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# **Case Study: The utility of amphibious forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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*While this case-study is constrained by secrecy aspects regarding operations in Libya and Somalia, it demonstrates the utility of an integrated 21<sup>st</sup> century amphibious force. The critical enabler was HMS Ocean. What started as a 7-week exercise evolved into a 7-month operation, with three payload re-configurations, spanning all amphibious roles, over a distance of 40,000 nautical miles.*

**Key words:** amphibious; Libya; Somalia; HMS Ocean; 2011

The title of this case study paraphrases General Rupert Smith's book, *The Utility of Force*, in which he argues that the entire concept of military engagement has experienced a paradigm-shift from 'industrial war' to 'war amongst the people' (Smith 2005: 3). Recent Middle-East campaigns, the 2011 'Arab Spring' and ongoing Asian-Pacific regional disputes<sup>2</sup> all appear to validate this assertion. Smith's thesis does not mean force cannot be used for positive effect; rather that force/politics ratios must be re-calibrated by a greater admixture of politics alongside military force.

Ninety per cent of the world's population lives within 100 nautical miles of the sea (UK Parliament 2012: Ev-w47). Logically, therefore, 90 per cent of potential trouble-spots lie in littoral areas. As a timely reminder, David Kilcullen asserts that, post-Afghanistan, "it's time for the military to re-engage with the challenge of irregular warfare in the urban littoral" (Kilcullen 2013: viii). Embarking into an increasingly uncertain 'Asian-Century' means that the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) ability to conduct littoral manoeuvre has exponential relevancy, affording the government a highly cost-effective means of recalibrating inter-agency levers to assist regional partners prevent or resolve potential brush-fires. As Sir Basil Liddell Hart observed: "A self-contained and sea-based amphibious force is the best kind of fire extinguisher because of its flexibility, reliability, logistic simplicity and relative economy" (Liddell Hart 1960a: 128).

## **Strategic Context**

This case study's theme fuses Smith's and Kilcullen's assertions with the: 'strategic challenges that will arise' as part of the Asian-Century (Australian Government 2012: ii); United States 'strategic rebalancing' to the Asia-Pacific; and the maritime strategy adopted by Australia's 2013 Defence White Paper (Department of Defence 2013: 29) to underpin its strategic interests: a secure Australia; a secure South Pacific and Timor-Leste; a stable Indo-Pacific region; and a stable, rules-based global order (Department of Defence 2013: 24-27).

## **'Industrial-Era' Amphibious Roles**

ADF doctrine describes an amphibious operation as: "A military operation launched from the sea by a naval and landing force embarked in ships, landing craft or helicopters,

with the principle purpose of projecting landing forces ashore" (ADDP 2009: 1-2). It envisages four types of amphibious operations: demonstration, raid, assault and withdrawal (ADDP 2009: 3-1). History is punctuated by scalable examples of each, from discrete raids in Bordeaux and Singapore Harbours to Gallipoli, Dunkirk, Normandy and Inchon. More recent utility was illustrated in The Falklands (1982), Kuwait (1991) and East Timor (1999).

Sir Thomas More Molyneux's 1759 work *Conjunct Expeditions* was the first to articulate the complexity of amphibious operations. Molyneux argued that combined operations were a necessary component of national defence and that the fleet and army, acting as consort, seem to be the natural bulwark (Coetzee and Eysturliid 2013: 123-124). As Liddell Hart observed, overcoming these complexities demands consistent training: "Adequate amphibious means are not only a matter of ships. Skilled personnel are no less important ... the required skill is the fruit of long training in amphibious techniques and of constant practice in combination of the various elements in such a force (Liddell Hart 1960b).

A single Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) can deploy for months with controllable political overheads and latent capacity to deliver a spectrum of amphibious effects as illustrated by the case study below involving HMS Ocean, a 22,000-tonne amphibious Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH).

## **Amongst The People – A Glimpse of One Possible Future**

The imminent delivery of Australia's two 27,000-tonne LHDs provides a focus to develop a robust ADF littoral capability. Rightly, the ADF has reached out to long-established practitioners, namely the United States Marine Corps and the Royal Marines. As the ADF develops its capability, however, it must avoid being hypnotised by the traditional amphibious roles or seduced into replicating the industrial-scale of earlier campaigns.

Instead, it must focus on more likely regional threats. Contemporary threats 'amongst the people' mean that: a 'demonstration' is more likely to be humanitarian disaster-relief; a 'raid' to be a helicopter-borne, Special Forces hostage-rescue mission; an 'assault' to be a maritime-launched Apache helicopter strike; and a 'withdrawal' to be a non-combatant evacuation. This new paradigm demands that inter-agency planners, instead of solely military planners, design a strategic-level regional engagement

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<sup>2</sup>Multiple South China Sea territorial disputes plus the May 2014 *coup d'état* in Thailand.

campaign to utilise the scalable capabilities that amphibious forces can exert.

Special Forces have become the tool of choice for many governments. This case study reviews two operations to illustrate the utility of 21<sup>st</sup> century amphibious force. Specifically, it examines the Royal Navy's HMS *Ocean* 2011 deployment as a glimpse of one possible amphibious future.

### A Tale of Two Global Contingencies

HMS *Ocean* left Britain in April 2011 on a scheduled Mediterranean amphibious exercise, Exercise Cougar, with an embarked force of Royal Marines, Commando Helicopter Force, and Army Apache helicopters. It returned 229-days later, having supported operations in Libya and Somalia.

In May, *Ocean* was re-tasked to Operation Unified Protector off Libya. In addition to air and naval operations, a military liaison advisory team had been deployed in April (UK Parliament 2012: 18). As astute journalists noted, "the British campaign also had a secret ground aspect, as Special Forces blended in with rebel fighters"<sup>3</sup> to direct airstrikes and "enable rebel forces to operate more effectively" (UK Parliament 2012: Ev-w1). In complementing operations ashore, "*Ocean* launched Britain's first amphibious-based Apache helicopter raid on 3 June, destroying regime armoured vehicles, installations and communications" (Taylor 2011); and continued to do so throughout the campaign.

Broader amphibious utility was demonstrated by *Ocean's* other embarked capabilities. Sea King helicopters conducted area surveillance operations; on-board rigid-hull boats conducted high-speed interception and boarding-parties; whilst the LPH itself acted as a base to protect humanitarian shipping and prevent arms deliveries (Taylor 2011: Ev-w10).

After 4 months of operations off Libya, *Ocean* was ordered east of Suez. While the press reported accurately that *Ocean* had reconfigured her personnel and air group and prepared for further contingency tasking, it purposely omitted details of what that task entailed.<sup>4</sup> *Ocean's* re-deployment had coincided with the kidnap of Judith Tebbutt on 11 September 2011. The Tebbutt's were holidaying in a remote Kenyan resort when husband David was killed and Judith taken to Somalia. By 20 September, the British media were reporting that Special Forces were waiting for the green-light to deploy. During that period, *Ocean* had been rapidly re-rolled and steamed to the Arabian Sea as an amphibious contingency platform to support a potential Special Forces hostage-rescue operation.

### Conclusions

Despite omnipresent global instability, analysts failed to predict the Arab Spring or its after-shocks. Fragmented, social-media inspired revolutions, however, validate Smith's concept and re-calibrated utility of force. Whilst this case-study remains constrained by disclosure aspects regarding operations in Libya and Somalia, the overarching narrative is the utility of an integrated 21<sup>st</sup> century amphibious force. The

critical enabler was HMS *Ocean*. What started as a 7-week exercise evolved into a 7-month operation, with three payload re-configurations, spanning all amphibious roles, over a distance of 40,000 nautical miles.

The relevance of this case-study is three-fold. Firstly, it highlights LPH/LHD similarities and offers a glimpse of how the ADF could develop a region-specific amphibious capability rather than slavishly adopting United Kingdom/United States doctrinal and deployment models. Secondly, it fuses Molyneux's legacy with Liddell Hart's dictum that amphibious operations are an inherently joint, complex and necessary component of defence strategy, demanding constant practice. Thirdly, and most significantly, it cautions that 'war amongst the people' has fundamentally changed the rules of the game. While providing a useful handrail, operationalization of the four traditional amphibious roles has been radically altered in terms of time, dimension and simultaneity.

According to Britain's First Sea Lord, operations in Libya demonstrated the strategic utility of the Royal Navy and value of persistent presence in regions of interest.<sup>5</sup> Scalable utility and persistence are integral features of amphibious forces and will imminently provide the Australian Government with Liddell Hart's metaphorical fire-extinguisher to deter, defeat and contribute to the security of its strategic interests. In an archipelagic region, prone to brush-fires, a quality fire-extinguisher is essential.

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<sup>3</sup>Mark Urban (2012), Inside story of UK's secret mission to beat Gaddafi, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16573516>.

<sup>4</sup>*Navy News* (29 Sep 11), <https://navynews.co.uk/archive/news/item/1631>; *Daily Star* (20 Sep 11), <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/211871/Rescue-plan-for-Judith-Tebbutt>; *Daily Express* (13 Sep 11), <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/270943/Hunt-for-snatched-British-wife>.

<sup>5</sup>Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, Maritime Conference, Royal United Services Institute, London, July 2011.