

Seapower Ashore: 200 Years of Royal Navy Operations on Land

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When the Cold War ended it brought to a close the latest in a series of major challenges to western maritime supremacy. This, no doubt temporary, respite has forced the navies of the western world to focus on their role in a new environment in which high intensity war at sea is improbable in the immediate future. For the Royal Navy, the Strategic Defence Review of 1997, and the development of Maritime Contribution to Joint Operations (MCJO), has focussed attention on the navy's role of supporting ground operations. While it is a truism that as no one lives on the sea, seapower must be exercised to influence events on land, it is equally true that the historical tradition of the Royal Navy has focussed on the dramatic struggle for control of the sea, rather than the more prosaic operations that exploited that control - blockade, amphibious operations and convoy protection. Although this is understandable, reflecting, as it does, the key strategic imperative, it inevitably relegates the operations that exploited seapower to a relative backwater. It is now quite natural that with the new emphasis on MCJO a great deal more attention is now being paid to the historical role of the Royal Navy in supporting ground operations. This collection of essays is a good example of this new focus is being reflected in naval histories.

Peter Hore has brought together an impressive list of contributors to explore aspects of naval support for operations ashore since the eighteenth century. While each essay is quite brief, each contributes to the main theme - that the Royal Navy has a long and successful history in providing support for land operations. The contribution made by the navy to these operations was varied. Over time some of the roles disappeared and others have remained fairly constant.

A seaborne expeditionary army can seldom take all that it required for a campaign. In the eighteenth century this usually meant a serious lack of horses. Cavalry for shock, reconnaissance and pursuit were often absent. Possibly more important, it also meant that draught horses for hauling artillery and supplies any distance from the landing point were unavailable. Although soldiers could be landed on the European littoral with some expectation of being able to forage for food, it would have been a remarkably negligent peasant community that did no spirit its flocks, herds and horses away at the appearance of a mass of sails on the horizon. Foraging in the Americas, where farms and plantations were generally more spread out, was even more difficult. Without horses, the army's mobility was seriously compromised. The soldiers could not make up this lack of motive power. Eighteenth century British armies did not employ valuable troops for an extensive supply tail. On continental campaigns the commissary-general and wagon-master-general contracted local horses and managed the movement of stores and provisions from magazines. The Royal Artillery and wagon-master-general handled the cannons and ordnance stores. It was difficult enough to

protect these trains and depots from enemy cavalry and militia. Without horses and wagons, an expeditionary army was at a distinct disadvantage. The only reliable source of manpower came from the fleet. Not only was it generally reliable, it was but it was skilled. Soldiers could quite adequately dig and perform general labouring services but they had little knowledge of mechanics. It was here that the fleet and the seamen played a major role. The seamen were used to handling large and heavy loads and had a good knowledge of ropes and mechanics. They were employed hauling stores, provisions, guns and ammunition. They sought water and conveyed it to the military camps. They provided wadding and 'junk' from old cordage - an essential part of artillery ammunition. They made also fascines and gabions, which were vital for siege operations.

Manpower and mechanics are the central points of Michael Duffy's essay in this collection. His work covers the broad contribution of the navy to the campaigns in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Although it not the first essay in the book, it is, in effect, a starting point to show just how varied these contributions were. The labouring power of the seamen was vital, but they also provided assault parties and gunners for batteries. They garrisoned positions to allow the army to conduct more formal attack or siege operations. The navy provided cannons. From the early eighteenth century, it was recognised that the navy's heavy guns, the 24lb and 32lb, provided excellent firepower against fortified positions. The seamen manhandled these guns ashore and into almost any position required; sometimes to the amazement of the army and the defenders. The sea officers' knowledge of these large guns and the power of explosives were often greater than that of the infantry officers, and this could greatly assist an operation.

At sea the fleet provided coastal intelligence. It also provided fire support from the sea. Most important, the fleet was there to re-embark the army when operations were over. This latter function has been too often neglected. Dr Duffy calls it 'the ultimate confidence-giving boost' (p.51). It was, in many cases, more than this. In European operations it was an essential operational pre-requisite. The worst nightmare for an army commander was to be stranded ashore facing a build-up of enemy forces. Failure to be reasonably sure re-embarkation, usually also meant failure to ensure reinforcement or continued use of the seamen's labour power ashore. Fortunately, in most cases the naval commander was able to give this reassurance. In the Caribbean, the Americas and islands of the Mediterranean, this reassurance was less important. There the army was not usually faced with an opposition that had the potential for rapid, large-scale reinforcement of regular troops.

From this wide range of activities that supported land operations during the French Wars, the essays explore specific examples of naval support ashore and demonstrate how its emphasis changed over time. Tom Pocock explains how Captain Sir Sydney Smith of the *Tigre* (80 guns) effectively halted Napoleon's attempt to return to Europe from Egypt, via Constantinople, at Acre. He captured Napoleon's siege train at sea. He used his marines and seamen to support the garrison of Acre and used the *Tigre* to fire into the flank of the French assaults.

Colin White explores Nelson's operations ashore. As a young post captain, Nelson accompanied an expedition up the San Juan river in Nicaragua in 1780. The seamen provided the boats for mobility up-river, assisted the assault and built a battery to batter a fort. The same kind of roles - support for assaults and work on batteries - were repeated in 1794 on Corsica, 1796 on Elba and 1797 at Santa Cruz de Tenerife. At Calvi, on Elba, Nelson lost his eye and at Santa Cruz he lost his arm. White makes an important point that the failure at Tenerife was at least partly due to the fact that the sailors and marines were not working with a body of regular troops. A small garrison of determined regulars (supported by local militia) were more than a match for the seamen was alone. During the eighteenth century, seamen provoked admiration for their skill, diligence and *élan*. They provided a wide range of vital services for expeditionary forces, but on land service against regular troops they were not usually capable of holding their own.

The nineteenth century saw a gradual change in the way in which the Royal Navy supported operations ashore. The dominance of the Royal Navy was unchallenged at sea. This placed a large number of men and powerful artillery for supporting operations ashore in most parts of the globe, unhindered by rival naval

forces. These guns could either be used from the sea or taken ashore for use inland. Professor Lambert shows how a small squadron under Sir Robert Stopford, co-operating with the Turks, successfully bombarded Acre in November 1840 and so ended Mehemet Ali's threat to Constantinople. Turkish troops were available to assault the town, but after half a day of bombardment the town's main magazine exploded and the Egyptians' evacuated that night.

Professor Lambert also shows how the Royal Navy's interest in destroying coastal fortifications, which had been stimulated by the threat of a potential French steam force at Cherbourg in the 1840s, was successfully used against the Russians at Sveaborg, the fort and naval arsenal which protected Helsingfors, in 1855. The need to make a pre-emptive strike against the French steam fleet led to consideration of how to bombard effectively fortifications which protected the enemy. Long-range mortar flotillas, supported by the line of battle, became the favoured approach. It was not tested until the war with Russia broke out in 1854. In 1855, the allied fleet was able to anchor off Sveaborg and within two days the arsenal was ruined and the buildings largely destroyed. The Russians were unable to strike back at such a range and it was understood that Cronstadt, the fortification that protected the channel to St Petersburg, would be attacked in 1856. The seaborne threat to the Russian capital was clear. Peace intervened, but even without landing forces, the Royal Navy had proved it could have a major diplomatic impact on events.

Although the power of bombardment from the sea had increased and would continue to do so throughout the century, its success depended on a number of variables other than local command of the sea. The weather, the attitude of the defenders and the strength of the defensive position were important factors. This is usefully demonstrated by Colin White in an essay on the Anglo-Japanese War of 1863-4. The bombardment of Kagoshima and the destruction of the town, signally failed to produce the required result. The Daimyo of Satsuma was prepared to see buildings destroyed, which in an earthquake zone could easily be rebuilt, and the shore batteries were able to keep up their fire on the ships. While British gunnery was good, its impact on the shore batteries was disappointing. The operation was ill-prepared and the weather precluded prolonged operations. In August 1864, the operation to open the Straits of Shimonoseki might have suffered a similar fate. However, the British, supported by French and Dutch warships, did not have to attack the entire fortified position. The Daimyo of Buzan, who controlled the southern defences of the Straits, remained neutral, allowing the Europeans to pass out of range of the guns on the northern coast. The northern batteries were powerful but not well sited. Preparations were carefully laid and the bombardment was a success, but it still required a landing force of marines and seamen to drive the Japanese from the guns. Over two days the batteries were carried and the guns spiked.

Bombardment from the water continued to play a vital role in supporting operations ashore. Richard Brooks shows how the gunboat operations on the Nile in 1896-1898 provided powerful tactical support and a degree of operational flexibility in the campaigns against the Mahdi. While naval fire support is not examined with regard to the First World War, it is explored in relation to two Second World War operations - as part of Peter Hore's essay on Norway in April-June 1940 and Ivor Howcroft's work on Walcheren in November 1944. Captain Hore's essay is largely concerned with the broader lessons from the Norwegian campaign for the conduct of joint operations - clear but flexible plans and orders, effective air cover, good tactical loading and concentration of effort. Mr Howcroft deals with a more concentrated operation. He explains the difficulties of long-range fire support and the tremendous dangers of the in-shore Support Squadron, whose sacrificial effort may have been crucial to the overall success of the operation. The continuing importance of fire support from the sea to prepare the 'battle space' (p.275) ashore is picked up in Lee Willetts's essay on the acquisition and deployment of the Tomahawk cruise missile by the Royal Navy. HMS *Splendid* fired the first Tomahawk from a British submarine towards a Serb target in Kosovo on 24th March 1999, taking naval bombardment from the sea deep into land-locked territory.

While the importance of the fleet's firepower from the sea is the constant theme of naval support for ground operations, other activities, which became important in the nineteenth century no longer carry the weight they did. The use of naval guns ashore was inherited from the eighteenth century and became more important in the following century. This is the theme developed in the essays by Richard Brook on the Naval

Brigades in the Indian Mutiny, an essay on Beatty's exploits on the Nile and at Tientsin and in Arthur Bleby's essay on the Naval Brigades during the Second Boer War. The rapid availability of disciplined manpower and heavy guns from ships on station during a crisis was exploited in India, China and South Africa. HMS *Shannon* provided half of the siege train for the relief of Lucknow in November 1857. The navy's ability to bring their 68lb guns inland to support the army was an important element in Sir Colin Campbell's campaign. HMS *Pearl* also provided guns for the campaign north of the Gogra river. In July 1900, 12lb and 4 inch guns from *Terrible* and *Algerine*, provided artillery support for the attack on the Walled City of Tientsin. In South Africa a Naval Brigade with artillery assisted the defence of Ladysmith. Other naval artillery units supported Buller's campaign and Methuen's advance to Magersfontein during 1899-1900. They accompanied Lord Roberts' campaign of 1900. On all these operations, the naval 4.7 inch guns and 12lb played an important part. This provision of firepower ashore, by disciplined gunners, was clearly a major contribution to the effectiveness of British colonial campaigns in the nineteenth century. Yet during the First World War, the importance of naval guns ashore had diminished. Although it is quite easy to suggest possible reasons for this, it could have done with some explanation in this volume. It is an interesting note that HMS *Hood*'s howitzer provided defensive fire support for a force of marines and seamen outside Dombass, Norway, in April 1940.

While the importance of naval guns ashore is clearly presented in these essays, the other role of the seamen ashore is far less clear - that of supplementary infantry. The Naval Brigades in India, China and South Africa were certainly capable of working with small arms and they did on occasions take the field as infantry. However, it is never made quite clear how successful they were, if their role developed during the second half of the nineteenth century and if so why. They were important extra rifles, but being capable of firing a rifle does not make an infantryman. With this in mind, the role of the Royal Marines particularly lacks the attention it deserves. As part of ships' companies and as battalion formations they were an integral part of the naval contribution. This poses problems for analysing their contribution, and indeed, budget conscious politicians have questioned the role of the Royal Marines on many occasions, but it is disappointing that none of these essays brings out any distinctive contribution, purpose or value. The Royal Naval Division (RND), formed in 1914, which is the subject of the essay by Captain Christopher Page, was not, as he makes clear, an obvious extension of the Naval Brigades, but a plan by Churchill to make effective use of the RNVR. Although it never lost its distinctive naval origins, it gradually evolved during the course of the war, after service at Antwerp and Gallipoli, into a unit largely indistinguishable from an army division. The 63rd Division, as it became in June 1916, served on the Western Front for the rest of the war, with its 190th Brigade consisting entirely of army battalions.

The RND served with some distinction during the war, despite a rather jaundiced view of its capability by its army divisional commander, and indeed Haig himself in 1916. It is a reminder that the interface between the Royal Navy and the other services has always had its frictions, and it is here that this collection has its greatest weakness. Joint operations necessarily involve contributions and perspectives from the two, and since 1918, three services. It is difficult to get a clear view of operations without understanding the different positions and capabilities. These essays are overwhelmingly from the naval perspective - its own view of what it achieved. The admiration of contemporaries for the Royal Navy's contribution, quoted in a number of essays, was no doubt genuine, but not necessarily a balanced or informed assessment of the operation. Thus, while each essay provides a commendable narrative, the overall effect is to leave the reader with a very partial picture. This partiality is not unique - indeed it is the norm rather than the exception. So while the collection is a useful series of short essays that will raise consciousness of the Royal Navy's historical tradition in supporting actions ashore, we are in need of far more 'joint' history to understand fully these operations.

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