

## *Book Review*

# **On contested shores: The evolving role of amphibious operations in the history of warfare**

*Timothy Heck and Brett Friedman*

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The study of amphibious operations has seen a definite resurgence during recent years. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan forced militaries to shift their focus from traditional operations to those of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. This shift in focus naturally affected the doctrine, organisation and employment of amphibious forces of Western militaries, such as the US Marine Corps and the British Royal Marines – who were both deployed in semi-conventional and counterinsurgency roles in Iraq and Afghanistan for extensive periods. However, after the end of these wars, both the US Marine Corps and the British Royal Marines had to go back to the proverbial drawing board and reassess their traditional roles as amphibious forces. Of interest, is the fact that in 2019, the Commandant of the US Marine Corps, General David H Berger, provided planning guidance in which he argued that the US Marines had to return to the sea, increase their naval integration, and expand their ability to fight not just from the sea but also in terms of sea control from the shore.<sup>602</sup> With this planning guidance, there was bound to be a drastic shift in the doctrine, organisation and employment of the US Marine Corps in general. While these developments were notable, they did not occur in a vacuum. Several militaries across the globe are currently reapplying their minds to amphibious operations and implementing drastic measures to remedy any potential shortfalls that exist in terms of doctrine, organisation and training. These changes are necessitated owing to the increasing likelihood of future amphibious operations due to an unprecedented population growth evidenced in coastal regions across the globe, the concomitant effects of climate change on existing waterways, rives and oceans, and growing political disputes in regions such as the South China Sea and the Arctic.

During 2020, the Marine Corps University Press published an edited volume by Timothy Heck and Brett Friedman titled *On contested shores: The evolving role of amphibious operations in the history of warfare*. The book comprises 23 key chapters that trace the historical evolution of amphibious operations from the sixteenth century through to the present, and even looks toward the future of amphibious warfare. In doing so, it investigates several lesser-known cases of amphibious operations throughout history, and offers nuanced views on some of the famous campaigns, such as Gallipoli, Tarawa and Normandy. The book also reflects on the historical development of amphibious warfare doctrine.

In general, the chapters are of a very high standard – with only one or two chapters that I felt were somewhat weaker in terms of their discussion, and the link to amphibious operations somewhat tedious. However, this is expected in such a big undertaking as *On contested shores*. To my mind, the chapters by Samuel de Kortz, James McIntyre, Edward Hagerty, Angus Murray, Bruce Gudmundsson, Jeffrey Schultz, Serrate Güvenç and Mesut Uyar, Keith Dickson, Ellen A Ahlness, Brett Friedman and Walker Mills deserve special recognition. From a personal point of view, I found the evolving discussion on the genesis of advanced base operations doctrine particularly interesting, as well as the case studies that deal with various lesser-known amphibious operations throughout history. The book includes an extensive list of selected further readings, as well as a handy index. My only criticism would be that the quality of the maps varies considerably throughout the different chapters. This is perhaps something that might have been addressed somewhat better.

From a South African point of view, *On contested shores* provides much food for thought. Due to insufficient naval and marine capabilities during the period of the world wars, the South African experience of amphibious operations was extremely limited. However, there are two notable exceptions, which have been explored only partly despite the wealth of primary archival material on these events preserved in South Africa and abroad. During the First World War, Union Defence Force troops were involved in limited amphibious operations during the South African invasion of German South-West Africa (modern Namibia) – particularly at Port Nolloth and Lüderitzbucht in 1914.<sup>603</sup> Several years later, South African troops once more took part in amphibious operations during the final phase of the Madagascar Campaign during the Second World War. Both these instances of amphibious operations by South African troops were anomalies, with no distinct marine capability or doctrine within the defence force at the time.<sup>604</sup> In fact, regular infantrymen from the army, with limited, if any, training and experience in amphibious operations, were used in an amphibious role during these deployments. On both occasions, the Royal Navy provided the prerequisite naval lift capability and required support for these operations. Despite these actualities, these case studies provide an interesting lens through which to investigate the South African experience of amphibious operations.

After the end of the Second World War, the South African Corps of Marines was established in 1951, with the initial sole purpose of extended harbour protection. However, by 1955, the unit was summarily closed down. During the so-called ‘Border War’, the marine infantry arm was resuscitated in 1979 with the establishment of 1 Marine Brigade of the South African Navy – envisioned to deploy as a fully-fledged amphibious brigade on operations in southern Angola and Mozambique. However, budget cuts, a greater emphasis on land-based counterinsurgency operations, and an ever-changing geostrategic landscape by the late 1980s, meant that any dreams of extensive amphibious operations by South African marines had to be discarded altogether. As such, the marine capability was once more disbanded in 1991. The history of the South African Corps of Marines is yet to be recorded, particularly in terms of its organisation, doctrine, training and deployments – this refers to a further gap in the historiography.

Arne Söderlund and Douw Steyn's *Iron fist from the sea: Top secret seaborne reconnaissance operations (1978–1988)*,<sup>605</sup> is in all likelihood the most detailed account dealing with the evolving role of amphibious operations from a South African perspective – albeit from a special forces point of view. The focus of this popular book is largely confined to the Border War era and the deployment of South African seaborne special forces in both multidomain and clandestine operations. In this regard, special forces operators, supported by elements from the South African Navy, succeeded in projecting force along the Atlantic and Indian coastlines of Southern Africa. Söderlund and Steyn's book tracks the doctrinal evolution of the employment of special forces in amphibious operations from a historical point of view, and in doing so addresses a gap in the historiography.

The establishment of the Maritime Reaction Squadron in 2005 reignited the marine infantry arm, and offered the South African Navy a specialised marine-like unit comprising a combat-ready amphibious, diving and small boat capability. The establishment of the Maritime Reaction Squadron occurred against the backdrop of a great need for the South African Navy to contribute to various peacekeeping roles within the African continent and to assist in boarding operations at sea, humanitarian operations and disaster relief. South Africa's renewed focus on an amphibious operations capability, despite its evident limitations, continues to receive little to no attention from historians, theoreticians and practitioners alike.<sup>606</sup>

The evident gaps in the South African historiography related to amphibious operations and doctrinal development deserves to be investigated in detail. Such an opportunity has presented itself with the recent announcement of a follow-up volume of *On contested shores* that is still being compiled. In the second volume, Heck and Friedman endeavour to explore the doctrine, organisation, training, materiel (weapons and equipment), leadership development (education), personnel and facilities needed to theorise, plan for, equip, lead and conduct amphibious operations further. Of particular importance is the fact that Heck and Friedman hope to include a variety of viewpoints, experiences and interpretations of amphibious operations in the second volume – especially from non-American authors. A definite opportunity therefore exists for academics, theorists and practitioners to explore the concept of amphibious operations from a distinct South African perspective.

All in all, *On contested shores* is a riveting read from start to finish and a welcome addition to the historiography on amphibious operations in general. By giving historians, theorists and practitioners the opportunity to consider the coming changes in amphibious operations from a historical point of view, it makes a distinct and valuable contribution to the historiography. *On contested shores* comes highly recommended, and can be considered for inclusion in university course material, particularly modules that deal with military history and strategic studies.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>602</sup> DH Berger. *Commandant's planning guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps*. Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2019.
- <sup>603</sup> See for instance DB Katz. "Sandfontein: An operational re-examination of the battle, contextualised within General J.C. Smuts' first phase of the German South West African Campaign 1914". *Journal of African Military History* (published online ahead of print 2021). doi: [10.1163/24680966-bja10007](https://doi.org/10.1163/24680966-bja10007)
- <sup>604</sup> See for instance DFS Fourie. "Operation Rose: The only amphibious landing by South African forces at war, Madagascar, 1942". *Military History Journal* 2/1. 1971. <<http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol021ce.html> on 23 September 2021> Accessed on 2 November 2021; EP Kleynhans. "A protracted picnic? The wartime experience of Arthur Bintliff in Madagascar, 1942". In IJ van der Waag (ed), *Sights, sounds, memories: South African soldier experiences of the Second World War*. Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 2020, 94–116.
- <sup>605</sup> A Söderlund & D Steyn. *Iron fist from the sea: Top secret seaborne recce operations (1978–1988)*. Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2018.
- <sup>606</sup> See for instance C Manganyi. "Resurrection of the marine capability in the South African Navy: The Maritime Reaction Squadron". *Scientia Militaria* 40/3. 2012. 429–471.
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