take up station in the region late this year.

In a TRAP mission, a Marine team flies low and fast into enemy territory aboard a V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. On landing, they would set up a defense perimeter to guard against intruders while freeing the airman from wreckage, if necessary, before collapsing the defense perimeter, accounting for all personnel, and quickly departing.

Trouble would come, of course, if any bad guys showed up, a situation that might demand reinforcements, in the form of more Marines with heavier weapons, and potentially a protracted

firefight (think, [Blackhawk Down](#)). And in case a scenario like this goes awfully wrong, the Rangers and paratroopers in Louisiana are practicing the same mission, launching a larger and more capable rescue force.

In other words, boots on the ground.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit departs for the Persian Gulf or eastern Mediterranean later this year, replacing a similar unit, the 22nd MEU, that is currently afloat in the region. The 82nd Airborne's 2nd Brigade Combat Team is currently in its rotation as part of the U.S. Global Response Force, on alert to be wheels up for anywhere in the world within 22 hours.

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