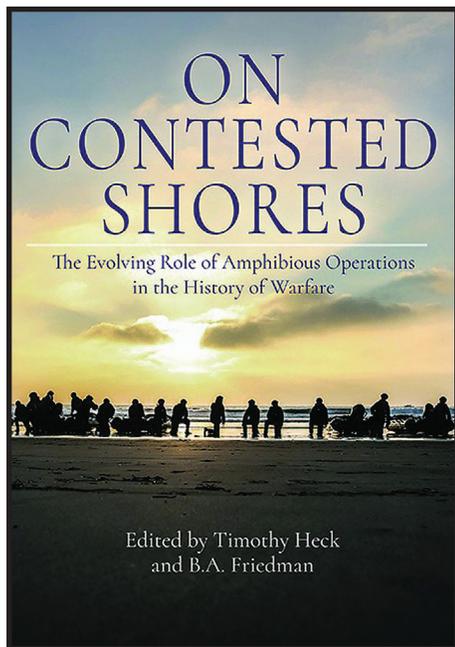


# BOOKREVIEWS



## ON CONTESTED SHORES: THE EVOLVING ROLE OF AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE HISTORY OF WARFARE

EDITED BY TIMOTHY HECK  
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REVIEW BY JAMIE L. H. GOODALL

It is no secret that the United States faces an ever-evolving threat landscape that appears to be accelerating at an unprecedented pace. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas identified the emerging threats to be “revolutionizing technological innovations, growing political and economic instability, widening wealth inequality, a rapidly changing climate, increasingly aggressive nation states, emerging infectious diseases, and other forces.”<sup>21</sup> Every branch of the U.S. armed forces is working to define their place in and strategize for this complex and diverse threat landscape. The U.S.

Army has its “The Army of 2030” vision, and the U.S. Navy has “Force Design 2045.” Even the U.S. Coast Guard has its “Ready Workforce 2030.” However, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), serving on both land and sea, has one of the most challenging futures.

Marines traditionally have been responsible for conducting expeditionary and amphibious operations. However, the terrorist attack against the United States on 11 September 2001 shifted the focus of many military forces—the Marines among them—from traditional force models to counterinsurgency. With the apparent conclusion of the Global War on Terrorism, the USMC has begun to return to its amphibious roots, sparking a lively debate on the relevance of amphibious operations. Some argue that these operations are “obsolete” or “dinosaur[s] which had outlived [their] usefulness” (7). Some have declared the age of amphibious assault over, arguing that an “atavistic insistence on building capabilities geared towards the now infeasible amphibious landing operations . . . will feed the very premise that animates political skepticism regarding the Marines’ utility by presenting the corps as a force built for battlefields that no longer exist.”<sup>22</sup>

It is within this context that Timothy A. Heck and B. A. Friedman conceptualized *On Contested Shores*. Self-described as “career Marine officers, who spent very little time at sea,” Heck and Friedman had “long been concerned that the Marine Corps was becoming too land-centric, heavily reflecting the characteristics of a second land army” (5). It was an anxiety that the then-Commandant of the Marine Corps General David H. Berger shared, tasking the Marines “with a return to the sea” (4). Reflecting on Lt. Col. Merrill L. Barlett’s *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare*, the editors realized that it had been nearly thirty years since anyone had taken on the broader history of amphibious

operations. An update to the scholarship was overdue.

In their research, Heck and Friedman identified a gap in our understanding of amphibious operations born of three interrelated issues: confusing amphibious assaults with amphibious operations; a narrow focus “on the drama and significance of” famous assault operations (such as Operation NEPTUNE in Normandy); and a failure to address both historical perspectives and future conceptualization (5). *On Contested Shores* is designed to tackle these problems and fill the knowledge gap. The editors sought to develop a diverse collection of essays (in terms of author and subject). They were particularly successful in the breadth of topics, covering the five types of amphibious operations: assault, withdrawal, raid, demonstration, and support of other operations.

The collection comprises twenty-three essays that work in concert to provide lessons from the past, evaluations of the present, and considerations for the future of amphibious operations. The first seventeen chapters cover amphibious operations spanning five centuries from a historical perspective. From Jacopo Pessina’s essay on the sixteenth-century nighttime assault and twenty-four-day siege of Porto Ercoletto during the Italian Wars (1494–1559) to Serhat Güvenç and Mesut Uyar’s study of Turkey’s amphibious operation YILDIZ-70 ATMA 4 (Star-70 Drop 4) in Cyprus in 1974, the majority of chapters examine the most studied type of amphibious operation (assault). However, several essays share lessons learned from the other four. For example, Samuel de Korte investigates the Pyrrhic victory resulting from the Dutch amphibious withdrawal at Leiden in 1574, and Gregory Liedtke evaluates how German naval evacuations on the Eastern Front between 1943 and 1945 prolonged German resistance despite its declining military fortunes. Edward J. Hagerty provides a look into Confederate Brig. Gen. Richard H. Anderson’s near-disastrous raid against U.S. troops at

Fort Pickens on Santa Rosa Island, Florida, in 1861; Benjamin Armstrong offers insight into how the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps used peacetime amphibious operations to facilitate diplomatic negotiations with Korea in 1871; and Eric A. Sibul considers how the Estonian military used not only amphibious raids and assaults during the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920), but also demonstrations to “throw the Bolsheviks off balance and disrupt their communications” (133).

The remaining six chapters use such historical lessons to evaluate present-day amphibious operations and offer ruminations on the future of these operations. For example, Kevin Rowlands uses the evolution of the United Kingdom’s approach to amphibious operations over the last seventy-plus years to demonstrate that different does not mean less specialization or abandonment of doctrine but an opportunity to become a more effective fighting force. Sulakshana Komeranth argues that to gain strategic advantage in the great power competition, Naval Special Warfare must reevaluate its mission and capabilities from the last twenty years and refocus on enhancing its “amphibious, more unconventional capabilities” (339).

Ellen A. Ahlness’s essay, which uses Russia’s historical and current engagement in amphibious operations to ponder the future, is a prime example of how the editors envisioned this book as creating a conversation between the past and the future. As climate change is one of the critical elements shaping the threat landscape, Ahlness seeks to move beyond a focus on Pacific littorals and equatorials when the Arctic region, which may be open for commercial shipping as early as 2050, is a “bellwether . . . for changing geophysical realities” (340). Given the possibility of future exploitation of the Arctic’s natural resources as a source of contention and Russia’s propensity for deceptive amphibious military strategies, Arctic states with accessible coastlines may find themselves vulnerable to an assault (351–52).

In total, the editors masterfully selected essays that not only demonstrate how the “history of amphibious warfare is one of both continuity and change,” but also the sheer “diversity of forms the subject assumes” (393). The result truly speaks to the collective labor involved in creating an edited collection. Although the editors were successful in the diversity of the sub-

ject matter, they were less so in terms of authors. Out of twenty-three essays, only two are by women. The editors note that the “community of interest around amphibious operations . . . remains quite homogenous in English-speaking militaries” (xiv). Although this may be true, databases such as Women Also Know History or Jacqueline Whitt’s (U.S. Army War College) crowdsourced list of women military historians might yield a more gender-diverse lineup. For example, Kunika Kakuta’s research on the Imperial Japanese Navy or Classical Athenian Navy, Anna Brinkman’s scholarship on eighteenth-century Anglo-Spanish maritime history, or Jennifer L. Speelman’s work on the military and maritime strategic importance of the Panama Canal could lead to fruitful discussions about the history and future of amphibious operations.

*On Contested Shores* is an essential update to the broader history of amphibious operations that expands our collective understanding of the subject and provides ample space to continue the conversation.

The book is available for free download at: [https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/OnContestedShores\\_web.pdf](https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/OnContestedShores_web.pdf).

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## NOTES

1. Alejandro Mayorkas, “Tackling an Evolving Threat Landscape—Homeland Security in 2023,” remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, 21 Apr 2023, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/04/21/2023-state-homeland-security-remarks-tackling-evolving-threat-landscape-homeland>.

2. Jack Watling and Sidhartha Kaushal, “Amphibious Assault is Over,” RUSI Defence Systems, vol. 21, 21 Jan 2019, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/>

[publications/rusi-defence-systems/amphibious-assault-over](https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-defence-systems/amphibious-assault-over).