



Summer Conference Report

Imperial War Museum Duxford 16 – 18 July 2004

Our Summer Conference was held against the background of the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings and so took as its subject, Amphibious Warfare. It was perhaps the proximity of this particular milestone that led our speakers to concentrate on 20th century operations. Indeed, in the May newsletter readers will recall Mike Taylor's report on the Military Mapping Conference at Greenwich in June which had a strong amphibious bias and elsewhere in this issue he reports on a very full conference about Normandy 1944.

But our Conference started with David Pinder's paper on the Claudian Invasion of Britain in AD43. In fact, this was something of a misnomer since he discussed a number of amphibious operations conducted by the Romans in the North Sea and English Channel either side of the year dot. Over a period of about thirty years from about 18BC the Romans made extensive use of ships to get troops from the Channel Ports into the lowlands of the Rhine estuary. Later on, in 55 and 54BC Julius Caesar mounted substantial and well-prepared operations against the island of Britain. All these operations displayed one of the great truths of amphibious warfare – it is far easier to get ashore than it is to stay there. The Romans were clearly well skilled in the other techniques – reconnaissance not only by naval craft but also from traders and diplomats, specialist shipping, joint command and logistic preparation. Nevertheless, the weather was perhaps the most significant single factor affecting not only Roman operations but those in the two millennia to follow. Caesar sailed to Britain late in the year and storms inflicted serious serious damage on his fleet; his Line of Communication was effectively destroyed. He withdrew because he was unable to sustain himself for a long period not because he was defeated tactically or operationally.

The literary record for Caesar's invasions is much stronger than that for the later and more successful Claudian one and David drew our attention to John Manley's recent book¹ which summarised all the available evidence – and revealed how scanty it is. It is not even clear if the invasion was actually opposed at all. Some troops might even have landed at a port courtesy of a local ruler who supported the Romans.

When we reached the 20th century it struck me that not only the weather but the word "Gallipoli" hung like a great, black thought balloon above every staff officer and planner of amphibious operations. In his paper Operation Neptune Correlli Barnett described Omaha Beach as a re-run of the landings at Gallipoli and explained that the planners saw Gallipoli as an example of how not to do it. We were fortunate, therefore, in being able to listen to Peter Chasseaud's paper Kissing Through the Veil – Geographic Intelligence & the Gallipoli Campaign. The Board of Enquiry that followed Gallipoli concluded that intelligence had been seriously lacking and was a key reason for the failure of the operation. In fact, there had been extensive studies of the Dardanelles by British military and naval attachés and others since 1877 culminating in a planning document in 1906 based on the possibility of a joint attack on Gallipoli. It seemed likely, therefore, not that there was too little information about Gallipoli

¹ Manley, John AD43: The Roman Invasion, Tempus Publishing 2001
ISBN 0752 419595



but too much – particularly since the planners were only given 40 days to mount the operation.

That lessons were learnt quickly from Gallipoli was revealed in the double act from Michael Orr and George Bailey on Amphibious Planning for Flanders 1917. Given the stalemate on the Western Front it was not surprising that the greatest seapower in the world should consider an amphibious operation on the seaborne flank. Planning began in 1915 for a landing on the Belgian coast but it was only in 1917 that Haig's 3rd Ypres Offensive offered the opportunity to mount one. George Bailey discussed Rawlinson's qualities and experience as commander of the operation. He had been the youngest commandant at Sandhurst and the first to encourage the study of what would later be called combined operations. Some of us had been "lucky" enough to visit the proposed landing beaches at Middelkerke on an appropriately cold and squally day during the 2003 Battlefield Tour. During his paper Michael Orr explained the planning in more detail. This really did look like a D-Day in miniature with detailed photographic and beach recce, careful studies of tides and currents, "commando raids" (er, by bicycle) against coastal batteries, specialised landing craft, tanks to tow guns and equipment in lieu of horses, equipment to get them up and over the sea wall and the 1st Division taken out of the line for specialist training from a sealed camp. The operation did not take place, however, since the breakout from the Ypres Salient did not take place and the landing had always been seen merely as supportive of it. Whatever else may be said of them, these planners appreciated the difficulty of maintaining the amphibious force ashore and the decision not to go was undoubtedly the correct one.

There were three papers on WW2 operations. At the tactical level John Sainsbury looked at the technical arrangements for a Self-Propelled Regiment of the Royal Artillery to bring down accurate fire from their landing craft during the run in. Correlli Barnett looked at Operation Neptune – the frequently overlooked naval planning for D-Day and Graham Dunlop² offered a truly three dimensional look at the triphibious operation to retake Burma in 1945. The common, if perhaps unstated, theme of these papers, in my view, was the determination of the British (or rather Imperial) General Staff to make the best possible use of sea and airpower to support land forces ashore. Correlli Barnett explained that the designs for specialist landing ships and craft had been sorted out by 1938/39 and many theoretical studies made by 1940. Admiral Ramsay had declared that his role in Neptune was "*to land the army as they require.*" Whatever amphibious failures the allies may have committed in WW2 they do not seem to have been due to jealousies or wrangling amongst the joint commanders or, particularly, to faulty or inadequate equipment. There is a contrast here, I think, with airborne and even large scale armoured operations which were much newer forms of warfare.

In my own paper on the US inspired invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs³ in 1961 sought to demonstrate the aspect further even further. The technical aspects of conducting an amphibious assault were taken for granted to an extent that the operation was planned by a covert organisation who felt they did not necessarily need to listen to the advice of US Marine Corps experts. The operation failed primarily due to fundamental misreadings of both military and political intelligence. The errors at the tactical and technical levels flowed directly from

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these rather than ignorance of the necessary techniques. We notice, as so often the case, that the troops got ashore relatively successfully. They were defeated because their political sponsors chose not to sustain them on the basis of an intelligence assessment – provided by the invaders – that the opposition would melt away.

Is there a parallel to the Roman invasion of Britain? Superpowers can generally land troops successfully on the shores of any nation they wish. But they will find it far easier to achieve their objectives if they can identify and consistently support leaders and factions within the target nation beforehand. The successful landings in Britain in AD43 and 1066 were merely the precursors to decades of bloody counterinsurgency campaigning.

It was often said of the D-Day landings that there was too much planning to get the troops ashore and not enough on what to do when they got there. The bulk of our papers showed that the techniques of getting ashore had been mastered in the 20th century to a point where the success was almost taken for granted. In retrospect it might have been instructive to hear about some of the operations before 1914, particularly those that had not gone well. I had thought of having a go myself but Havanah 1762 was almost a textbook success! Nevertheless, just as the significance of the Great War on our wider society is implicit so I think that the mere word “Gallipoli” performed the same function at our Conference and provided some explanation for all the subsequent meticulous planning to get troops “*from sea to land*”.

Andy Grainger



THE RACE FOR RANGOON, 1945 - THE COMBINED OPERATION⁴

Graham Dunlop

The term “amphibious” normally describes activity conducted from the sea to the land or vice versa, but the penultimate phase of the Burma campaign, the advance from the Chindwin to Rangoon in early 1945, although principally an inland operation, has a strong claim to being considered in the context of amphibious operations. To begin with, it involved the 14th Army in probably the widest assault river crossing of the whole war as well as extensive use of the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers for logistic support. Intimately supporting the main effort in central Burma, moreover, was a protracted series of complex and unique amphibious operations on the Arakan coast, without which the 14th Army’s advance would have been well nigh impossible. Finally, amphibious operations are combined operations, requiring the closest cohesion of all three Services if they are to succeed, and the race for Rangoon, on both its main, inland axis and on its amphibious flank, is a particularly fine example of combined operations under difficult, unexpected and makeshift conditions. It is an interesting and sadly under-recorded episode, overshadowed historically by Imphal and Kohima, the Pacific campaign and the culmination of the war in Europe.

The story starts in late 1944 far from the sea, on a narrow, tortuous jungle track, which ran south down the Kabaw valley from Tamu, near the Indo/Burmese border, to Kalewa, on the banks of the Chindwin. After a ferry crossing, the track continued south east to the small town of Ye-U, not far north of the Irrawaddy, where it joined what might be described as the proper road system of central Burma. In few places was the track wide enough for two vehicles to pass. In the dry winter season it was almost ankle deep in dust and in the summer monsoon it was a quagmire and barely passable for either wheeled or tracked vehicles. Even with the enormous engineer effort directed to improving it, the payload capacity of the track as far as Ye-U, would not exceed 437 tons per day⁵. Yet this was the single overland supply line for the 250,000 men of the 14th Army as they advanced into central Burma in early 1945⁶. Of course it was inadequate, and this had several important consequences.

First, it meant that, even when the track had been improved to all-weather standard as far as the Chindwin, the 14th Army would rely on river transport, which had to be built on site, for much of the onward movement of supplies and equipment as it advanced towards Rangoon.

The Army would be crucially dependent also upon air supply. In fact, from the time that the 14th Army closed up to the Irrawaddy, its entire daily consumption of fuel, oil, ammunition, replacement parts, clothing and rations, over 2000 tons per day at its peak, was delivered by

⁴ Three maps to accompany this paper are at the end.

⁵ National Archives, Kew (Hereafter PRO), WO203/1865 ALFSEA Administrative Appreciation March 1945. 437 tons per day was the fair weather maximum. The Kalewa to Ye-U section was reckoned to be unusable during the monsoon.

⁶ S Woodburn Kirby (ed), History Of The Second World War, The War Against Japan, Volume IV (Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, London, 1965), (Hereafter, S Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan), p. 202. PRO WO172/4168, 14th Army Q Ops War Diaries 1944, indicates ration strengths of the 14th Army around the 800,000 mark. The difference is probably due to the re-grouping of 15 Corps and ALFSEA taking over responsibility for substantial parts of the line of communication in late 1944, as well as inclusion of civil labour on the 14th Army ration strength.



air⁷. Ground and river transport were taken up by the delivery of heavy equipment and the stocking of an emergency reserve of supplies behind the front in central Burma. Even then, the build up of that reserve only ever achieved three quarters of its original planned capacity of 63,000 tons⁸.

Very soon after crossing the Irrawaddy, the 14th Army would start to advance beyond the 250-mile economic radius of action from its supply airfields at Imphal⁹. New base airfields, closer to the front, were needed, and they, themselves, had to be stocked with supplies for onward delivery. The Japanese airfields on the Arakan coast, which could be supplied by sea, were the only practical answer, so they had to be seized and developed sufficiently to cope with the load¹⁰.

These supply problems limited the forces that could be deployed and supported in the front line. Slim had, at his disposal, a substantial numerical superiority over the Japanese in central Burma, but, with the limitations on supply, he was only able to sustain a maximum of six divisions at the front for the crossing of the Irrawaddy, and five thereafter, as air supply became increasingly difficult¹¹. Between the Irrawaddy and Rangoon the Japanese could field the equivalent of approximately nine divisions, albeit they had been badly mauled in previous actions, and their weaponry and air support were inferior to those of the 14th Army¹². Still, given the way in which the Japanese fought in defence, that was not a good balance for a wide, opposed river crossing followed by a long advance under time pressure. Therefore, anything that could be done to divert Japanese attention from the main effort on the Irrawaddy, would be essential, and that demanded, amongst other things, aggressive operations on the Arakan coast¹³.

Even with air, ground and river supply working at full capacity, the 14th Army had to reach Rangoon and establish its main line of supply through the Port before the 1945 monsoon set in, about early May. Had it failed to do so, the Army could not have been maintained by overland and air lines of communication through the monsoon, and it would have had to withdraw, possibly back across the Chindwin, forfeiting much of what had been achieved by the fighting in Manipur during 1944¹⁴.

⁷ PRO WO203/2335, Letter from HQ ALFSEA to Combined Army Air Transport Organisation dated 16 March 1945 reporting the tonnages delivered by parachute and air-landing. The peak of 2000 tons per day was reached between 12 and 25 February 1945. 14th Army originally estimated 1006 tons per day (See PRO WO172/4168, 14th Army Q Ops War Diary 1944, 14th Army Administrative Instruction No 32 dated 22 December 1944).

⁸ S Woodburn Kirby *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p.105. The planned target was later revised down to 50000 tons (See PRO WO203/1865, ALFSEA Administrative Appreciation, March 1945 and S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p. 166).

⁹ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, Sketch 20, facing p. 412.

¹⁰ PRO WO203/2101, Arakan Operations 1945, Joint Planning Staff Planning Paper No 105 dated 8 January 1945. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p 200. Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff dated 30 June 1947 (Hereafter SACSEA Report), Paragraph 343.

¹¹ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 303.

¹² S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, Appendix 8.

¹³ SACSEA Report Paragraph 344. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (Cassell, London, 1956) (Hereafter, Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*), p. 383.

¹⁴ PRO WO203/2101, Arakan Operations 1945 Joint Planning Staff Planning Paper No 105 dated 8 January 1945.



There was, by March 1945, an increasing risk that clearing the Japanese out of their Irrawaddy front and completing the subsequent advance to Rangoon might not be possible before the monsoon¹⁵. It became ever clearer that there would have to be a fall back plan, involving an amphibious descent on Rangoon – hence the “race”, not only against the weather but also between the two formations heading for the Port by land and sea.

So that was the background situation. Let us now step back to late 1944 to trace events on the 14th Army front before looking in greater detail at the supporting amphibious operations conducted by the joint force built around Lieutenant General Christison’s 15 Corps.

In November 1944, when the 14th Army had got across the Chindwin, it became clear that Lieutenant General Slim, commanding the 14th Army, could no longer be expected to cope with both the central Burma and Arakan fronts. 15 Corps, on the Arakan front, was therefore taken out of the 14th Army’s order of battle to come under the direct command of General Giffard’s 11th Army Group, leaving 14th Army comprising 4 and 33 Corps¹⁶. At that time, Slim anticipated fighting his next decisive battle on the Shwebo Plain, between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy: Operation CAPITAL.

The Japanese, however, withdrew across the Irrawaddy and planned to fight behind the river, confronting Slim with this formidable assault river crossing with inadequate equipment and the supply problems that we have already identified¹⁷. He took a huge operational and logistic risk and used the Japanese’s favoured tactics of encirclement against them on a grand scale: Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL. 33 Corps made a head-on assault against the Japanese front across the Irrawaddy either side of Mandalay. The 19th Indian Division took the opportunity to “bounce” a crossing north of Mandalay on 14 Jan 45 and started a frontal assault on the Japanese defence of the City. A month later, on 12 Feb 45, the 20th Indian Division, followed by the 2nd British, crossed west of Mandalay, around Myinmu, to encircle the City.

Meanwhile, 4 Corps made a wide outflanking move to cut off the whole Japanese Irrawaddy front. The Japanese were deceived into believing that 4 Corps was crossing the Irrawaddy on the left of 33 Corps. In fact, it moved covertly through the Chin Hills on the right flank of the Army. On 13 Feb 45, the day after the 20th Division’s crossing, 4 Corps started to cross the river at Nyaungu, well behind the Japanese front and fairly lightly opposed. Nine days later 255 Tank Brigade and two mechanised brigades of the 17th Indian Division raced out of the bridgehead, to seize the hub of Japanese communications and supply at Meiktila. The 17th Division made no attempt to secure its lines of communication, being maintained entirely by air, and its third, air-portable, brigade was flown in once the airfield at Thabukton, on the road to Meiktila, had been seized. Meiktila fell on 7 Mar 45¹⁸. The Japanese counter attacked and laid siege to the Town, but after a period of bitter fighting, their Irrawaddy front collapsed. Mandalay was cleared by 21 Mar 45 and seven days later the Japanese withdrew from Meiktila¹⁹. It was during this period that Slim began to harbour doubts that he would make it

¹⁵ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 498.

¹⁶ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, Appendix 12. SACSEA Report, Paragraph 268.

¹⁷ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 310. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, c. XV.

¹⁸ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, cc. XVI and XXIII.

¹⁹ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 317-319, 382-392, 421-445 and 469-482. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, c. XXV.



to Rangoon in time to beat the monsoon and asked that a fall back plan to seize the Port by sea be prepared, leaving little time to plan and mount it²⁰.

Meanwhile, back on the Chindwin, the 14th Army boatyard at Kalewa began building work on 2 Jan 45. Over the next five months the yard was to assemble some 265 prefabricated craft, ranging from tugs to lighters, as well as barges made from local timber. On 26 Mar 45, two days before the Japanese withdrew from Meiktila, the 14th Army's forward maintenance area was established at the Irrawaddy river port of Myingyan, and river transport became an indispensable part of the supply system, delivering nearly 700 tons per day, until Rangoon could be opened²¹.

Once the Japanese had withdrawn from Meiktila the real race for Rangoon, a little over 300 miles to the south, began. Once again, 4 Corps made a rapid armoured and mechanised advance, averaging some 10 miles a day, building its own airfields every 50 miles as it went and paying little attention to the security of its line of communication. On 29 Apr 45 the Corps ran into stiff resistance at Pegu, some 50 miles from Rangoon. The Town was cleared by 1 May 45, but by then continuous heavy showers were falling. The following day the monsoon broke in earnest, a fortnight earlier than expected, slowing the advance to a crawl. On that day, however, the 26th Indian Division of 15 Corps landed at the mouth of the Rangoon River in rapidly deteriorating weather conditions, and it was discovered that the Japanese had evacuated the City, which was liberated on 3 May 45. Three days later, the 26th Division linked up with 4 Corps some 30 miles north of Rangoon, and on 10 May 45 the Port was open to sea-going ships, by which time the 14th Army was reduced to half rations²².

So that, in outline, is what happened on the 14th Army front. Now let us go to the concurrent amphibious operations on the Arakan coast and Rangoon, and see how they supported that main effort.

The Arakan coast was a truly horrible place in which to operate. It is a malarial, watery maze of rivers, mangrove swamp and tidal creeks (known locally as chaungs), much of which was navigable by small sea-going ships but none of which, in the 1940s, had been properly surveyed. There were no detailed pilotage charts of the area, and the Navy had to navigate close inshore, initially with army maps, air photographs and local guides until they could do their own surveys, often under fire²³.

Ashore, it was a remote region, with only a few, poor quality tracks, broken frequently by the chaungs. The locals tended to use the waterways for movement between villages, and the Japanese had followed suit in supplying their forward positions²⁴. Apart from a narrow strip of padi fields in the coastal areas, the countryside was characterised by precipitous, jungle-covered hills, which were easy to defend and extremely difficult to move through²⁵.

²⁰ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p. 327.

²¹ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, Appendix 16. PRO WO203/1865, ALFSEA Administrative Appreciation March 1945.

²² S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, cc. XXIX and XXXII.

²³ Bisheshwar Prasad (Ed), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939-1945, The Royal Indian Navy* (Orient Longmans 1964), (Hereafter, Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*), p.269.

²⁴ Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, p. 262.

²⁵ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume II*, pp. 253/254. SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 355/356.



The Japanese had occupied the Arakan coast in May 1942 in order to use the airfields at Akyab and Ramree to dominate the Bay of Bengal and to raid the industrial areas around Calcutta and Chittagong. At the height of their strength, the Japanese 28th Army in Arakan comprised the 54th and 55th Divisions, as well as the 77th Independent Mixed Brigade²⁶.

15 Corps, which was responsible for the Arakan front throughout the Japanese war, had involved itself in a variety of small-scale coastal, riverine and amphibious operations from the moment India came under threat after the British collapse in Burma. In June 1942, in the absence of any Naval inshore forces, soldiers of the Corps manned a variety of old river craft of dubious seaworthiness to defend the Sunderbans of the Ganges and Brahmaputra delta²⁷.

Naval Coastal Forces started to operate in Arakan waters during the winter of 1942/43. The following year, in Jan 44, 15 Corps and the Naval Coastal Forces teamed up to form an ad hoc force for local small scale amphibious operations. 15 Corps created 290 Special Purpose Company, crewing a number of ancient, steam driven river craft, armed with anti-tank and Bren guns, and embarking a locally raised and trained commando, consisting mainly of Pathan troops. The Coastal Forces contributed three flotillas of minor landing craft, with gunboats in support. Soon afterwards, 3 Commando Brigade arrived in Arakan and its units mounted a number of small raids along the coast. In May 44 coastal operations closed down for the monsoon period²⁸.

At the start of the next campaigning season, in late 44, as Slim's plans for Operation CAPITAL were developing, Giffard, commanding 11th Army Group, wanted 15 Corps to stand on the operational defensive in Arakan to release all possible resources for the main effort by XIVth Army in central Burma. Intelligence at that time indicated that the Japanese were withdrawing their 55th Division to the Irrawaddy valley, leaving the 54th Division to hold Arakan. To consolidate a sound defensive position, Giffard directed 15 Corps to mount a tactical offensive, clearing the Japanese out of the Mayu peninsular and the Kaladan valley to the east, and seizing the Japanese forward base at Akyab²⁹. Christison, commanding 15 Corps, planned to use the 25th Indian and 82nd West African Divisions, supplied entirely by sea and river, to clear the Mayu peninsular, while the 81st West African Division cleared the Kaladan valley, supplied by air. When that had been achieved, the 26th Indian Division and 3 Commando Brigade, who had trained together in amphibious operations, were to seize Akyab island under heavy air and naval bombardment³⁰. They would be landed by some 82 landing craft of Amphibious Force "W", which had arrived in India the previous year after taking part in Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily³¹. For these operations, Christison created an entirely joint HQ to command his Corps and the supporting Naval and Air Forces. Rear Admiral Martin, commanding Force "W", became the Naval Commander, and Air Vice Marshal the Earl of Brandon, commanding 224 Group RAF, became the Air Commander.

²⁶ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, Appendix 8.

²⁷ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, pp. 129-131.

²⁸ Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 255-266.

²⁹ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, pp. 101, 109, 110 and 136. SACSEA Report, Paragraph 344.

³⁰ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p.136.

³¹ PRO ADM199/192, Naval Operations, Burma, 1944-1945, Report on Operation LIGHTNING, dated 20 March 1945.



This joint HQ was to remain in being until Rangoon had been captured in May 45³². It was reflected at a lower level, where the 25th and 26th Divisions established equally integrated headquarters with the Navy and Air Force.

15 Corps' advance began on 14 Dec 44, by which time General Leese, lately commanding the 8th Army, had replaced Giffard, and Allied Land Forces South East Asia had assumed the role of 11th Army Group, commanding both 14th Army and 15 Corps as well as all other land forces in the theatre. While the 81st Division encountered stiff resistance in the Kaladan valley, progress on the Mayu front was a great deal quicker than had been anticipated. By 27 Dec 44, the 25th Division had reached Foul Point. On 2 Jan 45 Captain Jarrett, an airborne artillery observation officer flying over Akyab, noted a lack of Japanese activity, and landed his Auster to learn from the locals that the Japanese had evacuated the island. It was decided to bounce a crossing to Akyab, and the next day the 25th Division landed without the planned bombardment. An anti-climax it may have been, but the Akyab landing proved to be a vital rehearsal for more desperate future operations³³.

Spitfires were operating from Akyab by 9 Jan 45, in time to see off a substantial Japanese air raid on the newly captured base. Its seizure came at a timely moment, for about that time it became clear that the Arakan airfields would be needed to support the 14th Army after it had crossed the Irrawaddy³⁴. Work began immediately to develop the airfield and stock it for long range supply and offensive support operations. The port capacity of Akyab at that time was limited to 500 tons per day, so it was to be a long job³⁵.

At this stage developments caused Leese to review Giffard's initial intention for 15 Corps to stand on the defensive. Two immediate imperatives emerged. First, the Japanese withdrawing from the Kaladan valley in front of the 81st Division's advance had to be cut off to prevent their withdrawal into the Irrawaddy valley in good order, where they might tip the balance against the 14th Army. Landings were to be made at Myebon and Kangaw by the 25th Division, with 3 Commando Brigade under command, to prevent that.

Secondly, it became clear that further airfield capacity on the Arakan coast would be needed to support the 14th Army. The larger island of Ramree, some 70 miles further south, was to be seized by the 26th Division so that its airfield could be used together with the one at Akyab³⁶.

Prior to these landings the Royal Indian Navy sloops Narbada and Jumna, with three gunboats and 53 Brigade of the 25th Division, conducted probing operations up the uncharted Kaladan river to interdict Japanese lines of communication, cut their escape routes and draw their attention away from Myebon and Kangaw³⁷.

³² SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 347-349.

³³ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, pp. 139-142.

³⁴ Slim had first suggested the need for airfields on the Arakan coast at a Commanders in Chief conference on 18 October 1944 (S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p. 136).

³⁵ PRO WO203/2101, Arakan Operations 1945, Joint Planning Staff Planning Paper No 105.

³⁶ S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, pp. 214-219.

³⁷ Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 280-282. PRO WO203/2691, The Arakan Campaign of the 25th Indian Division.



On 12 Jan 45, just as the 19th Division was about to cross the Irrawaddy north of Mandalay, 3 Commando Brigade landed on the Myebon peninsular. The infantry got ashore in the face of fierce opposition, which caused substantial casualties to men and landing craft, but it was found impossible to land tanks and vehicles with them because of soft mud under the sand. Rapid reconnaissance was conducted under fire by gunboats and sappers to find a suitable alternative beach. While providing direct fire support for operations ashore, the sloop *Narbada*, drawing 12 feet of water, had to manoeuvre and fight for some time with less than one foot of water under her keel, a situation in which the soft muddy bottom was a positive advantage! The 25th Division landed the following day, and by 17 Jan 45 the Myebon peninsular was cleared of Japanese and their river supply line to the Kaladan valley was severed³⁸.

The next stage was to cut the Japanese overland lines of communication at Kangaw and prevent their escape. This was to be the hardest fight of the Arakan campaign. Kangaw was held strongly, and the only undefended approach was up the tortuous *Dainbong Chaung*, which was uncharted and could just accommodate a single column of landing craft and gunboats, to one small muddy gap in the mangrove. Once again, the *Narbada*, this time with 700 troops embarked, found herself with less than one foot of water under her keel as she crossed the bar of the *Thegyan River* on the approach to the *Dainbong Chaung*.

The assault was made by 3 Commando Brigade and 51 Brigade, the only all-Indian brigade in the Army at that time. It began on 22 Jan 45 under the support of heavy air strikes, bombardment by sloops, medium artillery on the Myebon peninsular and field guns lashed down in landing craft. The landing was slow and, again, it proved extremely difficult to get tanks ashore, but by 26 Jan 45 the village of Kangaw was seized and the road cut against strong opposition. For eight days the Japanese counter attacked repeatedly, with a ferocity which has been compared to the fighting at *Kohima*, and under the heaviest artillery fire used by the Japanese thus far in Burma. In order to protect the British guns from Japanese counter battery fire they were moved repeatedly by landing craft to gaps in the mangrove along the *chaungs*, whence they were manhandled, up to 300 metres, into position³⁹. After 2 Feb 45, however, the Japanese gave up, and the remnants of their Kaladan force, thinking that the British intention was to outflank the Irrawaddy front, withdrew through the jungle in small parties to regroup in defence of the *An pass*, leading into central Burma. During the fighting ashore, sloops and gunboats of the Royal Indian Navy, operating in the mangrove creeks, bombarded the coastal tracks south of Kangaw to interdict Japanese escape and re-supply routes. All this was taking place as the 14th Army was closing up on the north bank of the Irrawaddy for the main crossings by 4 and 33 Corps, a time when they needed the attention of the Japanese to be diverted by every possible means⁴⁰.

Meanwhile, on 21 Jan 45, the 26th Division landed at *Kyaukpyu*, on *Ramree island* with heavy air and naval support, including the battleship *Queen Elizabeth*. Little opposition was met on the beach at *Kyaukpyu*, but it increased steadily during the advance to *Ramree Town*, which

³⁸ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 364-365. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p. 216. Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 284-286.

³⁹ PRO WO203/1797, *Lessons From Operations*, Report by Commander Royal Artillery 25th Indian Division dated 21 March 1945.

⁴⁰ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 373-375. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, pp. 220-222. Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 287-289 and 297.



was entered on 7 Feb 45⁴¹. At that stage it became clear that the Japanese were attempting to escape in small groups to the mainland, so sloops, gunboats, landing craft and Army patrols set up a blocking line in the uncharted tidal creeks and mangrove swamps separating Ramree island from the mainland to cut them off. Once again, the Navy had to do its own surveying as it went in hostile waters, and suffered numerous groundings and quite a lot of damage as a result.

Hundreds of Japanese died, either at the hands of the Navy, or in the jaws of salt water crocodiles, or of thirst, starvation or drowning. Ramree was finally cleared of Japanese by 17 Feb 45⁴². By that time work was well under way developing the island's airfield at Kyaukpyu to support the 14th Army, who were just completing their assault crossing of the Irrawaddy and thus starting to go beyond economic range of air supply from Imphal.

While all this was happening Christison had flown over to see Slim, who had emphasised to him how important it was to keep the maximum number of Japanese tied down on the Arakan coast to prevent their reinforcing the Irrawaddy front. At about the same time, on 5 Feb 45, Mountbatten issued a directive to the Commanders in Chief, which included, inter alia, orders for 15 Corps to open the road from Taungup to Prome to increase the flow of supplies to the 14th Army as they moved south of Prome⁴³. This was a bit strange as the road had a fair weather capacity at best of only 500 tons per day, and, winding through jungle covered hills, was vulnerable to being cut by Japanese stay behind operations, at which they were adept. Moreover, after the monsoon set in, the small harbour at Taungup would become unusable⁴⁴.

In any event, no sooner had the directive been issued than it became clear that air supply to 15 Corps would have to cease in March in order to concentrate the available lift on the 14th Army⁴⁵. That effectively neutered the intended advance on Prome, and Christison focused, therefore, on developing further aggressive operations along the coast, but not penetrating far inland, where he would be unable to sustain them. The Japanese perception of events assisted in this. They were still convinced that the ultimate objective of British operations in Arakan was to turn the flank of their Irrawaddy front, so, far from escaping, the Japanese were preparing for a protracted and increasingly desperate defensive battle on the coast.

The Japanese 54th Division was, by then, split into two groups. The northern group, comprising the remnants of two regiments, which had withdrawn from the Kaladan valley and fought their way out past Kangaw, was deployed around the village of An to block the An pass track. The southern group, based on one rather less battered regiment, was based on Taungup, blocking the road to Prome.

⁴¹ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 366/367. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, pp. 219/220. Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 289-292. PRO WO203/3498, Director of Combined Operations Operational Reports, Report on Operation MATADOR dated 23 February 1945.

⁴² SACSEA Report, Paragraph 368. S Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume IV*, p. 220. Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, pp. 291-297.

⁴³ PRO WO203/5000, Future Operations Burma and Arakan, SACSEA Directive No 27 to Commanders in Chief dated 5 February 1945.

⁴⁴ PRO WO203/2101, Arakan Operations 1945, Joint Planning Staff Planning Paper No 105 dated 8 January 1945.

⁴⁵ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 415.



On 16 Feb 45, while 33 Corps was still crossing the Irrawaddy, the 82nd Division, coming down from the Kaladan valley, started to advance overland against the Japanese northern group. Meanwhile the 25th Division landed at Ruywa, after a 50 mile passage through the mangrove, in a classic outflanking move to cut the northern group off from the rest of their division at Taungup. Over the following month there ensued a slow and frustrating battle in difficult, jungle-covered hills. By 17 Mar 45, however, the Japanese had withdrawn to a new defensive position further up the An pass, and the British follow up by the 82nd Division, without air supply, was limited to that sufficient merely to retain Japanese attention.

While this was going on, the 26th Division crossed from Ramree to land at Letpan on 13 Mar 45 and began advancing on Taungup, reaching it by the end of the month. At this stage, however, Slim had requested the preparation of an amphibious assault to seize Rangoon, so operations on the Arakan coast started to wind down rapidly⁴⁶.

Initial planning orders for the landing at Rangoon, Operation DRACULA, were issued on 2 Apr 45. The 26th Division, nominated to lead the assault, was withdrawn from Taungup and concentrated on Ramree island prior to embarkation. The 2nd British Division, by then withdrawn from Burma to India, was to be the follow up division. The 25th Division and 3 Commando Brigade were withdrawn to India in order to minimise the administrative load in Arakan and to prepare for subsequent amphibious operations against Malaya. The 82nd Division continued to contain the Japanese in Arakan⁴⁷. Meanwhile, on 1 Apr 45, four Dakota squadrons started air supply operations from Akyab to the 14th Army as it started to advance south of Meiktila, well beyond economic range of air supply from Imphal⁴⁸.

Between 25 and 30 Apr 45, as the 14th Army was brought to a halt at Pegu, the assault convoys for Operation DRACULA, accompanied by three escort carriers, sailed from Ramree. A close covering group of destroyers secured the amphibious force from interference in the Gulf of Martaban. A second, deep covering group comprising the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Richelieu, four cruisers and two aircraft carriers sailed from Trincomalee to the area of the Andaman Islands to stop any Japanese naval interference from Singapore. D-Day was to be 2 May 45. The previous day a battalion of Gurkha paratroops was dropped at Elephant Point at the mouth of the Rangoon River, to destroy a Japanese coastal artillery position there after a heavy aerial bombardment. Sadly, most of their casualties on that operation were caused by friendly fire, when a stick of bombs fell short into their forming up position.

At 1500 hours on D-Day Wing Commander Saunders, the CO of 110 Mosquito Squadron, was flying over Rangoon jail when he saw painted on the roof "Japs gone – extract digit". Perceiving correctly from the turn of phrase that this was not a trap, he landed at Mingaladon airfield, disabling his aircraft by accident in a bomb crater as he did so. Having made his way to the jail to confirm the message, he went on to the docks, hijacked a sampan and set off to report his findings to the assault force, which, by that time, had landed at the mouth of the

⁴⁶ S Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan, Volume IV, pp. 341-351.

⁴⁷ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 500-510. S Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan, Volume IV, pp. 351-353.

⁴⁸ S Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan, Volume IV, Appendix 15.



river. Armed with that intelligence, the 26th Division entered Rangoon the following day, and the rest has already been covered⁴⁹.

So what makes this little known amphibious campaign worthy of interest? First of all it was an integral part of one of the most spectacular army group level manoeuvre battles of the war – arguably the best conducted anywhere by the Western Allies. By improvisation, deception and maximising the use of resources in which he had superiority, Slim outwitted and outfought the Japanese on the Irrawaddy front with a numerically inferior attacking force, over a formidable river obstacle, at the end of a tenuous supply line. By turning the Japanese flank and seizing Meiktila he forced the Japanese to counter attack him on ground of his own choosing and to their disadvantage. In the rapid advances to Meiktila and then on to Rangoon, he was prepared to drop his lines of communication and rely entirely on air supply to achieve speed and concentration of force. River and air transport were used extensively for tactical manoeuvre. Even by today's standards, this was a very advanced way of fighting, the like of which was probably not repeated until the American advance on Baghdad in 2003, and it was done by divisions, which, not very long previously, had been fighting through the jungle on foot with mules for transport. It required a great deal of tactical flexibility. Of course, Slim had the space to manoeuvre and total command of the air, but that does not detract from the skill of the operation. None of it could have been achieved, however, without the concurrent operations on the Arakan coast, directed at Army Group level, to seize the supporting airfields and tie down enemy forces, which might otherwise have tipped the balance unfavourably.

Rather like the landing at Walcheren in Nov 44 to open seaward access to the Port of Antwerp, the Arakan campaign was mounted primarily for logistic purposes – to shorten the supply route for the Army Group's main effort. In this respect it is interesting that neither Mountbatten nor Leese appear to have seen the intended opening of the Taungup to Prome road as an opportunity to turn the flank of the Japanese defence, but purely as an additional logistic enabling measure⁵⁰. It was the Japanese themselves who perceived the tactical threat.

The operations on the Arakan coast were unique in British amphibious experience, certainly in modern times. This was not just a landing followed by the movement of the battle inland, but a three-dimensional littoral campaign, lasting over five months, in which the sea and coastal waterways were used continuously as avenues of tactical manoeuvre and maintenance, and the Services were entirely inter-dependant. We had not really done anything like that since the Seven Years' War, and the nearest we have come since was in the Falklands.

It was, actually, a masterpiece of combined operations, controlled from a makeshift, but completely joint command, based on Christison's 15 Corps HQ and equally integrated subordinate headquarters at divisional and, occasionally, brigade level⁵¹. At the same time, the 14th Army and 221 Group RAF worked together as a thoroughly cohesive air/ground force, commanded from a similarly integrated joint headquarters⁵². The two axes were co-

⁴⁹ SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 542-548. S Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan, Volume IV, pp. 393-398.

⁵⁰ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 410.

⁵¹ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 349. Prasad, The Royal Indian Navy, p. 282.

⁵² SACSEA Report, Paragraphs 416-420. See also comments in the personal letters of Major General J S Lethbridge, then Brigadier General Staff, Headquarters 14th Army, now held in the Lethbridge Papers at the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (Hereafter LHCMA).



ordinated by Leese acting in concert with the other Commanders in Chief. Major General Lethbridge, who had led a liaison mission to the Pacific before becoming Slim's Chief of Staff, had been particularly impressed by the inter-service command cohesion achieved by the Americans, and had been disappointed by the lack of integration he found in India in late 1943⁵³. But this was every bit as good as the American model - and those of the European theatres - and it was reflected in the speed with which plans were developed and operations mounted. The culmination, in Operation DRACULA, demonstrated a capability to mount a complex and critical operation at short notice from widely separated bases, to conduct it in rapidly deteriorating weather, and to respond quickly to changing circumstances.

Christison's command organisation was developed to meet the needs and opportunities of the moment rather than according to any deliberate plan. Despite much abortive amphibious planning in SEAC and the development of excellent Combined Training Centres in India, many of the forces on these operations, and the commanders and staffs who controlled them, had little experience of amphibious warfare and had to learn on the job⁵⁴. Force "W", of course, had the experience of Sicily, but there were no procedures for the kind of protracted, truly amphibious operations in the type of environment encountered on the Arakan coast and many of the landing craft crews were brand new to the theatre⁵⁵.

It was largely an Indian affair, and, of the Indian land forces, only the 26th Division had been trained in amphibious warfare⁵⁶. The 25th Division, which, in the event, did most of the amphibious fighting, was reinforced by 3 Commando Brigade, whose units did, at least, have recent amphibious training, but which had not operated as a brigade before the campaign. The sloops and most of the landing craft and gunboats were found from the Royal Indian Navy, who won universal praise from the Army for their skill and determination in appalling conditions. Rear Admiral Troubridge, the previous commander of Force "W", had let it be known that Indians were not fit to man landing craft in the assault, but after the Myebon landing, Christison had recorded that the Indian crews were "as good as anything we shall get from the RN or RM"⁵⁷.

Mountbatten's previous experience as Chief of Combined Operations, and that of Force "W" at Sicily, as well as lessons from the Pacific, undoubtedly had a good deal of influence. The operations were, of course, assisted enormously by the almost total command of the air and sea enjoyed by the British, who were fortunate also in having the unopposed landing at Akyab as a rehearsal at the start.

The campaign was notable for the degree of improvisation required. Until amphibious shipping released from Europe eventually found its way to the Far East, the Navy had had to operate with local vessels and those landing craft too decrepit to be sent to the Mediterranean

⁵³ LHCMA Lethbridge Papers, Report of 220 Military Mission.

⁵⁴ Writing to General Auchinleck, C in C India, on 8 July 1944, Mountbatten described the Combined Training Centre at Cocanada as "...the best designed CTC I have ever seen and from the point of view of training for operations in the tropics, the best situated" (Mountbatten Papers MB1/C138 held at the University of Southampton).

⁵⁵ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 511. Prasad, *The Royal Indian Navy*, p. 278.

⁵⁶ PRO WO203/3498, Director of Combined Operations Operational Reports, Report on Operation MATADOR dated 23 February 1945. PRO WO203/2691, The Arakan Campaign of the 25th Indian Division.

⁵⁷ Mountbatten Papers MB1/C102 letters from Christison to Rear Admiral Godfrey, Flag Officer Commanding the Royal Indian Navy, dated 15 and 26 January 1945.



in 1943⁵⁸. Much of Force “W”’s equipment was worn after taking part in Operation HUSKY en route to India, followed by a long period of training and operations with inadequate maintenance facilities. Warships had to act as troop carriers whilst fighting, and the Army had to invent much of its procedures and tactics ‘on the hoof’, often with makeshift equipment, like operating local or home-made vessels and using field guns lashed into landing craft⁵⁹.

The operations on the Arakan coast, which had developed piecemeal and with much improvisation in the face of equipment, organisational and training shortcomings, succeeded in their most important object of securing the essential forward airfields to support the 14th Army. They tied down a Japanese division which could otherwise have reinforced the Irrawaddy front at a critical time. The intended opening of the Taungup to Prome road was aborted, but, in the event, that made no difference to the final outcome. The seizure and opening of Rangoon may have been something of an anti-climax, but it secured the 14th Army’s supplies just as its logistic position was beginning to look desperate due to the early onset of the monsoon, which would have seriously interfered with road, river and air supply. The relative ease of Operation DRACULA and the vision of hindsight belie the risks involved. Admiral Martin was most reluctant to go ahead with it in the deteriorating monsoon conditions, and, had the Japanese fought for Rangoon, the 26th Division could have been in a serious position, cut off and unable to be supplied or withdrawn because of the weather. It was, at the time, a close run thing. After all the frustration of seeing their amphibious plans aborted time after time, South East Asia Command was treated to this rather unexpected success story almost at the end.

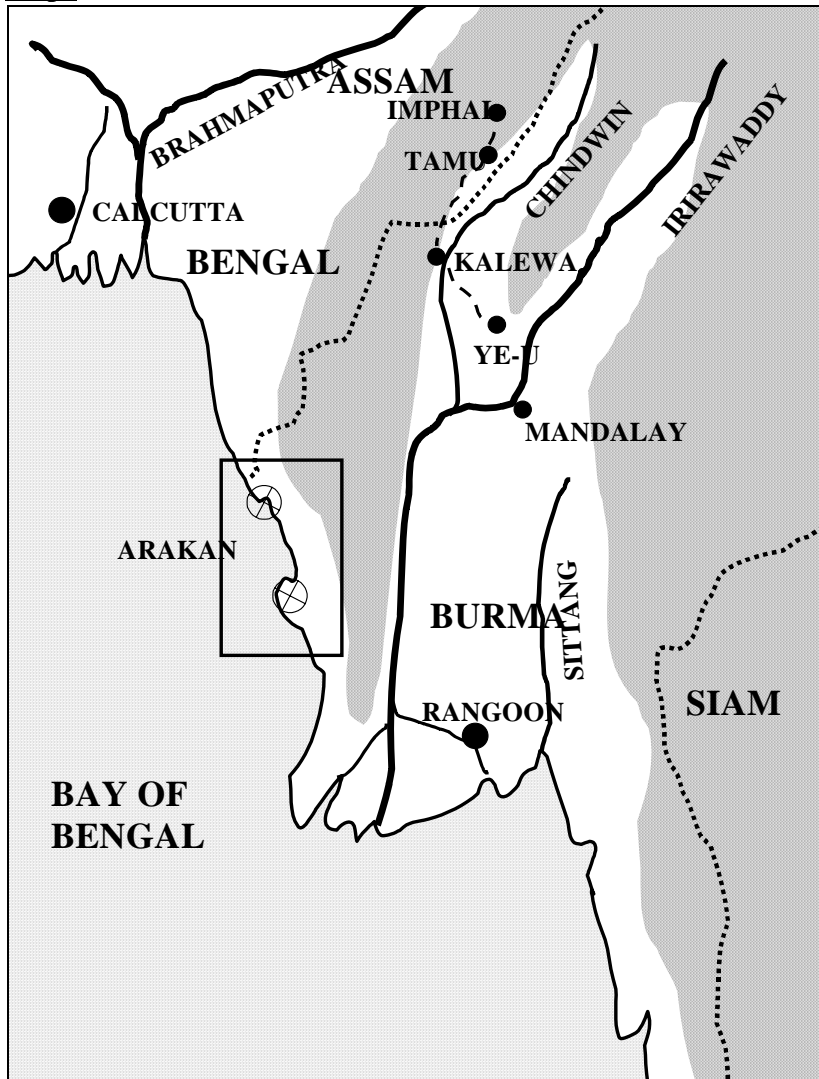
Mountbatten is reputed to have said to at least one unit in Arakan: “You’re not the Forgotten Army – no-one’s ever even heard of you.” I dare say that was true then, and, to a large extent, it’s true now. All this took place in a theatre at the bottom of the strategic priority list, and much of it on an obscure, subsidiary front of that theatre, but it inflicted upon Japan the greatest defeat on land in all her history. It was a brilliant operation.

⁵⁸ SACSEA Report, Paragraph 358.

⁵⁹ PRO WO203/1797, Lessons From Operations, Report by Commander Royal Artillery, 25th Indian Division dated 21 March 1945.



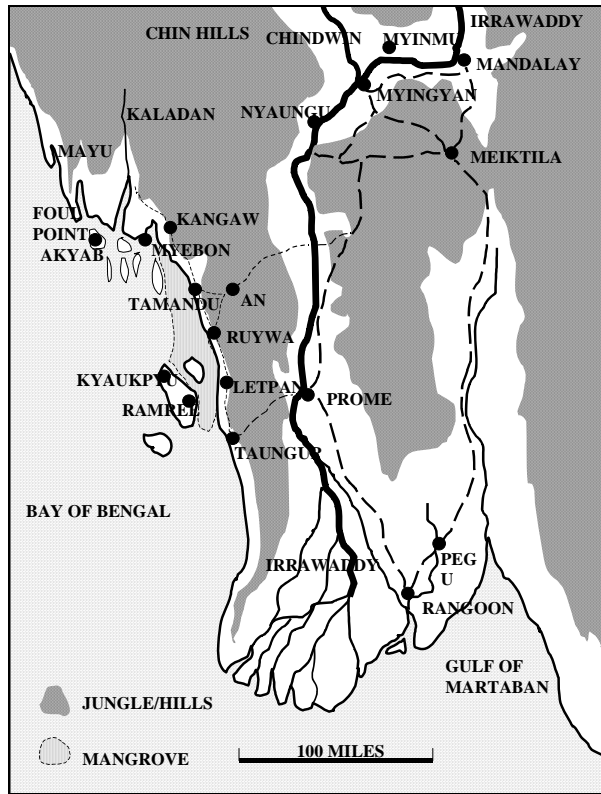
Maps



Map 1



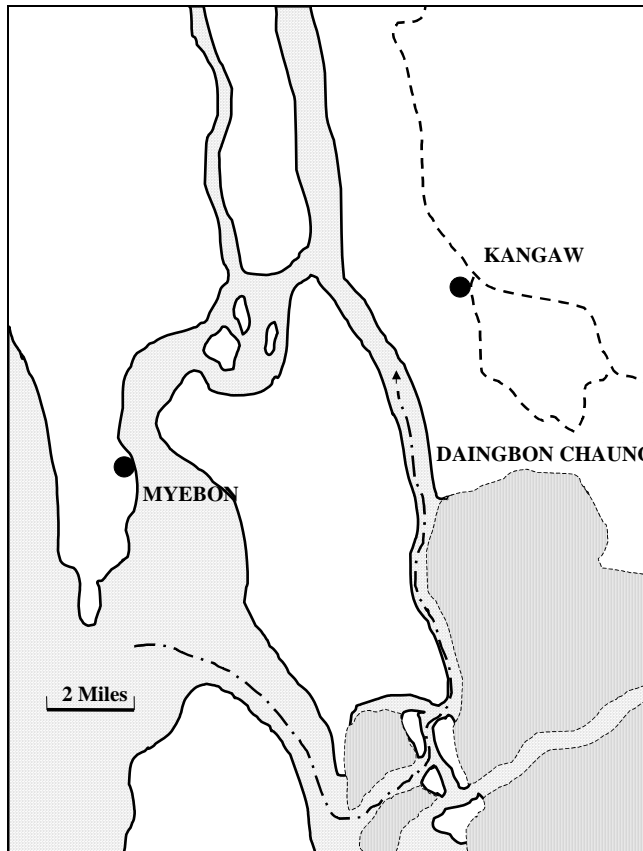
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Map 2



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Map 3



A Drastic Decision. Regime Change at The Bay of Pigs, 1961.

Andy Grainger

Following a presidential election won by the slightest of margins, the United States launches an amphibious assault on a small country with the aim of overthrowing a bloodthirsty and unpopular dictator and restoring democratic government. From the substantial amounts of intelligence supplied to it by a large *emigré* community it anticipates that the population will rally to the invaders and so plans for a relatively low level of military commitment. Further, it makes virtually no preparations for the security of the post-invasion political leadership. It is surprised when the invasion is confronted by a vast army of hostile militia and becomes bogged down in lengthy anti-guerrilla and internal security operations.

This, of course, is not an outline of any recent military operations conducted by the United States but a scenario that, in my view, could well have occurred if President John F Kennedy had committed US combat troops in support of the CIA inspired invasion of Cuba in April 1961.

The Bay of Pigs invasion is held up primarily as a tale of political failure at the highest political and strategic levels and incompetence at the operational one. It scarred the brief Kennedy presidency although, looking back now, forty years and several vastly more disastrous US interventions later, it seems almost innocent. After all, Kennedy did pull back from the brink unlike his successors in Laos, Vietnam, Somalia and elsewhere.

What happened? Briefly, and, somewhat to my surprise given my lack of knowledge of the events, I was surprised to find the Bay of Pigs invasion to be an example of a successful amphibious assault, launched at night. Brigade 2506, comprising 1300 Cuban exile soldiers, equipped and trained by the CIA and escorted to the coast of Cuba by the US Navy landed at Playa Giron, as the Cubans call it, in the pre-dawn hours of 17 April 1961. Unfortunately the new US President, in office only a few months, had scaled down the air strikes that preceded the operation to reduce its visibility. Around half of Castro's fifteen or so aircraft were destroyed on the ground but the remainder attacked the invasion fleet, sinking two of its five ships and driving the others away. Despite this setback the attackers seized a foothold and fought hard for 72 hours, expecting US air support or, at least, rescue by the US Navy. On 19 April, heavily outnumbered and outgunned, their ammunition expended, they surrendered. Apart from about a hundred who had been killed, most of the remainder were ransomed in December 1962 for \$50m worth of medicines.

Internationally, the world was horrified by an invasion of a sovereign state by the United States; it was, of course, a political gift to Khrushchev at the height of the Cold War. Within the US, the Cuban exiles were embittered by what they saw as betrayal by their sponsors. And there were, of course, elements in the armed forces and CIA who questioned the new president's resolve in the face of Communism. Why had the US betrayed those whom it had encouraged to fight the good fight against the red menace?

The aim of this paper is to examine how and why the invasion was mounted. Whilst the actions of Castro are of interest I will be concentrating on the planning on the US side via the



declassified documents that allow us to see the detail of the process. I will cover some of the operational aspects of the operation since they are of considerable interest to the Conference subject matter and they are probably unfamiliar to you.

I will conclude with some comments on the regime changes of 1961 and perhaps allude to the relationship between military planning and domestic politics in a democracy and the use and evaluation of intelligence; subjects which still retain their relevance today.

Origins

President Kennedy had only been in office for four months when the Bay of Pigs operation was launched. But the operation had its official origins at a meeting held by President Eisenhower in October 1959. There he approved a joint programme proposed by the State Department and the CIA to support anti-Castro elements whilst making Castro's downfall seem to be the result of his own mistakes. In other words, what might be called "*a cunning plan*". Six months later, on 17th March 1960, Eisenhower approved a CIA document entitled A Program of Covert Action against the Castro Regime.

Before looking at the plan in detail let us therefore now look briefly at events on the island of Cuba and why the US was thinking about overthrowing the Castro regime.

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. It was occupied by Spain from 1511 until 1898 when the USA kicked her out. This glosses over two very bloody wars of independence fought by the Cubans from 1868 to 1878, the so called Ten Year war and another commencing in 1895 which concluded when the US invaded and replaced the Spanish Government with one of their own. It is estimated that approximately 250,000 Cubans died out of a population of 1.5m between 1895 and 1898, mostly from diseases brought about by the herding of the population into towns so that anti-guerrilla operations could be conducted in the interior.

The Cubans had therefore invested a great deal of blood in their search for independence. They may have been sidelined when the US Army arrived in 1898 but they had clear ideas of what independence should be – democracy, equality before the law, Cuban control of the Cuban economy, a free press and so on. It did not include a Constitution imposed by the USA incorporating that country's right to intervene in Cuban affairs whenever its interests were threatened or giving permission to construct a naval base at Guantanamo for the protection of the Panama Canal.

By the late 1950's, American capital controlled:

90% of Cuba's mines

80% of its public utilities

50% of its railways

40% of its sugar production

25% of its bank deposits

American firms made enormous profits from their Cuban investments, while employing little more than 1 percent of the country's population. I think that is important – only a tiny number of Cubans had a stake in the profits being generated by them.



Castro's movement sprang directly from these nationalist movements. If, in the end, he turned towards socialism it was not through any deep-seated ideological desire but simply because he and his movement could see no way in which the mass of the Cuban population could benefit whilst their economy was in the hands of foreign companies.

All this made Castro's intentions very difficult for US intelligence to read. As his biographer, Tad Szulc wrote back in 1962 *"Among Fidel Castro's incontrovertible gifts is the ability to cloud his course in confusion, like a squid emitting ink as it retreats to the deep."*

What, therefore, was US intelligence to make of Castro and his followers when they entered Havana in January 1959? Was Castro someone with whom the US could work? If not, what, if any threat, did he pose to US strategic and economic interests?

January 1959 was a honeymoon period for Castro. It seemed that the corruption and injustice of the Batista regime and those before him had all been washed away. There were huge popular demonstrations of support numbering up to a million people on occasions. Many US companies even advanced their corporation taxes to the regime. Castro installed a cabinet of strongly middle class politicians, bankers and lawyers with a highly respected President, all with strong anti-communist credentials.

On the other hand there were scenes which disturbed the US.

Show trials of war criminals were given very wide publicity. The US reviewed these as abuses of human rights; Castro of course retorted that the USA had simply stood by during the atrocities of the Batista regime and why weren't they stopping the CIA inspired bombing raids over Cuba?

Of greater impact were speeches by Fidel, Che Guevara and others suggesting that the economy would be reformed and handed to the people.

This led, within only a couple of months, to the drying up of investment and consequent nationalisation of businesses and institutions without compensation. As the economy began to fail so the middle classes began to leave. On Castro's arrival in Havana exiles had flocked back to Cuba but within two years of the revolution 50% of Cuba's doctors, teachers and professional people had left.

So the Revolutionary Government's demands that Cuba be treated as an independent state were coming at a serious economic cost. But whilst US business interests might be alarmed at their financial losses, that was scarcely reason for the US government to intervene. Was there a threat to its vital strategic interests? It seemed that there might be.

Within a month of the revolution, the American chargé d'affaires in Havana on 2 Feb 59 cabled Washington with a despatch entitled:

"Cuba as a Base for Revolutionary Operations against Other Latin American Governments"

"A number of leaders of the successful revolutionary movement in Cuba consider that efforts should now be undertaken to "free" the people of some other Latin American nations from



their “dictatorial” governments.... Fidel Castro has reportedly made remarks along such lines, particularly during his recent visit to Venezuela.” The paper then considers reports of planning for attacks by Cuba on the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Haiti. The report concludes *“The planning for these various adventures appears to be preliminary and unrealistic at this stage and the groups disunited. However, in view of the background of many of the principal Cuban revolutionary leaders and the support their own movement has received from abroad, it can be expected that Cuba will be a center of revolutionary scheming and activities for some time with consequent concern and difficulties for various governments including our own.”* In Anderson p395.

By the end of 1959 the US was increasingly of the view that Castro’s regime was communist. They had deep concerns about the export of the revolution and the involvement of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Castro’s handling of the economy and his reluctance to involve the many religious, intellectual and middle class groups who had supported his guerrilla campaign had led to the development of an extensive internal opposition within Cuba. Armed rebels were operating in the Escambray mountains, a remote area and a traditional sanctuary for guerrillas. From the earliest stages of Castro’s revolution the CIA were involved with exile groups in Florida and other Caribbean countries such as Puerto Rico and Nicaragua and they supplied the rebels with airdrops.

It is against this background that October 1959 Eisenhower approved the idea of a cunning plan to support the Cuban opposition groups and bring about the downfall of Castro. As I have indicated, this led to the CIA Plan of March 1960. “A Programme of Covert Action against the Castro Regime”.

It stated:

OBJECTIVE: *“The purpose of the programme outlined herein is to bring about the replacement of the Castro regime with one more devoted to the true interests of the Cuban people and more acceptable to the US in such a manner as to avoid any appearance of US intervention.”*

This set out four requirements:

1. A publicly declared junta or exile government offering a wide appeal with the slogan “Restore the Revolution” and *“to address itself to the Cuban people as an attractive political alternative to Castro.”* [1 month];
2. A propaganda radio station to deliver its message both to Cuban exiles in the Caribbean and to the population of Cuba [2 months];
3. Creation of a covert organisation within Cuba to gather intelligence and carry out actions ie sabotage at the direction of the exile govt [two months];
4. Creation of a paramilitary force outside Cuba to organise, train and lead resistance forces inside Cuba [six months, probably eight].

Many of the documents relating to the planning have been declassified and were the subject of a seminar held in 1996. The record of this seminar – which included many of the middle ranking US and Cuban exile participants - is contained in Politics of Illusion edited by James G Blight and Peter Kornbluh. I found it a very useful context in which to set the more journalistic accounts like Wyden’s.



This plan must have seemed not unreasonable. Castro, it was true, had come to power on the back of an enormous wave of political support. But within only a few months things had turned very sour. The economy was in ruins; hundreds of thousands of skilled people had left. The country was very divided politically. Not only the US had been trying to work out what Castro's ideology was. So had the population of Cuba. There had been a strong and broadbased opposition to the Batista regime. Castro and Guevara, with their guerrilla columns in the mountains, which never numbered more than 3,000 people, drew a lot of support from various groups in the cities – from students, middle class political parties, church groups, the armed forces and so on – but they never had any intention of sharing power with them. These groups rapidly became very discontented.

It was in circumstances like this that the CIA had engineered the overthrow in 1954 of President Arbenz's vaguely left wing government in Guatemala and the CIA hierarchy saw no reason why Castro's regime could not be toppled in the same way.

But the CIA did not see the Castro's regime as being brought down quickly. As we have seen above, they thought that a political opposition and radio station could be set up in a month or two but it would be much more difficult to unsettle Castro's regime sufficiently to allow the exiles to take power.

The way they thought they could do this was to train guerrilla fighters at bases in, say, Guatemala and then parachute them into Cuba where they would set up networks with local resistance groups. The pattern followed OSS type operations against the Germans and Japanese in WW2. Accordingly, in March 1960, Radio Swan went on air from Swan Island off Guatemala and during the summer an airbase was built in Guatemala to where exiles could be flown from Florida and trained.

During the autumn of 1960 the tempo of clandestine operations intensified. There were more private airstrikes by Cuban exile pilots, more airdrops by the CIA and more protests about Radio Swan by Fidel Castro. But there were also growing signs that Castro was securing his position. His contacts with the Soviet Union were increasing and more of the airdropped weapons and agents were falling into his hands as his security organisations penetrated the political opposition both inside Cuba and amongst the exile organisations. It is also fair to say that a good many in the CIA with WW2 experience felt that this approach stood no chance at all.

Hundreds of foreign, mainly US, businesses were nationalised without compensation in order to fund the regime. Then, on 21st October 1960, in a TV debate with Vice-President Nixon, the presidential candidate, John F Kennedy attacked President Eisenhower's policy on Cuba by calling for support for the "democratic anti-Castro forces ... who offer hope of overthrowing Castro. Thus far," he says, "these fighters for freedom have had virtually no support from our government." Nixon is amazed at Kennedy's outburst and accuses him of being reckless and irresponsible. Nixon, of course, is fully aware of the US backing for the exiles which is supposed to be secret. And so the Cuban operation is kicked into the political arena.

It is at about this time that the CIA planners decide to alter fundamentally their approach to the overthrow of the Castro regime. They instruct the trainers in Guatemala to switch the



training regime from one of guerrilla warfare to conventional assault. Recruiting is greatly stepped up from a few dozen radio operators and saboteurs to the aim of creating a conventional infantry brigade of up to 3,000 men including tanks, a parachute capability and heavy weapons.

There seem to have been several reasons for this change:

1. Castro was getting stronger. Whilst he might be losing popular support he was securing his regime by more traditional means – internal security, informers at home, links with USSR and other sympathetic govts abroad. Guerrilla fighters and local resisters were no longer enough,
2. Secondly, it was known that pilots were being trained in the USSR on new MiG fighters which would greatly improve the capability of his air force and completely outclass the old WW2 bombers of the exiles,
3. The President of Guatemala was getting irritated at the presence of a US trained brigade on his supposedly sovereign state. Indeed, in November 1960, some young officers rebelled and Cuban exiles actually flew airstrikes against the rebels.

So the CIA planners in Guatemala produced a fresh concept and considered the possibility of overthrowing Castro by amphibious assault. The operation will have three phases:

1. Getting ashore
2. Securing a beachhead and commencing air and psychological operations
3. Slowly expanding the beachhead and recruiting volunteers.

The operation is predicated on Castro being too weak to throw the invaders back into the sea. And it was believed that the longer the beachhead remained, so his credibility would fail, his militia would defect and his government would collapse.

In January 1961 the Joint Chiefs are informed and a committee is set up with representatives from the Depts of State, Defense, the CIA and the Joint Chiefs. The code-name for the Operation is unbelievably Op Bumpy Road.

By this time, of course, Kennedy has entered office. He meets Eisenhower [on 19th January 1961] and they discuss world affairs. Both agree that in every third world conflict, the opponents seem to have higher morale. Why is this? You almost sense the question: why does everyone hate us? Their view seems to be that the Communists achieve the upper hand simply by cunning, duplicity and deception. I think this offers a useful context into which the Bay of Pigs operation is mounted. There was a sense that the communists were winning, whether in Cuba or Laos and, of course, tension was growing over Berlin. And what had happened in Cuba could, as Castro and Che Guevara fervently hoped, occur across South America. And last but certainly not least were questions of domestic politics. You did not win elections by being soft on communism.

Late in January Kennedy is briefed by the Joint Chiefs about the operation. Remember that he is electorally committed to “doing something” about Cuba but that overt US involvement is not seen as politically acceptable. A plan to bring down Castro’s government by guerrilla warfare in support of internal resisters has evolved into an assault landing by a brigade sized force using air support and fronted by a coalition of resistance groups. The State Department knows that the operation is an open secret; it has even been discussed in UN circles. At the



briefing Kennedy is told that Castro is due to receive 30,000 tons of military equipment from Czechoslovakia. He is told by General Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that “*What is required is a basic expansion of plans.*”

Kennedy, in office for only a month and with a brand new cabinet is faced with a series of choices. Cuba, of course, is only one of very many issues on which he is having to make decisions:

What advice does he receive:

- The Joint Chiefs want to expand the plan to dispose of Castro
- The CIA are also enthusiastic about it – after all, the worst case is a civil war in Cuba! And if we disband the exiles now there will be “a disposal problem”.
- State Department by now is getting very cold feet and worried about the diplomatic ramifications in South America where it is developing strong relationships with the OAS. Can’t we have a trade embargo first? they ask.

It is at this point that Schlesinger writes his “drastic decision” memo to the president. “*If we do take a drastic decision, [ie to invade]... It would fix a malevolent image of the new Administration in the minds of millions.*”

Given that D-Day is set for 5 March it is unfortunate that there is still chaos at the top in Washington. There is no shortage of ideas as to what to do, however.

Kennedy asks for an alternative to what he calls a WW2 type invasion. Eventually the CIA, in March, produce what becomes the final plan codenamed “Zapata”. The Brigade will land in the Bay of Pigs, an area of deep swampland on the south coast, virtually uninhabited and where it will be unopposed. There will be few recruits in the area but it will have the leisure to expand its beachhead, which includes an airstrip, and the area is so inaccessible that Castro’s forces will probably not even know that it has landed. Kennedy is unhappy about the scale of the supporting airstrikes since no-one will believe that 50 or 60 bombing sorties can be laid at the door of a couple of defecting pilots. The CIA reduce them, whilst assuring him that the Cuban population will rally to the invaders. The airstrikes will go in two days early, timed with a small scale diversionary landing in the far south-east of the country to make the whole thing look like a small scale exile operation.

The problem with all this is that the CIA planners in Guatemala have not been consulted. When they find out about the change of plan they actually try to resign but are persuaded to stay on. Then, at the last minute they hear that the airstrikes have been minimised. Without the planned airstrikes they know that Castro’s air force is strong enough to bomb and sink the five transport ships making up the invasion fleet. The whole plan has been based on air superiority since there are no fighters; the only planes that the exiles have are B26 Marauder twin engined bombers. There is virtually no AA defence and the ships are not combat loaded – but loaded on the basis of an unopposed landing.

The airstrikes, of course, failed on all counts. They hit only about 50% of Castro’s aircraft and simply warned him that something was up. The diversionary force, having been told it would face no opposition, aborted its mission when it found its remote landing beach to be well



defended. Castro, in fact, was aware of the ship, though not its purpose, but discounted it on the basis that a single shipload of troops would be ineffective.

So early on 17 April 1961, 1300 well-equipped Cuban troops and a number of CIA advisers and a substantial US Navy escort approached the Bay of Pigs. They expected no opposition and that the local population would rally to them. In the last resort the exiles thought that the US government, having expended so much time and effort on implementing the invasion, would intervene. As one of them said afterwards, "*With John Wayne on our side, how could we lose*". And the US Navy, for their part, could not believe that the US would not intervene formally given the resources it was committing.

Kennedy receives a cable from the US Marine officer who has trained the exiles brigade which extols their fighting qualities. Again emphasising that US troops will not get involved and that supporting airstrikes be minimal, he authorises the invasion only two hours before the point of no return.

He, of course, whilst deeply uneasy about the whole thing is operating on the assumption that there will be no opposition, that the invaders will receive a high degree of popular support and that Castro's militia will not have the fighting power or speed to defeat the invaders.

Let's now look at the contending forces.

Exile Forces

Brigade 2506 consisting of six battalions each of around 200 men, about 1300 in all. They had five tanks and the infantry were reasonably well-equipped including MMGs and bazookas. Many officers were former Cuban Army officers and seem to have been reasonably competent although discipline was always questionable since so many opposition groups were represented. Generally, however, motivation was high. The 1st Battalion was of paratroops and would drop via C46 transports.

The brigade was to be conveyed to the invasion beaches in five old merchant ships chartered by the CIA and seven landing craft loaned by and delivered to the assembly areas by the US Navy from Puerto Rico.

They are supported by 8 B26 Marauder bombers flying from Nicaragua (3½ hours flying time away).

Cubans

On Castro's side he and Che Guevara had completely reorganised the army on the basis of a guerrilla warfare strategy. The sources indicate that he had 25,000 regular soldiers which seems many times too high to me and 200,000 militia. Most of the militia had only a few days training and were equipped with Czech rifles and 20 rounds. But they were numerous. There were posts in every village so they could play a key coastwatching and tripwire role. Castro had also taken delivery of Russian tanks, 122mm howitzers and some anti-aircraft guns. All were of WW2 vintage but quite adequate for the job.

Castro was determined that the invaders must be attacked in their beachhead as quickly as possible. The operational plan was to throw militia units immediately against the invaders and then to deploy the armour, artillery and regular troops only when the main invasion had been located.



Castro knew that the invasion was coming but did not know where or when. The airstrikes on 15 April answered the “when” question but not the where. Castro himself thought the favoured spot would be the Oriente – a remote area in the eastern part of the island where Cuban revolutions always started, including his own.

It turned out that Castro had another advantage. In March 1959 he had visited the Zapata swamps around the Bay of Pigs. He developed an idea that a great drainage system could turn the 200,000 hectares into a huge rice field so that the poor charcoal burners would have a decent living. Tourism would follow after roads, canals and resorts were constructed. These plans have still come to nothing but Castro visited the area frequently and so by March 1961 he knew it very well.

Cuban Air Force

Figures vary but, essentially, Castro seems to have had three T33 jets, 1 B26 twin-engined bomber and four Hawker Sea Fury fighters available to him with seven pilots.

The T33 jets completely outclass the exiles’ B26 bombers and the Sea Furies can operate in either a bomber or fighter role.

A side-effect of the raids on 15th April is that the world press is not taken in by a “damaged” bomber that lands in Miami since the particular model is of a type only operated by the US Air Force and not by anyone else. It becomes quite clear that the US rather than some renegade exiles has launched the air raids and there is consternation at the United Nations.

Kennedy therefore prohibits the use of further airstrikes without his personal authority. But his impression is that this is not critical to the operation.

For his part Castro rounded up anyone who was a potential suspect, possibly as many as 100,000 people. This completely disrupted any plans there might have been for uprisings within Cuba – the CIA assessment of the efficiency of Castro’s security services was certainly accurate in this case.

Dawn 17 April: The invasion fleet lands relatively successfully especially considering it was at night. The frogmen guiding the fleet however were fired on by militia whilst still in the water and so Castro was informed of the invasion 45 minutes after it started. The ships came under machine gun fire whilst unloading but the main problems were coral reefs, assessed from air photos either as seaweed or clouds. Several landing craft were damaged or sunk but the main effect was that unloading was not completed by dawn which left the ships vulnerable to air attack.

The Cubans had a regular battalion of around 300 men at the Central Australia sugar mill about 15 miles from the landing beaches and militia platoons in a number of villages. Castro immediately flew to Central Australia, where he knew there was a telephone, having ordered the entire militia of Matanzas province, around 20,000 men, to move there. He therefore took personal command of the defence within hours of the landing.



At dawn 2 Sea Furies, 2 T33s and a B26 began to attack the invasion ships. The B26 was shot down by .50 cal MGs but the remainder caused serious damage. The paratroops arrived at their DZ over Playa Giron in the middle of all this and some were engaged both by the Sea Furies and their own colleagues that had landed by sea. They did, nevertheless, take their objectives. The 5th battalion, the least experienced unit then refused to disembark from their ship, the *Houston*. They only did so when it was hit by a rocket from one of the T33 jets and began to sink laden with ammunition and fuel. About 30 men were drowned but the rest struggled ashore albeit with no weapons.

Nevertheless it does seem as though most of the 1300 men in the invasion force as well as the tanks got ashore at Playa Giron by around 09.30 or 10.00 and advanced as far as San Blas about ten miles inland.

Both sides were flying airstrikes now. The presence of paratroops was a key indicator to Castro that this was the real thing. He redoubled his efforts to get reinforcements to the beachhead. The exiles bombers hit several truck convoys on the roads leading to the beaches but several were then shot down by the Cuban fighters. For their part the Sea Furies continued their attacks on the fleet and hit another ship, the *Rio Escondido*, carrying the communications equipment, the bulk of the medical supplies and the reserve ammunition. It blew up with such force that one of the CIA men on shore asked if Castro had the A bomb. Not entirely surprisingly the remaining ships withdrew into international waters.

The fighting continued for another 48 hours but, without further ammunition and US support, the invaders were now doomed.

Kennedy authorised the US Navy to take off survivors but they were concerned about the reefs and Cuban fire from tanks and artillery. Only about 26 survivors were picked up in small boats.

About 100 of the invaders were killed in action suggesting that the total number of casualties was several hundred.

In the aftermath there was a great deal of debate about Kennedy's failure to authorise airstrikes as if that would somehow have enabled the invasion to succeed. Such debate is a distraction. Outnumbered 10 or 20 to 1 and pounded by mortars, medium artillery and tanks, Brigade 2506 could only have survived with a healthy dose of US firepower. If that had been the idea then they might as well have sent the US Marines in the first place.

About 1200 survivors were captured. In December 1962, Castro released nearly all of the exiles in exchange for \$53 million in food and medicine raised by private donations in the United States. A small number of the exiles were put on trial in Havana for atrocities committed during the Batista regime.

Regime Change

The operation did, of course, succeed in imposing regime change in Cuba. Or maybe it just speeded it up.



A few days later on 1st May, Castro declared that Cuba was a socialist state. There would not be elections every four years but every day. The revolution was the direct expression of the people's will.

And as Che Guevara said a few months later to a White House aide, Richard Goodwin *"Thank you for Playa Giron. Before the invasion, the revolution was shaky. Now, it is stronger than ever."* Anderson p509

The regime changed in Washington too. Kennedy's young administration suddenly came face to face with reality. He accepted the responsibility for the disaster saying, *"I am the responsible officer of the government."*

As soon as the US hand was revealed by the defective B-26 at Miami Kennedy's instinct was to get out.

Why did he not cancel the invasion? The CIA had led him to believe that it was almost a no-lose situation – if Castro's militia defected and his regime collapsed, fine, if not then the invaders could just "go guerrilla" in the Escambray mountains.

On this basis it was well worth a punt, particularly if US involvement could be denied.

Following the debacle Kennedy set up a committee headed by General Maxwell Taylor to investigate what had gone wrong. This concluded that by November 1960, ie at the time the CIA decided that Castro could only be toppled by an amphibious invasion rather than guerrilla warfare, it was impossible to conceal US involvement. The operation should have been abandoned. The basic problems, that the CIA had failed to assess and evaluate intelligence properly and managed to organise a large military operation in which it lacked expertise, were covered up.

The Report also recommended, as such reports tend to do, a certain amount of restructuring in the various organisations to improve communication.

Kennedy himself did not rate such organisational reshuffling very highly, believing that most bureaucratic organisations work as well, or as badly, as any other. He believed that people made the difference and preferred to bring in people with whom he was more comfortable. He also believed in exercising tight control over the military as he put it *"to stop them getting out of control"*.

Conclusion

What else can we draw from this operation that took place forty years ago.

As far as a Conference about Amphibious Warfare is concerned, the very smallness of the Bay of Pigs operation offers some lessons that might be obscured in larger ones.

1. The importance of air superiority during the assault phase when the attackers are at their most vulnerable,
2. And do have some anti-aircraft defence,
3. The importance of combat loading so that the entirety of supplies are not lost if one ship is sunk,



4. The importance of reconnaissance of the landing approaches. The coral reefs thought to be seaweed could have been a disaster rather than an inconvenience,
5. Be ready for opposition. No opposition was forecast but it developed very quickly. Intelligence about defenders is traditionally awful. Nothing can be taken for granted.
6. Getting ashore is only the first part of the battle. If you can't land follow-up troops or supply the assault waves then the defenders will seal you off and once they have seized the initiative, life will become very difficult.

But above all, we see that amphibious operations, being so complex are simply not susceptible to rapid or fundamental changes of plan. The careful preparation that they require militates against flexibility. They should particularly not be organised by clandestine organisations which operate on a need to know basis.

During the Bay of Pigs, crucially, we see how difficult it is to grasp a situation when the rules change. A new regime takes power suddenly. What are its intentions? It seems to be trying to export revolution and striking up relationships with the USSR and other hostile powers. It is disorganised and there is a lot of opposition to it. The rules of the game to date are that regimes can be overthrown with a few people because none of them command any mass loyalty. Castro manages to change this. Many of the middle classes leave but the rural poor who benefit from the regime give him their total loyalty. But no-one had any idea how effective or how loyal this militia would be at the testing time.

And how much of a threat is it anyway? Senator Fulbright said later, "*Cuba was a thorn in the side not a dagger to the heart*" but at the time, who could tell?

Domestic politics come to have an unwelcome influence upon the operation. A "*something must be done*" atmosphere enters the decision-making process. This creates uncertainty and amphibious operations are particularly vulnerable to uncertainty because of the time consuming planning that they require.

More seriously, though, I think we see a failure of the checks and balances in what should be a robust planning system. In March 1960 President Eisenhower approved an operation with a clear objective and a set of clearly stated requirements. Six months later the CIA changed the plan radically from one of guerrilla warfare to amphibious invasion. But the new plan was reviewed by the Joint Chiefs and all the relevant departments in January 1961 in greater detail than at any other time and it survived.

True, the President asked new questions and, in fact, the plan was substantially revised yet again. It was at this stage that inertia set in. So much had been invested in the plan that the institutions were unable to step back. The new President simply asked that further avenues be explored. The various parties were only too glad to do so. In doing so some of them got too closely involved with their clients and lost sight of the objective – the overthrow of Castro without overt US involvement. They produced assessments that, due to the speed with which the plan had to be changed, were based on supposition and wishful thinking rather than any accurate intelligence data. And the administration was brand new; Kennedy had not managed anything bigger than a PT boat and some of his advisers were recently university professors.



The President was not given all the facts and, as unexpected events crowded in upon him, tended to meddle in detail without full knowledge of the implications. This made things worse.

Nevertheless he did stick with clarity to the guiding principles. He had been assured by his intelligence that the Castro would collapse at the sight of a viable opposition. He had always said that the US would not get directly involved. Castro did not collapse and Kennedy refused to intervene. He might have been misinformed but once the facts became clear he was clear as to what the fundamentals were.

I think that the Bay of Pigs is now seen as an unmitigated disaster. It may be that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 will be seen in the same way in forty years time. But Walt Rostow was unrepentant about the Bay of Pigs and I sense that those who feel that the invasion of Iraq was justified are probably as numerous as those who take the opposite view.

Kennedy was asked later why he did not lean more towards the views of Schlesinger who famously opposed the operation in his “Drastic Decision” and other memoranda. He replied that the memos would certainly look damn good in Schlesinger’s memoirs but it was a different thing to be faced with a communist dictator stirring up revolution, flying MiGs into the region and striking up alliances with the arch-enemies of the US, like USSR and China.

Regrettably, therefore, it seems to me that the only lesson of the Bay of Pigs is that whenever people have to take one of Arthur Schlesinger’s “drastic decisions”, there is always a fighting chance that they will wind up with a Bay of Pigs. But whatever the outcome, they will at least keep historians in a job arguing as to whether it was a disaster or not.

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