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Amphibious Renaissance The Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, 1956-1966¹

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Expeditionary capabilities, including amphibious forces, are currently undergoing something of a renaissance within the British armed services. The change in the strategic environment since the end of the Cold War has brought a corresponding change in defense posture. Where once the Royal Navy was primarily concerned with the struggle for sea control in the eastern Atlantic it is now adapting to a new role projecting power and influence far beyond Britain's shores. This is not the first time that such a change has occurred.

From the mid-1950s, the Royal Navy undertook a major reappraisal of its role, reducing the emphasis that it placed on preparing for a war against the Soviet Union and placing a new priority on power projection. Expeditionary capabilities, previously ignored, became central to the fleet's rationale. The navy developed a concept of mobile amphibious task groups, supported by large aircraft carriers and the necessary escorts and replenishment ships. These forces were to concentrate in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, in the region described by the British as '*east of Suez*'. Almost inevitably, this brought them into conflict with the Royal Air Force (RAF) who had developed their own scheme for the projection of power overseas. In the debates that followed, the various strengths and limitations of either case were discussed exhaustively and the value of both was tested in a number of actual operations.

The debates are of historical interest because their outcome had a fundamental impact on the shape and size of the British armed forces in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. They may also be of contemporary value as they highlight issues that remain important today, particularly as both the United States and the United Kingdom once again seek to project power overseas in a fashion that is militarily effective, politically acceptable and economically sustainable.

Obviously, in 20 minutes I will not be able to cover the subject in as much detail as I would like. I may have to skim over some points. I would be delighted to elaborate on these during the discussion period. All of the important issues are covered in some depth in my paper, copies of which are available on request.²

The Future Role of the Navy

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The 1956 Suez Crisis demonstrated the inability of the British armed forces to mount a rapid military response to crises beyond Europe. As a result, the 1957 Defence Review articulated a shift towards smaller, professional forces and greater strategic mobility to meet the demands of limited conflict beyond Europe.³ Even prior to Suez the Navy had anticipated the requirement and developed a new concept for the *Future Role of the Navy*. They announced that, in the future, forces devoted to major war would be reduced and resources would be reallocated to limited war tasks. At the center of this new concept was the creation of a task group built around an aircraft carrier and a new 'commando carrier' that would be based at Singapore.⁴

The new concept represented a fundamental shift in naval priorities. Prior to 1956 the main emphasis in plans and procurement had been preparation for a major conflict with the Soviet Union. Power projection capabilities in general and amphibious forces in particular had received a low priority.⁵ The change did not occur without some opposition. However, despite some initial misgivings, in the years after 1956 the navy embraced their new expeditionary role. Two 20,000 ton aircraft carriers were converted into helicopter equipped 'commando carriers' (LPH); the obsolete ships of the Amphibious Warfare Squadron were replaced by the new LPDs HMS *Fearless* and HMS *Intrepid* and six new Landing Ships, Logistic (LSLs) were built.

Amphibious vessels were only one component of this new expeditionary capability. Aircraft carriers were at the center of the proposed new task force. The Minister of Defence, Duncan Sandys, had begun his defense review with a skeptical attitude towards the value of aircraft carriers. However, the First Sea Lord, Lord Mountbatten had skillfully overcome this opposition by demonstrating their value in support of operations overseas.⁶ Unfortunately, gaining and maintaining approval for the replacement of the existing ships would prove more difficult.

The Admiralty developed the case for their new task force. Drawing on assets from all three Services the core of the force was to be an Amphibious Group of three operational ships, based at Singapore. These ships would be supported by four aircraft carriers, of which a maximum of three would be in service at any one time. An amphibious group of this size would be able to land and support a balanced military force of up to brigade group size. It would be able to conduct a tactical landing against a hostile shore or on a friendly coast where reception facilities were absent.⁷

Should Britain be required to maintain a presence east of Suez with no bases except in Australia the Admiralty advocated what was called the Double Stance. This required the maintenance of two amphibious groups supported by a total of six large aircraft carriers in order to guarantee the permanent availability of a brigade sized landing force with

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appropriate air support. The resulting force, to be called the Joint Services Seaborne Force, would draw on assets from all three services. Needless to say, this would require a significant increase in expenditure on the navy.⁸ Unsurprisingly the key Chiefs of Staff study completed in 1961, *British Strategy in the Sixties*, ruled out the Double Stance on the grounds of cost. Nevertheless, it did approve the concept of a single amphibious group requiring the deployment of all four major vessels east of Suez. Aircraft carrier strength was limited to one and later two such vessels maintained in commission in theatre.⁹

The utility of the Admiralty's concept was demonstrated during the 1961 Kuwait crisis. In response to a perceived threat to Kuwaiti independence from Iraq, the British deployed to Kuwait a reinforced infantry brigade group supported by air and maritime assets. Under the existing plan to reinforce Kuwait, the majority of troops were to arrive by air and join equipment held in stockpiles in Kuwait and Bahrain. However, in the first days of the crisis, both Turkey and Sudan refused to allow over-flight of their airspace and this, in conjunction with the 'air barrier' of unfriendly states in the Middle East, seriously undermined the plan. Indeed, 24 hours after the initial Kuwaiti request for help on 30 June the only full unit in Kuwait was No. 42 Commando landed from the commando carrier HMS *Bulwark* and supported by half a squadron of tanks from the LST HMS *Striker*.¹⁰

Unimpeded by political restrictions and able to poise over the horizon in international waters, ostensibly slow amphibious ships proved quicker and more mobile than the air transported alternative. In addition, and in contrast to troops arriving in long-range transport aircraft, the troops landed by helicopter from *Bulwark* did not need airport facilities to arrive and if necessary could secure theatre entry in a non-benign situation. In the event the amphibious force was able to adopt a covering position to secure the entry of the follow-on forces arriving by air and no Iraqi attack materialized. It was noteworthy that despite the existence of airfield facilities at Kuwait and Bahrain, the RAF was unable to secure a satisfactory air defense environment before the arrival of the aircraft carrier HMS *Victorious* on 9 July.¹¹

By 1964, all of the ships of the Amphibious Group were in service or being built. The situation regarding aircraft carriers was less satisfactory. The hulls of all of the existing ships had been laid down during the Second World War. Expensive modernization programs might extend the lives of these vessels but it was clear that if the navy was to maintain a fleet of three operational carriers into the 1970s, as planned, new construction would be required. The Admiralty favored large carriers over smaller, less capable vessels. Despite some concern that large and therefore costly vessels might encounter political opposition, in June 1962 the Admiralty approved a design concept for a ship of

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53,000 tons and costing about £60 million to construct.¹² This brought them into conflict with the RAF who had their own ideas about the best way to deploy air power overseas.

The Joint Services Seaborne Force versus the Island Stance

In what became known as the '*Island Strategy*' or '*Island Stance*' the RAF claimed that British interests could be supported through the application of long-range air power deployed from a notional series of bases that could be established across the region.¹³ The strategy offered a more limited intervention capability based around the use of long-range strike aircraft and air transported troops. It provided for intervention by a parachute battalion and an infantry brigade group, without armor up to 1,000 miles from the mounting base. The majority of the military force would be left in the United Kingdom and deployed by air into theatre if required.

The Admiralty correctly interpreted the Island Strategy as an attack on their plans. There was no place for either aircraft carriers or amphibious ships in the RAF plan. The navy criticized the scheme on the grounds strategic reality, political feasibility, and military practicality.¹⁴

They claimed that the strategy was not realistic because it was inflexible. Being tied to static bases, it would be unable to adapt to meet new threats in different areas. They also questioned the political feasibility or desirability of maintaining all of the island bases that were required. It was suggested that the establishment of bases off the east coast Africa would be interpreted as a threat to the newly independent East African nations. This might result in an increase in Chinese or Soviet influence in the region.

The navy also pointed out that the military feasibility of going into battle at ranges of up to 1,000 miles was untried and was dependent on there being no worthwhile opposition in the air or on the ground. In any case, even under the most favorable conditions, with four days warning, it would still take between eight and ten days to undertake the unopposed airlift of a brigade group 1,000 miles forward. There was little difference between this figure and the reaction time for a seaborne lift. The air-transported troops would have the additional disadvantage of arriving unacclimatised. With few land and air forces permanently based in the theatre the strategy would also lack the physical deterrence associated with seaborne forces.

The debate was conducted in the context of bitter inter-service rivalry. In the short-term, the shortcomings of the *Island Strategy* and the superior intervention capability of carrier/amphibious forces ensured the success of the Admiralty case. On 30 July 1963, the Minister of Defence announced to Parliament the decision to build an aircraft carrier of about 50,000.¹⁵ The Admiralty clearly hoped that more would follow. Indeed, they

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went as far as to agree a name for the second vessel. Unfortunately, this success was to be short lived. Within three years, the carrier replacement program had been cancelled.

The Royal Marines

Inter-service rivalry also characterized the relationship between the army and the Royal Marines. The Royal Marines had prospered under the navy's new role. The Commando Brigade expanded from three to five battalion-sized units and consideration was given to raising a sixth. The brigade also received additional artillery and logistic support elements, provided by the army. These were designed to allow the brigade, or individual commando units, to operate independently in an expeditionary role. This caused some disquiet in the army who displayed a periodic interest in the amphibious role east of Suez. This had less to do with a genuine commitment to amphibious operations than to a belief that by replacing one or more Royal Marine Commando units they might be able to avoid cuts to their own infantry regiments. Such attempts became particularly vigorous as the defense review initiated by the new Labour Government in 1964 began to bite.¹⁶

It is hard to portray this as anything other than cynical single-service politics. The army had no knowledge or experience of amphibious operations whereas the Royal Marines were specialists in this role, with years of hard won experience. In reality, it made little sense for the already over-stretched army to take on a new responsibility at the expense of the Royal Marines who were fully manned and turning away prospective recruits. In the event the gathering pace of change made the debate rather academic as the role that was being fought over was abandoned. Nevertheless, the debate over who should provide the infantry element of an amphibious force, and the degree to which specialist skills are required, has proven to be an enduring one that can still invite controversy today.

The End of Empire

The Royal Navy contributed towards the protection of British interests overseas in a variety of ways during the 1960s. This was particularly true of the east of Suez region. From exercises with allies and port visits by individual vessels, to participation in the ANZUK naval force and provision of the Hong Kong frigate guard ship the navy was an everyday feature of the military and diplomatic life of the region. The conceptual basis for the navy's policy was founded on the belief that the mobility and access provided by the politically free environment of the sea offered the ideal means of projecting power over a wide area and in response to unforeseen circumstances. They also believed that on many occasions the threat of air strikes by distant (and thus unseen) bombers would be insufficient to deter opposition and that troops arriving at secure airports in long-range transport aircraft would not suffice in all circumstances.

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The utility of the maritime concept was demonstrated in operations at Kuwait in 1961, at Tanganyika in 1964, and during the final withdrawal from Aden in 1967.

Conclusion

In the decade between 1956 and 1966, British amphibious capabilities had undergone something of a renaissance. Old, obsolescent war-built ships and craft were replaced by a modern mix of helicopter-equipped commando carriers, dock landing ships, and logistic landing ships. For the first time since 1945 the Royal Navy accepted amphibious warfare as a high priority task and the Royal Marines prospered. The Admiralty did not claim that they alone could meet the needs of British foreign and defense policy overseas and portrayed their concept for a maritime strategy as being inherently joint. Army units would provide support and follow-on elements for the amphibious group while RAF land-based aircraft were acknowledged as a vital supplement to carrier-based aviation. Inevitably, however, the concept of a Joint Services Seaborne Force was liable to attract funds to the navy budget and at the expense of the other services. The *'Double Stance'* was ideally suited to British needs east of Suez, but a navy that included six large aircraft carriers and eight major amphibious ships could only be afforded if radical cuts were made in other areas of the defense budget. This was never likely to happen. The *Single Stance* approach adopted in the 1960s placed a much smaller burden on the budget, but this reduced capability made it inevitable that scarce ships would sometimes be in the wrong place at the wrong time

When reception facilities could be guaranteed, air transported troops promised faster arrival times than the maritime alternative. Likewise, land-based fighter and strike aircraft could provide a cheaper alternative to carrier aviation when crises occurred within range of their bases. Neither situation could be relied upon. In situations where reception facilities were not available, or where larger forces requiring heavy equipment were needed, a mixture of maritime and air transported assets could build up a balanced military force faster than by air alone. Experience at Kuwait and Tanganyika showed that when a warning period allowed ships to poise offshore, maritime assets could offer an extremely rapid intervention capability. Strike aircraft operating from island bases lacked the mobility, flexibility, and physical deterrence associated with a forward deployed maritime force. There was also a serious question about the long-term viability of the bases from which they would operate.

The concept of a task force comprising an Amphibious Group and a large aircraft carrier and supported by joint assets was extremely well suited to British needs. Able to travel freely across international waters without reliance on forward bases, host nation support or over-flight rights—maritime forces could offer influence without provocation in a way that could not be matched by land based alternatives.

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Unfortunately, the operations that they were designed to support were essentially those of choice rather than necessity. When the government chose to concentrate resources on more immediate tasks, the maritime approach was doomed. For a period, in the late 1960s, the government sought to use airpower as a means of maintaining a very limited intervention capability. This did not occur because air power could do the same job better, or more cheaply. Rather, it was a reflection of the fact that the task had changed. Britain no longer aspired to maintain the robust, multi-faceted intervention capability that the maritime force provided.

The military and political value of the Joint Services Seaborne Force concept was belatedly demonstrated during the 1982 Falklands conflict. The task force that re-captured the Falkland Islands was in essence a smaller version of the force envisaged by the Admiralty twenty years earlier. Unfortunately, it lacked the scale and range of capabilities envisaged in the 1960s, and for this the sailors, marines, soldiers, and airmen were to pay a heavy price. However, the ability of a balanced maritime force to respond rapidly and effectively to unforeseen circumstances was demonstrated once again. The task force that sailed from Britain in April 1982 provided a visible sign of British determination and offered the politicians a variety of political options including, ultimately, the re-conquest of the disputed islands. This could not have been achieved by any other means. The arguments deployed by the Navy in the 1960s were vindicated once again. Given their stated desire to maintain a role in the wider world, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic would do well to remember this.

¹The analysis, opinions, and conclusions expressed or implied in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the JSCSC, the UK MoD, or any other government agency.

²Given the cancellation of the 15th Naval Symposium the complete paper will now be published as 'The Royal Navy, Expeditionary Operations and the End of Empire, 1956–1975' in the forthcoming book, Greg Kennedy (ed.) *Britain's Maritime Strategy East of Suez, 1900–2000: Influences and Actions* (London: Frank Cass).

³*Defence: Outline of Future Policy 1957*; Cmnd. 124.

⁴UK Public Records Office, Kew (henceforth PRO): DEFE 5/70, COS (56) 280, *The Future Role of the Navy*.

⁵For a detailed examination of this, see Ian Speller, *The Role of Amphibious Warfare in British Defence Policy, 1945–1956* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁶E. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident. British Naval Policy Since World War II* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), 199–209.

⁷PRO: ADM 205/192, *Presentation of Alternative Long Term Naval Programme*, 17 May 1961. PRO: DEFE 5/150, COS 109/64, 2 April 1964. PRO: DEFE 4/167, COS 26 mtg/64, 2 April 1964.

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⁸PRO: ADM 205/192.

⁹PRO: CAB 131/25, D (61) 28, 16 May 1961. PRO: ADM 1/29638. PR: DEFE 7/2235.

PRO: CAB 131/27, D (61) 1 mtg, 12 January 1962.

¹⁰PRO: DEFE 5/118, COS (61) 378, 18 October 1961.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²PRO: ADM 167/160, Board Memo. B.1421 and Board Minute 5535.

¹³PRO: AIR 8/2354.

¹⁴PRO: AIR 20/11423.

¹⁵PRO: CAB 127/37, CC (63) 50th Conclusions, cabinet meeting on 30 July 1963.

Parliamentary Debate (Hansard), Volume 682, column 237–238 and 992–994.

¹⁶For example see, PRO: ADM 205/185; PRO: ADM 205/191; PRO: ADM 201/135.