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New Communication Balloon Capabilities Tested Aboard USS Boxer

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USS BOXER, At Sea (NNS) -- Members of the Arizona Air National Guard embarked aboard USS Boxer (LHD 4) demonstrated an advanced communication platform, the Combat SkySat balloon Dec. 5.

The most modern communication balloon platform available, the Combat SkySat is larger than a weather balloon, and has the potential to provide communications between ship and helicopter, ship to shore, and between those on shore.

"There are some places between leaving ships and during insertions or raids where communication can be problematic," said Arizona Air National Guard Master Sgt. Kris Errett.

"Attached to the SkySat balloon is a communications payload containing global positioning systems, radios, and a hanging antenna. There are separate radios, one to control the payload and another, a communications repeater, for personnel to communicate with each other."

Boxer is the first ship in the fleet to have the new communication balloon platform aboard. It has been developed over the past three years, and this is the first operational underway test to determine future utility for embarked Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU).

With a suspended ballast system, the latex balloon can be controlled to maintain an altitude between 60,000 – 85,000 feet above sea level. On its way up, the instrument cluster gathers information on wind direction and speed.

"Helium or hydrogen can be used to enable the balloon to fly" said Tech. Sgt. Craig Armstrong, Arizona Air National Guard. "We use helium due to its stability and accessibility."

In the base of the balloon is a venting system to release gas in order to reach a lower altitude. Hanging below the antennae is a five-pound box of sand, and by releasing sand the balloon climbs to a higher altitude.

"Once we're done with the mission we release the payload from the balloon," said Errett. "The payload has a parachute attached that opens after being released from the balloon. The balloon then climbs up to 120,000 feet, freezes, and bursts into many tiny pieces"

The Boxer Expeditionary Strike Group (BOXESG) is currently underway in support of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit's Certification Exercise to prepare for an upcoming deployment.

BOXESG is comprised of Amphibious Squadron 5, the 13th MEU, Boxer, USS New Orleans (LPD 18), USS Comstock (LSD 45), USS Chung Hoon (DDG 93), USCGC Boutwell (WHEC 719), USS Milius (DDG 69), USS Lake Champlain (CG 57), Naval Beach Group 1, Assault Craft Unit 5, Assault Craft Unit 1, Beach Master Unit 1, Fleet Surgical Team 5, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (Rein), Helicopter Sea



081203-N-4774B-113 PACIFIC OCEAN (Dec. 3, 2008) A Marine assigned to the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (13th MEU) releases a Combat Sky satellite communication balloon from the deck of the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 4). Boxer is supporting the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit Certification Exercise to prepare for an upcoming deployment. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Daniel Barker/Released)

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Combat Squadron 21, Combat Logistics Battalion 13, Battalion Landing Team 1/1, and Fixed Wing Marine Attack Squadron 214.

For more news from USS Boxer (LHD 4), visit www.navy.mil/local/lhd4/.