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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma
Contatti: direzione@nam-sigm.org ; virgilio.ilari@gmail.com

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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexillographia.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

On Contested Shores
 Historical Lessons on Contemporary Amphibious Warfare
 The role of Air Power

by BASILIO DI MARTINO



In the afternoon of February 23, 1941, the Royal Navy launched Operation Abstention, with 200 men from No. 50 Commando boarding the destroyers *Decoy* e *Hereward* at Suda Bay (Crete). The following day the two warships, that were escorted by the light cruiser *Gloucester*, flagship of the Rear Admiral Edward de Faye Renouf, and *Bonaventure*, set a course for Castelrosso (Kastellorizo). This was the furthest and the easternmost island of the Italian Dodecanese, 130 km south-east of Rhodes, the main island of the archipelago, and just two km from the coast of Turkey. The Middle-East British headquarters

had been considering the conquest of the Dodecanese for quite a while, aiming to acquire an advanced base of operation against the Balkans. However, lack of resources had reduced the scope of the action to the seizure of the small island of Castelrosso, where to establish a torpedo-boat base as a first step towards the conquest of Rhodes. During the night of February 24, the gunboat *Ladybird*, that had sailed from Famagusta (Cyprus) with a party of 24 Royal Marines, joined the *Gloucester*-led naval formation. The threat posed by the bombers of the Regia Aeronautica from Rhodes was well understood and, while the airfields of that island had been attacked repeatedly in the previous nights, the flagship of de Faye Renouf was equipped with an early warning radar and the landings were planned before dawn on February 25. While the commandos landed by boats at Point Nifti, south-east of the harbour, the Royal Marines were debarked by the *Ladybird* on the quay, inside the harbour itself. The small garrison of 35 men, mostly sailors, could not halt the commandos on the beach, but was able to delay the Royal Marines in the village long enough to alert Rhodes by radio, before vanishing in the interior of the island leaving behind 8 dead, 8 wounded and 9 prisoners.¹

It could have been an easy success for the British forces had not it been for the swift reaction of the Regia Aeronautica. While chasing the *Gloucester*, the *Bonaventure*, the *Decoy* and the *Hereward* that were heading at full speed towards Alexandria, the S.81's from the 39° Stormo and the S.79's from the 34° Gruppo attacked the *Ladybird*, forcing the gunboat to leave Castelrosso, taking on board the party of the Royal Marines. At the same time the bombers, together with patrols of CR.32 and CR.42 fighters, harassed the commandos and on February 26 covered the landing of an expeditionary force from Rhodes that regained control of the island by the early hours of February 28. The destroyers *Hero* and *Decoy* were able to evacuate the invasion force during the last night. The losses amounted to 3 dead, 11 wounded, 27 prisoners, besides the damages suffered by the *Ladybird* and by the destroyer *Jaguar*, that was engaged by the Italian destroyer *Crispi* during the final phase of Operation Abstention. The Italian forces registered 8 dead, 11 wounded, 11 prisoners, together with the loss of a three-engine S.81 bomber and some light damage to the *Crispi*.

The failure of Operation Abstention was an unexpected blow to the British

¹ B. DI MARTINO, *La Regia Aeronautica nel Dodecaneso*, Rivista Aeronautica, Roma, 2022, pp.154-160.

plans and was mainly due to the hastened preparation and the underestimation of the enemy's capabilities. According to Admiral A. B. Cunningham, commanding officer of the Mediterranean Fleet, Abstention was badly conceived and worse executed, more so because of the lack of whatever air support could be required, a circumstance that was clearly underlined in the weekly resume to the War Cabinet:

«Kasteloritzo Island was occupied at dawn on the 25th. Units were landed from H.M. Destroyers *Decoy* and *Hereward* with only slight opposition. H.M. Gunboat *Ladybird* entered the harbour, and a party of Royal Marines was landed in the town. *Ladybird* was slightly damaged in a heavy raid by enemy aircraft and forced to withdraw. Two enemy E-Boats attacked the island during the night of the 25th/26th. H.M. Destroyer *Jaguar* located a ship in the Inner Harbour and fired torpedoes, four explosions being heard. Later *Jaguar* engaged an enemy destroyer and hit her twice, but the enemy made her escape. During the night of the 27th/28th our forces were withdrawn due to heavy air attacks and the landing of enemy reinforcements. »²

Oddly enough, the same errors, mainly regarding the lack of air support, occurred again in the autumn of 1943 in the same geographical area, nullifying the effort to exploit the Italian capitulation, as Jeffrey Schultz well describes in his essay in the first volume of *On Contested Shores: The Evolving Role of Amphibious Operations in the History of Warfare*.³ This volume, edited by Timothy Heck, an artillery officer, and by Brett A. Friedman, a U.S. Marine Corps Reserve officer, offers a chronological examination of the evolution of amphibious operations in military history since the 16th century. In so doing, it considers the third dimension of amphibious operations mainly in three scenarios beside the Dodecanese in 1943. James K. Greer deals with the overture of the German campaign in Norway in April 1940, Gregory Liedtke analyses German naval evacuations on the Eastern Front with a focus on the evacuation from the Taman peninsula in 1943, Serhat Güvenç and Mesut Uyar cover the Turkish amphibious operation in Cyprus in 1974 that included an airborne side.⁴ In the second volume, edited by

2 «War Cabinet Weekly Résumé (No. 79) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation from 12 noon February 27th, to 12 noon March 6th, 1941», available in <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-66-15.pdf>.

3 J. SCHULTZ, «The Reich Strikes Back: German Victory in the Dodecanese, October–November 1943».

4 J. K. GREER, «Operation Weserubung: Early Amphibious Multi-domain Operations»; G.

Heck and Friedman together with Walker D. Mills, a serving U.S. Marine officer, the relevance of air power to amphibious operations is coming out mainly in the chapter «Policy and Interoperability», with the essays authored by Darren Johnson, dealing with Operation Husky, and by Xiaobing Li, dealing with the People Liberation Army amphibious campaigns in the 50's.⁵

Johnson's essay deals with the challenges of joint operations, mostly caused by interservice rivalry, mutual lack of knowledge and cultural issues. Together with the coordination problems of the amphibious assault to Sicily, he clearly underlines the fundamental role of air power, both in offense and defence. Husky was prepared by a massive counter air campaign that annihilated the Axis air forces on the island forcing the Regia Aeronautica and the Luftwaffe to redeploy the remnants of their offensive components to mainland Italy, if not to Provence as the Germans did. It is worthy to say that this outcome was not a surprise for the Italians. The invasion of Sicily had been the subject of the grand manoeuvres of the year 1937 that had unequivocally identified air superiority as the capstone of a successful defence.⁶ The defender's air component, being able to operate from airfields close to the landing zone, had delayed the advance of the invading force, preventing the capture of vital airfields where the enemy could redeploy his fighters, and in so doing it had granted the land component the possibility to effectively counter-manoeuve and reduce the beachheads. The elements of the problem had therefore been clearly identified but in 1943 the overall scenario was totally different, and the sheer force of number spoke by itself.

These few examples are good enough to point out that, since the aircraft came of age, amphibious operations put to test more than a Navy-Army dualism. Air power is an enabling factor that cannot be neglected, since gaining and maintaining air superiority over the approaching routes and the landing sites can mean the difference between victory and defeat. Even if some air component can be organ-

LIETDKE, « German Naval Evacuations on the Eastern Front, 1943–45»; S. GÜVENC, M. UYAR, «Against All Odds: Turkish Amphibious Operation in Cyprus, 20–23 July 1974».

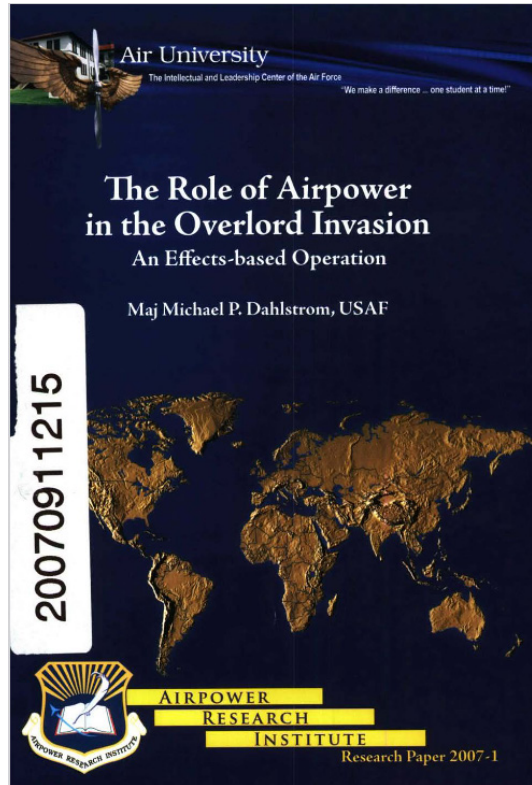
5 D. JOHNSON, «Operation Husky: The Challenges of Joint Amphibious Operations»; X. LI, « PLA Amphibious Campaigns and the Origins of the Joint Island Landing Campaign».

6 J. J. ROUQUEROL, «Grandi manovre in Sicilia», *Rivista Aeronautica*, 12-1937, pp. 521-522; A. ALBERGONI, 1937. *Le Grandi Manovre in Sicilia dell'Anno XV*, Scienze e Lettere, Roma, 2010.

ic to the Navy, or to the Marine Corps as for the United States, what used to be a bi-dimensional effort, long ago has become a three-dimensional game, that requires careful planning, specific procedures and, most of all, each of the three components, land, sea and air, need to have an in-depth knowledge of the way to operate of the other two. It is an issue that common training and exercising can help a lot to solve, but we have to bear in mind that it is mostly a cultural issue: the soldier, and the sailor, want to have the air power right on the spot when they need it, and are therefore strongly oriented towards keeping on hand the air assets, while the airman wants to exploit

the inherent capabilities of air power, range, speed, altitude, or in one word flexibility, within the context of well-defined campaign plan, acting in an independent even if coordinated way. Bearing in mind that interservice rivalry and competition for prominence often overshadow synchronization and cooperation between armies, navies, and air forces, the answer lies in a command structure that has to be inherently joint, and also combined whenever required. It must be a well-oiled machine, repeatedly tested in exercises and capable to swiftly react to whatever foreseeable situation, based on established contingency plans. With regards to the air assets, since resources are usually limited, a trade-off has to be achieved based on a planning process that moves from the apportionment and the allotment of all available forces to produce the so-called Air Tasking Order (ATO).

Large-scale amphibious assaults of World War Two era are unlikely to happen again, perhaps except for the Pacific theatre of operations where the Taiwan issue is an open question, but whatever type of amphibious operation we have



in mind, the assault, the retreat, the raid, the demonstration, and the support of other operations, air superiority remains a key factor. However, how it will play will be somehow different from the past. Adversaries will increasingly employ defence in vertical depth, layering the effects of cyber disruptions, electromagnetic jamming, conventional air defence systems and even drones to achieve an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) effect. Even if advanced fighters will manage to gain air superiority in the “blue skies,” the “air littoral”, that is the airspace below them, will remain contested and will pose a major threat to any attempt to gain air control to effectively operate against the enemy’s ground forces. The defender can easily implement a strategy of air denial, based on a defence-in-vertical-depth approach that employs multilayered and overlapping systems and integrates their effects from the blue skies to the air littoral.⁷

Since the advent of military aviation, only major powers have been able to overcome the financial, organizational, technological, and scientific obstacles along the path leading to build and employ an advanced and effective air force, but today this assumption is no longer valid. The democratization of technology, with the diffusion of multi-use and cheap hardware and software, and the global reach of internet that gives access to an enormous amount of data, make low cost but effective robotic airpower massively available to most countries and also to not-state actors. Drones can provide reconnaissance and precision strike capabilities and can be used as a cheap expendable mass, according to an attrition logic that cannot be applied to manned platforms. Operators of drone survive to fight another day, fighter pilots don’t.

The same logic will apply to all kind of amphibious operation when the attack force moves from the blue waters to the brown waters, being forced to confront a well-conceived A2/AD strategy and to force its way through a layered defence. From the defender point of view such a strategy is the smarter and more economical choice. By deploying sufficiently large numbers of small and cheap unmanned systems in a distributed way he could increase both the costs and uncertainty of the efforts to quickly seize a beachhead. It looks like the future of amphibious warfare, and may be also of air warfare, is denial.

7 M. K. BREMER, K. A. GRIECO, «Air denial: the dangerous illusion of decisive air superiority», in Atlantic Council, *Air Power after Ukraine*, August 30, 2022.

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