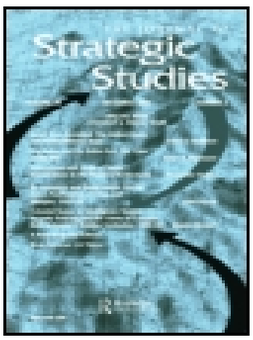

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'The special service squadron of the Royal Marines': The Royal Navy and organic amphibious warfare capability before 1914

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ABSTRACT

It is usually maintained that before 1914 the Royal Navy had abandoned interest in amphibious warfare. This article argues otherwise. It shows that prior to 1914 the Admiralty sought to reconfigure the Royal Marines as an organic maritime strike force. The idea was advanced by junior officers and taken up by the naval leadership, who appointed a high-level committee to elaborate the details. Significant steps had been taken before war broke out, thereby showing that modern British amphibious warfare doctrine pre-dates the ill-fated Gallipoli operation and needs to be understood in a broader context than is currently the case.

KEYWORDS Royal Marines; amphibious warfare; First World War; Royal Navy

Amphibious warfare has been a hotly contested topic in military and naval history: when did it start, who was involved, and where? Its origins and development are of more than just academic interest, as the syllabus of any military college will attest.[1] History informs current thinking on the subject in so many ways, and so much of this historical interest pivots on Britain and its actions before and during the Great War, most especially the ill-fated seaborne assault on Gallipoli in 1915. This article substantially extends our understanding of this topic by re-evaluating the place of amphibious warfare in pre-1914 British naval planning. Existing works universally depict the British military leadership as having abandoned all interest in combined operations early in the first decade of the twentieth century, with the Navy following suit in late 1911. In direct contrast to this interpretation, it will be argued here that, far from abandoning amphibious warfare, the Admiralty actually developed a heightened belief in its value in the two years prior to the outbreak of the First World War. Indeed, so deep was this conviction that Britain's naval leaders, aware of

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[1] Jeremy Black, *Combined Operations: A Global History of Amphibious and Airborne Warfare* (Lanham MD: Roman & Littlefield 2017).

the General Staff's deep hostility to any involvement in such campaigns, actually sought to create their own organic ship-to-shore capability so as to be able to undertake amphibious landings without the Army's cooperation.

I

The historiography on the development of amphibious warfare in Britain before 1914 is clear. It is generally accepted that in the run up to the First World War the leadership of the British Army, which had once strongly promoted combined operations, shifted this littoral emphasis towards continental style coalition warfare. While enthusiasts for combined operations still existed – Major-General Charles Callwell being a good example[2] – in the early years of the twentieth century, under the aegis of such advocates of the 'continental commitment' as Generals James Grierson, Spencer Ewart and Henry Wilson, the army re-modelled itself as an expeditionary force ready to fight traditional land battles in north-western Europe.[3] Any proposals that might detract from this plan – such as earmarking assets for coastal landings – were from then on deprecated. Given the scholarly consensus surrounding this analysis, the focus of the debate on the development of British amphibious warfare has been on the extent to which the Royal Navy planned to use such methods in the event of war with Germany. On this subject there is considerable division. Particularly controversial is the question of how far, if at all, landings from the sea informed the strategic thinking of the First Sea Lord from 1904 to 1910, Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Arbuthnot Fisher. The orthodox historiography, epitomised by the works of Arthur Marder, maintains that combined operations related to the seizure of North Sea islands or landings on the Baltic coast were a major component in Fisher's pre-war planning.[4] Whether these projects were seen as an admirable extension of Britain's historical maritime traditions or unrealistic fantasies based upon a complete disregard for the technological innovations of modern warfare has evoked some dispute, but that the plans existed and were genuine reflections of Admiralty thinking was not initially called into question.[5] That changed when Nicholas Lambert published a revisionist study of British war planning. Contrary to the orthodox view, he

[2]Daniel Whittingham, *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2020).
[3]Keith Jeffrey, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2006); John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy c.1900–1916* (London: Routledge 1974); Samuel Williamson, Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 1969).
[4]Arthur J. Marder, *F[rom the] D[readnought to] S[capa] F[low: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–19]* Vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford UP 1961–70) I, 383–8; P. Haggie, 'The Royal Navy and War Planning in the Fisher Era', in Paul Kennedy (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin 1979).
[5]Nicolas d'Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902–14* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996); Paul Hayes, 'Britain, Germany, and the Admiralty's Plans for Attacking German Territory, 1906–15' in Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes, Robert O'Neill (eds.), *War, Strategy and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1992), 95–116.

argued that Fisher never seriously advocated in-shore combined operations.[6] In his view, Admiralty proposals for seaborne landings were merely smoke screens aimed at disrupting the military's continental strategy and moving the war planning agenda towards a more maritime approach. Indeed, Lambert argues that the Admiralty's real plan was an extreme form of economic warfare designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of the German financial system by bringing down the global economy within months of a war starting, a method of attack that he has on at least one occasion labelled as 'Brits-Krieg'.[7] This argument has proved controversial.[8] All its elements have been subjected to critical re-appraisal, including the claim that amphibious warfare was never a genuine element in Jacky Fisher's war plans. In a detailed examination of Fisher's strategic thinking, Shawn Grimes has shown that capturing an island near the German North Sea coast in order to acquire an advance base for in-shore blockade operations was central to Fisher's strategic thinking. Thus, far from being a mere smoke screen, combined operations were an essential element in British naval war planning.[9] Grimes' analysis, although probably the dominant view today, is not shared by revisionist, thus demonstrating the current historiographical divide.[10]

Nevertheless, if the role of amphibious warfare in the period from 1904 to 1910 is much debated, there is a broad consensus over what happened thereafter. According to just about all accounts, Fisher's successor as First Sea Lord, Sir Arthur Wilson, developed his own plans for seizing German North Sea islands as a means of facilitating a blockade of Germany's main naval ports. On 23 August 1911, these proposals were put before government ministers at a special meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, where they met with considerable scepticism. Indeed, Wilson's performance persuaded the assembled decision-makers that naval planning should not be the job of just one figure, however senior and eminent, and that a naval staff was needed for this purpose.[11] Wilson, who opposed the creation of such a body, was duly dismissed and with him, or so it is said, went his plans for amphibious operations. Admittedly Churchill, the new First Lord of the Admiralty, later sought to re-introduce schemes for offensive ship-to-shore campaigns against German islands and appointed a committee under Rear-Admiral

[6]Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare in the First World War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 2012).

[7]Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Brits-Krieg: The Strategy of Economic Warfare', in George Perkovich and Ariel Levite (eds.), *Understanding Cyber Conflict: 14 Analogies* (Georgetown: Georgetown UP 2017), 123–46.

[8]John Coogan, 'The Short-War Illusion Resurrected: The Myth of Economic Warfare as the British Schlieffen Plan', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38 (2015), 1045–64; John R. Ferris, 'To the Hunger Blockade: The Evolution of British Economic Warfare, 1914–1915', in Michael Epkenhans and Stephan Huck (eds.), *Der Erste Weltkrieg zur See* (Oldenbourg De Gruyter 2017), 84.

[9]Shawn Grimes, 'Combined Operations and British Strategy, 1900–9', *Historical Research* 89 (2016), 866–84.

[10]Matthew S. Seligmann, 'The Renaissance of Pre-First World War Naval History', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36 (2013), 454–479.

[11]Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy*, 191–3; David Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics and British War Planning, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2017), 201–2.

Lewis Bayly to draw up blueprints.[12] However, Bayly's work was not well received in the Admiralty and nothing had come of his work by the time that the First World War began.[13] On top of that, this apparent last-minute resurgence in interest has been largely written off as the eccentric idea of Churchill, the amateur strategist. For most historians it did not represent the broad consensus within the service about amphibious warfare.[14] In effect, therefore, the consensus is that seaborne landings had ceased to be a serious element in British naval planning by the end of 1911, at least until their most unfortunate revival at Gallipoli in 1915.

This paper while accepting the new orthodoxy as established by Grimes regarding the importance of amphibious warfare to the Admiralty in the period from 1904 to 1910, does so with one significant change in emphasis. While Grimes mostly focused on the role of combined operations in British naval thinking – that is to say undertakings in which the Navy provided the sea transport, the escorting warships and the covering fire, while the Army contributed the military manpower – this paper will instead stress the Navy's desire to develop its own organic amphibious capability, one that, if realised, would have made the senior service independent of Army cooperation and capable of conducing landing operations from its own resources. The only way in which such an objective could have been achieved at this time was by repurposing significant parts of the Royal Marines into a dedicated seaborne strike force. What made the Marines the most obvious candidate for this role was that they were not an independent uniformed service. As an existing fighting arm of the Royal Navy under the direct control of the Admiralty, no negotiations with another branch of government would be needed to effect this change. Furthermore, their status as soldiers with maritime experience meant that they were already acculturated to ship-to-sore operations. On top of this, their existing force structure, consisting of two elements, the Royal Marines Light Infantry ('the Red Marines') and the Royal Marine Artillery ('the Blue Marines'), meant that they could provide both troops and inbuilt fire-power. As such, they were already the most obvious source of personnel for shore detachments and landing parties. Upscaling them for wider and more intensive amphibious warfare was not, therefore, an unimaginable leap and was potentially more useful than their existing role of ensuring discipline at sea, providing bandsmen, and manning a turret in larger warships. On the contrary, suggestions for just such a reorganisation had already been made on several occasions in the first decade of the twentieth century, a fact that has been noted, albeit fleetingly, by a few historians. However, probably because nothing seemingly came of these initiatives, they have not generally

[12]Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2013), 48.
[13]David Morgan-Owen, 'Cooked up in the Dinner Hour? Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plans Reconsidered', *English Historical Review* 545 (2015), 891–3.
[14]Hayes, 'Britain, Germany, and the Admiralty's Plans'.

been accorded any importance in the historiography.[15] Instead, where their existence has attracted any comment at all, it has generally been to stress that these proposals were outside the mainstream of naval thinking, put forward by officers intellectually ahead of their times and in no sense an indication of a major strand in contemporary naval thought and certainly not one likely to attract the attention of the Admiralty.[16] This article will argue otherwise. In an interesting parallel with contemporaneous efforts in the United States to create an advance base force of the Marine Corps, it will show that not only were the early papers on a Royal Marine striking force genuinely meant and seriously considered, but, of even greater importance, they left an important legacy.[17] This became evident after the extraordinary meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) on 23 August 1911. While the session undoubtedly set in motion the early retirement of Sir Arthur Wilson and the subsequent abandonment of key elements of his war plans – most notably those aspects involving the close blockade of the German North Sea coast – the rejection of amphibious operations by the naval leadership was definitely not one of the outcomes. On the contrary, following the August CID meeting there developed a new impetus behind the idea of re-purposing the Marines as a strike force and this led to a serious officially sanctioned investigation into the possibility of providing the Navy with the ability to undertake landing operations without the involvement of the Army, whose cooperation it was now abundantly evident would not be forthcoming. These efforts, which will be outlined in detail in this article, provide clear proof that coastal landing was not just a feature of the Fisher era, but remained a major component of Admiralty thinking right up to the eve of the First World War. To begin with, however, it is necessary to outline the antecedents of the process that began after the August 1911 CID meeting by highlighting the early private efforts to promote amphibious warfare and to repurpose the Royal Marines for this role.

II

The officer who most clearly personifies the service's early interest in developing its own organic amphibious warfare capability is Maurice Hankey. Hankey would have an illustrious career, becoming in 1912 the Secretary of the Committee of

[15]David R. Massam, 'British Maritime Strategy and Amphibious Capability 1900–1940', PhD, Oxford, 1995, 245–7; Matthew Heaslip, 'Britain's Armed Forces and Amphibious Operations in Peace and War 1919–1939: A Gallipoli Curse?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (on-line January 2019).

[16]For example, Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets* Vol. 3 (London: Collins 1970–74) I, 66; Ian Speller, *The Role of Amphibious Warfare in British Defence Policy, 1945–56* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2001), 21.

[17]Jeter A. Isley and Philp A. Crowl, *U.S. Marines and Amphibious Warfare: Its Theory, and its Practice in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1951), 21–4; Graham A. Cosmas and Jack Shulimson, 'The Culebra Maneuver and the Formation of the U.S. Marine Corps' Advance Base Force, 1913–1914', in Merrill L. Bartlett (ed.), *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1983); Leo J. Daugherty III, *Pioneers of Amphibious Warfare, 1898–1945: Profiles of Fourteen American Military Strategists* (Jefferson NC: McFarland 2009), 71–89.

Imperial Defence and in 1916 the first and ultimately longest serving Cabinet Secretary. At the outset of the twentieth century, however, he was merely a captain in the Royal Marine Artillery. Hankey's personal papers show that he started investigating what he labelled 'warfare on the littoral' while serving in the Mediterranean Fleet, possibly as early as 1899. Two aspects of the argument he developed in his very first appreciations are worth highlighting. The first is the view that history validated the idea that assault from the sea was invariably a feature in maritime war, if not at the outset of conflict when command of the sea was in contention, then certainly at the point that one side had achieved superiority over the other. Posing the semi-rhetorical question is there 'any reasonable probability that in future wars the Navy will be called upon to undertake operations upon the enemy's coastline', he responded that 'naval wars almost always arrive sooner or later at a stage when one of the belligerents … is obliged to withdraw to the shelter of its defended ports'. At this point the other would be obliged 'to establish a rigorous surveillance over the ports in which the enemy has taken refuge … ' To achieve this, Hankey argued, would bring about the 'necessity of an advanced base', something demonstrated in previous wars such as the blockade of Toulon during the French Revolutionary Wars, which 'led to the reduction of Corsica', or, more recently, the Sino-Japanese and Spanish-American Wars, which led to 'numerous minor operations on the coastline … such as the seizure and occupation of advanced bases for the fleet'. The second key line of argument was that the assets best suited to undertaking such actions were those personnel most familiar with maritime conditions, namely sailors put ashore as part of a Naval Brigade or the Royal Marines. As Hankey relayed, 'there is an old saying that a boat will hold 100 sailors, 75 marines or 50 soldiers … ' He continued that seamen and Marines would, by simple familiarity with the nautical domain, be better at embarking and disembarking than soldiers and would make the transition from boat to shore quicker and more easily than their military counterparts.[18] The implication regarding their greater utility in these circumstances was clear.

Hankey's initial jottings concerning 'warfare on the littoral' were intended to form the basis of a book on the subject. The book never materialised, but the effort was certainly not wasted as the ideas in the draft manuscript would subsequently be utilised as the basis of several formal submissions making the case for a dedicated naval amphibious capability.

The first of these comes from early 1904. In May of that year Hankey, by then attached to the coast defence section of the Naval Intelligence Department (NID), submitted a nine-page memorandum to the Head of the NID's War Division, Captain George Alexander Ballard, on 'Advance Bases for the Fleet', in which he reiterated and elaborated the arguments he had made previously in 'warfare on

[18]Hankey, 'Warfare on the Littoral' n/d [but commenced according to notations on cover in 1899]. Cambridge, United Kingdom, C[hurchill] A[rchive] C[entre]: [Maurice Hankey Papers] HNKY 6/1.

the littoral'.[19] As before, using historical examples from previous conflicts – most notably the Sino-Japanese War and the Spanish-American War – he stressed that a blockading fleet would require proximate advance bases to operate off an enemy's coast. However, he now fleshed out the force that would be needed to hold such a lodgement. Arguing that this should be made up exclusively of Marines on the grounds that there was no military unit ready for such a role and that Marines were better trained in recognizing friendly and hostile ships and so less likely to fire on the former by mistake, he listed in detail not just the supplies, but also the ordnance and personnel that should be prepared for this role. In compiling this roster, he drew heavily on reports of recent manoeuvres conducted by the United States Marine Corps in Subic Bay in the Philippines, which highlighted the importance of light weight equipment in the rapid completion of the temporary defences.[20] Finally, he also specified other operations beyond holding an advanced base for which such a force of Marines would be useful.

As Hankey later recalled, Ballard was extremely busy when this proposal was submitted, and he set it aside for later consideration. When that came, over a year later, Ballard was extremely impressed, but thought the paper would be more likely to receive a favourable hearing from the Admiralty if it emanated not from the Naval Intelligence Department, but directly from the Royal Marine authorities. Accordingly, Hankey sent it to the Assistant Adjutant General, Lieutenant-Colonel James Henry Bor, to ask if a revised version – one that was updated to include pertinent examples from the Russo-Japanese War – might be something that the Deputy Adjutant General (DAG) would be prepared to include in a formal submission to the Board.[21] Bor's response was positive: 'I have shown this to the DAG and he is quite willing to put the proposal forward for consideration. … As you have offered to revise it will you kindly do so at your convenience and return it to me.'[22]

While it does not appear as if Hankey ever took up this opportunity, he did continue to press his ideas in other fora. For example, in July 1905 he appeared as a witness before the Committee on the 'Training of Junior Naval Officers under the New Scheme' headed by Vice-Admiral Sir Archibald Douglas. Hankey used the opportunity provided by his personal testimony to push for amphibious warfare to part of the curriculum. As he explained to the committee, an officer in the Royal Marines:

> wants to be a specialist in littoral warfare – warfare of the coast. I have studied a good many wars lately with a view to trying to find out what he should know,

[19]Hankey, 'Advance Bases for the Fleet', 2 May 1904. CAC: HNKY 6/3.
[20]Interestingly, recent studies have noted the institutional similarity between the Royal Marines and the US Marine Corps at the outset of the twentieth century. Heather P. Venable, *How the Few became the Proud: Crafting the Marine Corps Mystique, 1874–1918* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 2019). The fact that both were thinking about advance base doctrine at the same time reinforces this.
[21]Hankey to Bor, 29 November 1905. CAC: HNKY 6/3.
[22]Marginal Note by Bor to Hankey, 2 January 1906. Ibid.

> and I have come to the conclusion that instead of being, as at present, taught mainly Military duties and Infantry Drill, he wants to study especially raids, … and the defence of advanced bases, such as the Japanese at Elliott [*sic*] Islands,[23] or the American Marines at Guantanamo, where they defended the advanced base, kept off the Spanish skirmishers, and thus enabled the ships to coal in safety. Then, again, the seizure and preparation of landing-places for the subsequent advance of an army.[24]

He took a similar line when in December 1906 he crafted a paper entitled 'Proposals for improving the Constitution of our Military Striking Force'.[25] It began with a warning that there was a gap in Britain's defence preparations: 'the lack in our national war organisation of any body of troops, which can be despatched at a moment's notice, and without attracting a large share of public attention for an enterprise across the sea, and which is trained to disembark rapidly upon a hostile shore.'[26] This deficiency, Hankey maintained, was all the more telling as the Admiralty had recently examined a number of projects each and every one of which would have required landing an armed force from the sea. Top of his list was 'seizing by a *coup-de-main* the German island of Borkum, as a flying base for submarines and destroyers'. Given this evident need and the 'remarkable fact that … there exists no organised force … which is trained for rapid disembarkation on a hostile coast', Hankey proceeded to consider how it might be provided. His answer was a simple one: 'a portion of the Royal Marines should be organised so as to provide the first detachment of our national striking force.' The Marines, he argued, were 'by their organisation and training no less than by their traditions … peculiarly qualified to undertake this responsibility.'[27]

Hankey again took up this cause a mere two years later when, in conjunction with Fisher's trusted assistant, Commander Thomas Evans Crease, he penned a paper on the 'Organisation of an Expeditionary Force'.[28] The rationale was the same as in the previous papers: 'a small, fully equipped Military Expeditionary Force, capable of being launched at a few hours' notice' was needed for such purposes as taking 'possession of an island, or a harbour on the enemy's coast that is to be used as a temporary base for naval operations, and afterwards to provide the land defence of the base.'

[23]The Elliot Islands, now known as Changhai County, are an archipelago off the Liaodong Peninsula, close to Port Arthur.

[24]Parliamentary Papers, 'Reports of Departmental Committees appointed to consider certain questions concerning the Extension of the New Scheme of Training for Officers of the Navy, &c.', 1906, Cd.2841.

[25]Hankey, 'Proposals for improving the Constitution of our Military Striking Force', 12 December 1906. CAC: HNKY 6/4.

[26]That the time required for the British Army to mobilise would inevitably delay any amphibious operations dependent upon inter-service cooperation had been a point at issue since the mid-1890s. David Morgan-Owen, 'War as it Might have been: British Sea Power and the First World War', *Journal of Military History* 83 (2019), 1110.

[27]Hankey, 'Proposals'.

[28]Crease and Hankey, 'Organisation of an Expeditionary Force', October 1908. T[he] N[ational] A[rchives of the United Kingdom]: CAB[inet papers] 63/1.

Such a force, it was re-iterated, could not be composed of army units. Deploying regular soldiers would not only be time-consuming, as most barracks were far from the coast, but would also excite a lot of attention and so compromise the element of surprise. Accordingly, it was insisted that 'the whole force should be drawn from the Royal Marines.' Having once established this, the remainder of the 28 page memorandum outlined how 4565 officers and men of the Royal Marines – the number considered necessary for the operations proposed – could be assembled and how the food, stores, ammunition, hospital and transport arrangements for such a force could be put together.

This was not Hankey's last paper on the subject. According to his later recollection, he delivered a 'rough sketch' version of the 1908 memorandum to Winston Churchill, the New First Lord of the Admiralty, in 1912.[29] As far as it is possible to tell from the surviving record, this, his sixth analysis of the topic, was Hankey's final attempt to promote the idea of the Royal Navy developing its own organic amphibious capability by re-organizing the Royal Marines into a dedicated strike force. It is, however, worth noting that, if Hankey was the most persistent advocate of this project, he was not entirely alone. In September 1906, for example, Richard Phillimore, the Flag Captain to Admiral Douglas, the Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth, also submitted a paper on the need for a dedicated British 'striking force' capable of being landed on the enemy's coast. Like Hankey, he, also, saw the Royal Marines as central to such a project.[30]

III

As can be seen, decidedly in the person of Maurice Hankey, a tenacious advocate of this idea, and to a lesser extent in the form of other more occasional contributors, such as Thomas Crease and Richard Phillimore, the Royal Navy possessed a body of opinion that saw a need for an organic ship-to-shore landing capability that was not dependent upon the cooperation and involvement of the Army. The significance of this has so far been missed. In the existing historiography, it is generally perceived as largely ineffectual and irrelevant to the development of naval policy, with no officially sanctioned initiatives stemming from its efforts. The reality is somewhat different and, ironically, it seems that the event that is normally regarded as the death

[29]Hankey to Dixon, 12 November 1914. Ibid. A further document in the Hankey collection, 'A suggested improvement in the composition of the military forces of Great Britain' is dated by one historian as 'after 1912' [HNKY 7/1], which might qualify it as the paper in question. Jim Beach, 'The British Army, the Royal Navy, and the 'Big Work' of Sir George Aston, 1904–1914', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29 (2006), 162.

[30]Phillimore, 'Further Employment of the Royal Marines', enclosed in Phillimore to Douglas, 8 September 1906. TNA: ADM[iralty papers] 116/996.

knell of serious Admiralty interest in amphibious warfare was the spark for its re-ignition.

On 23 August 1911, at a specially convened meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the War Office and the Admiralty outlined their plans for war with Germany.[31] Sir Arthur Wilson, the First Sea Lord, explained that the Navy intended to mount a close blockade of the German coast and to facilitate this called for the seizure by amphibious landings mounted by regular soldiers of the islands of Wangeroog in the North Sea and Fehmarn in the Baltic. Wilson also named Heligoland in the German Bight as another potential target for seaborne assault. It was, of course, blockade rather than combined operations that lay at the heart of Wilson's plans, a fact recognised on the day by Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, and subsequently rediscovered by the historian David Morgan-Owen.[32] This has not, however, stopped commentators then and since characterizing Wilson's desire to capture an island base as 'madness' and using these proposed operations as a reason to question his grasp of the realities of modern warfare. The soldiers present at the meeting were unsurprisingly hostile – Sir William Nicholson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, described the plans as 'doomed to failure' – but their condemnation was matched by that of the politicians, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith labelling them as 'puerile' and Home Secretary Winston Churchill retorting that he was filled with considerable 'misgiving' at what Sir Arthur had proposed.[33]

It is notable, however, that none of these criticisms dulled Sir Arthur Wilson's enthusiasm for his amphibious ideas. Indeed, less than a week after the CID meeting the Admiralty wrote to the War Office with a formal request that a force of 6000 infantry plus supporting units be kept in readiness to assist the Navy in its North Sea operations. Predictably given their earlier attitude, the General Staff was unimpressed. Claiming that the proposals 'could only end in disaster,' they refused outright. Noting that 'assistance from the Army would be worse than useless if not cordially given', Wilson then drew a line under this issue, an action that for most historians marked the end of serious pre-First World War plans for combined operations.[34] Wilson's dismissal three months later has further reinforced the sense that a new era in naval planning was beginning, one in which combined operations would play no part.

In one respect this was undeniably correct: the General Staff's refusal to cooperate with the Admiralty's schemes did, inevitably, close any prospect of meaningful combined operations.[35] However, it is important at this juncture

[31]Committee of Imperial Defence, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23, 1911'. TNA: CAB 2/2.
[32]Morgan-Owen, 'Cooked up', 865–906.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Minute by Wilson, 9 September 1911. Marder, *FDSF*, I, 394.
[35]In 1913 a revised 'Manual of Combined Naval and Military Operations would be issued.' Its existence is no indication of interest at that time in either service in such activities. TNA: W[ar]O[ffice papers] 33/644.

to differentiate between combined operations, which by definition necessitated the involvement of the Army, and amphibious projects, which, while certainly needing military force, did not require that force to be provided by the War Office. If the Navy could supply its own assets, then it could continue to entertain proposals for coastal campaigns irrespective of the views of the General Staff. Of course, in late 1911, the Admiralty possessed no such capability, the regular use of small naval brigades in nineteenth century warfare notwithstanding, and, consequently, this was not a viable option. Yet, as we have seen, there was a long tradition of far-sighted officers such as Hankey suggesting the creation of just such a force. All that was therefore required was for someone with influence to revive this tradition and for the Admiralty to take it seriously. That was exactly what was to take place.

In the first half of 1912, a matter of months after Sir Arthur Wilson had been dismissed and his war plans, with their schemes for capturing German islands, had been abandoned, the new Second Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg, formally submitted a minute calling for the establishment of what he termed a 'Flying Corps of the Royal Marines.'[36] This proposal had nothing to do with aviation. Rather, as Battenberg explained, his intention was 'to form such a Corps which could be utilised for seizing an advanced base for the Fleet, either in British, Neutral or Hostile Territory.' To this end, he sketched out in brief its possible composition. If 800 enlisted men from the Royal Marine Light Infantry were taken from each of the naval bases at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth and combined with 600 members of the Royal Marine Artillery from Eastney and if this concentration of manpower were supplemented by a number of 4.7 inch guns on moveable mountings, along with some 12 pounder guns on field carriages and some 24 inch searchlights, then a dedicated force of 3000 officers and men with specialised equipment would be brought into being. Battenberg further proposed, although this was not an essential element of the scheme, that a portion of this force be made up of active service personnel with the remainder coming from the reserves on mobilisation. He ended his minute: 'If approved, the Chief of Staff and Deputy Adjutant General might be directed to elaborate the details forthwith.'[37]

The new First Sea Lord, Sir Francis Bridgeman, was enthusiastic. Passing on Battenberg's minute, which he described as 'a valuable suggestion', to the Chief

[36]Battenberg, 'Flying Corps of the Royal Marines', 5 June 1912, in Admiralty Case 11193. TNA: ADM 116/1293. There is some confusion over the dating of this document. Battenberg's original manuscript is dated '5/6/12', but Bridgeman's minute in response is dated '6.5.12'. One of these is clearly wrong. In the Admiralty papers the mistake is attributed to Bridgeman, the date of whose minute is corrected by an unknown hand to 5 June. However, there is also a typescript version of the correspondence in a Royal Marines Office docket (TNA: ADM 1/8313). In this version, it is Battenberg's dating that is queried, and a correction is applied giving the day of completion of his paper as 6 May 1912. As subsequent references in the papers are made to Battenberg's 'minute of 5 June', this article will assume that this is the correct dating.

[37]Ibid. The existence of these minutes has been obscured either by their being mislabelled or by their being filed with papers on other subjects.

of Staff, Rear-Admiral Ernest Troubridge, he called for comment. 'Please criticise – favourably if possible – as it's a really useful idea.'[38] If this implied that the First Sea Lord expected Troubridge to be ill-disposed to Battenberg's ideas, he need not have worried. 'The establishment of such a force as that proposed by the Second Sea Lord,' began the Chief of Staff, 'would fill a long-felt gap in the Naval and Military organisation of the Empire and would add greatly to the offensive power of the Navy.' Citing a 1910 Committee of Imperial Defence paper on the 'Principles of Imperial Defence', he went on to suggest that such a force would be particularly useful for capturing an advanced base for the fleet.[39] Previously, he noted, such an undertaking would generally have necessitated assistance from the Army 'with the inherent disadvantages of dual control and the putting in force of their comparatively cumbrous and slow mobilisation system (with its consequent publicity) before the expedition can start.' However, Battenberg's idea would 'do away with all these disadvantages, and the Admiralty would always have at a few hours' call the services of a compact, highly trained, and mobile force to employ whenever required.' Nevertheless, if Troubridge was supportive, he still had two suggestions: first, that to avoid confusion with the Royal Flying Corps, the new body be called the 'Special Service Force, Royal Marines'; second, that, given the 'difficult and arduous nature of the duties' which this force was intended to perform and the fact that mounting an opposed landing was 'amongst the most difficult operations of war', the leadership and training of the proposed unit would need to be strengthened. In particular, the 'cadres of these battalions should be in existence during peace, and the officers and men on the active list should be appointed for a certain fixed period', as should the commander of the force, the battalion commanders and their adjutants. In addition, the necessary outfit of light artillery and searchlights should be assembled and permanently retained at Eastney 'for immediate use.' Troubridge then concluded with a re-iteration of his strong support:

> The expense involved by the establishment of a force so organised would be comparatively small, and the increase in offensive power of the Fleet in having ready at hand at a few hours' notice a well-trained and organised force for use anywhere in seizing an advanced naval base, would be very great.[40]

Did anything come of this? At the time that Battenberg made this suggestion the naval leadership was grappling with the important question of whether to turn Scapa Flow, a large natural harbour in the Orkney Islands, into a wartime base for the fleet. Given that there were many channels into Scapa Flow, were it

[37]Ibid. The existence of these minutes has been obscured either by their being mislabelled or by their being filed with papers on other subjects.
[38]Minute by Bridgeman, 5 June 1912 [6.5.12 in original]. Ibid.
[39]Committee of Imperial Defence, 'Principles of Imperial Defence', Paper 62c, 8 July 1910. TNA: CAB 5/2.
[40]Memorandum by Troubridge, 10 June 1912 [10/5/12 in typescript]. TNA: ADM 1/8313.

to be designated as a naval anchorage, these would need to be secured either by being blocked by heavy obstructions or through being fortified by artillery. As a rule, this would require the government to embark upon the expensive process of erecting fixed defences and establishing a permanent garrison. However, with the naval estimates already at an all-time high, a cheaper alternative was being considered. This was to restrict the fixed gun and search light emplacements to the widest and most easily accessible entrances into the bay and to set aside some portable weapons and equipment that could be rushed to the narrower and more difficult ones in the event of conflict. To test out the viability of this proposal, it had been decided back in May to despatch a squadron of Royal Marines equipped with field guns and moveable searchlights to Flotta Island in the Bay during the summer manoeuvres to determine how quickly and effectively they could render the channels impregnable.[41] Battenberg saw in this operation an opportunity simultaneously to appraise his own proposal as the force to 'be used in the coming manoeuvres to seize and hold Scappa [*sic*] Flow anchorage', although smaller than the one he envisaged for his 'flying squadron', was not dissimilar in role and mobility.[42] Thus, a test of one would also be a test of the other. However, while this made perfect sense and was for that reason accepted by the Board, it had two unfortunate consequences. First, by assessing the viability of a strike force through the medium of an operation designed to afford protection to a British territorial base, it inextricably intertwined two different roles – home defence and overseas operations – and so muddled the purpose of the new force. The unintended danger was thereby inadvertently created that future progress over the flying column would become bound up with the question of the defence arrangements for Scapa Flow. Second, as these manoeuvres were scheduled to commence in July this meant that, despite Bridgeman's support and Troubridge's eager endorsement, no immediate action was taken. While the latter issue would quickly be remedied, the former would continue to complicate matters for some time to come.

IV

By early August 1912 the Admiralty was in possession of a full report concerning the activities of the Royal Marine force sent to Flotta to establish temporary defences in the Orkneys.[43] This report was detailed and wide ranging and had important implications, including, as Troubridge recognised,

[41] In what might be described as a case of convergent development, the US Marine Corps conducted advance base exercises between December 1913 and January 1914. Cosmas and Shulimson, 'Formation of the U.S. Marine Corp's Advance Base Force'.
[42] Battenberg, 'Flying Corps of the Royal Marines', 5 June 1912. TNA: ADM 116/1293.
[43] 'Report on the Expeditionary Force of the Royal Marines Sent to Establish Temporary Defences at Flotta for the protection of the Southern Entrances to Scapa Flow, July 1912'. Ibid.

for 'the proposals put forward by the Second Sea Lord'.[44] Nevertheless, despite acknowledging this, the Chief of Staff's response was entirely focused on what it revealed about the potential defence arrangements for Scapa Flow. To this end, he proposed that a committee be set up to perfect these and he largely ignored the question of the 'Flying Squadron'. Almost immediately, therefore, the intermingling of the two questions had created a situation in which work on the new Special Service Force of the Royal Marines was receding into the background as attention focused predominantly on the security of the Orkney Islands. Fortunately, at this point Churchill intervened to keep consideration of the strike force on track. Work on 'the emergency defence of Scapa Flow', he wrote, should advance in accordance with Troubridge's suggestion that a special committee be appointed to settle the details. At the same time, however, the First Lord also insisted that the 'organisation of the flying column of marines as outlined by 2SL [Second Sea Lord] and COS [Chief of Staff] should not be delayed.' A separate committee would work out the details.[45]

As a result of Churchill's minute, on 10 October a committee was appointed to 'draw up a scheme for the defence of Scapa Flow.' For reasons that will be examined below, this committee was dissolved in February. Meanwhile, simultaneously and more importantly for this article, a parallel body was appointed to draw up a scheme for a flying column of the Royal Marines. Chaired by Lieutenant-General Sir William Nicholls, the Deputy Adjutant General, it also included Commander C.R. Watson representing the Mobilisation Division of the Admiralty War Staff, Major H.E. Blumberg, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the Royal Marines, Captain H.F. Montgomery from the operations Division of the Admiralty War Staff, W. Sanger of the Accountant-General's Department, and R. Skinner from the Naval Branch of the Admiralty Secretariat. In the main, its terms of reference coincided closely with Battenberg's minute of 5 June. They were to:

> consider and report upon the best manner of organising a flying column of Royal Marines, consisting of 3000 officers and men, with a view to its utilisation for seizing and holding an advanced base for the Fleet either in British, neutral or hostile territory …

However, they deviated in one important respect from the original. In a resumption of the adverse intertwining of the Orkney issue with the strike force question, the paragraph concluded that 'the use of a portion in manning the defences at Scapa Flow in an emergency [should be] kept in view.'[46]

Unsurprisingly, the committee members found this addendum confusing as regards the Admiralty's intended priorities. Accordingly, they sought clarity

[44]Minute by Troubridge, 2 August 1912. Ibid.
[45]Minute by Churchill, 27 September 1912. Ibid.
[46]'Terms of Reference' attached to Admiralty letter, 10 October 1912. Ibid.

as to the primary focus of the new force. Was it to 'man and defend temporary bases … in the United Kingdom'? Or was it to 'seize temporary or advanced bases in foreign territory'? Was it to 'cover the landing of a large force on a hostile coast'? Or, alternatively, could it be to 'execute raids'?[47] These were prescient questions. At this juncture, however, they were told to focus on the first two objectives, although, unhelpfully, they were also informed that in so doing they need not exclude consideration of the other two areas. Fortified with this clarification – really no clarification at all – the committee embarked upon its work.

The report took some five months to compile.[48] Given the ambiguous advice with which it had been provided concerning the potential missions of the new force, the committee had faced the difficult task of attempting to reconcile a series of competing priorities that frequently pulled in different directions. As a result, its recommendations were framed by the need to cover a series of eventualities, some of which, it was assumed, might need to be delivered at the same time. This led to some common conclusions, but also to some that were applicable to specific scenarios only.

Topping the list of universal recommendations was a new regime of preparatory instruction. The various duties contemplated for the new force, the committee observed, 'require a high standard of training and discipline on the part of the officers and men in order that they may be efficiently performed.' This meant that those allocated to the flying squadron, be they active service personnel or members of the reserves, should as far as possible be trained together, and that this training should be undertaken intensively and to an expanded syllabus. The reason for this was that functions that would usually be performed by specialist corps, such as the Royal Engineers, would need for this force to be performed by its own members. To this end, instruction would be required in such new areas as the handling and repair of electrical instruments, the maintenance of telephones, and the construction and siting of batteries and magazines. Finally, given the need for heightened proficiency in such areas as embarking and disembarking, additional intensive training was recommended even for tasks that fell within a Marine's existing areas of competence.

However, while the committee felt able to make some recommendations that were common to the force as a whole, its report was clear that with the putative new unit having several distinct missions, much of what it proposed would be context specific. Accordingly, the committee felt obliged to consider the organization and work of the so-called 'flying column' under two distinct headings depending on whether it was acting as:

[47]Minute by Nicholls, 29 October 1912. Ibid.
[48]'Report of Committee appointed to draw up a scheme for the Organisation of a Flying Column, Royal Marines', 7 March 1913. Ibid.

(i) The garrison of the fixed defences at Scapa Flow and Cromarty.
(ii) The Special Service Force …

The reason for this was that the 'conditions of (i) and (ii) differ materially'. The peace-time core of the garrisons at Cromarty and Scapa Flow, for example, would have to be stationed at these distant sites and not in the usual Marine barracks. As a result, they would not be available for common training – perhaps less of a problem as they would need to focus on special tasks peculiar to them, such as the use of heavy land service guns – and, furthermore, their numbers might need to be subtracted from the size of the force available for amphibious operations. There would also be particular complications in getting them quickly up to full strength in wartime.

As regards the strike force – they preferred the term 'Special Service Force' to 'Flying Column' – Nicholls and his fellow committee members were of the view that optimal efficiency would be created if it were organised into 'self-contained units, to be called companies, each capable of manning a 4-gun battery, with 4 searchlights, and of providing for its own land defence and internal arrangements.' It was, therefore, proposed that eleven such companies be formed, two from the Royal Marine Artillery and the remaining nine from the Royal Marine Light Infantry, with a peace-time nucleus of 496 active service men for these companies kept permanently at the several Marine headquarters. The main difficulty anticipated in achieving this was the paucity of active officers and NCOs available to make up this force and, for this reason, special measures were proposed to free up existing personnel from their current duties in order to make them available for their new roles. The committee also suggested ways to attract suitable people to join those reserves designated for wartime mobilisation into this force.

The report was a comprehensive assessment and there was no doubt that the committee had laboured long and hard to produce clear and definitive proposals despite the confusing operational parameters that had been given to it. Nevertheless, by the time the report came out, circumstances had changed significantly as far as east coast defence arrangements were concerned, a fact that had already led to the disbanding of the Scapa Flow committee and the handing of its work to the Cromarty committee under Lieutenant-Colonel Lewis Conway-Gordon.[49] This had considerable implications for the development of the 'flying column'. As the new Chief of Staff, Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Jackson, observed:

> Since this Committee was formed, it has been practically decided that the defences of both Cromarty and Scapa Flow shall be fixed, and the decision as regards the latter place has to a certain extent modified the terms of reference

[49]Murray to Conway-Gordon, 4 February 1913. Ibid.

> on which the committee have reported, and has led them to cover a wider field than would have been the case had this decision been come to earlier … [50]

In practical terms, this meant that those parts of the report predicated on Marines rushing north to install and man temporary base defences were already out of date. Thus, as had previously been the case, the failure properly to delineate the role of the new force to one clear core mission, as had been suggested in Battenberg's original minute, and the stubborn insistence on keeping open the subsidiary option of temporarily securing Scottish anchorages was continuing to hinder its development. As a result, the Admiralty's first response to the report necessarily involved three months attempting to disaggregate those parts of the report that were now inapplicable from those that still had relevance to the originally intended mission. After some toing and froing of minutes between Alexander Duff of the War Staff Mobilisation Division, Henry Jackson, the Chief of Staff, and I. W. S. Anderson, the Principal Clerk in the Naval Branch of the Admiralty Secretariat, agreement was reached on the key questions. Foremost amongst them was 'whether the defensive garrisons of Cromarty and Scapa Flow are to be taken from this organised force or not.' In Jackson's view: 'It seems to me unnecessary.'[51] However, as the representative from Naval Branch pointed out, given that the garrison of Cromarty had been fixed at a war-time strength of 346 men and that it was expected that 600 or so would be needed for Scapa Flow, there was a new requirement for almost 1000 Marines for coastal defence purposes. From where these would be found was not entirely clear. The Director of the Operations Division of the war Staff, Captain Ballard, assumed that they would be 'drawn from the personnel to be allotted to the Special Service Force.'[52] However, if that were the case, the latter would need to be cut down from a proposed establishment of 3000 to one of just over 2000.[53] Even then, as Duff had already observed, 496 Marines would be rendered unavailable for draft to the fleet. 'It is necessary,' he went on, to determine ' … whether or not they are to constitute an addition to peace requirements.'[54] On all of these points the Deputy Adjutant General, General Nicholls, to whom these issues were referred, had definite views. He was certain, for example, that 'the garrisons of Scapa Flow and Cromarty should be separate units, and quite distinct from the Special Service Force … ' He was no less clear that it was 'positively essential that the 496 Active Service men of the SSF … should not be available for draft in the ordinary sense whilst belonging to these forces.' His reason: 'it is necessary to have a highly trained force and one that is accustomed to have worked and been trained together under its officers and n[on-]c[ommissioned] officers.' Such was the arduous nature of the proposed role that to 'assemble hastily detachments

[50]Minute by Jackson, 11 April 1913. Ibid.
[51]Ibid.
[52]Minute by Ballard, 5 May 1913. Ibid.
[53]Minute by Anderson, 6 May 1913. Ibid.
[54]Minute by Duff, 19 March 1913. Ibid.

from the four Marine Divisions and to expect them to carry out the object required successfully against trained troops would be but to court disaster.' For all of these reasons, he concluded that the necessary personnel should 'be considered as an addition to peace requirements.'[55]

This interchange of minutes was referred to the Assistant Secretary, Sir Oswyn Murray. His response demonstrated why mixing up the otherwise unrelated areas of coast defence and amphibious warfare was so destructive. He concurred that the two questions were quite distinct and that they 'should be kept as far as possible separate.' However, as so much had changed since the original terms of reference were drafted and since the committee had met and reported that he thought it 'advisable to refer the question back to the Committee for further consideration.' In doing so, he suggested that this time 'a definite statement as to the duties the Special Service Force are required to perform in war would be desirable for the Committee's guidance.'[56] In short, he was arguing that the matter needed to be re-examined afresh. Despite the view of the new Second Sea Lord, Sir John Jellicoe, that 'the Cromarty and Scapa Flow garrisons should be separated entirely from the Special Service Fore' and that therefore the only issue was whether the latter should have an establishment of 2000 men, Battenberg, now First Sea Lord, supported Murray. 'The whole of this will now have to be re-considered with the new scheme of taking over the East Coast Defences,' he decided.[57] However, in promoting delay, he differed from Murray in one crucial respect: he did not reconvene the committee. The matter was, thus, entirely held over, pending a final decision on the defence of the Scottish naval anchorages.

The inevitable effect of this decision was to push the amphibious warfare agenda firmly into the background as all eyes focused instead on the protection of the east coast. The most pressing aspect of the problem, it soon transpired, was the considerable expense likely to be entailed in making the various northern naval bases truly secure. In this context, the fact that the fortifications might be manned and operated more cheaply by Royal Marines than by the Royal Garrison Artillery – each Marine costing between £48 and £53 per annum as opposed to over £59 for a garrison artilleryman – meant that an immediate saving might be made by putting the defences north of Sheerness into the hands of the Admiralty and using Marines as the main personnel.[58] Unsurprisingly, given this financial incentive, Churchill suggested just that. In a paper evidently intended for consideration by both the War Office and the Committee of Imperial Defence, he offered active service Marines for the peace time garrisons of the new coast defences – 800 coming from their present numbers – and further proposed that this force

[55]Minute by Nicholls, 13 May 1913. Ibid.
[56]Minute by Murray, 26 May 1913. Ibid.
[57]Minutes by Jellicoe, 27 May 1913 and Battenberg, 28 May 1913. Ibid.
[58]Memorandum by Churchill, no date [1913]. CAC: CHAR 13/22B/288-91.

would be brought to full strength when war-time mobilisation commenced by means of Marine reservists. He also added, in a rider that would prove highly significantly for future developments, that 'after providing for [those] requirements', the Admiralty would be able to 'organise 4 naval and marine brigades out of their surplus reservists'.[59]

Quite where the 800 active service Marines needed for the local defence batteries would come from was not spelt out at this stage. However, it soon became clear that, in the short term at least, it would be at the expense of the Special Service Force. This was made clear in a Memorandum by Churchill on the establishment levels of the Royal Marines. There were, he noted, a total of '17,800 Marines, of whom 11,400 are afloat and 6,400 ashore'. 'In war time,' he continued, 'all active service Marines go afloat except 1,600 men, of whom 800 are unqualified recruits. The other 800 have been lately saved for a special purpose'. This special purpose was, of course, 'a mobile brigade of Marines which could if necessary be sent to protect the Orkneys or any other minor detached oversea service required by the Admiralty.' If the memorandum up to this point seemed no more than a reiteration of the terms of reference that had been given to Nicholls' committee – that is to say a flying column with two conflicting missions – what Churchill wrote next showed that the priorities had clarified in the wake of the east coast question and had done so decisively in one direction. 'The Admiralty,' Churchill proclaimed, 'attach so much importance and urgency to the proper defence of the East Coast batteries that they would be prepared if necessary to defer the formation of this mobile brigade and employ these 800 men in the first instance in manning the East Coast batteries.'[60] In short, the Navy's proposed organic amphibious capability would have to wait for the defence provisions of the new naval bases to be agreed and implemented.

It turned out to be a long wait. Despite the evident belief in mid-1913 that the defence arrangements of Cromarty and Scapa Flow would quickly be settled, allowing then for the subsequent resolution of the Special Service Force, this turned out not to be the case. Instead discussions over what to do over the fortification of the northern naval bases dragged on; they would still be on-going when war broke out in August 1914. As a result, when in early 1914 Churchill asked for a progress report on the 'flying column', as he still called it, the Principal Clerk, Walter Nicholson confirmed that 'arrangements have been suspended pending certain discussions [about East Coast Defences] at CID' and the Admiralty Secretary was forced to admit that 'no action has been taken since … May last.'[61] If seemingly surprised, Churchill was, nevertheless, evidently still interested in seeing this taken forward. 'Bring up as soon as the East Coast Defences Qu[estion] has been settled' was his

[59]Ibid. and Memorandum by Churchill, 2 May 1913. CAC: CHAR 13/22A/56-60.
[60]Memorandum by Churchill, no date [1913]. CAC: CHAR 13/22B/286-7.
[61]Minutes by Churchill, 10 April 1914, Nicholson, 23 April 1914, and Greene, 24 April 1914. TNA: ADM 116/1293.

response.[62] The problem was that in the few remaining months of peace this would not be settled and, as a consequence, the Special Service Force of the Royal Marines would never get re-evaluated. As Churchill's final minute shows, this was definitely not for lack of interest; rather it was a consequence of the unfortunate manner in which the topic had originally been framed. Pairing it with the separate base question had caused difficulties from the very start; in May 1914 it was still hindering its swift development.

Nevertheless, the proposed forward deployment of Marines did bear fruit, if not in the manner originally envisaged. On the outbreak of war in August 1914, Churchill was eager to involve the Navy in the defence of the Belgian ports. Needing a land force to do this, he was naturally drawn to the Royal Marines, whose reconfiguration as a strike force had, as we have seen, been the subject of prolonged and on-going discussion. In his memorandum of 2 May 1913, Churchill had proposed that those Royal Marines not drafted to the fleet should be constituted into a separate brigade. Egged on by Fisher, who characteristically and enthusiastically endorsed the creation of such a force, Churchill now brought it into being, and the units thereby created were swiftly deployed first to Ostend and then, alongside even more hastily collected and equipped naval reservists, to Antwerp.[63] Whether either of these operations was a good idea is open to serious question, but the lineal descent from a facet, if not the main element, of earlier thinking is clear.[64]

V

Nevertheless, while Battenberg's idea of a Special Service Force of the Royal Marines was never actually brought into being – at least not until the Second World War – the proposal to create it, the enthusiastic reception it received, and the serious study of it undertaken by Nicholls' committee and subsequently all point to the seriousness of the Admiralty's desire to create its own organic amphibious strike force. In one sense, this is not surprising. As the first part of this article demonstrated the idea had a long pedigree at the Admiralty with key officers like Hankey, Crease and Phillimore all promoting the concept. That the Admiralty would rediscover this once the War Office had made it patently clear that it would not take part in combined operations was entirely natural. As a result, it is apparent that, contrary to what has been said, the Admiralty's interest in amphibious operations did not end with

[62]Minute by Churchill, 3 May 1914. Ibid.

[63]Fisher to Churchill, 16 August 1914. CAC: CHAR 13/43/25. This letter is dated 16 May 1914 in the catalogue, but it is clear from the content (e.g. seizing Ottoman dreadnoughts) that this cannot be correct.

[64]Historians to make this link include K. W. Mitchinson, *Defending Albion. Britain's Home Army, 1908–1919* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 46 and 221; Barry Gough, *Churchill and Fisher: titans at the Admiralty* (Barnsley: Seaforth 2017), 254–5; Massam 'British Maritime Strategy', 248.

either Fisher's retirement in 1910 or Sir Arthur Wilson's unconvincing performance before the CID in August 1911; nor was Churchill's creation of the Bayly committee to investigate the seizure of German islands a complete aberration, notwithstanding the hostile reception that Bayly's proposals received. The matter was still being actively considered when war began in 1914. Whether anything would ultimately have come of Battenberg's minute in the sense that he wrote it is, of course, unknowable, but that is was being seriously considered and genuinely pushed forward is a significant fact.

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