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Defense of Advanced Bases: the Forgotten Mission

Volume 67, Issue 2 | Author: [Gary W Anderson \(/person/gary-anderson\)](/person/gary-anderson)

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The ability to seize advanced naval and air bases is more important today than ever. But once seized they must be defended. The tools are there; what's needed now is a plan.

Since the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, one of the Marine Corps' primary missions established by law has been the seizure and defense of advanced naval bases. Marine expertise in the seizure aspect of this mission is unparalleled. Our defensive capabilities in this mission are less easily proven. In this we are essentially victims of our own success. In World War II and Korea, amphibious victories were so quickly exploited that the defensive aspects were not needed.

This may not be the case in the years ahead. There are three primary uses for the Marine Corps' being mentioned in the professional and public press. Each of these involves some potential for an enemy counterlanding. Marines could be used in their traditional role as amphibious forces, as part of a rapid deployment force, or in littoral defense. In reality, however, each ultimately would result in the occupation of an advanced naval or air base; this base would be vulnerable to counterlanding. Consequently, the defensive aspects of advanced base work could stand an updating to deal with the technology and tactics of the eighties.*

Logic and the examples of recent history indicate that there are two ways to defeat an amphibious landing. The first is to repel or destroy the amphibious task force (ATF) at sea; the second is to destroy the landing force (LF) ashore or in the water. The destruction of Japan's Midway operation in World War II is a good example of the first case. Since sea and air superiority represent two prerequisites for a successful amphibious operation, a fleet action presents the most inviting method of defeating an amphibious landing before it starts. Unfortunately, we cannot always count on a successful fleet action to protect the MAGTF ashore. The Navy may well be required to provide such a variety of services in the next war that a MAGTF ashore would most likely have to provide its own protection.

There are only two examples in modern history where defense forces have repulsed an amphibious landing without fleet support; these are Gallipoli and the first Japanese landing on Wake. Admittedly, in both cases the success of the defenders was more a result of the attacker's incompetence than the defender's skill, but they provide a good base to start an analysis.

Wake wasn't the high point of Imperial Japanese planning in World War II. In the first landing (11 December 1941) the Japanese failed to secure sea superiority, air superiority, or even a numerical advantage over the defenders. An ill-prepared U.S. Marine advanced base force was able to put the Japanese task force to rout by use of shore-based gunfire and aerial bombing. In their classic amphibious study, *The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War*, Jeter Isely and Philip Crowl use the Japanese experience in the first Wake landing as an example of the validity of Marine doctrine in calling for sea, air, and a three-to-one manpower superiority as prerequisites for an amphibious landing.

Gallipoli showed the potential for an opportunistic commander ashore to destroy an amphibious landing once it gets to the beach. The timely counterattack by Mustafa Kemal at Chunuk Bair on 25 April 1915 prevented the ANZAC forces from consolidating a reasonable force beachhead. It doomed them to be trapped on a narrow strip of beach for the remainder of the campaign.

Undoubtedly, a MAGTF defending against an enemy landing would like to repeat either of the examples given. Unfortunately, we will not be able to count on the incredibly poor planning and dismal execution that categorized Gallipoli and Wake Island on the attacking side. Ignoring bad generalship by the attacker, the defender has certain advantages in an amphibious operation. It will be up to the MAGTF commander to maximize these advantages.

Defeating the Amphibious Task Force

The defeat of the enemy force while it is still at sea is the most desirable alternative. Once operations have progressed ashore, it is much more difficult to dislodge the landing force. No matter how efficiently spread-loading is conducted, the loss of a single transport is a heavy blow to a landing force. Given the extreme dependence on mechanization which the Warsaw Pact employs, the loss of tankers or fuelcarrying ships would be disastrous; it's hard to run a tank battalion on the scrapings from an oil slick.

The primary emphasis which a defending MAGTF would place on amphibious defense should be on maintaining air superiority. In an age of diminishing military resources, it would be unrealistic and unwise to count on having new coastal defense missile and artillery systems. Our fixed-wing assets provide the MAB and the MAF with exactly what is needed to defeat an enemy counterlanding. A coordinated, combined arms force with sufficient balance of air, transport, artillery, and infantry units under a single commander provides exactly the type of counterforce that the Germans and Japanese lacked at Tarawa, Eniwetok, Okinawa, North Africa, Normandy and in so many other fruitless defenses. The mix of fighters, attack, reconnaissance and electronic warfare aircraft provides a perfect combination for antilanding ATF operations.

Currently, Marine aircraft lack some of the more sophisticated air-to-ship ordnance systems employed by the Navy. However, none of these is incompatible with existing Marine Corps aircraft systems; air-to-ship missiles and mines can easily be fitted to existing aircraft, and the aircraft crews could be trained to employ them without a major disruption in current operational efficiency.

In attempting to disrupt an amphibious landing, it would appear that the MAGTF commander would be well advised to expend no more than two-thirds of his assets against the enemy ATF. For reasons to be discussed later a reserve of fixed-wing aircraft must be maintained to support further operations ashore. In defense of littoral areas, this aviation function might have an even more useful collateral function: it could be used in denying the chokepoints to the Soviets as fleet exits. This sea control function was outlined by Cdr Bruce Van Heertum in MCG, Sep79.

Beating the Enemy Landing Force

Should MAGTF aviation fail to repel the enemy ATF, efforts must be directed toward destroying the enemy's landing force. Here we come face to face with the classic problem of counteramphibious defense: does one defend at the beach or in depth? Let's explore these two philosophies and discuss which might be more appropriate to the MAGTF:

The classic Japanese strategy of defeating the enemy at the beach has fallen into disrepute of late. While not proposing suicidal Banzai charges or self-termination in a beachside bunker, I would suggest that we would be professionally remiss if we did not review this strategy in light of new technology and weapons development. Wire-guided missiles, precision-guided artillery munitions, and better fire control have increased the lethal effects of potential beach defenses immeasurably. More than one Marine Corps critic has used this evidence to claim the impossibility of future successful amphibious landings. Now these arguments have some validity, and even a hypnotic attraction; the objection to them involves a basic problem of mass and concentration. It is very difficult to fortify every place that an enemy may land sufficiently to defeat his ship-to-shore movement. The cost of defending everywhere is to be strong nowhere; this is particularly true of the limited material and manpower available to a MAGTF.

The resources and time involved in creating an effective beach defense are enormous. The devilishly ingenious plans for the defense of the Atlantic Wall in World War II were good, but the ability to complete them on time was beyond the genius of even Erwin Rommel. There is no guarantee that a MAGTF commander will have either the time or the resources available to equal even the limited success that the "Desert Fox" achieved with his brilliant, if incomplete, preparations. Short of defending an island the size of Tarawa, an unlikely possibility, the static beachline defense doesn't look like an entirely viable option for a Marine commander.

The elastic inland defense adopted by the Japanese starting with the battle of Peleliu has a number of advantages for Marines. Although the casualty ratio of indepth defense is not particularly superior to the static beach defense, the time required to establish a viable beachhead is significant. In comparing the Gilberts, Marshalls, and Mariannas campaigns where the static defense was used, with the later campaigns where elastic indepth defenses predominated, we see a distinct difference. In the Pacific the static defense campaigns roughly averaged 12 days; the indepth defense campaigns, 47 days. Although all the Japanese efforts were failures, the additional time provided by the elastic defense could have been invaluable if reinforcements had been available.

In both approaches, the ultimate cause of failure by the defenders was the inability to launch a coordinated combined arms counterattack. There is a critical point in any amphibious operation where, as a result of the confusion of the ship-to-shore movement, a well-coordinated counterattack would succeed. The first night at Tarawa and the first week at Normandy are prime examples; this weakness was admitted by the commanders involved. In all cases, however, the ability to launch these counterattacks was not as great as the willingness to do so. The two primary reasons for these failures are cited as disruption of communications and the attackers' ability to interdict the counterattack by means of air superiority.

Two Prerequisites

"Evidence thus far would indicate that an elastic defense combined with a coordinated well-supported counterattack would be the best way of defeating an amphibious landing. This belief is supported by the Turkish experience at Gallipoli, but it is much easier said than done. Experience in World War II would indicate that there are two keys to launching a successful counterattack; these are air cover and communications.

Failure of communications was a disastrous and persistent plague on Japanese defensive plans in the Pacific. The disruption of wire communications on Tarawa, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Saipan were largely credited for Japan's inability to respond decisively to the threat on the beach.

At Normandy, the lack of air power was a key in thwarting a combined German mechanized counterattack against the allied landing. German tankers of the Panzer Lehr and Hitler Youth Divisions watched in grim despair as the eagles of American and British aerial might descended at will on their columns, turning their counterattack into a bloodstained carnage of shattered men and machines. The allies effectively sealed off the beachhead. This was a direct result of negligible German tactical air support.

The MAGTF has several definite advantages that it can call upon to protect these two vital anti-amphibious assets. First, our ability to use radio communications is a tremendous improvement over World War II technology. The disruption of Japanese communications in World War II was directly attributed to the frailty of telephone wire when subjected to the effects of naval gunfire and aerial bombardment. Our ability to use radios down to the platoon level provides a vast improvement over the Japanese method. The use of wire and other means as a backup is also helpful.

At this point let's return to the earlier statement calling for a reserve of one-third of the MAGTF's fixed-wing assets. These assets should be committed to providing local air support of counterattacking forces to ensure that they don't suffer the same fate as Hitler's legions in 1944. These assets will be needed to protect the counterattack force from enemy air, provide aerial reconnaissance, and furnish close air support for the counterattack.

MAGTF defensive priorities should stress defeat of the enemy at sea as a prime objective. Should combat operations move to the beach, five key elements will be needed to repulse such landings. These are:

Reconnaissance: Early detection of the main enemy effort is essential.

Communications: A sound, redundant mix of radio, wire, and other means will help prevent a repeat of Japanese defensive failures during World War II.

Separation and Camouflage: In both nuclear and conventional situations, a healthy spread of logistics, reserves, headquarters, and fire support elements should be absolutely necessary.

Aviation Reserve: The one-third force reserve of fixed-wing aviation assets previously mentioned is necessary to support the counterattack.

Strong Mobile Reserves: As in the mobile defense, the counterlanding defense force should place the majority of its assets in a strong, balanced, mobile reserve; this force will be used to strike decisively before the enemy force beachhead line is secured.

The Soviet Situation

Thus far our discussion has been limited to a generalized approach to the counterlanding problem. At this point it is appropriate to address our most probable opponents in any future conflict, the Soviet Union and her surrogates. According to LtCol D.K. Cleff, the nine battalions of Soviet naval infantry are designed to maximize their effectiveness by being attached to nine motorized rifle divisions. The naval infantry would provide the first wave of the division-sized amphibious assault. This gives the naval infantry a much greater amphibious potential than its 12,000-man strength would originally indicate.

As Andrew Hull indicated in his article "Soviet Naval Infantry" (MCG, Jul80), the Soviet naval infantry can be used in four types of amphibious missions. These are strategic, operational, diversionary, or tactical. Given the most likely Marine Corps missions in the eighties, I would estimate that there are two cases where Marines might interface with an attempted Soviet landing. Should Marines be assigned the defense of a littoral area, particularly if it is choking Soviet sea exits, the Russians might attempt an operational landing to dislodge our forces. In the case of a Marine seizure of a port or airhead to provide a follow-on for a rapid deployment operation, the Soviets might attempt a tactical landing to disrupt the further flow of supplies. In either case the Russians have strengths and weaknesses that must be considered.

The increased power and experience of the Soviet navy, air arm, and land forces offer some distinct strengths in providing amphibious operating forces. First, the cross attachment of naval infantry and army forces allows a large potential manpower advantage, or at least it seems so on paper. In addition, an amphibious capability gives a nation the familiar advantages of surprise, strategic mobility, and a seaborne flanking potential in support of ground operations. A third advantage derives from recent Soviet efforts to beef up their naval gunfire support assets; newer cruisers, such as the Soviety Soyuz, have been fitted with 7.3-inch guns which lend an impressive naval gunfire asset to its fleet.

Fortunately for us, the Soviet Union also has some apparent amphibious weaknesses that could be exploited by an opportunistic defense force. The most glaring, but possibly fleeting, disadvantage is its continued weakness in fleet aviation. Despite the appearance of Hormone helicopters and SU-17 Fitter attack bombers, the Soviets have yet to develop the level of carrier air sophistication required for long-range support of amphibious operations. Although this deficiency can be offset if the operation is conducted close to shore-based aviation assets, it is a limiting factor in a long-distance venture, such as a Persian Gulf intervention. A second limitation is that Soviet seaborne command and control systems have yet to be tested in combat.

On the tactical level, the use of naval infantry as the first wave in an assault could cause the severe limitation of shortening the landing frontage to one-half of a colored beach. In an era of superweapons this early concentration of men and material is dangerous indeed. Another problem inherent in the cross attachment of elite naval infantry with less

well trained conscript line divisions is the potential of a break in the continuity of the assault. In amphibious operations rapid buildup ashore is essential. The break between the elite naval infantry landing and the less sophisticated motorized infantry is an area that should be of concern to Soviet planners.

Beating the Soviet ATF

Earlier in this article, we identified the sea as being the preferred place to stop an amphibious thrust. Hopefully the Navy could accommodate us by sinking our opponents far short of any beach; however, in the worst case, the MAGTF commander may well find himself with a Soviet fleet to his seaward flank. If Mr. Hull has correctly interpreted Soviet doctrine we could then expect an increasing preparation of the beach by Soviet naval gunfire and air. As mentioned earlier, the proper response would be to commit up to two-thirds of MAGTF fixedwing assets to disrupt the Soviet ATF. The priority of targets in this effort should be aviation assets, command and control ships, amphibious ships, tankers, and finally, fire support ships. Should the attack progress past the line of departure, landing craft would also be attacked.

Some will criticize the idea of holding one-third of the aviation assets in reserve for operations ashore as not concentrating sufficient mass at the decisive point; this criticism has some validity, and the rules of common sense must apply. It would be unthinkable for a MAGTF commander who is winning the battle at sea to fail for want of a few more additional air strikes as a result of an arbitrary reserve strength figure. Any MAGTF commander in his right mind would turn a Nelsonian eye to such a rule if success were indicated. I would merely enjoin the commander to establish the reserve and not to commit it if substantial early success were not achieved. Military historian John Keegan reminds us not to reinforce failure. I believe that to be a good rule of thumb.

Defeating the Soviet Landing Force

Should the Russian forces proceed ashore, the earlier mentioned priorities should apply. It will be necessary to determine the main landing beaches and helicopter landing zones as early as possible. If this can be done quickly, between H hour and H+2, it seems reasonable that a brigade-sized MAGTF could beat a landing force of up to a division in strength.

Once ashore the Soviets must make the transition from the first wave of naval infantry to the follow-on motorized rifle troops. We can also assume that helicopterborne troops will attempt to establish blocking positions inland.

The timing between the landing and the MAGTF's counterattack will be critical. The manner in which the MAGTF commander handles his electronic warfare and fire support assets during this interval will be the decisive factor. By using indirect fire, air strikes, expendable jammers, and scatterable mines, the MAGTF should slow down and confuse the follow-on infantry's attempts to establish a coherent antiair defense system and to link up with their blocking forces inland.

The Egyptian Precedent

Although we have not seen a modern post World War II Soviet combat landing, the Egyptian crossing of the Suez in the 1973 Yom Kippur war may well indicate the kind of sequence one might expect from the Soviets, or their surrogates, in a beach assault. If we substitute beachhead for bridgehead, we see in the Egyptian crossing a deliberate buildup of elite troops covered by antiaircraft systems on the far shore. The first wave carried wireguided antitank missiles to provide interim antitank defense until Egyptian tanks reached the far shore. According to the London Sunday Times report of the battle, the interval between the initial crossing and the eventual buildup of heavy Egyptian forces on the far bank offered critical opportunities that were missed by the defenders.

We can expect a similar attempt during a Soviet landing. The initial Israeli failures to quickly identify the bridgehead, disrupt the landings by fire, and to launch coordinated counterattacks by balanced combined arms forces cannot be repeated by the MAGTF.

If our efforts succeed the Soviet force will be prevented from establishing the kind of integrated antiair system that enabled the Egyptians to strengthened their bridgehead on the Suez in 1973. This would allow the type of coordinated tank/infantry counterattack that could defeat the helicopterborne force and beach landings in detail.

Developing a Doctrine

It would be an understatement to say that counteramphibious defense has a dubious history. In 1920, however, amphibious operations had an equally poor record. The time has come for the Marine Corps to balance its two advance base missions and develop an effective modern doctrine for counterlanding operations. This article is not designed to provide such doctrine; it simply suggests starting points for updating the defense of the advanced base. The unique capabilities of the modern MAGTF are ideal for such a defense. Properly used, a MAGTF can exploit its combined arms potential to thwart an enemy landing.

A strong defense doctrine that is capable of being implemented within existing resources would be a prime consideration in preparing the Marine Corps to meet its responsibilities over the next two decades. The ability to seize advanced naval and air bases is more important today than ever. But once seized they must be defended. The tools for this are available; all that is needed is a plan.

* FMFM 8-3 was last revised in 1974; it does not take into account Soviet naval developments, ATGM technology, or the increased capability of precision guided munitions; In addition, the command relationships outlined in the manual would need revision if a Marine Corps sea control mission (MCG, Sep79) were to become a reality.

 </person/gary-anderson>



[Gary W Anderson \(/person/gary-anderson\)](/person/gary-anderson)