

The image shows two RHIBs (Rigid-Hull Inflatable Boats) moving across the water. The boat in the foreground is closer and more detailed, showing several crew members in military-style gear. The boat in the background is further away and partially obscured by the wake of the first boat. The water is dark with white foam from the boats' movement.

THE RESURRECTION OF BOARDING

BACK TO THE FUTURE OR FORWARD TO THE PAST?

For many centuries boarding represented a main technique of naval warfare, if not the only. Even when the guns and carronades were already thundering over the seas, the only way to put the enemy's resistance to an end was often to put a detachment of naval infantry onboard in the harm's way. Then at the end of the 19th century this method of warfare faded away. About one century later, when the instability replaced the long-time equilibriums, naval forces were again called to board vessels, though this time the context was quite different. Not anymore the end of furious naval battles, most often the only way to control the situation when other more technologically advanced sensors were not of help.

Well-coordinated measures to combat today's scourge are required. Besides better platforms, industry is offering specific equipments, including RHIB, small-calibre rapid-fire weapons, excellent low-cost sensors, devices for the monitoring of chemical hazardous agents aboard ships, digital communications, and improved computer technology.

TODAY'S VBSS NEEDS NEW SHIPS

Today, boarding operations have become the 'bread and butter' of most naval deployments. VBSS (Vessel Boarding Search & Seizure) is a significant component of most of these operations. While a proficiency in ASW, AAW and ASuW must be maintained by any naval service, one should recognise that they are applied only during training and exercises, while Maritime Security Operations (MSO) and Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) are carried out on a daily basis.

The old-times men-of-war were designed and built with a clear attention to the need of the boarding parties: high fore and aft castles to repel hostile forces, fighting tops from where missiles could be launched, spaces for marine troops, wide availability of light arms, etc. Today the most recent combatants have plenty of traditional warfare capabilities, yet very often they lack a specific feature to support routine boarding operations. Ships as modern as the "Arleigh Burke" class destroyers, or the Franco-Italian HORIZON, or the German "Sachsen" class represent the current top of naval technology, but were designed after 'Cold War' requirements, where MSO and MIO were considered mostly a Coast Guard task. As a consequence, the only improvement over previous designs was limited on having one or two RHIB onboard, rather than the slow lifeboats of the past classes.

But the situation is going to drastically change for the next classes of surface combatants. For instance, the Italian Navy's FREMM-GP ("Bergamini" class) are to be fitted with three RHIB, one 7m boat on a single-point davit on the starboard side, one 7-11m boat on the port side davit, and one 7-11m boat in the aft stern ramp, with a Calzoni dedicated launch and recovery system capable of handling up to 12 tons loads.

The ASW variant of the FREMM class will have only two boats on the sides, as the stern area will be used for the VDS gears. The "Bergamini" class will also feature 20 additional accommodations for an Embarked Military Force (EMF) with the very same standard used for the other permanent members of the crew. The dual hangar of both variants is capable to operate two NH90 helicopters or one AW101 and one NH90. The hangar could also house a container for special gears to be used during the boarding as well as to support Special Operations. The frigate will also have reconfigurable spaces to be used as a briefing room or a mission planning room with adequate access to the ship's communications and classified C4ISR non-real-time network.

The future UK Royal Navy's Global Combat Ship (a.k.a. Type 26) is being designed from its very onset with full interchangeable capabilities, including those aimed to MSO and MIO. A wide aft mission bay will allow operations of boats and other mission equipment (see