



Royal Marines:

Soldiers from the sea

by Col T. J. Saxon, Jr., USMC (Ret)



Why has Great Britain failed to exploit the amphibious capabilities of our brothers-in-arms?

Many historians claim the turning point in the American Revolution came at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. And had the British the amphibious equipment to execute the preferred tactics the outcome of the battle could have been different and the course of the incipient rebellion radically affected.

True, the British won a tactical victory on Bunker Hill. After being repulsed twice, the

Redcoats finally flanked the American breastworks and drove the colonists from the heights commanding Boston harbor. But it was a "dear bought victory," according to British Gen Henry Clinton—"another such would have ruined us." Statistics bear him out. The British lost 1,084 killed and wounded out of 2,200 engaged, against American losses of 441 out of 3,200 militia. More importantly, the battle proved that a homespun militia could slug it out with regulars in a real stand-up fight. This strategic fact aroused a spirit of exultation and confidence throughout the continent.

General Thomas Gage, the Captain-General of His Majesty's forces in North America and military governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had warned the home government for months before Bunker Hill that they must either abandon the Colonies to their fate or send massive reinforcements to overawe the Whigs and the Liberty Men. The dumping of three shiploads of tea, subject to a nominal export duty, into Boston harbor in 1774 by outraged colonists—thinly disguised as Mohawk Indians and Negroes—indicated the more radical colonists meant to goad King George III and his officials into a showdown.

To punish the colonists for the Boston Tea Party, the port was closed to commerce and by May 1775 Gage had received reinforcements which brought his force up to 10,000. This did not include the sailors and Marines in Adml Graves' fleet. Nevertheless, the British at Boston were hemmed in on every land side except in the town of Charleston, which had been evacuated, and the peninsula on which it

stood, now a no-man's land. Gage did not have sufficient troops to occupy the peninsula which lay some 500 yards across the Charles River from Boston. However, he considered the threat a minor one, since the peninsula lay under the protective guns of the British fleet.

On 12 June Gage offered a pardon to all of the "infatuated multitudes" who "with a preposterous parade . . . affect to hold the army besieged" if they would lay down their arms. The colonists responded on the night of 12 June by moving three Massachusetts regiments onto the Charleston Peninsula and throwing up a breastwork of dirt. The original plan was to fortify Bunker Hill, but a reconnaissance convinced the American regimental commanders that a second mount, known locally as Breed's Hill, would command the harbor more effectively. Within four hours, 1,000 militiamen, using only picks, shovels and their bare hands, had thrown up a shoulder-high earthen fort.

British sentries in Boston had reported hearing some activity on the peninsula but both Gens Clinton and William Howe agreed the "minor demonstration" could be dealt with the following morning. At dawn HMS *Lively* fired a broadside at Breed's Hill. Senior British officers watched with disbelief as the cannonballs bounced off the sloping face of the earthwork. The fort was proof against musket and long-range cannon. The colonists overnight had turned the British position; the threat of American bombardment of British positions in Boston must be dealt with before Gage could put into operation his plan to break out and attack the colonists' concentra-



A parade of Royal Marines from 1664 until the present.

tion at Cambridge.

Howe, who was to lead the British attack, saw little reason for haste. He equipped his troops for a major field operation: bread and boiled beef for three days and a parade with full equipment. Moreover, Howe's choice of a landing site was influenced by several factors. A mill dam filled the triangle between the mainland and the Charleston Peninsula while the northern side of the peninsula on the Mystic River was known to consist of extensive mud flats. Not only that, the town of Charleston offered ideal cover for American snipers. These considerations mitigated against the ideal tactics of landing at the Charleston neck and cutting off the Americans in the fort. Howe's choice of a landing point was also dictated by the lack of flat-bottomed boats. The navy's longboats, unable to navigate the shallows, were the only craft available to ferry the British assault troops.

Howe's first assault units landed at Morton's Point on the eastern tip of the peninsula. This wave, composed of ten light infantry and ten grenadier companies and supported by the 4th or King's Own Regiment, landed unopposed at about 1400. Howe was so confident of victory that he had his troops stack arms and eat their mid-day meal while the longboats returned for the second assault wave.

The British landing had caught the Americans by surprise but Howe's delay gave the colonists time to bring up reinforcements from Cambridge. Over 1,000 militiamen now waited on Bunker Hill to back up the Americans manning the fort; and 200 Connecticut volunteers lay behind a rail fence about 100 yards back from the breastwork. Another 1,000 militia were moving into position on the peninsula.

Howe could hardly believe the report on the results of the initial attack. Both his flanks were gone. And his majestic Redcoats—the best soldiers in all of Britain—were unable to break through the American lines. The carnage was staggering. Howe ordered his troops to fall back and regroup.

Howe again led his men through the waist-high grass up the rocky terrain, urging them to drive the colonists out of the fort on Breed's Hill and off the peninsula. The result was the same. Dead and wounded were everywhere. His troops were shattered after this second repulse. Many grenadier and light infantry companies had fewer than twenty-five per cent of able-bodied soldiers left; others reported ninety per cent casualties.

When Clinton saw Howe's men turn and retreat for the second time he sent word to both Gage and Howe that he would land reinforcements of Royal Marines, plus the 63rd Regiment, nearer the town of Charleston with the hope that a combined assault would dislodge the determined Americans.

Again British troops, clad in their brilliant scarlet coats and carrying field-marching packs weighing 125 pounds, assaulted the heights. The frontal assault on Breed's Hill by Clinton's Redcoats stalled. Then the order was passed down the ranks of the British Army: "Let the Marines come through."

The Royal Marines succeeded where the Army had failed. The colonists began to give ground. At the same time, on the right, Howe wheeled left as his troops came within musket range of the rail fence where 1,500 militia now



Final assault at Bunker Hill

crouched. Leaving only his remaining light infantry to keep the militia pinned down, Howe led his whole force up the hill to hit the fort from the flank.

The maneuver worked. The defenders behind the breastwork were running out of powder and shot. They gave ground to Howe's troops. Once through the fort, the British could outflank the militia behind the fence and seize the rest of the peninsula. American resistance collapsed. For the record, Bunker Hill was recorded as another victory for the British regulars.

The battle proved more than that a rabble of farmers could stand up to the finest infantry in the world. It also demonstrated the value of Marines in joint operations. Besides their role in the frontal assault on the fort, British Marines also fought in another critical area in the battle. Maj Pitcairn and his Marines, with the 47th Regiment, were ordered to suppress sniper fire from the burning town of Charleston and to turn the left flank of the fort. That two battalions of Royal Marines—even when committed piecemeal—could be so effective was not lost on certain American colonists. It strengthened the arguments of John Adams and his Marine (or Maritime) Committee of Congress to build a navy on the British model. To do so would require Marines. Moreover, if the plan to invade Nova Scotia from the sea materialized, Marines would play a key role.

Thus on 10 November 1775, some five months after Bunker Hill, the Continental Congress enacted a resolution drafted by the Marine Committee, establishing the American Marines—the first regular force of the new nation:

Resolved, That two Battalions of Marines be raised . . . that particular care be taken that no person be appointed to office or enlisted into said Battalions, but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea, when required . . .

The Continental Marines naturally were modeled after their British counterparts—the first true soldiers of the sea. Although the idea of Marines can be traced back to 480 B.C., when Themistocles arming the Athenian Navy against the Persians, ordered the fleet to “enlist Marines, twenty to a ship, from men between 20 and 30, and archers,” it wasn’t until the 17th Century, during the Dutch Wars between England and Holland, that modern Marines came into being. On 28 October 1664, King Charles II by an Order in Council decreed “that twelve hundred Land Souldjers be forthwith raised, to be in readiness, to be distributed into his Majesties Fleets prepared for Sea Service . . .” This force was the first to be specially raised and trained for service with the fleet. Before this, soldiers who were embarked in ships of the Royal Navy were drawn from any regiment available.

The new regiment was named “The Duke of York and Albany’s Maritime Regiment of

Foot”; and the present Corps of Royal Marines is a direct descendant. The British unit differed from the French *Campagnie de la Mer*, established by Cardinal Richelieu in 1622, in several ways. The British Marines were to be soldiers trained in the ways of the sea and would be under the command of the Admiralty. The French unit, conversely, was composed of sailors trained to fight on land. By 1665, Holland had organized the Royal Netherlands *Korps Marineers* and Richelieu’s seamen were renamed: *le Regiment de Marine*.

The first combat for both the British and Dutch Marines was against each other, during the Dutch Wars from 1665–1674. However, in future years, a strong traditional tie of friendship was to develop between the two units. British and Dutch Marines fought as allies in the capture of Cadiz and the storming of Gibraltar in 1704. The seizure of Gibraltar and the prolonged siege are commemorated by the world “Gibraltar” on Royal Marines’ Regimental Colours. The performance of the Marines in such early campaigns so impressed Adm Vernon that, in 1739, he urged “the necessity of converting most of our marching regiments into Marines.”

The 18th century also saw British Marines in action against the Spanish in Cuba and the French on Belle Isle off the coast of France in 1761. In this latter engagement, the Marines won the Laurel Wreath, which they wear to this day in their badge.

In 1802, King George III granted that the title “Royal” be added to the British Marines. The King acted on the recommendation of Lord St. Vincent, the great commander and strategist, who declared: “There never was an appeal made to them for honour, courage or loyalty, that they did not more than realize my highest expectations. If ever real danger should come to England, the Marines will be found the country’s sheet-anchor.” He suggested an expansion of the Marine unit or, second-best, that every infantry regiment serve afloat as Marines, in rotation, to support England’s role as an amphibious power.

Two years later, on Lord Nelson’s recommendation, a Corps of Artillery was added to the Royal Marines for duty in ships and ashore. The performance of its members ashore was so good that Napier, historian of the Peninsular War, wrote: “Never in my life have I seen soldiers like the Royal Marine Artillery.”

The War of 1812 saw an unusual situation

develop between the British Marines and their offspring—the American Marines. The U.S. Marine commander at Norfolk, Virginia, who had the honor of receiving the first British sword surrendered in the war, insisted it be offered from a Royal Marine officer. Numerous subsequent sea battles between British and American ships saw Marines from both nations locked in mortal combat.

Napoleon, following his defeat at Waterloo, paid the Royal Marines perhaps their greatest compliment of the 19th century. Inspecting a Royal Marine Honor Guard aboard HMS *Bel-lerephon*, the Emperor looked critically at the unit, nodded knowingly, and said: "One might do much with 100,000 soldiers such as these."

King George IV decreed in 1827 that the Royal Marine motto be *Per Mare Per Terram* and that the Corps' insignia henceforth be a globe surrounded by a laurel wreath. In issuing the Royal order the King explained that the Eastern Hemisphere of the globe had been selected to represent the Marines' valour because the list of battle honours, usually depicted on regimental colours, was so lengthy that he was unable to choose between them. Thus "His Majesty's Jollies" added yet another legend to their growing list.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the Royal Marines and their American counterparts fighting side-by-side for the first time in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 in China. The campaign got its name from a *Yao* Society of rebels whose title, "The Fist of Righteous Amity," was translated by English-speaking foreigners into "Boxers." These Boxers and

other rebel groups, who believed that they had been made invulnerable by sorcery and incantation, originally revolted against their Manchu leaders, but in a short time this anti-regime movement was manipulated into a nationalistic drive to kill all foreigners in China.

In late May of 1900, after Boxers had burned foreign-built railroad stations and shops near Peking, the foreign legations accredited to the Imperial Court telegraphed military forces debarked at Tientsin for protection. Chinese railroad officials agreed to allow an international contingent, numbering twenty-two officers and 423 enlisted men, to go by train to Peking only after being threatened with dire consequences—including a threat to hang the Tientsin stationmaster.

Two trains carried the international guard. It consisted of seventy-eight Royal Marine Light Infantry (the title of the Corps approved by the Admiralty in 1855 and one which remained until 1923 when the Corps was merged with the Royal Marine Artillery) under the command of Capts B. M. Strouts and L. S. T. Halliday; forty-eight U.S. Marines and five sailors, led by Capt John Twiggs Myers; fifty-one German Marines; thirty Austrian Marines; seventy-five French sailors; seventy-two Russian sailors; thirty-nine Italian sailors; and twenty-four Japanese Special Naval Landing Force.

The Chinese allowed the foreign troops to move from the station through the city gate of Yung-Ting-Mien and the Chien-Men and into the enclosed Legation Quarter. This area of Peking was about three-fourths of a mile square and contained the buildings housing



British and American Marines drive enemy from the Han Lin during Boxer Rebellion.



Royal Marines display their military polish during precision drill.

the eleven diplomatic missions accredited to the Imperial Court. Enormous ramparts, sixty feet high, and many of them nearly seventy feet thick, isolated this foreign community from the rest of the city. On the south side lay the crenelated Tartar Wall with a top wide enough in places "for four carriages to be driven abreast at full speed." To the north and west arose the walls of the Imperial City, and to the east the buildings backed onto Customs Street, which could be reached only by the gateway at Ha-Ta-Men, and then along Legation Street. A canal bisected the whole compound. The walled-in Legation Quarters thus provided a natural fortress. The problem, however, was that it was too large an area for such a small group of men to defend adequately.

On 22 June the Chinese Imperial Court declared "war on all the world" and laid siege to the Legation compound. By now, in addition to the diplomatic personnel and their military guards, the fortress was jammed with refugees. Over 300 foreigners, including women and children, and 600 Chinese refugees were housed in Legation quarters designed to hold a normal population of sixty. Some 2,000 native converts also were crowded into the abandoned Su Wang Fu Palace which faced the British Embassy across the canal.

There was no immediate shortage of food, water, or ammunition. A flock of sheep, 150 ponies—assembled for a race—and wheat from a grain shop were within the walls. Moreover, the Peking Hotel's wine cellars had an inventory of more than a thousand cases of champagne. Five wells within the compound insured a plentiful supply of water. And all the military detachments had brought large quantities of ammunition. The American Marines were by far the best equipped in this respect. Each man had 372 rounds and there were 8,000 rounds for the Colt machinegun.

The southern section of the Tartar Wall, assigned to the American and German Marines, was the key to the defense of the Legation area. If the Boxers seized this redoubt, they

would be able to direct plunging fire on the defenders below. Barricades erected along the top of the wall faced a formidable Chinese breastwork and some 2,000 Boxers a few yards away. The defenders recognized their precarious position on the wall. "Twenty-nine men against the Chinese Army" was one description. Capt Myers told the American envoy, Edwin Conger, that "it is slow, sure death to remain here. The men all feel it is a trap and simply await the hour of execution." Yet as the British Minister was later to write, "Captain Myers' post on the wall is the peg which holds the whole thing together."

Several attempts by American Marines to drive the Boxers off their western section of the wall and, conversely, Chinese assaults against allied barricades failed. However, on 1 July, the German Marines, who manned a barricade 500 yards to Myers' rear, took flight under heavy shellfire from three Chinese guns. Even worse, they signaled the Americans in their rear, facing the other direction, that they had been overrun. The Americans, following a prearranged battle plan, also retreated, abandoning the wall for a lower barricade covering the ramp leading to the top of the wall.

At a council of war in the British Embassy, the allied leaders agreed that the Tartar Wall must be recaptured if the compound was to be saved. Myers was picked to lead the counter-attack. His detachment consisted of fourteen U.S. Marines, ten British, and ten Russians. Seizure of the abandoned American barricade came surprisingly easy because for some reason the Chinese made no move to stop the assault. However, a German unit failed to reoccupy their old defensive position and had to settle for an intermediate holding position. The American Marines quickly built another barricade across the wall to guard their rear.

However, another serious danger now threatened the Marines' position on the wall. The Boxers had constructed another breastwork, set obliquely across the bastion, and were now only a few feet to the left (south) of

the allied position. Moreover, a 15-foot tower, which dominated the American barricade, was being constructed by the Chinese. If the tower remained in Boxer hands, the American control of the wall would be impossible. Just after midnight on 3 July, in a heavy rain-storm, Myers selected thirty of his men, twenty-four Royal Marines, under Sergeant Murphy (second in command) and Corporal Gregory, twenty-six Russian sailors under Captain Vroublesky, and one of the Volunteer Corps, Nigel Oliphant, a one time officer in the Scots Greys, for the tough and desperate task of breaking through the Chinese lines and storming the tower.

The primary assault against the Chinese barricade and tower led by Myers consisted of only British and American Marines. The Russians made a diversionary attack on the right. Myers led the Anglo-American force along the Boxer barricade across the bastion. As luck would have it, the Boxers had failed to man the tower. This enabled the attackers to advance quickly into a position behind the Chinese who were still blazing away into the darkness at their front. In thirty minutes the battle was over. The Boxers took to their heels. The new barricade and tower were firmly under allied control. Thirty-six Boxers lay dead and two Chinese flags were captured. Total allied casualties: two U.S. Marines dead; one American, one British, and one Russian were wounded. The wounded American was Myers himself who had tripped over a Chinese spear and sustained a painful flesh wound in the calf.

In reporting on the night battle on the wall, the American Minister later wrote: "The bravest and most successful event of the whole siege was an attack led by Captain Myers."

A missionary wrote in his diary that the battle was "the most important offensive operation carried out by the garrison during the siege—a struggle which more than any other was the pivot of our destiny."

"Perhaps the most critical situation during the siege," declared Halliday, who survived a wound to become a lieutenant general and Adjutant-General of the Royal Marines.

The siege of Peking lasted fifty-five days and cost the garrison sixty-eight dead, including Capt. Strouts, RMLI, and 150 wounded. On 14 August an international army, totaling some 18,000 troops, with American Marines and Royal Welch Fusiliers in the vanguard, fi-



Raiding party practices rubber boat landing.

nally broke through to Peking. During the latter days of the siege, Chinese barricades crept closer, food and ammunition reached dangerous levels, and daily casualties mounted. However, it was the night assault on the Tatar Wall that was, in fact, the turning point in the defense of the Legations. And it is that combined assault which is depicted on the Royal Marines' war memorial in London's Mall, facing the old Admiralty Building. A Chinese flag, presented by Capt Myers hangs in the parent-home of the Royal Marines at Eastney Barracks.

The Royal Marines participated in one of the few successful amphibious operations conducted by the British in World War I. In 1918—on "St. George's Day"—the Marines raided the German advanced naval base at Zeebrugge, Belgium, and destroyed the important submarine base. In World War I, Royal Marines also served in all capital ships and cruisers of the Royal Navy. In this capacity they took part in all major naval engagements, including the Battle of Jutland. They also fought ashore in larger numbers than ever before, forming a brigade of the RN Division, anti-aircraft and siege artillery units in France, and providing four battalions in the Dardanelles.

World War II saw the strength of the Royal Marines grow from 12,300 to 80,000 by 1945. The war also saw several new roles assigned to His Majesty's Jollies, which are reflected in the functions and shape of the Corps today. Commandos were first organized in 1940 with the mission of conducting raids from the sea,

e.g. the Dieppe Raid in 1942. Later they were assigned the role of spearheading major amphibious assaults in Sicily, Italy, the Aegean Islands, Normandy, and Burma. Commandos were raised initially from the Army but by 1942, Royal Marines strength had increased, and the first Royal Marine Commando was formed. By 1945 nine Royal Marine Commando units were in being. At the end of the war the Army Commandos were disbanded and the Commando mission was given exclusively to the Royal Marines.

Since World War II, Royal Marine Commandos have taken part in operations in Africa and the Near, Middle and Far East. 41 Commando, Royal Marines, served in the Korean War, attached to the U.S. Special Raiding Force, which carried out a number of successful amphibious raids to destroy enemy communications in North Korea. Later 41 Commando was attached to the U.S. 1st Marine Division and fought in the Chosin Reservoir operation against both the Chinese and North Korean forces. In recognition for its service in this battle, 41 Commando was awarded the American Presidential Unit Citation with a Battle Streamer for its regimental colour.

Commandos have been used extensively in emergency and counterinsurgency operations in Palestine, the Suez Canal Zone, Cyprus, South Arabia, Eastern Malaysia, Aden, and Borneo.

The Captain General of the Royal Marines is His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. The Corps is commanded by the Commandant General, whose headquarters is a part of the Navy Department in the Ministry of Defence. The Royal Marines today maintain a force of some 6,000 officers and men. It consists of a Commando brigade, an independent Commando group, a light regiment of Royal Artillery, an independent squadron of Royal Engineers, an air liaison squadron, logistics units, headquarters organizations, training personnel, and the ceremonial bands. Other units include a special boat squadron and a raiding squadron—the “glamour boys” of the Royal Marines. Based at Poole Harbour, they are trained as frogmen, paratroopers, demolitionists, reconnaissance experts, and in other tactics needed for their missions of clearing underwater obstacles; long range reconnaissance and intelligence gathering; attack raids; and the preparation of helicopter and assault boat landing zones.

A Royal Marine Commando of 600 men is

similar in strength and firepower to a British infantry battalion. A Commando group with its support elements is designed to operate indefinitely in peacetime and for up to thirty days in combat. The Royal Navy has two Commando carriers, HMS *Bulwark* and HMS *Albion*, and two assault ships, HMS *Intrepid* and HMS *Fearless*, which provide naval support for the Royal Marines. Unlike the U.S. Marine Corps, the Royal Marines do not have their own tactical air support units. Air support is provided by the Royal Air Force while the Fleet Air Arm provides air Commando squadrons (equipped with helicopters) to lift the Royal Marines in assault operations.

Given the successes found in the Royal Marines’ glorious 312-year past and Britain’s reliance on seapower during much of her history, one may wonder why the Corps has not been developed into an amphibious fighting force embodying all the different arms required for effective attacking power, and capable of carrying out a large-scale landing operation. Although the great value of the Royal Marines was proved soon after their formation as the “Admiral’s Regiment” in 1644, they have always been limited in size and mission—unlike the U.S. Marine Corps.

Why?

The late B. H. Liddell Hart accused his countrymen of having “shown an obstinate disfavor of the concept, except in its application to the social sphere.” He cited their failure to adjust forces to changing conditions and new needs as reasons why the British have always paid heavily in war “and in no respect have they paid so heavily as in amphibious operations.

“Although Britain has, by force of geographical circumstance, been more amphibious in action than any other power, her performance has been much poorer than her experience. That deficiency is due to her failure to develop her Marines into a special ‘lock-opening’ force of adequate scale. The United States has been much wiser in this important respect.”

Britain’s poor performance in amphibious operations for the past 300 years, (e.g., Bunker Hill and the Gallipoli expedition) when compared to the achievements of the Royal Navy on the high seas and also of the Army ashore may be, as Liddell Hart argues, because of a “missing factor”—the failure to build a powerful amphibious Corps from the nucleus provided by the Royal Marines.

US&MC