

AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT MANOEUVRE FROM THE SEA

Tristan Lovering (editor)
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This is not perhaps the most obvious topic for review in the *Journal* of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. But since medical services have always been woven throughout the structure of every military unit, it seems fair to assume that there is a number, and possibly quite a large number, of Fellows of this College who have a passing interest – even first hand experience – of military affairs.

This book is a wonderful compendium – cock-ups, triumphs and all.

Each operation has been described by an expert. Of special interest are the two assaults that have been written up by a Fellow of this College, Professor John Forfar. Captain John Forfar was the Medical Officer of 47 Royal Marine Commando and won a Military Cross during the Assault on Walcheren in 1944. He writes dispassionately in the third person and yet describes most vividly the action and the strategic significance. Walcheren was an outstanding success which was easily as important as the operation at Arnhem. Perhaps we would have heard more of Walcheren if, like Arnhem, it had failed?

John Forfar's other piece is arguably even more interesting. The capture by 47 Commando of the coastal village of Port-en-Bessin as part of the June 1944 landings was a classic Commando amphibious operation. The target was of great strategic significance because it was to be the terminal for the fuel pipeline upon which the subsequent Normandy battles were to depend. The Commanding Officer of 47 Commando opted for a flank march of 10 miles rather

than a frontal assault. With Forfar as the Medical Officer, the Commando landed on D-Day and lost a quarter of their strength on landing. They landed two miles further from target than intended. They were strung out over a mile of coast, the Commanding Officer was missing, and many men were missing their boots, rifles and heavy weapons having had to swim for their lives to get ashore. Forfar had lost the bulk of his medical supplies. From these inauspicious beginnings, they managed to gather themselves together, and struck out inland and then parallel to the coast towards their objective behind the coastal defences. Cut off in enemy territory, outnumbered, outgunned, no logistics, without sleep for three days, they eventually assaulted the cliffs either side of the village on the afternoon of 7 June with gallantry worthy of the Victoria Cross, having overcome every unforeseen obstacle placed in their way. Read all about it in this book, and in Forfar's own book *From Omaha to the Scheldt – the story of 47 Royal Marine Commando*.¹

With action in the air, on land, at sea, and below the sea, amphibious warfare embraces the most complex of all military operations and the expertise required to conduct them successfully is a perishable, fragile thing. For 40

years throughout the Cold War, amphibious warfare was the military runt in this country when it came to defence spending. In 1981, it was hanging by a perilously frayed thread indeed. The Falklands War – written up in this book by Julian Thompson who commanded 3 Commando Brigade – came just in time to preserve this precious experience and thus 21 years later the British Royal Marines were able to play a key part in the highly successful seizing of the Al Faw Peninsular in the Iraq War of 2003.

It has been said that there are only three types of military operations: adjustable military foul-ups, semi adjustable military foul-ups and complete military foul-ups. This is an acceptance that there is an infinite number of uncontrollable variables in war, and that the only thing one can expect with any confidence is the unexpected. Success depends on many factors, but if we allow the experiences of our forefathers to gather dust in unread books, then we can only expect our foul-ups to be complete. This book is replete with them all.

Brigadier I Gardiner
Royal Marines

The full version of this review can be found on the College website.

