

# Rusty Hand of Steel: the Naval Raid

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*"There comes from the sea a hand of steel which plucks the German sentries from their posts."*

Winston Churchill, 1942

The naval raid, an armed incursion of limited duration and magnitude, executed with surgical delicacy by highly mobile light infantry deployed from the sea, is as old as sea warfare itself. And despite its popular and narrow association with the darker days of World War II, Churchill's "hand of steel" policy still has wide applicability today.

It is unlikely that a naval raid will ever turn the tide in a global conflict. Furthermore, it is a tactic which tends to dissipate a navy's forces, distract its attention from the main design, and incur severe losses. Yet it is one of the options at the disposal of a task force commander which can achieve great success. It is also one which has not been used effectively or with adequate frequency by the U. S. Navy in recent years.

*Strategic Value:* In essence, the naval raid is a means of conducting sea-supported guerrilla warfare. It disturbs an enemy's lines of communication, probes his strengths, wears down his forces, and generally throws him into a burdensome defensive posture. The United States, despite a tradition of successful guerrilla warfare practitioners—Robert Rogers, Francis Marion, John Singleton Mosby—has exhibited a marked lack of enterprise and competence in committing that guerrilla heritage to the sea.

This deficiency may be accounted for in part by our propensity for, and success at, invasion with occupation during the last century. Why raid when we can occupy? Why harass when we can vanquish? However, the exigencies of modern warfare and its goals have changed the appeal of invasion as an alternative. Limited war has caused the sharp and painful jab to replace the knockout haymaker in importance.

The applications of the naval raid go beyond total or limited war. The isolated raid may be used as a tool of diplomatic policy. When conveyed to the raided country, its limited scope and object can make

toleration or limited hostilities acceptable alternatives to war as a response. The isolated naval raid permits the raiding country to segregate a single source of dispute, to destroy or neutralize that source, and still limit the possibility of a general large-scale hostile response from the raided country. A case in point has been the naval raids by Israeli naval commandos against Palestine Liberation Organization strongholds in Tyre. The Tyre raids allowed the effective use of force without drawing all of Lebanon into a conflict with Israel. The expressed intention to withdraw is credible, because raiding parties are too small to occupy the raided area and their logistical support too limited. In diplomatic disputes, it is a means of focusing enduring pressure when a more forceful ploy might blur issues and mire both parties in a protracted conflict.

The character of the naval raid makes it distinctly suitable for five principal applications:

► *To Capture Intact:* In Vietnam, as part of Operation Phoenix, naval special warfare units successfully pursued a campaign aimed at capturing high-ranking members of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. These abductions provided valuable intelligence, deprived enemy units of experienced leadership, and engendered demoralization. Clandestine raiding offered the opportunity of capture as well as annihilation.

During World War II, several naval raids were directed at retrieving intact the enemy's means of making war. At Dieppe, France, in August 1942, British commandos plucked key German radar assemblies from installations they pretended to destroy. These assemblies were needed to evaluate the state of German radar development. On another occasion, the U.S. Navy, as the result of a conscious program, used a boarding party armed as light infantry to capture a German submarine, the *U-505*. This capture



U. S. NAVY (LARRY CAGLE)

provided invaluable code and technical information.

The foregoing operations were mounted primarily for intelligence purposes, but the principle would also allow the captured material to be used against its original owner. Intact capture also allows for rescue of our own forces. In perhaps the most successful prisoner of war rescue of recent times, the British in 1940 attacked and boarded the German supply ship *Altmark* in Norwegian waters, rescuing 400 British prisoners by using a small boarding party. More recently, in An Xuyen province, Vietnam, U. S. Navy SEALs rescued 28 South Vietnamese POWs in a single raid launched from sampans and riverine craft.

The USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2) and her crew were the subjects of a belatedly planned and never executed naval raid following her 1968 capture. The container ship *Mayaguez*, seized by Cambodians in May 1975, provided the ideal opportunity for a naval raid, but instead it was first handled as an air strike,

then as a large-scale amphibious real estate acquisition. Both the *Pueblo* and *Mayaguez* incidents were prime chances for naval raid rescues, but instead they proved the glaring absence of U. S. preparedness in this area.

► *To Gather Intelligence:* The naval raid broadens the spectrum of intelligence sources. Even more significantly, it is an extremely reliable way of confirming intelligence reports.

For example, photo intelligence alone as a source is inadequate. This was one of the principal lessons of the 1943 assault on Tarawa. Reefs surrounding the beaches remained undetected by photography, and the landing force eventually stalled at these reefs and incurred deplorable losses. Had the underwater demolition teams (UDTs) then existed and conducted a reconnaissance, the story would have been different. But the U. S. Navy seems condemned to repeat his-

tory. The *Mayaguez* rescue attempt again relied almost exclusively on photo intelligence. Had a clandestine raiding party made a reconnaissance, it could have provided the intelligence necessary to forestall the subsequent futile and costly assault.

The raid's value in peacetime intelligence gathering is often overlooked. Navies are inherently well adapted for gathering intelligence in peacetime. They can cruise for long periods offshore in international waters, picking the best time for a clandestine or covert intelligence-gathering raid. Such raids can both provide additional information and verify reports derived from other sources.

► *To Arouse Popular Support:* A 9 August 1942 report (by the U. S. Military Intelligence Service) on British commandos stated:

"The moral [*sic*] effect of a raid usually counts far more than any material success it may achieve. If the material effect is important, the moral value will rise sharply; but even if no material success is gained, the moral value may still be high."

When the turnabout of public opinion can be more damaging than a lost battle, the method of engagement is as important as the outcome of the engagement itself.

Air strikes by an affluent nation effected from the remote comforts of seemingly omnipotent aircraft may gain military advantages at the expense of popular support. The charismatic impact of the raider has always been a strong factor for his employment. Churchill saw the commando raids of World War II as a way to attenuate Axis forces, to exhibit a continued will to fight before the eyes of Britain's prospective allies, and to buoy national morale. The ability of highly mobile light infantry to engage numerically superior forces on essentially the enemy's own terms must be acknowledged as one method of attracting or maintaining popular support.

Though not a naval raid, the 1976 Israeli hostage recovery from Entebbe, Uganda, is a classic instance of the raid garnering widespread enthusiasm for the overdog. Entebbe entailed the use of limited mobile forces by an industrialized, materially prosperous, and technologically sophisticated raiding country against an underdeveloped, materially impoverished, and technologically unsophisticated underdog alliance. It achieved not only its immediate objective

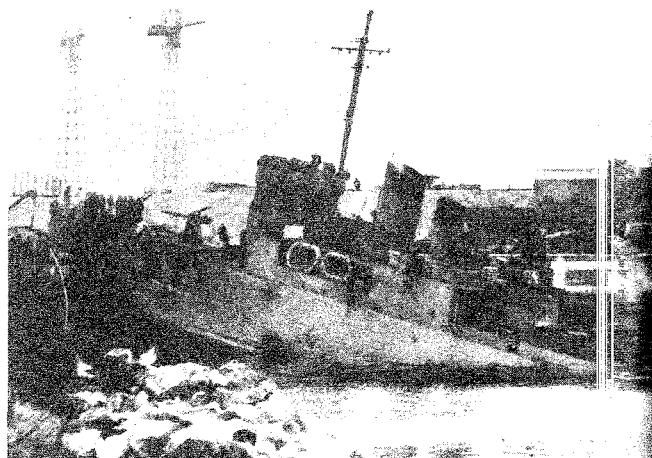
of rescuing hijack victims but also brought favorable world opinion. Boldness may well achieve what impersonal technology cannot.

An example of a naval raid achieving the same end was the British attack against the port of St. Nazaire, France, in March 1942. Organized to sabotage the only dry dock outside of German waters capable of accommodating the battleship *Tirpitz*, the raiding party scuttled explosives-laden HMS *Campbeltown* (a four-stack destroyer, formerly the USS *Buchanan*) [DD-131] after ramming the lock gates at 19 knots. The charges went off as planned, and the dry dock was inoperable for the rest of the war. The Germans had such respect for the British commandos that they organized a parade for one of the captured raiders who had earned a *Victoria Cross* in the action.

Another factor which contributes to the naval raid's ability to maintain public support is the discriminating nature of its prosecution. Noncombatants are less likely to become casualties in a raid than, for instance, in an air strike. The daring Royal Air Force strike on Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen in 1945 had the misfortune of also bombing the nearby Jeanne d'Arc parochial school, which was in session. As technology progresses, perhaps such errors may become less likely. But in any event, we must contend with the effect of aerial bombing as perceived by the public, not simply its actual effect.

► *To Engage the Unindustrialized Adversary:* Flexibility, sensitivity, intelligence, and public opinion are the key ingredients to fighting an unmechanized war. Fixed targets are few and not often consequential in an unindustrialized country. Aerial destruction of the few materiel targets and saturation bom-

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



In this photo from a successful raid, HMS *Campbeltown* is shown after she rammed the St. Nazaire dry dock and before she exploded, knocking out the dock for the rest of the war.

ing are unavailing unless coupled with an occupying or raiding ground force. Our experience in North Vietnam showed that a determined enemy can dodge bombs if that is all it has to dodge. A strong-minded enemy can prepare for and endure a predictable, single-dimensional attack. Guerrilla warfare is an unindustrialized country's game. The naval raid is counter-guerrilla warfare supported from the industrialized country's province, the sea.

► *To Destroy the Indestructible:* The naval raid is one method of destroying structures, such as the St. Nazaire dock, which cannot be efficiently destroyed by bombardment of any kind.

In addition, the absence of air superiority may require an unconventional method of demolition. Nevertheless, the ability of the raider to focus conventional explosive force nowhere approaches that of a conventional air strike. The target's distance from the shoreline inversely governs the amount of explosive deployable and geometrically increases the likelihood of discovery of the raiding party before it can attain its objective. Still, naval raids beyond the raiding country's circle of air superiority are feasible, as evidenced by an Australian-supported raid on Singapore in 1943. Despite Japanese superiority in the air over Singapore, commandos using kayaks penetrated the harbor and sank seven ships with limpet mines.

The difficult-to-reach or difficult-to-destroy target may be demolished by the naval raid. The declining significance of this particular characteristic to the United States requires it be listed last among the five applications to naval raiding.

*Conclusion:* The United States has neglected the development of a useful option. This option has fallen into disuse more from inept or tardy application than from any unsoundness in its applicability. As a course of action, it affords benefits which are valuable, unique, and of growing importance to the military situation of today. Ironically, the capability has withered in this country at a time when other nations have come to use guerrilla warfare more frequently.

The strategy for winning political victories by military means has been altered by the worldwide realization that sheer might does not guarantee victory. The United States achieved victory in World War II primarily through the quantitative approach to warfare, that is, by overwhelming the enemy with manpower and munitions. Following the war, the nation committed itself to this approach, and many other countries followed our example. However, the

increasing rate of success for belligerents waging terrorist campaigns or prolonged limited wars has been shockingly evident since the mid-1950s. Our adversaries have become aware that:

► We have been unswervingly committed to the quantitative approach in nearly every situation.

► Our approach is highly vulnerable to a style of warfare which avoids decisive military engagements and tests long-term political resolve. The United States is invariably cast as the bully attempting to kill a fly with a sledgehammer. This characterization undermines our popular support and consequently weakens our military position.

Since there are few conclusive battles in current conflicts, the hostilities continue until one side wears out psychologically. The side that wears out is normally the side that has ignored the public relations value of the nature of its engagements and forfeited public opinion as a result. The raid is a means of garnering and maintaining favorable public opinion.

A qualitative approach to warfare is, therefore, the answer. Combatants, not simply their leaders, must have a sense of the underlying politics of a conflict, grasp the possible ramifications of their acts, and exploit the public relations aspects of their deeds. This approach demands a sophisticated combatant and a mature strategy sensitive to the new priorities in military operations. These new priorities value winning support both back home and worldwide higher than the achieving of a purely material objective. The naval raid is well suited to this qualitative approach and to accomplishing both objectives. Yet the basic soundness of naval raiding is not part of U. S. naval thinking. Understandably, though not justifiably, the United States would rather lean on options which favor its technological preeminence and industrial productivity. But in doing so, it neglects a precious option.



Lieutenant Commander Crossland was commissioned at the Columbia University NROTC unit in 1970 (B.A. in American history) and holds a 1977 J.D. from Fordham. In Vietnam he served in SEAL Team One's detachment tasked with Operation Phoenix abductions and POW rescue operations. He subsequently taught unconventional warfare tactics to the Republic of Korea underwater demolition team and served with UDT 12 in Coronado, California, and the Western Pacific. Now an in-house attorney for an energy conglomerate, he resides in Fairfield, Connecticut, and drills with a UDT/SEAL Naval Reserve unit in Little Creek, Virginia. Lieutenant Commander Crossland is familiar with the negative consequences of naval raiding; his father-in-law Whitney Coulter was captured at Dieppe and held prisoner in Germany until the end of World War II.