NAVAL RESERVE OFFICERS TRAINING CORPS
AMPHIBIOUS WARFARE

THEMES AND TYPES OF AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS

I. 8 Themes of Amphibious Operations

Although each case is a discrete amphibious operation treated on its own merits, several themes will prevail throughout the course:

- The Problems of the Tadpole. Amphibious warfare does not have a domain of its own, but exists instead in the region between war on land and war at sea. Naval forces have only a limited and temporary ability to project force over land. Similarly, ground forces have only a limited and temporary ability to project influence over the sea. Land and naval warfare have fundamentally different characteristics. Like a tadpole, the amphibious operation must make a transition from the one element to the other and in so doing undergoes a transformation from naval power to land power. During this time, the amphibious force and the operation itself are most vulnerable. One of the principal concerns of the amphibian becomes to undergo that transformation as quickly as possible (that is, to build up ground combat power quickly), in order to minimize vulnerability.

- The Landing Itself Is Rarely the Key Problem. This is a corollary of the first theme. Historically, most actual landings have succeeded — that is, the attacker has succeeded in getting ashore. Defenders are rarely able to cover an entire shoreline, and so the attacker must sometimes fight a pitched battle merely to reach the beach. In fact, one of the primary objectives of the amphibious planner is to choose his landing sites so as to minimize resistance on the beach. Historically, the more critical problem for the attacker is building up enough combat power quickly to prevent being driven back into the sea when the enemy reacts to the landing by counterattacking.

- The Problems of Command. The fact that amphibious operations exhibit characteristics of both naval and land warfare pose problems for unity of command. In early amphibious operations a single leader directly commanded both components; Caesar in 54 B.C., for example, was both general and admiral. As each type of warfare became more complex and specialized, special command arrangements between land and naval commanders developed.
• The Amphibious Invasion Is a Means to an End, Not an End in Itself. The objective of the amphibious operation is not merely to deposit a ground force on the beach. The landing is merely a prerequisite for accomplishing a subsequent ground mission. Thus, consideration of the ground mission should drive amphibious planning -- although historically, this has not always been the case. In many cases, planners have become so concerned with the technically complex problem of getting to the beach that they have given little or no thought to what to do once they got there. Classic examples are Burnside's landing at Roanoke Island in 1862, or the first Union attack on Fort Fisher in 1864. By contrast, Eisenhower's landings in the Mediterranean and at Normandy show excellent planning beyond the shoreline. British General James Wolfe, victor at Louisbourg in 1758, believed that when an army has landed, the business is only half done. This insightful statement not only recognizes the difficulties of the landing itself, but also that the landing is merely a prelude to what follows.

• The Influence of Terrain and Geography. Like land and naval warfare, amphibious warfare is heavily influenced by the conditions of terrain and geography. Only certain portions of the world's coastlines are assailable by amphibious forces -- dictating if and where a landing can be made and, therefore, influencing both the attacker's and defender's plans. For example, in 1942, the vast stretches of usable shoreline on the North African coast gave Eisenhower the freedom to make landings against only light resistance and, thus, envelope his objectives by land. By contrast, the nature of the Pacific theater in the Second World War compelled Marine and Navy forces, in some cases, to make costly, direct assaults against fortified islands. The development of specialized amphibious equipment has decreased to some extent the obstacles imposed by geography and terrain.

• The Amphibious Operation as a Form of Envelopment. Often, amphibious operations have been a means for turning the enemy's flank by sea. This has occurred at various levels. Strategic examples include the Gallipoli expedition in 1915 and the landings in North Africa in 1942, followed by subsequent operations in the Mediterranean -- both designed to turn the strategic flank of Europe and open a new front. Operational examples include MacArthur's landing at Inchon in 1950 and the attempt to flank the Germans in Italy by landing at Salerno vice driving the length of the peninsula. The classic example of a tactical envelopment by amphibious landing is the Allied landing
at Anzio in 1944.

Such use of amphibious operations provides the attacker the
flexibility and initiative to attack where and when he wants.
In that regard, B.H. Liddell Hart wrote: "Amphibious
flexibility is the greatest strategic asset that a sea power
possesses". [Marines and Strategy, p. 31] Likewise, Winston
Churchill believed that it would be a crime to have amphibious
capability and leave it unused.

- **The Inherent Chaotic and Decentralized Nature of
Landings.** The technical problems of transforming from naval to
land power make a landing an extremely difficult undertaking.
Enemy resistance compounds the problem many times over. George
C. Marshall believed that a landing against organized and highly
trained opposition was probably the most difficult undertaking
which military forces would be called upon to face. By nature,
amphibious operations are thus fraught with friction. The
landing itself is by nature a small-unit action. The highest
level of direct control that can be extended is limited by the
number of men that can be carried in a single craft landing on
the beach. Small-unit leadership and initiative are imperative
to success. It is only after the landing force has gotten
organized on the beach that successively higher level commanders
can assume control. In some cases, as at Tarawa, this cannot be
gained for some time after the battle has begun.

- **The Development of Amphibious Technology and
Techniques.** Being a specialized and complex type of operation,
the amphibious landing requires specialized amphibious equipment
and techniques, especially in naval gunfire support and
amphibious craft and vehicles. The development of technology
and techniques has been a continuous process, beginning as early
as Caesar's invasions of Britain.