

Decisive

Amphibious

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MARATHON 490 BC

Why Decisive

✦ IN 1851, SIR EDWARD CREASY GAVE THE WORLD HIS ideas on the world's fifteen most important battles. Whether or not one agrees with his selection, it is interesting to note how many of these battles were either amphibious assaults, or were dependent upon amphibious operations. It is the author's intention to critique several of these decisive battles, in the light of modern amphibious doctrine.



The Battle of Marathon released men from the paralyzing fear of Persian arms. It permitted the emergence of ancient Greece, free institutions, intellectual freedom, and democracy.

Background

By 490 BC, Darius, the "Great King" of the Persians, ruled almost all of the civilized world. Athens was a growing City-State, just beginning to spread its influence over the Greek peninsula and adjoining islands. Almost a decade before, the Athenians had intervened in a scrap between the Persians and the revolting Persian colony, Ionia. Though he quickly defeated them, Darius, who had never heard of the Athenians before, decided there and then that they were to be enslaved. The Persians, never defeated before Marathon, were generally believed to be invincible, adding psychological shock to their arms.

Task Force Able

The first force Darius sent against the Greeks was destroyed by shipwreck, but Darius' determination was unshaken, and a second force was ordered to prepare for "Operation Hellas."

Task Force Baker

Datis, a Mede, was selected to command; his deputy was Artaphernes, a nephew of Darius. The total strength has been estimated at 100,000 men, of which 85,000 were combat troops.

Cilicia was designated as the staging area for the Landing Force, which included native Persian and Sacae infantry, cavalry from Khorassan, negro archers from Ethiopia, mountain troops from Hyrcania and Afghanistan, and lightly-armed swordsmen-infantry from Egypt. Most were veterans, but their languages and military organizations differed.

The Attack Force included a fleet of 600 galleys, and numerous PAs and KAs. As the Persian navy consisted almost exclusively of combat galleys, all Persian maritime

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Battles-1: Marathon

cities were ordered to contribute their merchant marine. The ships were operated by civilian crews, under Persian military commanders. Unlike our doctrine, the Troop Commander was also the Attack Force Commander.

The Embarkation Order specified that certain transports were to be especially fitted to embark, carry, and debark the cavalry. The transports were of a shallow-draft type, designed to be beached — a sort of LST without the bow-doors or ramp.

The Greeks Are "Softened Up"

While the fleet was being assembled, and the TQMs were burning midnight oil, Darius employed psychological warfare. He sent an ultimatum to each of the Greek City-States, demanding submission. So terrible was the fear of Persian arms that the Greek islanders and most of the Greeks on the continent complied at once. At Sparta and Athens it was a different story. Not only were the Persian demands rejected, but the emissaries were almost lynched.

The Persians found and employed quislings in most of the principal cities, often deposed Greek leaders who were opposed to the growing democracy.

The Persian Plan

"Operation Hellas" was to be executed in two phases. Phase I included seizure of all principal Greek islands between Samos and the Greek peninsula, and reduction of Eretria on the Greek mainland. The plan also included establishment of supply bases on some of the islands. Phase II included reduction and seizure of Athens, to be followed by reduction of Sparta.

Hippias, a former tyrant deposed and exiled by the Athenians, promised to incite revolt in Athens with his fifth column provided the Persians would make him puppet dictator. He accompanied the Attack Force, and proposed BEACH GREEN (Marathon) for the main effort. Marathon was selected for two reasons:

- (1) A previous expedition of Hippias' had landed there, and had found the beach ideal for landing ships.
- (2) The plains immediately inland of the beach afforded a good maneuver area for the Persian cavalry.

Datis planned to land unopposed if possible; by assault if necessary. The Athenian army was to be defeated quickly, then Athens was to be delivered by Hippias' fifth column.

Phase I went off like clockwork.

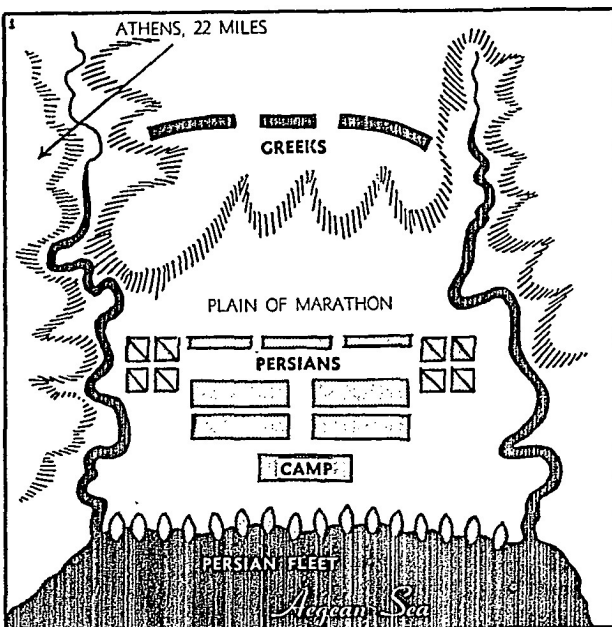
Phase II started out successfully. While the landing was no surprise, it was unopposed, and the Persians took their time reorganizing, making no effort to seize the

unguarded mountain pass leading to Athens. Apparently Datis had a good Shore Party, as beach dumps were quickly established.

The Defense Force

At this time there were 10 Greek generals, each selected by one of the 10 principal Greek tribes, and each having equal authority. One magistrate was elected to the position of *Polemarch* (War-Ruler) for one year, and exercised authority over the 10 generals, presaging our own system of authority over all military forces resting with an elected civilian. It was customary to rotate command of the whole force daily among the 10 generals.





On this occasion, the Greeks wisely decided to suspend the custom in order to ensure battlefield continuity. Therefore, each of the others gave up his day of command to Miltiades, highly respected by all for his soldierly qualities.

All Greek citizens of military age were required to serve in the army, and most had seen considerable combat service. Of about 20,000 Athenians of military age at this time, more than half were detailed to guard Athens itself, leaving about 9,000 in the field force. The Spartans wanted to help the Athenians, but certain religious ceremonies prevented them until too late. One tiny ally, Plataea, sent its whole army—1,000 men! Miltiades' force totaling about 10,000 men, had certain advantages over the 85,000-man Persian army. First of all, they were fighting for their freedom. They had fought together before, spoke the same language, understood the organization of their neighbors, and were controlled by a strong chain of command. Moreover, they had body armor and bronze shields, as opposed to the Persians' wicker shields. On the other hand, they had no archers or cavalry, although the bow was the long range weapon of the day, and cavalry was the shock force.

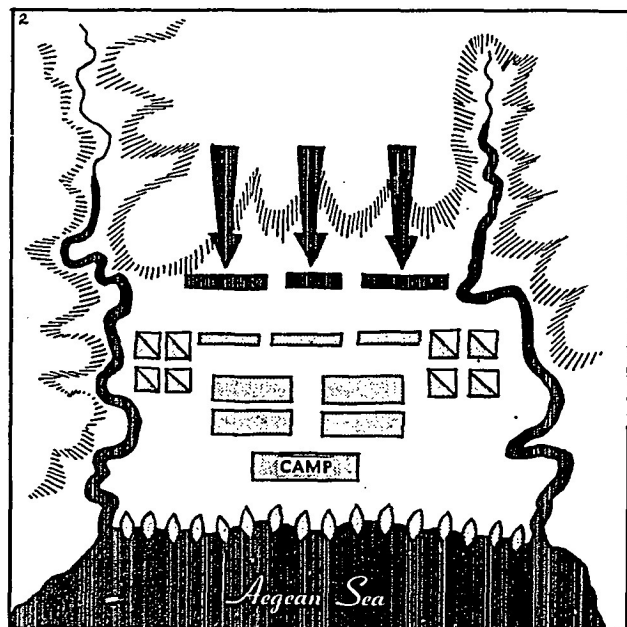
The Defense Plan

The plains of Marathon are enclosed on three sides by mountains, shaped like a horseshoe open toward the sea. Miltiades occupied the mountain in the center, astride the pass leading to Athens. Five of the Greek generals preferred a static defense until the Spartans arrived, the other five were in favor of attacking as soon as possible. It remained then for the *Polemarch*, Callimachus, to cast the deciding vote. Miltiades is credited with successfully urging him to vote for attack.

While the invaders were wasting time, the Greeks

planned their counterattack. Having no cavalry, Miltiades planned to prevent successful use of the Persian cavalry. Knowing the unwieldiness of the Persian host, he planned to bring about an engagement which would place a premium upon the maneuverability of the Greek phalanx. Miltiades divided his force into three parts: a comparatively weak center, and two strong wings. Once contact was made, the center was to withdraw slowly to a very strong natural position, extending the Persians in pursuit, and the two wings would execute the envelopment.

Speed would be essential during the descent from the hills and until contact was made. The intervening area



must be crossed so rapidly that the Persian archers would not have time to inflict crippling casualties on the Greeks.

Timing was essential in the launching of the envelopment. If it were launched too soon, the Greeks themselves might be enveloped. If launched too late, the Persians would have built up enough strength in the salient to repulse the wings. In either case, it would mean failure for the Greeks.

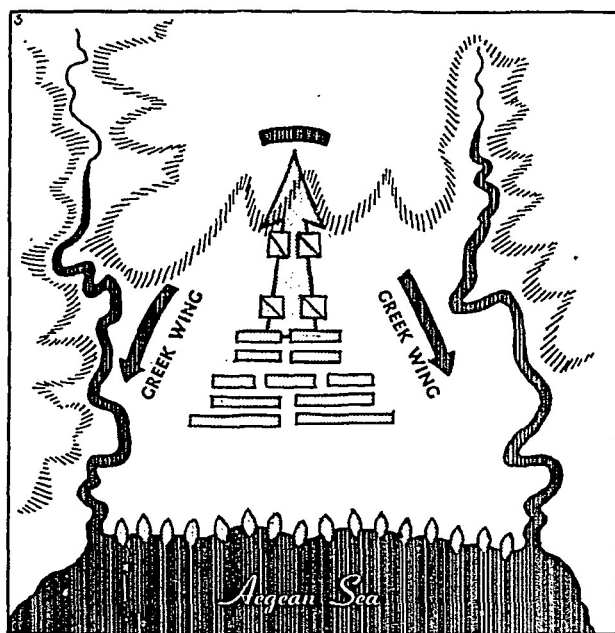
Datis Divides His Forces

While the Greek generals were making their attack plan, Datis made his second big mistake. Observing the Greeks now occupying the mountain pass, he realized how difficult it might be to force his way through to Athens. There was another land route along the coast, but as the mountains come very close to the beach, it would canalize his force, rendering it particularly vulnerable. Therefore, he decided to reembark the greater part of his landing force, including most of the cavalry, sail to Athens, land there, and defeat the home guard while Miltiades was held in place by the rear-guard at Marathon.

The Battle

When the Greeks saw the "Athens Force" sail away, they launched their attack, catching the remaining 20,000 Persians by surprise. Perceiving the solid phalanxes roaring down upon them with only long, sharp spears and bronze shields visible, many of the auxiliaries headed for the beach — and home. The native Persian infantry formed behind their wicker shields, and bore the brunt of the initial attack, sustaining severe casualties, as their shields would not turn the heavy Greek spears. Soon, other Persian forces joined the battle, appearing to force back the Greek center as the Greeks' planned withdrawal began. When the Persians were fully extended, Miltiades' two heaviest forces, the wings, crashed down on them. The Persians were surprised again, thrown into utter confusion. Their tactical organization was so loose that the Persian commanders were unable to counter the Greek maneuver. The Greek center rejoined the wings, and crushing the Persians back on their own supporting troops, drove them to the beach.

The Persians made very little effort to defend themselves until they were aboard the ships again. At this point the Greeks sustained their only considerable losses, trying to fire or to board the landing ships. The Persians, now desperately fighting for their very lives, inflicted



many casualties.

The Box Score

The Battle of Marathon was over. The Greeks had lost only 192 men, the Persians had lost 6,400 men. These amazing figures are actual counts of contemporary historians. The Persians also lost seven galleys captured before they could get them off the beach.

Miltiades detailed a small force to guard the dead and the spoil, and led the rest of his force back over the

mountains to Athens, arriving there before the Persian attack force landed. Datis, realizing that it was too late to attack Athens, called off the operation and sailed back to bring Darius the bad news.

This signal defeat of the most feared army in the world changed the course of world history for all time. The Persian empire remained powerful, but the world now knew that it was not invincible. Most important, oriental philosophy, government, and religion were barred from Europe long enough to give democracy and other occidental ideals a chance to grow.

The Moral

What are the lessons this first of the decisive battles of the world teaches the modern amphibious commander?

1. Tactical Advantage Must Not Be Jeopardized.

Datis could have seized the pass without opposition, and probably could have reduced Athens — had he acted promptly.

2. The Initiative Must Be Maintained.

Datis lost the initiative when he failed to attack, and aggravated his mistake by withdrawing part of his forces, allowing the remainder to become disorganized.

3. The Landing Force Must Be Given a Clear-cut Objective.

Persian activity seemed aimless, once the landing had been accomplished.

4. The Selection of a Landing Beach Must Take into Consideration the Subsequent Plan of Maneuver for All Arms.

The beach at Marathon was suitable for beaching ships and the area inland was well-suited for cavalry maneuver but apparently little thought was given to the strong defensive position it offered the Greeks, or the limited routes of egress it afforded the Persians.

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