

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 

**MILITARE**

RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 5  
2024

Fascicolo 19. Giugno 2024  
**Storia Militare Moderna**



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### *Nuova Antologia Militare*

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare  
Periodico telematico open-access annuale ([www.nam-sism.org](http://www.nam-sism.org))  
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020  
Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597).  
Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023)



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare  
([www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org](http://www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org))

Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma  
[info@nadirmedia.it](mailto:info@nadirmedia.it)

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma  
[www.tabedizioni.it](http://www.tabedizioni.it)

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 9788892959330

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## Four Recent Essays on Amphibious Warfare between the XVI and the XVIII Centuries

BY MARCO MOSTARDA

**W**hile amphibious warfare has recently come under increased academic scrutiny,<sup>1</sup> the two volumes of *On Contested Shores. The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations in the History of Warfare* edited by Timothy Heck and B. A. Friedman and published by the Marine Corps University Press<sup>2</sup> stand out as Clausewitzian attempt to illuminate the «potential future» of amphibious operations by means of historical case studies capable of stimulating a fruitful theoretical debate. Nowadays the U.S. Marine Corps is caught at the crossroads between a recent past represented by the season of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), which saw the Corps committed mainly to counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria; and a future in which it is supposed to return to its true amphibious roots vis-à-vis the challenge represented by the A2/AD strategy of China, Russia and Iran. As for the “true amphibious roots” of the Corps, it should be noted that the latter has never been stranger to the significant developments of the American COIN doctrine, as showed by the *Small*

1 Among the most recent publications, Jeremy BLACK, *Combined Operations: A Global History of Amphibious and Airborne Warfare*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018; D. J. B. TRIM and Mark Charles FISSEL (Eds.), *Amphibious Warfare, 1100-1700. Commerce, State Formation and European Expansion*, Leiden, Brill, 2005; Mark Charles FISSEL, “The Egyptian Origins of Amphibious Warfare: Out of Africa”, in Kaushik ROY and Michael W. CHARNEY (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the Global History of Warfare*, London and New York, Routledge, 2024, pp. 217-241; ID., “Byzantium’s amphibious ways of war, 810-961”, *Nuova Antologia Militare*, 5, 2024, No. 18, pp. 337-383.

2 Timothy HECK, B. A. FRIEDMAN, *On Contested Shores. The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations in the History of Warfare*, Quantico, Virginia, Marine Corps University Press, 2020.

*Wars Manual*:<sup>3</sup> a summa of the experience gained between 1898 and 1934, when the Corps was engaged primarily in the conduct of limited military interventions in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Still, we subscribe to the point of view of the editors of *On Contested Shores*: namely, that the GWOT led the Marine Corps to act as some kind of second land force, pushing it away from its chief purpose of fighting naval campaigns alongside the U.S. Navy.<sup>5</sup> Although a “slimming down” of a too heavy USMC might be due in order to regain its original purpose, the goal should be to strike a balance between the kind of heavy assets making the Corps a pointless copy of the U.S. Army, and an undue reliance on the light, flexible forces stemming from a dangerous overindulgence in the special operations narrative.<sup>6</sup> Although it is unquestionable that in a multipolar world the Marine Corps is required to perform tasks in low-intensity environments other than the WW2-style massed amphibious assaults, at the same time there can be little doubt that breaking the barrier of the Chinese A2/AD will require force concentration supported by mass firepower. This is the main challenge that the USMC will ostensibly be facing in the near future.

With the following book reviews, dedicated to the four essays of *On Contested Shores* dealing with amphibious operations between the XVI and the XVIII centuries, we took the opportunity to make our modest contribution to the ongoing debate by outlining some fundamentals of the amphibious warfare and putting forward some interpretive suggestions.

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3 *Small Wars Manual. United States Marine Corps, 1940*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1940.

4 Ronald SCHAFFER, “The 1940 Small Wars Manual and the Lessons of History”, in *Military Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr., 1972), pp. 46-47.

5 *On Contested Shores*, cit., p. 5.

6 As for a recent example of such an overreliance, see Gunnery Sergeant Jesse DAVIS, U. S. Marine Corps, “Force Design Is Still Too Heavy”, in *Proceedings. U. S. Naval Institute*, April 2024, Vol. 150/4/1,454. For a critical reassessment of the Chindits taken as an example by the aforementioned author, see Douglas PORCH, *Counterinsurgency. Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 143-145.

## I

PORTO ERCOLETTO, 1555.<sup>7</sup> SIEGE OF LEIDEN, 1575.<sup>8</sup>

John F. Guilmartin first pointed out that «Mediterranean warfare at sea was not naval warfare in the orthodox sense, but that it was a form of amphibious warfare in which the relationship of the fleet to the shore was at least as important as its relationship to the opposing fleet».<sup>9</sup> The nature of the naval operations waged by the Mediterranean states was thus shaped by the peculiar shortcomings and qualities of the galley: her limited autonomy, preventing a squadron made of oared warships from blockading a port or cutting a sea line of communication (SLOC) over a long period of time, inspired a strategy chiefly focused on conquering or defending coastal strongpoints which, in turn, could support one's own joint operations in protecting friendly lines of communication and harassing those of the foe. The galley was perfectly suited to this kind of tasks: highly mobile, shallow-draught, thus capable of closing in on the coast and disembarking the soldiers and the ordnance she was laden with, her qualities were fully on display in reinforcing and supplying coastal outposts incapable of holding out without the logistical support granted by the navy, and in providing land forces with the crucial assistance needed for subduing the opposing strongholds.<sup>10</sup> In consideration of the highlighted impossibility of drawing a clear line of demarcation between land and naval operations, if we take into account Frederick L. Taylor's early remark about the growing convergence between land and siege operations since the battle of Cerignola,<sup>11</sup> one destined after the advent of the *trace italienne*

7 Jacopo PESSINA, "An Amphibious Special Operation. The Night Attack on Porto Ercoletto, Tuscany, 2 June 1555" (pp. 9-24).

8 – Samuel DE KORTE, "The 1574 Siege of Leiden during the Eighty Years' War. Attack by Land, Relief by Sea" (pp. 25-37).

9 John Francis GUILMARTIN, *Gunpowder and Galleys. Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, London, Conway Maritime Press, 2003, p. 73. The orthodox naval warfare Guilmartin makes mention to is, of course, that built on the Mahanian paradigm, whose limits the author stresses in *Ibid.*, pp. 31-36.

10 Phillip WILLIAMS, *Empire and Holy War in the Mediterranean. The Galley and Maritime Conflict between the Habsburgs and Ottomans*, London and New York, I. B. Tauris, 2014, pp. 207-208. Arturo PACINI, «*Desde Rosas a Gaeta*». *La costruzione della rotta spagnola nel Mediterraneo occidentale nel secolo XVI*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2013, pp. 157-169.

11 Frederick L. TAYLOR, *The Art of War in Italy, 1494-1529*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1921, p. 149 observed that, since Cerignola, every important battle of the Italian Wars «took the form of an attack on an entrenched camp»; that is, on field fortifications

to be traduced into the predominance of siege warfare in the conduct of the military operations *tout court*, we may say that the Renaissance warfare, taken as a whole, seems to consist of a series of joint operations revolving around pivotal fortified positions in which it is not possible – nor would be appropriate – to operate distinctions without them seeming artificial. This holds true not just for the Mediterranean, but also for the Dutch theatre of war we will touch upon later on.

In his *An Amphibious Special Operation. The Night Attack on Porto Ercoletto, Tuscany, 2 June 1555* Jacopo Pessina provides us with a carefully researched case study of one of those combined operations other than the fully-fledged amphibious assaults on which, as aptly stressed in the introduction of the current volume, works of popular history have always tended to focus:<sup>12</sup> specifically a *coup de main*, or *encamisada* according to the language of the day,<sup>13</sup> rephrased as a special operation by applying to a naval setting Noah Harari Yuval's concept of a «combat operation [...] limited to a small area [...] a relatively short span of time, and [...] conducted by a small force, yet capable of achieving significant strategic or political results disproportional to the resources invested in it».<sup>14</sup> Considering the circumstances of the assault against the fort of Porto Ercoletto – that is, the complex siege operations aimed at reducing Porto Ercole during the War of Siena – that specific coup, aside from its amphibious features, on a tactical level does not look significantly dissimilar from the many surprise actions connoting siege warfare at that time. On a strategic level, however, Pessina is undoubtedly right in stressing the disproportionate repercussions of the operation – thus fitting in with Yuval's definition – which let the Imperial-Florentine forces to establish a beachhead at Lo Sbarcatello and disembark the guns needed to bombard the Stronco fort, whose surrender led to the capitulation of Porto Ercole and, in turn, to the cutting off of the supply lines sustaining the Sienese exiled government in

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whose difference from the permanent ones, especially after the advent of the bastion, was limited mainly to the durability of the materials employed.

12 *On Contested Shores*, cit., p. 5.

13 Julio Albi DE LA CUESTA, *De Pavía a Rocroi. Los Tercios Españoles*, Madrid, Desperta Ferro Ediciones, 2021, p. 42: «las encamisadas, como se llamaba a los golpes de mano – generalmente nocturnos – porque en ellos los soldados se ponían las camisas sobre los vestidos para reconocerse y no matarse entre sí».

14 Noah Harari YUVAL, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry, 1100-1550*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2007, p. 1.



Montalcino.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the failings in terms of planning and the potentially disastrous mistake made by Captain Giovanni Pazzaglia in reconnoitring the French-Sienese positions of Porto Ercoletto – drawing a triangular fort instead of a square one as a consequence<sup>16</sup> – the good understanding between admiral Andrea Doria and Chiappino Vitelli, captain general of the Florentine cavalry, and the daring showed by the latter in leading the assault of 300 hand-picked Spanish soldiers against the stronghold won the day. Vitelli, an accomplished military engineer himself,<sup>17</sup> can be considered a good example of that kind of Italian military professionals willing to serve the House of Habsburg wherever they were required, and for whom we have already suggested to adopt the slightly reworked label of “agents of empire”.<sup>18</sup> After the War of Siena he would have served Philip II of Spain in North Africa (Peñón de Vélez and La Goulette, notably two other combined operations) and then in the Low Countries. Credited to be the first one to have introduced – at the siege of Mons in 1572 – the system of circumvallation and countervallation lines devised half a century earlier by Prospero Colonna while besieging Milan,<sup>19</sup> he would have died in 1575 as a result of wounds received at the siege of Zierikzee.

In this regard, in his *The 1574 Siege of Leiden during the Eighty Years' War. Attack by Land, Relief by Sea* Samuel de Korte maintains that «while the rebels were superior on the water, the same could not be said on land.<sup>20</sup> However the

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15 Pessina, “Special Operation”, cit., pp. 22-24.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 21. This failure foreshadows one of the defining features of the combined operations of a later age, especially the British amphibious operations of the XVIII century: that is, the crucial importance of intelligence gathering in planning a successful attack and the difficulties encountered by land forces in patching together reliable pieces of information, thus making them dependant on the navy and its more agile crafts in performing such a task. We will touch upon this issue hereafter.

17 Michele LODONE, “Vitelli, Giovanni Luigi”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Volume 99, 2020; Carlo PROMIS, “Biografie di ingegneri militari italiani, dal secolo XIV alla metà del XVIII”, in *Miscellanea di storia italiana edita per cura della Regia Deputazione di Storia Patria*, Torino, Fratelli Bocca Librai, 1873, pp. 431-442.

18 Marco MOSTARDA, Virgilio ILARI, “Exploring the Italian Military Paradox”, in Jeremy BLACK (Ed.), *Global Military Transformations: Change and Continuity, 1450-1800*, Roma, Società Italiana di Storia Militare – Nadir Media, 2022, p. 227.

19 Christopher DUFFY, *Siege Warfare. The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494-1660*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 70.

20 DE KORTE, “Siege of Leiden”, cit., p. 35.

Zierikzee, where the Spaniards were led to victory by Cristóbal de Mondragón, showed that both sides of the conflict could make an optimal use of amphibious operations.<sup>21</sup> Flooding an area was not aimed at creating a combat environment in which the Dutch have an intrinsic edge, rather to hamper the movements of an enemy not suitably equipped to such a stark change of setting. Indeed, the Spaniards, as already seen, could count on a robust expertise in terms of combined operations honed in the Mediterranean:<sup>22</sup> one liable to be applied to other theatre of operations, as showed by Federico Spinola's proposal of using the Mediterranean galleys against the Dutch rebels because perfectly suited to the shallow waterways of the Low Countries.<sup>23</sup> Then, the reason why the relief of Leiden represents «the most celebrated example in Dutch history in which flooding and an amphibious operation ended a siege»<sup>24</sup> is not the use of an extreme measure such as submerging the fields – after all, the dykes were already breached at the siege of Alkmaar in 1573 – or the unprecedented scale on which this was attempted, or also the clear evidence that the Spaniards were taken aback; rather the fact that the inundation, as the author reminds us, instead of being used as a purely defensive means in order to compel the enemy to retreat before it, was used *offensively* for the first time, letting the relief troops sail straight to the Spanish besieging lines.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the specific case represented by Leiden, in briefly dealing with the early enterprises of the Sea Beggars the author appropriately highlights the close interplay between land and naval forces in shaping the amphibious nature of the

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21 Petra GROEN (Ed.), *The Eighty Years War. From Revolt to Regular War, 1568-1648*, Leiden, Leiden University Press, p. 151.

22 PESSINA, “Special Operations”, p. 24, n. 58 stresses the well-known fact that the Spaniards created the first marine units conceived as a landing force.

23 Emiliano BERI, “L’ammiraglio e il generale. Federico e Ambrogio Spinola da Genova alle Fiandre”, in ID. (Ed.), *Dal Mediterraneo alla Manica. Contributi alla storia navale dell’età moderna*, Roma, Società Italiana di Storia Militare – Nadir Media, 2022, pp. 113-114. Although suddenly coming to an end with the death in combat of Federico Spinola in 1603, the introduction of Mediterranean oared vessels in Flanders had long-lasting consequences, the actions of the galleys representing «the first major contribution that organized naval power had made to the war in the Netherlands»: see R. A. STRADLING, *The Armada of Flanders. Spanish Maritime Policy and European War, 1568-1668*, Cambridge, Cambridge U. P., 1992, p. 13.

24 *Eighty Years War*, cit., p. 150.

25 DE KORTE, “Siege of Leiden”, cit., p. 37.

Eighty Years' War since its onset.<sup>26</sup> A more detailed reconstruction of their genesis, though, would have further driven the point home, because the *Watergeuzen* were born in May 1568 from the need Louis of Nassau had of some ships for protecting his lines of communication through the Eems estuary during his attempted invasion of Friesland. With the Count's subsequent defeat at Jemmingen, the Sea Beggars mainly turned to piracy, even though they still claimed to operate under the letters of marque issued by William of Orange, recognized as a sovereign ruler by the English government.<sup>27</sup> They kept raiding the coastal villages of Holland and Zeeland and harassing the local garrisons, with the Dutch community of refugees in England as an ideal market where to sell the fruits of their plundering activities. Lacking a secure base from which to extend the radius of their operations (in 1570 they had been driven from Bommel with heavy losses), the Sea Beggars would have finally acquired one with the capture of Den Briel in April 1572, this accomplishment proving in hindsight «to have been a major turning point in the conflict». As stressed further on by the same authors, «we can conclude that in the first phase of the Revolt, military operations on land in Holland and Zeeland would have been inconceivable without assistance from the navy, both in terms of enabling amphibious operations and providing logistical support».<sup>28</sup>

The capture of Den Briel and the failure of the Royalists led by Bossu to recover it – *en passant* due to the effective use of the flooding as a weapon for the first time – did not simply set a political example soon to be followed by many other towns. It also set the cornerstone of a broader strategic approach which, by holding Zeeland, aimed at controlling the sea lines of communication to and from Antwerp, the most important port in the Atlantic world at the time.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in a certain sense, the overarching objectives as well as the defining tactical features of the climatic struggle for the control of Antwerp fought thirteen years later – itself a siege in an amphibious environment dominated by the use of means like controlled floodings, river barrages and the kind of special crafts such as those devised by the Italian engineer Federico Giambelli<sup>30</sup> – were defined earlier in the

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26 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27, 28-29.

27 Geoffrey PARKER, *The Dutch Revolt*, London, Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 121-122.

28 *Eighty Years War*, cit., pp. 55-56, 155.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 153-155; DUFFY, *Siege Warfare*, cit., pp. 76-79. The flooding of the area between Fort Liefkenshoek and Fort Lillo prevented the Spaniards from capturing the latter and

war during the operations revolving around the strongholds of Den Briel, Leiden and Zierikzee. In conclusion, touching upon the breaking of the dykes as an extreme means which, as De Korte rightly points out, fits in well with scorched earth policies,<sup>31</sup> we cannot help but note the fundamental asymmetry between the Dutch rebels and the Royalist forces in resorting to controversial means characterised by a high political cost. Despite the inundations being quite unpopular with the peasants and ruining the field potentially for years to come, the insurgents did not shy away from repeatedly making use of them without incurring in any significant political backlash, whereas Philip II felt compelled to reject the suggestions by Emanuel Philibert of Savoy and Luis de Requeséns to resort to the very same solution because «it would earn for us a reputation for cruelty which would be better avoided, especially against our vassals».<sup>32</sup> Although such a display of self-restraint may sound odd if coming from the monarch who had sanctioned Alba's Council of Troubles and the savage reprisals against Mechelen, Zutphen and Haarlem, «that a province would be lost and ruined forever» would have run counter, we guess, the displayed desire of saving the Low Countries from the heresy and the very mission of the monarchical institution. In doing so Philip II showed a shrewd appreciation for «the need to maintain an image of legitimacy and fairness», managing to contain the political damage to the sole provinces affected by the rebellion.<sup>33</sup> That the insurgents, whose proclaimed aim was to overthrow a tyrannical and unjust regime, were not affected by the same political restraints thus enjoying a wider political latitude, represents a lesson of enduring value.

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blockading the estuary of the Scheldt, thus imposing the decision of closing it with the famous pontoon bridge built by the Duke of Parma. For a detailed description of Gianibelli's "infernal machines", see: Peter KIRSCH, *Fireship. The Terror Weapon of the Age of Sail*, Barnsley, Seaforth Publishing, 2009, pp. 18-22.

31 DE KORTE, "Siege of Leiden", cit., p. 37.

32 Geoffrey PARKER, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 1998, p. 137.

33 Matthew C. WAXMAN, "Strategic Terror: Philip II and Sixteenth-Century Warfare", in *War in History* 1997, 4 (3), p. 341.

## II

THOMAS MORE MOLYNEUX.<sup>34</sup> . DELAWARE RIVER CAMPAIGN, 1777.<sup>35</sup>

Since the publication of Julian S. Corbett's *Seven Years War. A Study in Combined Strategy*,<sup>36</sup> the topic represented by combined operations has always attracted a steady interest – even a disproportionate one, we may say, if compared to their actual effectiveness – due to the author's emphasis on the «skilful use of naval and amphibious operations in a limited conflict», thus setting the «ultimate example» of a peculiar British strategic approach.<sup>37</sup> Even though *Seven Years War* still represents an insightful and stimulating strategical critique of that war reflecting the fundamental and enduring issues addressed by Corbett's thought – such as the deviations naval strategy is subjected to due to political concerns<sup>38</sup> – the reader has to bear in mind that Corbett's primary aim was that of stating the Royal Navy's case against the continentalist approach of the Army General Staff within the context of the strategic debate ensued between 1905 and 1911: thus, the navy's claims on dictating a comprehensive national strategy which would have relegated the army in a subservient role needed to be substantiated by validating the «tradition and effectiveness of this view of sea-power» by means of an analysis taking into account the significant eighteenth-century precedents.<sup>39</sup>

In doing so, as already stressed by Donald M. Schurman, Corbett forced

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34 Andrew YOUNG, "Amphibious Genesis. Thomas More Molyneux and the Birth of the Amphibious Doctrine" (pp. 38-54).

35 James R. MCINTYRE, "The Delaware River Campaign of 1777. An Examination of an Eighteenth-Century Amphibious Operation" (pp. 55-72).

36 Julian S. CORBETT, *England in the Seven Years War. A Study in Combined Strategy*, London, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1907.

37 Andrew LAMBERT, *The British Way of War. Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 2021, p. 170.

38 The issue represented by «political conditions» blurring «the true strategical outlines» is best exemplified by Corbett in dealing with the delicate diplomatic situation Newcastle had to tackle at the eve of the conflict: one which compelled the British government not to adopt overtly aggressive measures so as not to thwart the prospects of renewing the Triple Alliance with Austria and the United Provinces, and especially trigger the *pacte de famille* between Paris and Madrid. See, ID., *Seven Years War*, cit., vol. I, pp. 36-39.

39 Richard HARDING, "Sailors and Gentlemen of Parade: Some Professional and Technical Problems Concerning the Conduct of Combined Operations in the Eighteenth Century", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Mar. 1989), p. 55.

«events into a posthumously conceived historical pattern»<sup>40</sup> meant to educate the naval officers of his day: a pattern which does not entirely reflect priorities and calculations of an earlier generation of statesmen and commanders and, therefore, one ought to be approached with caution by the modern reader due to its potentially distortive effects. This state of affairs has already been pointed out by historians such as Daniel Baugh, a specialist of eighteenth-century British naval history and administration forcefully criticizing Corbett's narrative because «marred by factual errors as well as unwarranted speculations».<sup>41</sup> However, it seems that Baugh missed the bigger picture in this specific circumstance, because those Corbett incurred were not truly factual errors or unwarranted speculations. As aptly stressed by Andrew Lambert, Corbett's decision of taking into serious consideration the French invasion plans of 1756 and 1762 (the first case being just an elaborate *ruse de guerre* meant to pin the British naval forces in the Channel and leave Minorca – the actual target of the French war aims – unguarded) was functional to draw a parallel with the contemporary 1907 Invasion Inquiry,<sup>42</sup> thus reinforcing – we may add – the threat posed by an aggressive Imperial Germany and providing the students of the Naval War Course with useful case studies to test their planning abilities with. While Corbett's soundness of judgement is vindicated, the reasons why his work needs a proper historical contextualisation and ought to be carefully approached stand out most clearly.

In his *Amphibious Genesis. Thomas More Molyneux and the Birth of Amphibious Doctrine*, the author Andrew Young seems unfortunately prone to take Corbett's theses at face value, paying only lip service to the significant literature providing the needed rectifications to his thought.<sup>43</sup> Young confidently writes in

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40 Donald M. SCHURMAN, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914*, London, Cassell, 1965, p. 167. See also Andrew LAMBERT, "Sir Julian Corbett and the Naval War Course" in Peter HORE (Ed.), *Dreadnought to Daring. 100 Years of Comment, Controversy and Debate in The Naval Review*, Barnsley, Seaforth Publishing, 2012, p. 42.

41 Daniel BAUGH, *The Global Seven Years War, 1754-1763*, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2011, p. 685.

42 LAMBERT, *British Way of War*, cit., p. 468, n. 79.

43 In YOUNG, "Amphibious Genesis", cit., pp. 44, 46, 48, 53, Harding's "Sailors and Gentlemen of Parade" is repeatedly cited, his breaking down in different factors of the failures often met by amphibious operations borrowed, but Harding's main contention – that amphibious operations were seldom seen as decisive because affected by inherent shortcomings which could be addressed by technical improvements only after the 1850s – is

terms of «state interest and national strategy»,<sup>44</sup> taking for granted that a clear-cut “national” strategy already existed and that amphibious operations – considered as a «distinct military theory» whose development is to be traced back to the Seven Years War – were firmly ensconced already within the frame of this strategic approach.<sup>45</sup> As for the state interest and the related strategic issues, even by embracing Nicholas A. M. Rodger’s “fiscal-military state” – a «capital-intensive, high-technology mode of warfare» capable of linking military victory up to economic interests – as the interpretive proposal best suited to explain the alleged British exceptionalism,<sup>46</sup> thus plausibly inferring that British statesmen nurtured a precise notion of the state interests and the most appropriate military means to further them, one still has to take into account that «there are few documents which clearly and explicitly link the broad objectives of national policy with the direction and control of naval operations in this period. Those few suggest that statesmen and admirals had a concept of what they were trying to achieve with the use of naval force, although it may have been only a series of broad assumptions about strategic objectives upon which they grounded their broad discussions about operations».<sup>47</sup>

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brushed aside.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

46 N. A. M. RODGER, “From the ‘military revolution’ to the ‘fiscal-naval state’”, *Journal for Maritime Research*, 13:2, pp. 122-123.

47 John B. HATTENDORF, R. J. B. KNIGHT, A. W. H. PEARSALL, N. A. M. RODGER, Geoffrey TILL (Eds.), *British Naval Documents, 1204-1960*, Aldershot, Scholar Press for the Navy Records Society, 1993, p. 193.

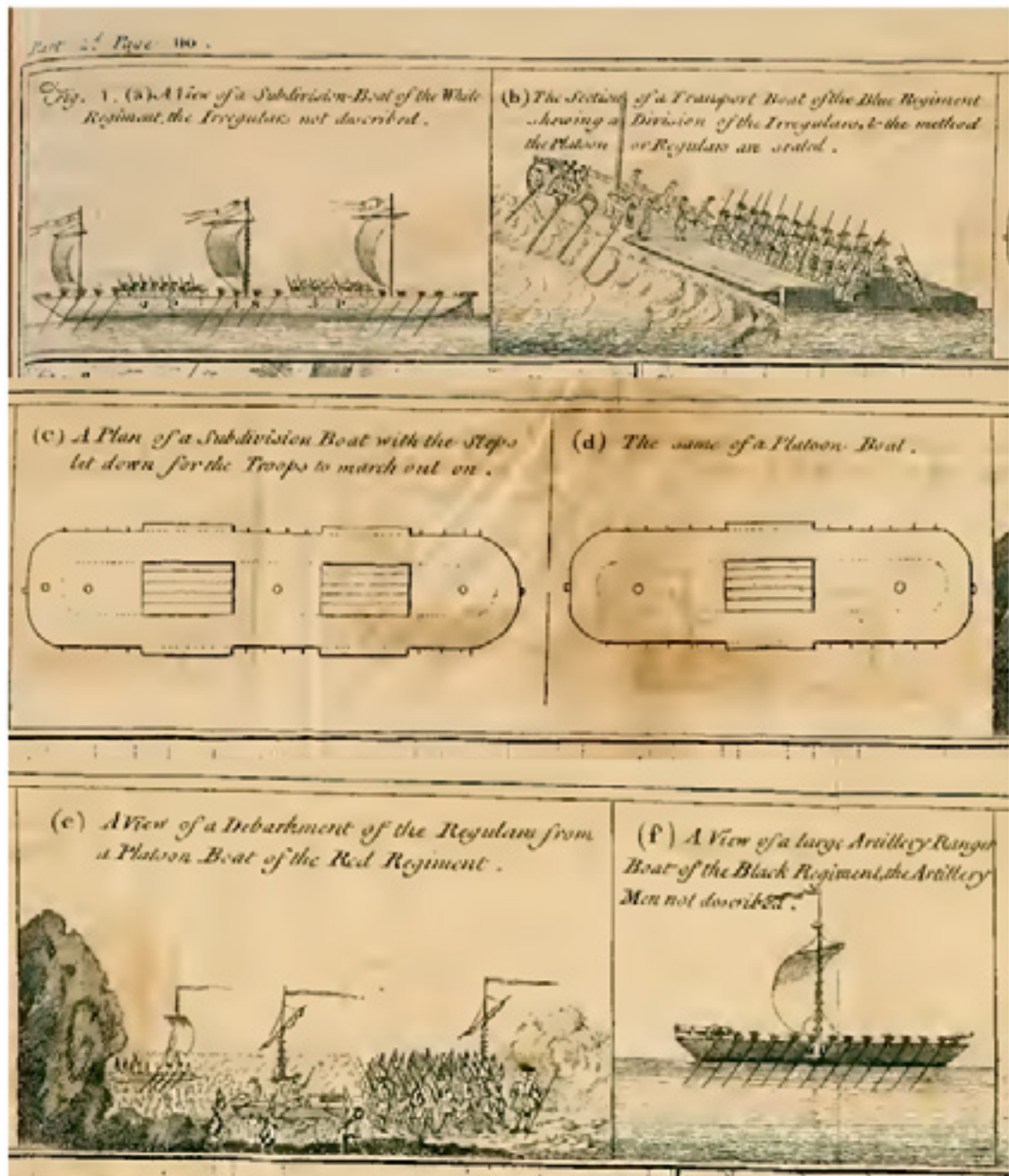






Fig. 2 Molyneux, *Conjunct Expeditions*, Plate II, p. 100  
The Bay of Chatalilon (Chatelaillon), West France

Therefore, Young's assertion that a doctrine concerning amphibious operations already existed, let alone that Molyneux managed to expand on it by means of his *Conjunct Expeditions*,<sup>48</sup> rests on shaky foundations. Even if we assume as a working hypothesis the actual existence of such a doctrine *sub specie* of an informal one, *Conjunct Expeditions* could not be considered a milestone in its evolution without attempting to retrace the circulation of such a treatise, identify some evidences of the institutionalization of at least part of Molyneux's suggestions, or convincingly highlight the influence exerted by the proposed procedures on contemporary practices; something that the author notably omits to do. Young has a point in defining Molyneux as an «instinctive doctrinal thinker» but this does not suffice, and the assertion that he «can rightly claim paternity of amphibious doctrine» seems unwarranted if left unsubstantiated.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, from the

48 YOUNG, «Amphibious Genesis», cit., p. 54.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 39. Quite disconcerting, however, is Young's contention that «Molyneux might be

flat-bottomed boats to an ad hoc signalling system, *Conjunct Expeditions* touches upon the very same procedures detailed by David Syrett as the defining features of the more mature British amphibious operations between the Seven Years and the American Wars.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, it is undeniable that the failure of Mordaunt's raid against Rochefort in 1757 represented the prime mover of both Molyneux's treatise and a series of innovations concerning the practices and procedures of the British amphibious operations: in this regard Syrett mentions Robert Beatson, according to whom flat-bottomed boats were developed after Rochefort in order to address the need for a proper landing craft.<sup>51</sup> Still, the relationship between these innovations and Molyneux's suggestions needs to be better clarified, all the more because, as recognized by Young himself, «at no stage did he claim to have invented new methods».<sup>52</sup>

Hence, it is plausible that *Conjunct Expeditions* merely kept track of changes intervening in amphibious operations during the Seven Years War, without this work exerting any particular influence on a doctrine that, true to the best British tradition, kept resting on a practice which refrained from translating itself into a formalized body of knowledge. The very extent and impact of these changes should be rephrased because, as already noted by Richard Harding, their momentous nature was linked with the commonly-held historical assumption about Pitt as a particularly innovative war minister, a reputation that scholars repeatedly managed to refute in the last fifty years.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, a more dispassionate look at the British amphibious operations already attempted between 1740 and 1748, one liable not to be swayed by the catastrophe at Cartagena to the extent of unduly

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termed Clausewitzian», remarkably disregarding that Clausewitz is a thinker averse to the idea that military theory should be translated into codified doctrine and can therefore be reduced to axioms or procedures.

50 DAVID SYRETT, "The Methodology of British Amphibious Operations during the Seven Years and American Wars", *The Mariner's Mirror*, 58:3, pp. 272-273, 275.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 272-273.

52 YOUNG, "Amphibious Genesis", cit., p. 54.

53 HARDING, "Gentlemen", cit., pp. 38-39. The author carefully scrutinize Pitt's elimination of the council of war as a deciding body from the amphibious operations in the wake of Rochefort's failure – a relevant organizational change if taken into the account in light of Molyneux's demands for significant revisions in the command structure – coming to the conclusion that «the reason for this omission was fundamentally political rather than military»: one aimed at shifting the burden of political responsibility for any future failure on the commanders involved rather than on the government.

inferring from it a primitiveness that came of age only under Pitt's ministry, ought to recognize that most of the practices and procedures informing such operations had been laid down way before Rochefort, as evidenced by significant documents such as the plan of attack against Louisbourg proposed by the then Commodore Peter Warren in 1745.<sup>54</sup> Relevant technical improvements, such as the introduction of flat-bottomed landing crafts instead of the whale boats employed by Warren, may have enhanced the pace of amphibious operations and the flexibility of the forces involved, but without dictating any radical overhaul of their planning and execution.

As already suggested by Harding, it is therefore apparent that the unprecedented success met by amphibious operations during the period 1759-63, more than the consequence of any kind of innovation, was the by-product of the «unprecedented security» enjoyed by the amphibious forces, deriving in turn by the unquestioned naval ascendancy achieved by the Royal Navy: one never enjoyed before and only sporadically possessed after, up until Trafalgar.<sup>55</sup> Such an approach has the advantage of explaining the mixed fortunes suffered by the British amphibious forces during the American War – despite the fact that the alleged crucial improvements brought about by the fiasco at Rochefort had been implemented already – with failure as a function of increasingly overstretched forces. As already observed by Lord Sandwich in 1777, «the mode of carrying on the war in America has been such for the last two years that the fleet has not been employed in the purpose in which it can be most useful towards distressing the enemy [...] it was natural to suppose that with such a force properly stationed he [Lord Howe] could have made it very difficult for the Americans to receive their supplies, carry on their trade, and fit out privateers to annoy the trade of Great Britain. The contrary however has been the case, because the greatest part of Lord Howe's fleet has been employed in convoying, embarking and disembarking the troops, and attending the operations of the army».<sup>56</sup> The opposite was true as well and it would be even more so a year later, when the French intervention increas-

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54 "Amphibious operations: success at Louisbourg, 1745", in *British Naval Documents*, cit., pp. 374-378.

55 HARDING, "Gentlemen", cit., pp. 51-52, 54.

56 G. R. BARNES, G. H. OWEN (Eds.), *The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1771-1782*, Vol. I, London, Publications of the Navy Records Society, 1932, pp. 327-328.

ingly diverted the Royal Navy from supporting the Army in the North American theatre in order to counter the threat posed by a substantially strengthened French Navy.

In this regard *The Delaware River Campaign of 1777. An Examination of an Eighteenth-Century Amphibious Operation* by James R. McIntyre provides us with a thoroughly researched example of the shortcomings of the British combined operations, true to the Clausewitzian lesson according to which «historische Beispiele machen Alles klar»:<sup>57</sup> a lesson all the more relevant in a publication whose ostensible goal – as we already observed – is to encourage fertile theoretical reflections by providing significant case studies. As stressed by the author, during the Philadelphia Campaign of 1777-78 opening the Delaware River to British shipping represented a fundamental war aim, because failing to accomplish it would have entailed General Howe abandoning the city for want of supplies.<sup>58</sup> On this point we think that some further clarifications are needed. Harding, in his critical reappraisal of the British amphibious warfare in the West Indies between 1740 and 1742, resumes Herbert Richmond's thought and reworks it into a distinction between amphibious operations true and proper, in which «the striking force was maintained at sea and preserved its maritime mobility»; and operations taking advantage of land-based allies or magazine ashore that, for such a reason, were not truly amphibious. Therefore, concludes the author with an illustrative example, once established at New York in 1776 Howe's army was no longer involved in an amphibious operation.<sup>59</sup> Albeit a more rigorous definition of the significant debate terms is always welcomed, in light of Piers Mackesy's observation – that the British forces were to remain for the most part confined to narrow bridgeheads depending on supplies from home and therefore resting on lines of communication «strained to the uttermost»<sup>60</sup> – we feel compelled to conclude that the nature of the British war efforts in the North American theatre was fundamentally amphibious and therefore affected by the inherent

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57 Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *Hinterlassenes Werk Vom Kriege. Mit historisch-kritischer Würdigung von Dr. Werner Hahlweg*, Bonn, Ferdinand Dümmler, 1952, p. 87.

58 MCINTYRE, "Delaware Campaign", cit., p. 58.

59 Richard HARDING, *Amphibious Warfare in the Eighteenth Century. The British Expedition to the West Indies, 1740-1742*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, p. 1.

60 Piers MACKESY, *The War for America, 1775-1783*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, p. 65.

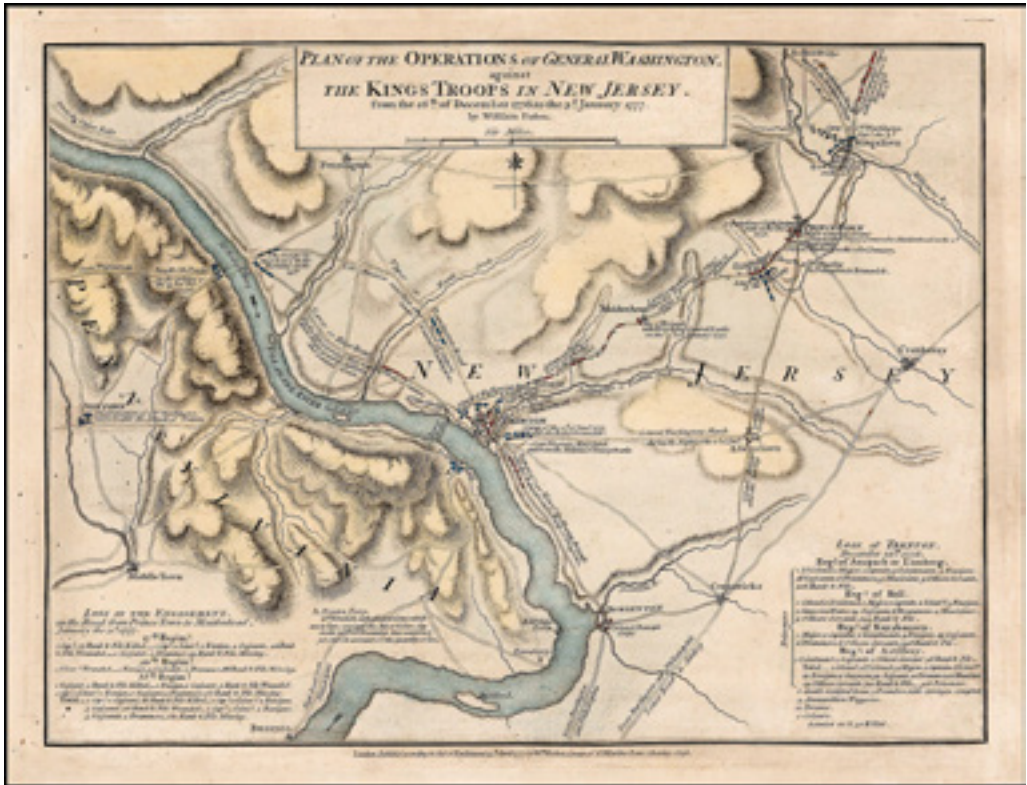


Fig. 3. William Faden (1749-1836), Plan of the operations of General Washington, against the Kings troops in New Jersey, from the 26th. of December 1776, to the 3d. January 1777. Library of Congress (Wikimedia Commons).

shortcomings of this kind of operations: from the contingent coordination issues between the army and the navy, to the already stressed overstretching of the naval forces. These proved not to be up to the task of assisting the army and effectively blockading the rebels at the same time, let alone tackling the French and then the Spanish intervention.

McIntyre's detailed reconstruction of the riverine warfare along the Delaware, culminating in the failure of the first assault against Fort Mercer, offers much with which to flesh out the outline of the combined operations traced by Harding and Syrett. The army's shortcomings in terms of intelligence gathering and its reliance on naval reconnaissance<sup>61</sup> are aptly showed by General Howe's depend-

61 HARDING, "Gentlemen", cit., p. 41, 46; SYRETT, "Methodology", cit. p. 270.

ence on frigate patrollings, notably those performed by Captain Hammond's *HMS Roebuck* which provided the British command with a complete description of the American defensive network and with evidence of the pivotal role played by Fort Mifflin.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the limited firepower enjoyed by the army and its dependence on naval gunfire support in order to reduce enemy fortifications<sup>63</sup> is highlighted by the outcome of the operations aimed at taking Fort Mercer. Howe had initially envisaged a combined operation of land and naval forces aimed at attacking Fort Mifflin and Fort Mercer simultaneously because, being the latter «the staging area for supplies and reinforcements for Fort Mifflin», its fall would have made the former untenable: however, the combination of Howe's impatience with Carl Emil von Donop's rash eagerness to vindicate the Hessian honour – slighted by the defeat at Trenton – ensured that the sole Fort Mercer was attacked by 1.200 Hessians badly supported by ten 3-pounder guns.<sup>64</sup> As a consequence, the assault was bloodily repulsed and the belated intervention of the navy against Fort Mifflin, spearheaded by Captain Reynold's 64-gun *HMS Augusta*, led only to the loss of that ship together with the sloop of war *HMS Merlin*.<sup>65</sup> McIntyre has a point in stressing that «the British did not possess any formal institutional organization to facilitate amphibious or joint operation», though they still had a fair amount of operational experience;<sup>66</sup> this lends credence to what stressed earlier on, namely that Pitt's organizational changes were marked by a chiefly political drive without much influence on the anatomy of command, and that the British combined operations kept resting on a practical knowledge rather than on a codified doctrine.

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62 MCINTYRE, "Delaware Campaign", cit., pp. 56, 58.

63 HARDING, "Gentlemen", cit. pp. 47-48; SYRETT, "Methodology", cit., pp. 275-276.

64 MCINTYRE, "Delaware Campaign", cit., pp. 62-63. Captain Johann Ewald attested that all the officers involved regarded the affair with levity except for the old and experienced Captain Krug, who said that «if our preparations are not being made better than I hear, we will get a good beating». However, the fact that the main faults of the plan of attack rested on the lack of cooperation with the available naval forces, rather than on the loss of the surprise effect and the deficient coordination between the Linsing and the Minnigerode Battalions, seems to be lost on Ewald as well; see Johann EWALD, *Diary of the American War. A Hessian Journal. Translated and Edited by Joseph P. Tustin*, New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 1979, pp. 98, 102.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71. The author does not provide an identification of the two ships' type, which is taken from Rif WINFIELD, *British Warships in the Age of Sail, 1714-1792. Design, Construction, Careers and Fates*, Barnsley, Seaforth Publishing, 2007, pp. 99, 276-277.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Once addressed on the spot the lingering issues of coordination between the land and naval forces, Fort Mifflin was speedily reduced by means of massed naval firepower and Fort Mercer abandoned as a consequence. British combined operations remain a stimulating matter of historical enquiry, but we feel compelled to conclude that forcing an ultimately flimsy doctrinal framework upon them will not further a proper understanding of the subject.









A Smart Macaroni, Caricature from “Martial Macaroni”, in Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection. Courtesy by Brown University (see West, «The Darly Macaroni Prints and the Politics of “Private Man.”», *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 25.2 [2001], pp.170-1.

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