

RMMGS078; ROYAL MARINES IN COMBINED OPERATIONS 1939-45

Introduction

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the functions of the Royal Marines were as follows :—

To provide detachments which, whilst fully capable of manning their share of the gun armament of ships, are specially trained to provide a striking force drawn either from the Royal Marine Divisions¹ or the Fleet. This force to be immediately available for use under the direction of the Naval Commander-in-Chief for such amphibious operations as raids on the enemy coast and bases, or the seizure and defence of temporary bases for use by the Fleet.

These functions envisaged the Army waging a continental war with the Royal Navy holding the seas and conducting, as a subsidiary to naval strategy, such amphibious operations as were necessary with its Royal Marine forces. It was under these conditions that the Corps carried out its initial amphibious operations of the war, notably in Norway, France and the Low Countries in 1940. To this end, too, the original Royal Marine Brigade was formed, expanding later to the Royal Marine Division.

When the Army was driven from Europe, a totally different state of affairs arose, in which combined operations assumed a major role in grand strategy. In particular, raids on certain parts of the enemy coasts became the province of the Director of Combined Operations and not of the Admiralty, to whom, strictly speaking, the Royal Marine formations belonged. The course of events proved, moreover, that an amphibious operation for the seizure of a naval base had assumed proportions far beyond the strength of any force of which the Corps could dispose. At the same time large Army formations were being trained in the technique of landing operations ; such operations had become part of Allied grand strategy rather than the responsibility of the Naval C.-in-C. alone. In actual fact, Royal Marine formations found themselves operating under Army rather than Naval Command. The old definition of the Corps' function was, in practice, obsolete.

The functions of the Royal Marines were therefore re-defined as follows:— To provide:—

- (1) Detachments for service in H.M. Ships which, whilst fully capable of manning their share of the gun armament, are specially trained to undertake such landing operations as the Naval Commander-in-Chief may find it necessary to order.
- (2) Units to undertake, in co-operation with other Services, special amphibious operations.
- (3) Units for the rapid establishment and temporary defence of Naval and Fleet Air Arm Bases.

Although this definition was not laid down until 1943, it should be realised that it was made, in fact, after the event. From 1940 onwards, the Corps had swiftly developed and adapted itself to meet the changed amphibious conditions of the times. During the process, the work of C.O.H.Q. became linked more and more with that of the Royal Marines. It is the purpose of this chapter to outline briefly the major amphibious commitments which were undertaken by the Corps. These may conveniently be grouped as follows :—

- (1) Commando forces.
- (2) Support.
- (3) Minor Landing Craft.
- (4) Beach Maintenance.
- (5) Raiding.
- (6) Miscellaneous.

The part played by the Royal Marine Commandos, and details of the Royal Marines in the support role, both afloat and ashore, are the subject of separate guidesheets.

¹ This refers to the Headquarter Establishments at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth which were, at that time, called Divisions.

Landing Craft

Prior to 1943, minor landing craft had been manned by sailors. During the first quarter of 1943, the problem of finding the manpower for the assault fleet and, at the same time, to provide the various and multitudinous special parties required, came under very close study. Possible solutions included the provision of American landing craft crews and the transfer of personnel to the Navy from the other Services.

In the event, it was agreed that the load should be divided between the three Services, the Army and the Air Force making a certain contribution to assist the Navy. It was at this time that the Royal Marine Division was disbanded and its units reorganised to meet the requirements of the new situation : its Headquarters, under Major-General Sturges, provided the main element of the new Commando Group Headquarters, its infantry battalions were re-formed as Commandos, and the large numbers of officers and other ranks from the other units of the Division were used to man landing craft. Thus the Royal Marines assumed what was to become one of their permanent war and post-war commitments. Previously they had only manned the guns of support craft.

The acceptance of this landing craft commitment involved a considerable change of policy for the Corps. In particular, the admission of Royal Marine Officers to the command of commissioned ships of the Royal Navy was in itself a marked departure from tradition and a development of importance. A.F.O. 3795/43 is of interest in this connection :—

*" Royal Marines Command in Certain Classes of Vessel
(C.W. 24996/43.—19 Aug. 1943)*

In the following classes of vessels, officers of the Royal Marines are to be employed as Executive Officers. For the purpose of assessing their relative executive rank, Article 224, Clause 2, of K.R. and A.I. is to be followed. The order of command of such officers amongst themselves and in relation to Executive Officers of the Royal Navy, Royal Naval Reserve and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, will then be governed by the rules in Article 175-181 and elsewhere.

They will be entitled to command money, entertainment allowance and First Lieutenant's allowance at the same rates and under the same rules as for executive officers.

Royal Marine Officers appointed in command will exercise all the powers of Commanding Officers of H.M. Ships.

All Royal Marine Officers appointed to these vessels will previously have been given a suitable course of navigation.

Classes of Vessels affected

Landing craft, assault	..	..	..	..	(L.C.A.)
Landing craft, flak	..	..	..	..	(L.C.F.)
Landing craft, gun	..	..	..	..	(L.C.G.)
Landing craft, infantry	..	..	..	..	(L.C.I.)
Landing craft, mechanised	..	..	..	..	(L.C.M.)
Landing craft, personnel	..	..	..	..	(L.C.P.)
Landing craft, support	..	..	..	..	(L.C.S.)
Landing craft, tank	..	..	..	..	(L.C.T.)
Landing craft, vehicle	..	..	..	..	(L.C.V.)
Landing barges	..	..	..	..	(L.B.)"

Nine months after the decision that the Corps should man British minor landing craft, two-thirds of the British craft in the " Overlord " landing were manned by Royal Marines. This is ample evidence both of the adaptability of the Corps and of the excellence of the training organisation which was set up to meet the commitment. From then onwards Royal Marine-manned landing craft took part in amphibious operations in all theatres, notably at Walcheren, in the Mediterranean and the Arakan. One advantage of having soldier/sailor crews for such craft was brought out during operations against the island of Brae in the Adriatic in 1944. L.C.A.s had landed about 50 men of 2 Commando, who held a small perimeter after the main force had withdrawn. The craft were lying in a cove when the Commandos ashore were heavily engaged by the Germans. Headed by their officer, the crew of the L.C.A. left their craft in charge of one man and went inshore as a military organisation to extricate the Commandos. They carried Brens and carbines, and their arrival tipped the scales enabling the Commandos to withdraw, bringing with them a seriously wounded officer who could not otherwise have been evacuated.

Beach Maintenance

The development and employment of the Beach Organisation eventually became the responsibility of the Army concerning its own beach maintenance, and the provision of the organisation to carry out the task. But mention will be made here of the R.M. Beach Unit, which was formed in 1941 for use in support of the R.M. Brigade, and the part played by the Royal Marines in the formation and operation of Beach Bricks for operations in Sicily and Italy in 1943.

The 7th Battalion Royal Marines, which left U.K. for South Africa in late 1942, was ordered to the Middle East in December, 1942. On arrival, the Commanding Officer was required to draw up a draft organisation for a Beach Brick within five days.

This was done. The battalion remained at Kabrit from 1st January, 1943, until embarking for Sicily in July, 1943. During this time, in conjunction with the C.T.C., Kabrit and G.H.Q. Middle East, in Cairo, the Beach Brick Organisation was evolved and Bricks were formed and trained. Briefly the Bricks consisted of a nucleus battalion, to which specialised units (an A.A. Regiment, Signals, R.E., R.A.S.C., R.A.O.C., R.A.M.C., a R.N. Beach Commando) were added, making up a total strength of about 2,600. A defence company with carrier-borne mortars was provided by the nucleus battalion, but the essence of the idea was that all Brick personnel were prepared to fight, the rifle companies of the nucleus battalion providing the hard core of this defensive potential.

7 R.M. trained itself and its attached units for this role, and produced teams of instructors to assist in the training, in Egypt and Palestine, of the four infantry battalions chosen to fulfil a similar role (1st Bn. Welch Regiment, 1st Bn. Highland Light Infantry, 2nd Bn. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and 18th Bn. Durham Light Infantry) and their attached units. All five Bricks were employed in the landings in Sicily.

Mobile Landing Craft Advanced Bases

Some mention must be made of the M.O.L.C.A.B.s. These were bases possessing facilities which could rapidly be established on a selected site for the accommodation of personnel and the maintenance and first aid repairs of hulls, machinery and armament of landing craft. The total strength of a M.O.L.C.A.B. was 36 officers and 374 other ranks, of which the major proportion were Royal Marines, under a Royal Marine Commanding Officer. The functions of the M.O.L.C.A.B. were as follows :—

- (1) As a temporary advanced base at which the short range portion of an assault force (the Build-up Group) could assemble in preparation for an assault.
- (2) As an advanced base set up in captured territory directly after an assault to support the build-up phase of an operation.
- (3) As an advanced base at which a Build-up Group could re-form, recuperate and refit, after an assault, in preparation for a new operation
- (4) As a temporary addition to a static rear base in order to provide increased facilities during a peak load period.

These units were designed primarily for use in South-East Asia and the Far East and, in the event, owing to the collapse of Japan, the five units which had been planned were not all found necessary. However, half of one M.O.L.C.A.B. was sailed across the Channel, transported by road to the Rhine and used to assist in the Rhine crossing. Subsequently two M.O.L.C.A.B.s were located in the Far East.

Raiding

The Commando role of the Royal Marines with its embodied responsibility for amphibious raiding, was by no means a new departure for the Corps. Operations by various ships' detachments early in the war (notably by that of H.M.S. *Ramillies* at Diego Suarez, Madagascar) can reasonably be considered as falling within its scope. Other purely amphibious raiding operations by units other than Commandos were also undertaken; details of operations by three such units are narrated briefly here.

11th Battalion Royal Marines

This unit was the infantry battalion of 1st Group of the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.), which was organised to establish and defend an advanced naval base. After the withdrawal from Greece, this unit was located in the Middle East and carried out a small raid on the island of Kuponisi to destroy a radio location station. Later it attempted a much larger scale raid to destroy harbour installations at Tobruk. This operation, undertaken when Rommel had driven the 8th Army back to El Alamein, did not succeed owing to bad weather and the preparedness of the defenders.

Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment

This unit, under the cover name of the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment, had been formed, in July, 1942, from selected officers and other ranks of the Royal Marines. They had been specially trained in the use of canoes with the object of carrying out operations, either of reconnaissance or attack, against targets which could not be dealt with by other means.

The detachment underwent very severe endurance tests, and were expert in the use of " limpet " mines.¹ This form of attack was specially useful against ships in harbours where it was not desired to employ aircraft in bombing, owing to the presence of neutral or friendly inhabitants. This force from its inception was under the command of C.C.O.

On 30th October, 1942, the following letter was sent by C.C.O. to the Secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee:—

"Operation ' Frankton ' has been planned to meet Lord Selborne's requirement, referred to in C.O.S. (42) 223 (O) and subsequent papers, that steps should be taken to attack Axis ships which are known to be running the blockade between France and the Far East.

Both seaborne and airborne methods of attacking the ships have been carefully examined, and the plan now proposed is the only one which offers a good chance of success.

On an average, between six and ten blockade runners are usually found alongside the quays at Bordeaux, in addition to other shipping. It is hoped to deal with at least six blockade runners.

Briefly, the plan is for one officer and five other ranks of the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment to paddle up the River Gironde in ' cockles ,² moving during the hours of darkness only, and to place ' limpets ' on the water-line of the ships they find at Bordeaux. The ' cockles ' will be carried to within nine miles of the mouth of the river in a submarine which will be on passage to normal patrol duty and thus will not require to be specially detailed."

At their meeting on 3rd November, the Chiefs of Staff " approved the plan for Operation ' Frankton.' "

No. 1 section R.M. Boom Patrol Detachment under Major H. G. Hasler, Royal Marines, was selected to train for this operation. The following programme was carried out:—

31st October-7th November. In H.M.S. *Forth*, with six cockles Mark II, developing the technique of hoisting a boat out fully loaded (480-lb. load including crew) by means of a tackle and an extension girder 4 ft. long on the muzzle of the gun of a " T " Class submarine. Training included dummy limpet attacks and 24 hours' training in P. 339.

10th-14th November. Carrying out exercise " Blanket " (attack on Deptford from Margate, via River Swale).

19th-20th November. In H.M.S. *Forth* preparing and packing stores, testing hoisting gear under full load, swinging compasses, field training ashore, fusing limpets, etc.

30th November-5th December. On passage in H.M.S. *Tuna*, briefing crews, study of air photographs and reconnaissance reports.

The cockles embarked in H.M.S. *Tuna* were launched off the mouth of the Gironde River at about 8 p.m. on the night of 7th December. In his report on the operation to the Secretary of the Admiralty, dated 29th April, C.C.O. reported as follows :—

" I forward herewith the report of the Force Commander (Major H. G. Hasler, R.M.) on Operation ' Frankton.' "

Of the six canoes, each manned by two Royal Marines, which were launched from H.M.S. *Tuna* off the mouth of the Gironde River, one was damaged in launching and never left the submarine, two were capsized in tidal races and one lost touch at the mouth of the Gironde.

The remaining two canoes manned respectively by Major Hasler and Marine Sparks and by Corporal Laver and Marine Mills, successfully reached their objective 50 miles up the Gironde River and attached the limpets to six ships.

There is good reason to believe that at least three and probably five ships were holed, of which at least three are believed to have been blockade runners.

¹ Small explosive charges which could be secured to the hulls of ships by electric magnets and which were fitted with fuses.

² A small semi-folding canoe, quick to erect and capable of carrying two men and 200 lb. of stores. Designed by Mr. Goatley to the specifications of C.O.H.Q.

Of the personnel engaged, Major Hasler and Marine Sparks have successfully regained this country. Marine Moffat is known to have been found drowned by the Germans at the entrance of the Gironde River whilst Cpl Sheard was never found. The remainder were captured and shot.

This brilliant little operation carried through with great determination and courage is a good example of the successful use of 'limpeteers.'

From documents captured at the end of the war, it is now clear that the following ships sustained damage:—

Alabama .. five limpets exploded.
Tannenfels .. two limpets exploded.
Dresdan .. two limpets exploded.
Portland .. one limpet exploded.

A further explosion occurred on the seaward side of *Sperrbrecher* 5. No damage was caused and it was presumed that the explosive charge had dropped off the ship's side and exploded on the river bed.

R.M. Detachment 385

This detachment was specially formed early in 1944. It was composed of ranks who were highly trained canoeists and trained, to a moderately good standard, as swimmers. It formed the general purpose part of the Small Operations Group, whose task in S.E.A.C. was to provide small parties of uniformed troops trained and equipped to operate against targets on enemy-occupied coasts or in river and lake areas. Other units in the Group were Combined Operations Pilotage Parties, a Special Boat Section and a Sea Reconnaissance Unit. It is of interest that the setting up of this Group was the first attempt made to co-ordinate the activities of various units with similar roles which had previously operated as " Private Armies." It is also of interest that the Small Operations Group was commanded by a Royal Marine officer, Colonel H. T. Tollemache.

Miscellaneous Tasks

In addition to the major roles which the Corps was called upon to fulfill in Combined Operations, there were many others, smaller and, maybe, of a more temporary or *ad hoc* nature. Particularly is this true in the case of N.W. Europe where :—

- (1) R.M. Port Parties fulfilled a multitude of roles during and after " Overlord " in France and Belgium.
- (2) R.M. Signallers (800 personnel) played a large part in naval communications ashore.
- (3) A R.M. Provost Company landed with Forces " G," " J " and " S " in the initial assault on the Normandy coast and was wholly engaged in operational duties on the beaches for the first fourteen days.
- (4) R.M. Engineers, from the earliest days of the operation, performed a variety of tasks in France.
- (5) The R.M. Engineer Commando provided Landing Craft Obstruction Clearance Units during the assault and afterwards took part in operations inshore as demolition teams with 1st and 4th Commando Brigades.
- (6) R.M. Armoured Support Group. Originally it was intended that this Group should man Centaur tanks mounting a 95-mm. gun, which would act as a ready-made turret in L.C.T. (A.). The craft would beach and the unit (then known as the R.M. Support Craft Regiment) would operate as Field Artillery from their beached craft. The role in which the Group finally operated added a third task, which was to strengthen the fire of the divisional artillery and, with this end in view, the tanks went ashore and operated up to ten miles inland.

Royal Marine Officers also served within C.O.H.Q. and were to be found in all branches of the staff and all its various activities. In particular, the first Director (later Deputy Director of Combined Operations) from 21st July, 1940, until 13th November, 1940, was General Bourne; Brigadier Wildman-Lushington was R.M. Adviser to C.C.O. and later Chief of Staff from 19th December, 1941, until 20th December, 1943 ; and Brigadier V. D. Thomas, R.M., was Chief of Staff from 21st December, 1943, until 22nd September, 1946.

Conclusion

The part played by the Royal Marines in Combined Operations in World War II has been summarised under the main headings. To give a final picture of the part played by the Corps, it is of interest to enumerate the main roles performed by them in the Normandy invasion. Some seventeen thousand Royal Marines were in action, by far the largest Royal Marine effort of the war. The following were the main activities :—

Five R.M. Commandos and 4 S.S. Brigade H.Q. with tasks ashore.

R.M. Landing Craft; more than two-thirds of the L.C.A. and most of the minor craft in the Build-up Force were manned by Marines.

R.M. Armoured Support Group. Guns crews of L.C.G. and L.C.F. About half the Landing Craft Obstruction Clearance Units were Royal Marines.

R.M. Signals were largely employed in the organisation of the Flag Officer, British Assault Area.

Detachments in H.M. Ships in the Bombardment Force, several detachments were in greater than normal strength.

Naval Camp Staffs on both sides of the Channel.

R.M. Provost employed on beaches in naval ports and attached to Commandos.

R.M. Port Parties in three ports on the Normandy side.

R.M. Hard Parties loading craft on the U.K. side.