



From Whaleboats to LCACs – The Development of the US Marines Amphibious Doctrine

¹Máté Domján

¹University of Szeged, Doctoral School of History, Szeged, Magyarország,
domjan.mate@gmail.com

Abstract

What is an amphibious operation? What types of these operations are distinguished, and how did they change throughout the 20th century? In this study, I will examine the development of the United States Marine Corps (USMC) amphibious doctrine through the changing definitions of the types of these operations. During this period, new types of amphibious operations were created, in conjunction with the structural changes of the USMC and the evolution of military technology.

Keywords: Whalesboats, US Marine, development

1. Amphibious operations

According to the definition of amphibious operations stated in the latest edition of the *Joint Publication 3-02 Amphibious Operations* by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, „An amphibious operation is a military operation launched from the sea by an amphibious force (AF) to conduct landing force (LF) operations within the littorals. The littorals include those land areas (and their adjacent sea and associated air space) that are predominantly susceptible to engagement and influence from the sea and may reach far inland.” [1]

These operations have four key characteristics: the coordination and cooperation of naval and landing forces, the rapid build-up of combat power on hostile shores, forces organized to the task, and the unity of effort and operational coherence.[2] In amphibious operations, the landing forces can be transported to the shores by amphibious vehicles or helicopters. The contemporary doctrine for amphibious operations differentiates five major types of these operations: amphibious assault, amphibious raid, amphibious demonstration, amphibious withdrawal, and other amphibious operations.[1]

The USMC first published its amphibious doctrine in 1933, titled *Tentative Manual of Landing Operations*. In this, they distinguished three types of landing operations: main landings, secondary landings, and demonstrations. The Navy adapted these in 1938 under the title *FTP 167 Landing Operations Doctrine*. They also expanded the list of operations with a new type, called surprise landings, and this was the first time landing raids appeared as an objective of these operations, too. After World War II, these operations were called amphibious operations.

In the 1960s, unified amphibious doctrines were created for the different branches of the US military, although every service used a different numbering system for them. The Marines adapted these doctrines under the title *LFM 01 Doctrine for Amphibious Operations* in 1962. This doctrine named four categories of amphibious operations: amphibious assault, amphibious raid, amphibious demonstration, and amphibious withdrawal.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were working on a new system of unified doctrines for the military, under a common title and numbering system. Part of this progress was the *Joint Publication 3-02 Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations* in 2001, which divided amphibious operations into the five types, expanding the earlier list by the category of other amphibious operations.

1.1. Main landings and the amphibious assault

According to its definition, the main landing „[...] *is the landing upon which the success of the tactical plan depends. In the assignment of troops and supporting ships, it has first consideration and must be assigned the forces necessary for its success. [...] In certain operations, no main landing may be initially designated; especially is this so where two or more strong landings are made and a large reserve is held out for the purpose of exploiting success. The landing which is exploited then becomes the main landing.*” [4]

In contrast to this, the *LFM 01* defined amphibious assaults relatively short, saying, „*The amphibious assault is the principal operational type of amphibious operation. It involves the landing and establishment of a landing force on a hostile shore.*” [5]

The *JP 3-02. Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations* uses a more detailed definition for these operations: “*an amphibious assault involves the establishment of an LF on a hostile or potentially hostile shore. The organic capabilities of amphibious forces, including fire support, logistics, and mobility, allow the United States to gain access to a crisis area by forcible entry.*” [2]

1.2. Secondary landings and subsidiary landings

The *Tentative Manual of Landing Operations* defined secondary landings as: [Those landings that are] *made outside the immediate area of the main landing, which directly or indirectly support the main landing. They may be made prior to, coincident with, or subsequent to the main landing. [...] [3]*

Although the title secondary landings vanished from the amphibious doctrines of the 1960s, there is a separate chapter in these publications, called subsidiary landings, which has an almost identical definition to them: „*An amphibious operation may require one or more subsidiary landings to be conducted outside the main landing area to support the main operation. These landings may be conducted before, during or after the main landing. [...] [4]*

Subsidiary landings are also mentioned in *JP 3-02*; however, that is only a subchapter of the action phase of amphibious operations. Their definition remained very similar to the ones from the previous publications: „*a subsidiary landing is a landing, normally conducted by elements of the amphibious force, usually made outside the designated landing area to support the main landing. An amphibious operation may require one or more subsidiary landings conducted before, during, or after the main landing.*” [2]

1.3. Demonstrations and amphibious demonstrations

The demonstration is the last one of the three „original” types. In the 1930s, it was defined as: „*A Demonstration is an exhibition of force or movement indicating an attack, with or without an actual landing. It is made for the purpose of diverting enemy reserves, artillery fire, or aircraft, from the area of the main landing, or the retarding of enemy forces thereto. [...] [3]*

LFM 01 uses a very similar definition of amphibious demonstrations, but with different wording. It defines demonstrations as „[...] *an operation conducted for the purpose of deceiving the enemy by a show of force with the expectation of deluding the enemy into a course of action unfavorable to him. The demonstration is a feint at landing involving an approach to a beach or landing zone. It is intended to confuse the defender as to the time, place or strength of the main attack, and normally includes preparatory and supporting fires.*” [4]

In the 2001 doctrine, its definition has a short summary first, and then a longer explanation: “*The amphibious demonstration is intended to confuse the enemy as to time, place, or strength of the main operation. [These operations] may be conducted in conjunction with other deception operations in order to delude or confuse the enemy. [...]*” [2]

1.4. Surprise landings

The „strangest” type of landings, the surprise landing, is only mentioned in the *FTP 167 Landing Operations Doctrine* from 1938. Its definition is: „*Rubber landing craft, track landing vehicles, and other special types of boats, as well as parachute troops, and troops transported during the night from a distant base by patrol planes or large commercial clipper planes, should be utilized to the fullest extent to execute surprise landings at points where, due to the nature of the beaches or terrain, landings would not ordinarily be expected. These landings may be in connection with or part of the main or secondary landings and should be made in accordance with the same principles and for the same purposes as previously set forth in this section.*”[5] In my opinion, this definition shows the explorative nature of early doctrines, trying to invent new types of operations, using modern inventions, and new types of units for landing operations.

1.5. Landing raids and amphibious raids

The landing raids also first appeared in the *FTP 167*, although only as an objective of landing operations. Its description says, „*Landing raids are generally made for the purpose of destroying enemy facilities and establishments [...], or for harassing defense forces, diverting attention from operations in other localities, and effecting division of enemy forces. Such operations depend largely for success upon rapidity of movement and surprise, and normally involve relatively small forces, a limited advance inland, and a quick withdrawal.*[...]” [5] The last sentence summarizes the most important aspects of raids, since its three key characteristics are the small, task-organized forces, swift incursion into the objective area, and a planned withdrawal at the end.

The 1962 doctrine mentioned amphibious raid as a type of amphibious operations and used a similar definition. According to this, „*An amphibious raid is a landing from the sea on a hostile shore involving swift incursion into or temporary occupancy of an objective followed by a planned withdrawal.*” [4]

The *JP 3-02* also used a very similar definition for these operations, saying, „*An amphibious raid is an operation involving a swift incursion into or the temporary occupation of an objective to accomplish an assigned mission followed by a planned withdrawal.*” [2]

1.6. Amphibious withdrawal

LFM 01 defined amphibious withdrawal as „[...] a withdrawal of forces by sea in naval ships or craft from a hostile shore.” [4] This is relatively short, although it contains the important details of this type of operation.

In 2001, the definition of this type of operation was almost the same as earlier. It says, „*Amphibious withdrawals are operations conducted to extract forces by sea in ships or craft from a hostile or potentially hostile shore.*” [2]

1.7. Other amphibious operations

This is the „youngest” type of amphibious operations, first published in 2001, and because of that, the definition of this type cannot be compared to the ones from earlier doctrines. In this publication, there is no real definition for these operations, although it has highlighted that the capabilities of amphibious forces are well-suited for military operations other than war (MOOTW) [2].

2. Conclusion

The typology of amphibious operations went through many changes during the 20th century. From the definitions used in the different amphibious doctrines, we can see the similarities and differences between each doctrine. We can also trace the development of certain types from their definitions, and there are some types that were abandoned or “demoted” after an experimentation phase. The main landings of the 1930s became the archetype for amphibious assault, although elements of it were absorbed by some other types. The secondary landing lost its place amongst the types of amphibious operations; however, it was never completely forgotten. The demonstration changed the least, from the original types, only elements of its definition have been refined. The landing raid went from being only an objective of amphibious operations to becoming one of the most prominent types in the late 20th century, also becoming the basis for some other operational types. Amphibious withdrawals evolved during the second half of the century and went through only some minor changes. At last, the other amphibious operations, which were only published at the dawn of the 21st century, have become one of the most popular types of amphibious operations since, covering a wide range of operations, where military capabilities can be used, outside of fighting.

From these, it is clear that the evolution of amphibious operations did not stop by the end of the century, and they have been developing ever since. The US Marines will always find a way to adapt to the changing world of conflicts, and wherever they go, the amphibious warfare will evolve with them.

3. References

- [1] Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2019/2021) *JP 3-02. Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations*. xi; I-3–I-4.
- [2] Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2001) *JP 3-02. Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations*. xi; I-2.; XV-3; XV-6; XV-9; XV-5; XV-11.
- [3] Department of Navy (1933/1934) *Tentative Manual of Landing Operations, Chapters 1-7*. Washington D.C., Chapter I. 5; uo.; Chapter I. 6;
- [4] Departments of the Army and the Navy (1962) *LFM 01. Doctrine for Amphibious Operations*. Washington D.C.: 1-4; 5-3; 1-4; 19-3; 17-3.

- [5] Office of Naval Operations, Division of Fleet Training. (1938) *FTP 167. Landing Operations Doctrine*. Washington D.C.; 9.; 2.;