

From Sea to Land

Amphibious operations during the modern period

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Abstract

Amphibious operations, documented since Antiquity but associated with the major landings of World War Two, belong to the classical range of warfare. In spite of technological evolutions, the problems remain identical: being able to successfully combine means by land, air, and sea during an attack on a coastline. After the glory days of the early modern period, which won renown for British “landings” on the continent, the Industrial Revolution led to their eclipse, so much so that in 1939, strategists were convinced that the era of amphibious operations was a thing of the past. However World War Two, which opposed naval and land powers, on the contrary provided them with a new dimension.

Article

What do the Battles of Marathon (490 BCE) and Hastings (1066), the “English landings” during the Seven Years’ War, the taking of Fort Fisher by Union troops in 1865, the Dardanelles and Iwo Jima during the two world wars, Suez in 1956, and the attack on Port San Carlos, which heralded the retaking of the Falkland Islands by the British in 1982, have in common? All of these military actions proceeded from a landing, and as such were connected to amphibious operations, and also present many common characteristics despite the centuries separating them. For example, General Eisenhower would have been surprised to observe how similar the problems described by Caesar—in book IV of *The Gallic Wars* during the attempted invasion of Brittany in 55 BCE—were to his own on the morning of June 6, 1944.

Landing, amphibious operation: definition and typology

Photographs, such as the series *The Magnificent Eleven* by Robert Capa, or films such as *The Longest Day* (1962) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), tend to identify an amphibious operation with a landing. Yet the latter is only one of the stages in a larger whole, even though it is its climactic moment. An amphibious operation can be defined as a manoeuvre launched at sea against a hostile or potentially hostile coast that includes air, land and naval means. Amphibious operations are perilous and complex undertakings conducted against a coastline, which operate at the intersection of two environments, and require a transition from one to the other. They consequently necessitate meticulous preparation, rigorous execution, and considerable logistical support.

Amphibious operations are frequently associated with large-scale actions carried out through the deployment of considerable human and material means. This is another distorting lens inherited from World War Two. The 160,000 men who landed on Sicily in the summer of 1943, or the 183,000 on Okinawa in April 1945, are the exception rather than the rule when it comes to troop landings. Four types of amphibious operations can be distinguished. The goal of the first type is to conquer a bridgehead and from there seize a territory. The second is a raid conducted by limited and highly specialised troops. This involves an “assault” or a “commando” *coup de main* against a one-off and

localized target. The third is a large-scale embarkation operation. The fourth and final one involves a demonstration of force that presents a sufficiently credible threat of fixing troops on the coast.

The Industrial Revolution: a major turning point in the history of amphibious operations

Until the Industrial Revolution, the success of amphibious operations was based largely on the advantages maritime mobility offered in comparison to land mobility. The time needed for an army to move to the attacked section of the coastline allowed the attacker from the sea to disembark under very favourable conditions. The geopolitician Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) saw in this phenomenon one of the explanatory factors for British supremacy over the world at the dawn of the nineteenth century. In contrast, he believed that the rise of railroads would pose a threat to London, and the transportation revolution and evolutions in military technology did indeed challenge the supremacy of maritime mobility. Disembarking troops risked being overwhelmed by the combination of mass armies, which could hold large portions of the coastline, and the ability of railroads to reinforce them rapidly. With regard to assault fleets, the steam age confronted them with new issues. Aside from the question of coal supplies, which determined their capacity to operate, ships henceforth had to contend with the threat of coastal batteries, whose range continued to increase, along with mines and of course submarines.

These evolutions profoundly affected how landings were prepared and conducted. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the primary amphibious operations took place outside of Europe, as part of different episodes in the colonial conquest of Asia, the Pacific, and North Africa. They were no longer used on the European continent after the Napoleonic Wars, which marked the end of the “landing” model as the British had practised it for a number of centuries. Industrialization and its consequences changed the nature of amphibious operations, and in particular made their success very uncertain, as illustrated by the different theatres of the Crimean War (1853-1856). In the Baltic, the daring capture of Fort Bomarsund (August 1854) in the Åland islands by French and British troops did not compensate for the failure of more large-scale actions. In August 1854, the landing on the Kamchatka peninsula was pushed back to the sea by the Russians, while the one planned against Sebastopol was abandoned in favour of a more classical siege for lack of amphibious means (1854-1855).

The twentieth century: the new golden age of amphibious operations

The difficulties that emerged with the Industrial Revolution were confirmed in the early twentieth century. In 1915, the Dardanelles landing turned into a fiasco. Increasing numbers of troops and the necessity of immediate artillery support for them, along with the mechanization of armies and their expanding logistical needs, were major challenges for armies. As a result, the interwar period was one of intense reflection and experimentation with equipment. While the contribution of aviation began to be taken into account, the first prototypes of vehicles specifically designed for amphibious operations were developed. These vessels, with their varying cargo capacity and ability to land troops and equipment— while providing support for them on a shore lacking port infrastructure—were consecrated during World War Two as the indispensable instrument for a successful landing. With increasing operational engagements came the acquisition of the experience needed to master amphibious operations, a mastery that proved decisive in the Allied victory in 1945.

In the aftermath of the hostilities, European navies were pushed far into the background by their American counterparts. With the rise of atomic weapons and the early signs of the Cold War, they struggled to maintain their amphibious know-how, and were content with launching occasional operations in the colonial wars that were beginning at the time. For example, they watched from afar during the daring landing of UN forces at Inchon (1950), which was brilliantly orchestrated by the US

Navy. The Korean conflict was also the occasion for a live experiment with the helicopter, which became an indispensable instrument in these operations, as demonstrated by its use by European navies in Indochina (1947-1954), Suez (1956), and the Falkland Islands (1982). Air mobility opened new perspectives. Under certain conditions, it even made it possible to dispense with a coastal landing, by making the transition from sea to land via air.

The major landings of World War Two were of a scope that is not possible today, although mastery over amphibious operations remains a criterion of power for states. The coastalization of populations and human activities is, in fact, one of the salient characteristics of globalization.

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