“Landing Craft, Medium (LCM)

The last landing craft we will look at is by far the eldest: the venerable Landing Craft Medium, Mark 8. The LCM-8 is the last direct link with the kind of landing craft you see in old war movies storming the beaches of Normandy or Iwo Jima. The basic design of this long-serving utility craft dates back to British vessel of the early 1940s. Back then, the requirement was to haul a thirty-ton tank or equivalent load from an offshore transport. Other than increasing the payload capacity to accommodate a modern main battle tank, not much has changed.

The basic LCM-8 is a metal box, with a retractable bow ramp and a pair of 165 hp marine diesels. Most of the LCM-8s are made of high-tensile steel, though some units were welded aluminum to reduce weight for stowage aboard LKA-113-class assault cargo ships. Aft is a small pilothouse. And that is about it. There are armament or berthing facilities for the crew of five (they live aboard their mother ship). The cargo area is open to the elements. The LCM-8 can make about 10 kt/18 kph for a range of about 190 nm/347 km with a sixty ton cargo load or perhaps125 Marines. An LCM-8 can carry every piece pf ground equipment in a MAGTF, except the M1A! Abrams tank. The LCM-8s roll a fair amount, and can ride decidedly rough in heavy seas. Nevertheless, they are quite seaworthy, despite the pounding that they deliver to their passengers and cargo.

Currently, though the capability does still exist, an ARG carrying a MEU (SOC) would almost never carry LCM-8s. Where you find the LCM-8 is in the three maritime preposition squadrons. There they function as cargo carriers for vehicles and equipment. They act as tugs for barges, and transport personnel between ships. Many allied forces, including Britain’s Royal Navy, use the LCM, and will continue for sometime. After a half century of service, however, the LCM’s retirement from the U.S. Navy is finally at hand. Within the next ten to fifteen years, the last LCMs will leave U.S. service, becoming a fond memory to the sailors that crewed them. They have served in wars from Pacific to the South Atlantic, with distinction.

What will repace them? By about 2010, the Navy will need a landing craft with a cargo capacity in the thirty-five-to-fifty-ton range. A logical successor might be a downsized LCAC. In addition to carrying cargo, a gunboat version able to escort LCAC’s or AAAVs would be very useful. The problem, of course, is money. There simply is no budget for anything but paper studies, and no program office has been chartered to solve the problem. Given the fiscal limitations of the next decade or so, you might see LCMs serving well into the first quarter of the 21st century. They are simple. They work. That alone may keep them around for some time to come.”

- Excerpt from Marine, A Guided Tour of a Marine Expeditionary Unit, by Tom Clancy, © 1996 Berkley Books, (p. 195-196).