Return the Amphibious Advantage to the Offense

It's not our last resort

by Maj Peter Ciaston, Capts Sean Blochberger, Corey Goodwin, Nicholas Huang & Anthony Molnar

Considered to be a "last resort" of modern warfare, the amphibious assault brings to mind Hollywood scenes depicting the Normandy landing from productions like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*. At Normandy, the Allies ultimately beat harrowing odds to overcome the threat posed to the amphibious force. If an amphibious assault were to be conducted today, the execution would be similar. Unfortunately, a modern task force ordered to amphibiously assault a complex, multi-domain defense would suffer intolerable losses. Because of advances in defensive technology and the weight of contradictory tactics and doctrine, our forces are inadequately prepared to conduct an amphibious assault without shedding blood in quantities that harken back to World War II. This creates a situation where the benefits of an amphibious assault are outweighed by the associated risks. While debate persists over the practicality and relevance of the amphibious assault, the tactical utility of forcible entry from the sea cannot be denied. Given that utility, the amphibious assault must be modernized. This article reviews applicable case studies to demonstrate the historic relevance of the amphibious assault as well as the current doctrinal, organizational, and material challenges to current amphibious tactics.

>Maj Ciaston is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as the Combat Engineer Capabilities Integration Officer within the Fires and Maneuver Integration Division of the Capabilities Development Directorate, Deputy Commandant Combat Development and Integration.

>>Capt Blochberger is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as the Joint Assault Bridge/Modernized M9 ACE Project Officer at Marine Corps Systems Command.

>>>Capt Goodwin is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as a Project Officer within the Field Testing Branch of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory.

>>>>Capt Huang is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as the Aide de Camp at Marine Corps Systems Command.

>>>>>Capt Molnar is a Combat Engineer Officer currently serving as the Mk154 Project Officer at Marine Corps Systems Command.

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Lastly, it provides a three-pronged recommendation on how the Navy and Marine Corps must improve the amphibious assault concept to return the tactical advantage to the offense in the conduct of forcible entry from the sea.

In 1991, 2ndLt Michael Russ wrote an award-winning article titled, "Marine Amphibious Force Operations in the Persian Gulf War." In this article, he acknowledged a well-publicized accomplishment of the amphibious task force (ATF): how the amphibious feint "supported the diversion for '[General] Schwarzkopf's left hook.[1]'" Less well-known is that an assault, not a feint, was

We must modernize our amphibious assault concept to overwhelm adversary defenses while preserving tactical momentum. *(Photo by author.)*

the ATF's original mission. In the final report to Congress on the conduct of the Persian Gulf War, it states that the ATF, comprised of the 4th MEB, 5th MEB, and the 13th MEU, initially prepared to conduct forcible entry operations along the Kuwaiti coast in support of a ground assault from the west.[2] Unfortunately, amphibious planners had to present a time and resource intensive course of action, complete with the knowledge that Iraqi sea mines would severely restrict friendly ship maneuver to a minimum of 72 miles from the shore.[3] While these challenges were significant and enhanced by a lack of neutralizing capabilities, the amphibious assault remained an option. The seaborne forcible entry remained a possibility until February 1991, when the planners ultimately decided against an initial amphibious assault; however, they continued planning.[4]

While the decision to forego the initial amphibious assault had several factors, the final report to Congress specifically acknowledges the Iraqi mine threat to the ATF.[5] This is a point worthy of consideration. A large-scale amphibious assault was not discarded because of irrelevance; rather, the threat posed by Iraqi mines, compounded by complex maneuver, diminished the potential advantage. The ground invasion proved incredibly successful, but we cannot assume the availability of a landbased course of action in the future operating environment. The Persian Gulf War is evidence of how a potentially valuable amphibious assault course of action can prove unfeasible without proper material development and training preparation.

An earlier case study illuminates the need to continually develop and improve amphibious technology and tactics surrounding forcible entry from the sea. The Falkland Islands campaign could have been disastrous for Great Britain because of their distance from the conflict. Their ultimate success, partially due to a lax Argentine posture, has been the subject of study by potential adversaries. In 2008, Lyle Goldstein wrote an article titled, "China's Falklands Lessons," detailing the lessons the Chinese military gleaned from the Falklands War. Certain conclusions, like the assertion that the Argentines made a critical error by assuming there would not be a counterattack, strike frightening chords in the modern geo-political context.[6] As Marines, we must not ignore the troubling parallels between the Falkland Islands and resource-rich geographic areas an adversary might target. Without a proximate unit postured to immediately respond, the British allowed the Argentines time to prepare. Fortunately for Great Britain, historical records reveal the Argentines did not anticipate a military response and failed to do so.[7] In addition, the Falklands presented a geography amenable to conducting unopposed landings.[8] We cannot ignore how geography and defensive posture favorably influenced Great Britain's striking power while diminishing the Argentines' power to resist. The MEU exists as America's striking power to be applied at a moment's notice. To leverage the combat power and speed of the MAGTF afloat, we must modernize our amphibious assault concept to overwhelm adversary defenses while preserving tactical momentum.

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In 1973, city planners Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber defined the "wicked problem" as a problem where "the information needed to understand the problem depends upon one's idea for solving it.[9]" While they applied this term to describe the intertwined problems and solutions of social policy, it can readily apply to the Marine Corps' task in modernizing the amphibious assault. Inconsistent doctrinal responsibilities between the Navy and the Marine Corps commanders within an ATF are the first issue. While the commander of landing forces (CLF) and the commander of the amphibious task force (CATF) have primarily complementary responsibilities, the perspectives potentially clash within a gray transition zone where contradictory perspectives could disastrously collide. According to *Joint Publication 3-02 (JP 3-02), Amphibious Operations*:

> Seaward of the beach, in the surf zone and on the beach up to the line of demarcation, CATF will have responsibility for mine countermeasures and assault breaching. Landward of the line of demarcation, CLF will have responsibility for mine, barrier, and obstacle removal, supported by combat engineers and explosive ordnance disposal.[10]

While responsibilities appear neatly delineated, Service perspectives and potential tactical decision conflicts are not. One dangerous hypothetical is an environment that requires mine proofing, the visual or mechanical confirmation explosive hazards are removed from a cleared lane. The Navy does not proof as SOP in countermine activities whereas the Marine Corps does.[11] To compound the issue, certain Marine Corps assets typically used for proofing, such as the assault breacher vehicle, may not arrive prior to the assault wave. This leaves a decision between the CATF and the CLF to either force the AAVs to push through un-proofed lanes or to deploy surface connectors with the assault wave.

Material solutions for the amphibious assault are only as pointed as the doctrine-based gap analysis can determine. A modern execution would largely rely on legacy technology that is either heavily repurposed or would prove ineffective in the current operating environment, let alone the additional challenges we anticipate will exist in the future. Exacerbating both the doctrinal issues and the development of a well-rounded material solution is that no single entity owns all the components. This is the fundamental issue. The current array of stakeholders covers a breadth proven too large to normally gather in one forum. Conferences and working groups meant to tackle opposed landings often persevere through the absence of important subject matter experts from one or two necessary communities. Our result is a concept that has not undergone a complete rehearsal that will identify where command and control links are missing and where material capabilities assumptions fall flat.

The doctrinal, organizational, and material challenges present a daunting naval problem. To solve it, there are three steps the Navy and Marine Corps must take. The first step is to develop a baseline for a modern execution of the amphibious assault; the baseline will guide capabilities and limitations analyses to feed into gaps, both material and non-material. In order to fully develop the baseline by capturing all of the challenges within each gap, it is essential to convene a Service level-naval conference to fully rehearse and revamp the current amphibious assault concept. Conference attendees, subject matter experts from across all naval warfighting functions, will comprise an amphibious assault task force to define the shortfalls and inconsistencies of the current concept. The conference output will guide the requirements process as well as fill in the gaps of the current construct.

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The gaps will influence future technology development, and support a doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities–policy assessment. Without first generating the initial baseline, any proposed solution will look good in a vacuum, but may not actually advance the concept far beyond where it currently resides.

The second step is to incorporate the gaps from the baseline analysis into training and exercises. The initial assessment will feed into modeling and simulation data compiled by the task force and injected into wargaming for tactical feedback. Wargaming results combined with all previous data points will be used for fleet/staff table-top exercises. Ultimately, the process results in the conduct of live force experimentation. The overall process is depicted in Figure 1. Against a determined defense, command anxieties between the CLF and the CATF could prove ruinous. Exercises that focus on blue-green transitions will familiarize Navy and Marine Corps personnel with the full conduct of an amphibious assault and promote a familiarity with operating in a dynamic command environment of green and blue. Real world sustainment will reinforce and validate the doctrinal concept and help identify additional practical issues that would hinder real world operations. The remaining piece will be assigning ownership to keep the process current.

The third step is to initiate the development of a proposed organizational concept: the naval assault battalion (NAB). As a unit, the NAB will ensure amphibious mobility for the MEB regimental landing team and

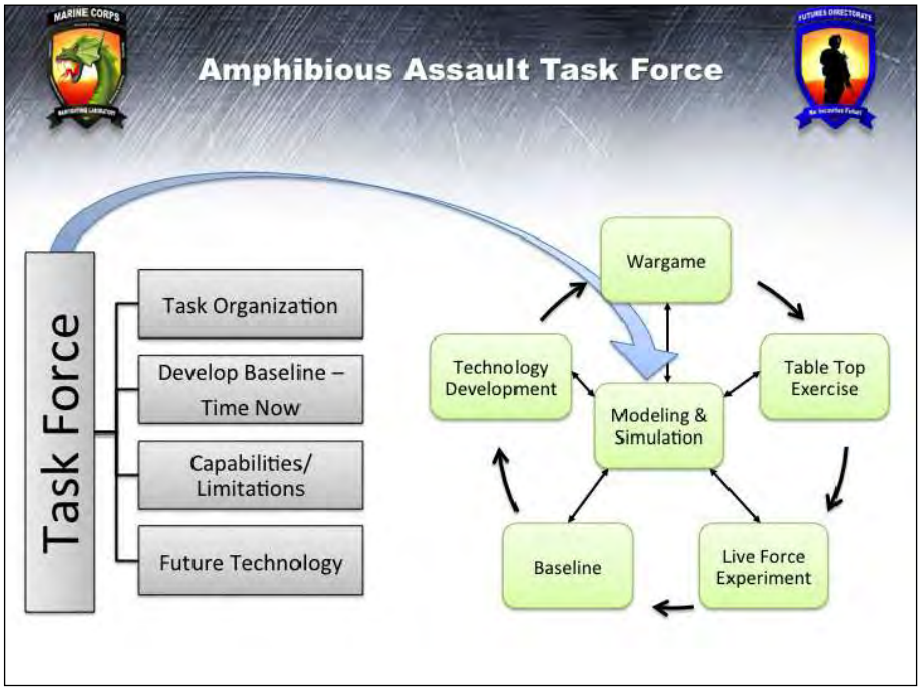

Figure 1. Data is compiled and injected into wargames for use in table-top exercises. *(Figure by author.)*

Support for the landing. *(Photo by author.)*

larger MAGTFs by inheriting mine countermeasure responsibilities where Navy mine clearing stops. Comprised of Marines, Sailors, airmen, and robotic, autonomous systems, the NAB will consist of two naval assault companies (to provide clearing, proofing, and lane marking), one support company (one beach platoon, one shore platoon to control the flow of combat power from the very shallow water through the beach), and one headquarters and services company (comprised of subject matter experts from each warfighting function to streamline operations). The NAB will improve the current MEB-based construct as a standing unit of manned and unmanned teams designed to execute the amphibious assault breaching role from the seaward edge of the very shallow water (greater than 40 feet), through the surf zone and the clearance coordination line to the beach exit. Initially, the construction of the NAB should consist of modern prototypes and emerging technologies, while the table of organization could draw from existing capabilities across the Navy and Marine Corps. This "paper" NAB could be outfitted with future technologies and assessed through wargames, modelling, and simulation to determine the precise composition that would lend the greatest capability and geographic flexibility.

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An amphibious assault will always be bypassed in favor of an uncontested landing. However, publications such as the *21st Century Strategy for Naval Seapower*, the *Marine Operating Concept*, and *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* demand consideration of contested landing scenarios in a new, integrated naval structure. Favorable landing sites are identifiable by friend and foe, and a commander must possess a viable amphibious option that has been rehearsed and refined. The National Defense Strategy directs us to find solutions and new ways to achieve success. For the Marine Corps to accomplish this, it must establish a baseline amphibious assault, examine the resultant faults, and incorporate them into a modern, NAB-like concept that is able to integrate naval tactics and emerging technology to crush any level of adversarial defense in the future operating environment.

Notes

1. M. Russ, "Marine Amphibious Force Operations in the Persian Gulf War," *Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, July 1997).

2. Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, (Washington, DC: 1992).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Lyle Goldstein, "China's Falklands Lessons," *Survival*, (Online: 2008), available at https://doi.org.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. H.W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences*, (Online: 1973), available at http://urbanpolicy.net.

10. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication (JP 3-02), Amphibious Operations,* (Washington, DC: January 2019).

11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-34, Engineering Operations,* (Washington, DC: May 2016).

>Authors' Note: This article represents the combined effort of the M.I.N.E. Research Project, an informal collaborative endeavor comprised of the above Combat Engineer officers. The project was started to analyze the problems facing the amphibious assault in order to draw attention to current issues and propose potential doctrinal, organizational, and material solutions.