

‘Making Waves in the Mediterranean’

Mediterranean Maritime History Network, Messina-Taormina, 4-7 May 2006

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Paper: ‘A Mediterranean Amphibian’: British Warfare, 1693-1713’

[TRUNCATED DRAFT WITHOUT FOOTNOTES FOR CONFERENCE WEBSITE: NOT TO BE QUOTED]

‘A MEDITERRANEAN AMPHIBIAN’: BRITISH WARFARE, 1693-1713

During the winter of 1694-5, England (Britain from 1707) wintered a fleet for the first time in the western Mediterranean thus marking its emergence as an European power in the Middle Sea during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The historiographical consensus moulded by John Ehrman’s early work, including his 1949 article in the *Cambridge Historical Journal* on William III’s Mediterranean policy and his monograph on the Williamite Navy, *The Navy in the War of William III 1689-97: Its State and Direction* (Cambridge, 1953), and more recently by Nicholas Rodger’s second volume of his trilogy on British naval history, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London, 2004), has hitherto characterised Britain’s penetration of the Mediterranean as a function of naval power. It was considered that the Royal Navy’s material and tactical dominance of other European fleets combined with its protection of British maritime trade underpinned this exercise in seapower; opposition fleets were either defeated on the open seas or kept tied up in port, while their merchant marines were harassed from the principal trade routes. This interpretation however largely fails to consider the combined service role of the army and the navy in facilitating the strategic penetration of the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy’s first winter in the Mediterranean might be viewed as a consequence of William III’s combined service deployment on both the French and eastern Spanish coastlines in an attempt to divide and defeat the French Brest and Toulon squadrons. In order to maintain its long term presence in the Mediterranean, suitable bases had to be sought and, during the period 1693-1713, the usual means of acquiring ports at places such as Gibraltar and Minorca was through a combined army-naval operation. Moreover, although it was undoubtedly the case

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that the Royal Navy exercised the traditional elements of seapower such as the set piece naval battle off the coast of Malaga in 1704 to sustain the strategic penetration of the Mediterranean, it was also the case that amphibious actions served as an important handmaiden to the naval war strategy during the wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. An examination of the operational and strategic history of Britain during this period should show it to be a Mediterranean amphibian in its conduct of warfare.

The Nine Years' War which broke out in 1688 ranged a Grand Alliance of states including England, the United Provinces, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire against Louis XIV's France. The Grand Alliance's objectives in seeking to check France's territorial aggrandisement on its north-east frontier in the reputed interests of its national security, to respond to recent depredations in the Palatinate following the failure of Louis XIV to secure the election of his candidate as Elector of Cologne and to safeguard the nascent balance of power within the European states system meant that the Grand Strategy was oriented around the land based fighting on the European continent. William III, was indeed most enthusiastic to commit troops to Europe and to lead the fight against Louis XIV's armies. This he achieved: the size of the British corps in Flanders peaked at some 29,000 men with over 27,000 foreign troops subsidized by Britain by the end of the war. The continental contribution to William's Grand Strategy was considerable. However, not only did the land fighting in Flanders reap little decisive reward, it was not the exclusive feature of the Grand Strategy. William sought to organise a series of combined service actions – amphibious warfare, to give it its generic combat term - to debilitate the French fleets operating out of Brest and Rochefort in the north and Toulon in the south, and also to facilitate his ambition to establish England as a Mediterranean seapower. Furthermore, a key consequence of the successful fulfilment of William's Mediterranean ambition was the ability to relieve the

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military pressure in northern Europe by intervening in the war on the Iberian peninsula, and, in particular, at Catalonia.

In 1694, William dispatched a two squadron fleet: one squadron commanded by Admiral Lord Berkeley was to assault the northern French coast line, particularly at Brest, with the intention of destroying the northern French fleet and also to establish a diversionary front for the fighting in Flanders; the second squadron comprising 63 warships and commanded by Admiral Edward Russell was bound for the Mediterranean. Specifically Russell was headed for the waters off Barcelona where the French Admiral Tourville had taken station to succour Marshall Noailles's army as it advanced on this principal Catalan town. A siege in early autumn seemed probable. However, news of Russell's approach caused Tourville to scurry back to Toulon, believing his fleet to be outnumbered by the Anglo-Dutch force and this action effectively allowed Russell to complete his mission of chasing the French from the western Mediterranean sea.

Running short of provisions and with only a few weeks left in which the larger rated vessels could remain at sea, Russell expected that he would shortly head for England. The King, wishing to consolidate this newly gained strategic position in the Mediterranean, had other ideas, however. Towards the end July, William let it be known to the Cabinet Council that he wanted Russell to continue as long as possible in the Mediterranean and on his departure to leave a squadron to winter in the Mediterranean basin. Specifically, on 7 August 1694, William ordered Russell to use Cádiz as a base and winter with the whole fleet in the Mediterranean; only the passage of the French fleet through the Straits would admit Russell's departure. William now had the strategic presence in the Mediterranean which he had long sought and the 1695 campaign season offered the prospect of converting this into territorial

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gains upon the French Mediterranean coastline or tangible diplomatic currency by helping the Spaniards to force the French back across the Pyrenees.

Aside from the marine soldiers aboard, Russell's fleet had no additional troops to use either as a strike force on the French coast or to offer as support to the Spanish army. Accordingly, it was decided in December to boost Russell's capability by dispatching to Cádiz four regiments - about 3000 men in total. The transportation of these troops was however beset by chronic delay and it was not until the end of April before they were delivered to Russell in the Mediterranean. A descent on Toulon or at Marseilles - similar in form to that undertaken at Brest - was considered the optimum use of these troops by the Ministry and the Instructions sent to Russell in May prioritised these targets. Russell, however, first attended to the subordinate part of his Instructions which required that he put troops into Barcelona to prevent its capture by the French who were considered likely to make it a priority again in the forthcoming campaign. Then he took the fleet to the Îles d'Hyères whence he was able to reconnoitre Toulon; while Rear-Admiral Neville was sent with four Colonels to assess Marseilles. Both missions reported on the extensive French defensive preparations, particularly at Toulon where the French fleet lay, apparently showing no signs of putting out. Russell then returned to the Catalan coast to find that the troops were not required in Barcelona, the war in Spain having taken a different course from the previous year.

The opportunity for Russell to intervene in the Spanish theatre was a product of the altered military realities in Catalonia where the energy of the new Viceroy and army commander, the Marquis de Gastañaga, caused the Spaniards to take the initiative. In the spring, he moved to capture Ostalric and Castelfollit de la Roca. The French had retired to Gerona and consequently the Viceroy was keen to capture Palamós next; but he required

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Russell's help. Initially Gastañaga had proposed that Russell land his troops at Blanes whence they would march with the Spanish army to Palamós. The Admiral, concerned that this held out the prospect of several days marching and presumably keen to firm up the details of the operation, instead informed the Viceroy that he would land up to 4000 soldiers at a bay near Palamós if the siege looked likely to go ahead. On 7 August (NS), two bomb vessels were sent into the Bay of Palamós to throw some shells as a preliminary to the siege. Two days later, upon Brigadier Stewart's word that the military circumstances were propitious with the French army camp reportedly at least four leagues from Palamós at La Bisbal d'Emporda, Russell landed 3000 English infantry and about 500 Dutch troops under Count Nassau in the early hours of the morning at St Feliu de Guíxols. Linking up with the Spanish army which had encamped at Calonge, the whole force marched that day to within two miles of Palamós.

In the event, an engagement did not occur. The allies occupied and began fortifying some high ground so that when on 12 August the French marched forward to inspect their opponent's position, they wheeled north and left for the neighbouring town of Palafrugell. Over 12-13 August (NS), Russell had delivered the second phase of naval support. Bomb vessels and ketches with mortars were towed into Palamós Bay to throw their shells at the town and were exacting considerable damage when a frigate, which had previously been dispatched on an intelligence gathering mission along the Provence coast, returned. The Captain had taken two Toulon fishermen prisoner and they claimed that the French fleet of sixty warships was now lying in Toulon Road, armed and ready to sail. In order to prevent them passing through the Straits, Russell wished to go in search of them and once a Council of War had sanctioned his resolution, he informed Gastañaga that he was recalling his troops so he could leave the Catalan coast.

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The intelligence about the French fleet's imminent departure proved to have been a ruse concocted by Vendôme. When Russell arrived off Toulon the fleet were found to be still in the harbour, though he was unable to determine the extent of their preparations for sea as bad weather forced him off station. By then, however, any further combined action on the Spanish coast could not be contemplated and, although the French did evacuate from Palamós and Castelfollit de la Roca, they maintained a presence in Catalonia. For the remaining two years of the war, England maintained a squadron in the Mediterranean sufficient for the protection of trade, but without the military capability to intervene decisively on the French or Spanish coasts. Nonetheless, William had achieved his objective to secure the strategic penetration of the western Mediterranean and success in this task had been largely a function of amphibious warfare.

The deployment a role of amphibious actions within the Mediterranean continued in the succeeding conflict – the War of the Spanish Succession. Diplomatic efforts to solve the imminent succession crisis to the Spanish throne – Carlos II's demise as the last Spanish Habsburg without any children was widely anticipated – foundered when Carlos left his inheritance to Louis XIV's grandson, Philip, Duc d'Anjou and then certain of Louis's clumsy action such as recognising the Old Pretender as James III & VIII – led to the reformulation of the Grand Alliance which had opposed him in the previous conflict. Again, the fighting was initially concentrated in north eastern continental Europe and Britain's strategic contribution came in the form of tens of thousand of troops and subsidies of European allies. Significantly, John Churchill, Earl, later Duke, of Marlborough assumed command of the this army and won four notable, and often decisive (certainly in the popular mind at any rate), land victories at Blenheim, 1704, Ramillies, 1706, Oudenarde, 1708 and Malplaquet, 1709. Combined army-navy actions were, however, to prove of great import to the wartime Grand

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Strategy, particularly when in 1703, the Alliance committed itself to placing the Emperor's second son, the Archduke Charles, on the Spanish throne. This had not been an initial allied war objective and was a product of detaching Portugal from France's embrace, an event which was precipitated by the combined army-navy action led by Sir George Rooke and the Duke of Ormonde initially against Cadiz in the late summer of 1702 and then spectacularly against the port of Vigo which harboured the Spanish plate fleet in October. The commitment to the Archduke Charles's Spanish ambition emphasised the Mediterranean basin as a theatre of war and established the Spanish mainland as one. Accordingly, the Alliance dominated by Britain sought to augment and safeguard its Mediterranean presence through the capture of a convenient port where the ships of the fleet might refit and winter. Consequently, an amphibious action was deployed against Gibraltar in 1704, with an Anglo-Dutch amphibious force led by Admiral Byng and Prince George of Hesse-Darmstadt successfully capturing the Rock in July of that year; later in the war, (1708), James Stanhope and Admiral Sir John Leake commanded an operation to capture the islands of Sardinia and Minorca, with the latter's harbour, Port Mahon, a particularly welcome acquisition. Fighting on the Spanish mainland was continually accompanied by army-navy actions along the coast line: notably, Barcelona was taken in 1705, when Earl of Peterborough and Admiral Sir Cloudesly Shovell combined forces. Significantly, success at Barcelona allowed the Archduke Charles a foothold from which he might advance upon Madrid.

Two years hence from Barcelona, however, military reverses on the Spanish mainland led to the British ministry seeking an amphibious deployment within the Mediterranean to relieve the pressure and force the French to reduce their commitment in Spain. Accordingly, it was decided to strike at the central port for the French Mediterranean fleet – Toulon. In a complex combined service operation, the Holy Roman Empire's commander, Prince Eugene

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was to advance westwards from Piedmont where he had been assisting the Duke of Savoy, to attack Toulon from its landward heights while Sir Cloudsley Shovell would simultaneously warp his fleet in to the port's roadstead and begin a bombardment. Although, ultimately unsuccessful, the operation did in the short-term force the French to respond and regroup within the Mediterranean theatre and it demonstrated Britain's strategic commitment to amphibious warfare within the Mediterranean. Such commitment was further manifest in the choice of combined service deployments as the main form of support rendered to the Protestant Camisard rebels in the Languedoc from 1704.

British warfare in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has been too frequently interpreted in a bipolar manner: either it is viewed as predominantly land based continental campaigning or focused on the Royal Navy's command of the seas. While neither interpretation is wholly inappropriate, there is a history of joint service operations, particularly in the Mediterranean, which should force historians to adjust this bipolar picture. During the Nine Years War, William III and his ministries adopted amphibious warfare as a means to facilitate the Royal Navy's penetration of the Mediterranean and this commitment was subsequently underscored during the subsequent Spanish Succession conflict when successive ministries mounted combined army-navy actions to gain an appropriate Mediterranean port for the fleet. Amphibious warfare was not however used simply as a means to gain, and then preserve, a Mediterranean presence for Britain. At key moments during both wars, Britain deployed this form of warfare in an attempt to shape the strategic and military realities of the conflicts. Certainly, during the years, 1693-1713, Britain was an Mediterranean amphibian.