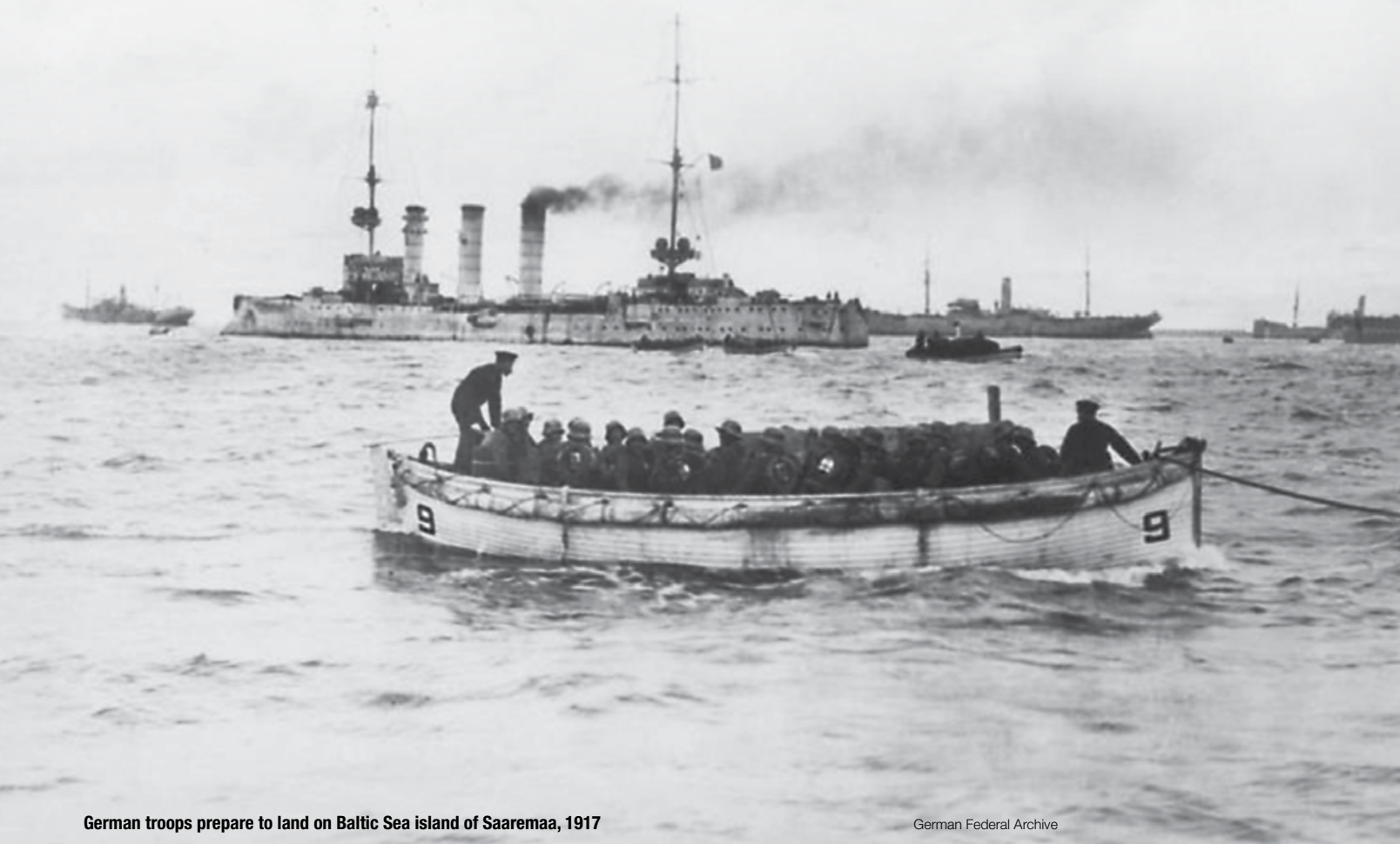


Operation *Albion* and Joint Amphibious Doctrine

By GREGORY A. THIELE

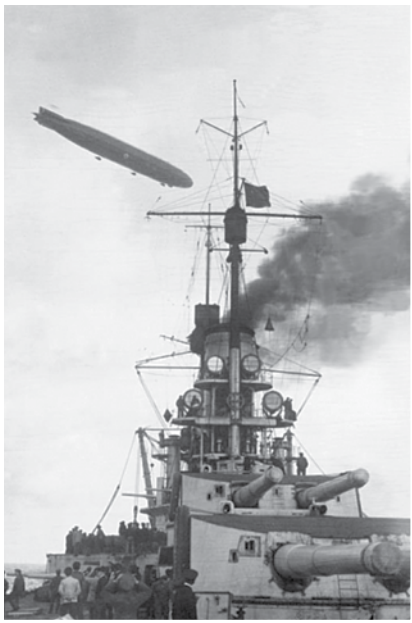
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German troops prepare to land on Baltic Sea island of Saaremaa, 1917

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Zeppelin airship flies over SMS *Grosser Kurfurst* during Operation *Albion*

In the fall of 1917, the German army and navy conducted an amphibious assault in the Baltic Sea. The operation was codenamed *Albion*. The goal of the operation was ambitious: to convince Russia to sue for peace by seizing several islands protecting the Gulf of Riga. Seizure of these islands would pose a direct threat to the Russian capital of Petrograd. The Germans had no significant experience with amphibious operations, nor did they have any doctrine for their conduct. In spite of this, the operation was planned in approximately a month, and the German landings and subsequent operations ashore were a tremendous success. There is a great deal to be gained by a study of Operation *Albion*; it is an excellent illustration of many of the major elements of current U.S. joint amphibious doctrine.

By September 1917, World War I seemed to be going well for Germany. The French and British armies had been unable to break through the German defensive system on the Western Front and had suffered heavy casualties in their attempts. The Russians had been wracked by revolution in March 1917, although they had remained in the war after the fall of the czar. The Russian army and navy suffered from indiscipline as a result of this upheaval, but still managed occasionally to put up stout resistance against German

attacks. The German high command had to contend with a stalemate in the west and a tottering, but still capable, opponent in the east.

Germany's position was, however, much weaker than it seemed. The Entente had paid a heavy price during its offensives in the west, but so had the German army in turning back those offensives. On the Western Front, the German army was not strong enough to attack with any prospect of success against the numerically stronger Entente. In addition, Germany's allies, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, were having difficulty sustaining the struggle after 3 years of war. The Entente, on the other hand, had a powerful new ally: the United States. The Germans estimated that it would take the Americans until the middle of 1918 to deploy a force large enough to be a major factor in the outcome of the war. If the German army could not achieve a decisive victory in the west before this time, then it would become impossible to prevail afterward.

Another concern was the British blockade. Soon after the war began in August 1914, Britain had blockaded German and German-occupied ports. The British wanted to prevent the importation of war materials, but their definition of *contraband* also included food. As a result, the German people were slowly starving to death. The Germans referred to the winter of 1916–1917 as the “turnip winter” due to the lack of food.¹ The strain on the home front began to tell on the German soldiers at the front.

This was the situation facing Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff. These two men, empowered to act virtually as military dictators, believed that ultimate victory could only be achieved on the Western Front. Britain and France had to be forced to sue for peace if the war were to be ended on terms favorable for Germany. To achieve such a result would take far more troops than were currently available in the west. The question was how such a large number of troops could be freed for operations in the west. Ludendorff's conclusion was that if Russia could be forced from the war, a million German troops could be transferred from the Eastern to the Western Front. The key factor was time. Russia had to be subdued as quickly as possible so German troops could be moved west in time for a spring offensive in 1918.

Culture of Cooperation

There were a number of obstacles that made an amphibious assault a difficult undertaking for the German army and navy. From the creation of the German Empire in 1871 until its demise in 1918, Germany was first and foremost a land power. The buildup of the German navy that occurred in the decades before World War I did not radically change this, nor did it cause the military services to seek to work more closely together. As a result, both before and during World War I, the army and navy had virtually no experience with joint operations. In fact, throughout the first 3 years of World War I, they had essentially conducted separate wars with little coordination. To add to the complexity of mounting an amphibious operation, the German armed forces had no amphibious doctrine. All lessons would be learned through hard experience. Moreover, there was no specialized equipment for conducting an amphibious assault; German troops would go ashore in

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General Oskar von Hutier, organizer of Operation *Albion*

towed boats. The Germans were also under severe time constraints; poor weather in the Baltic Sea would make the operation impossible by the end of October.²

The Germans put the commander of the Eighth Army, General Oskar von Hutier, in charge of organizing the operation. Von Hutier was an extremely shrewd general best known to history for his later involvement in the 1918 offensives on the Western Front. He made the commander of the landing force and the commander of the Special Fleet coequals for planning. If there were any disagreements they could not work out themselves, they could then seek out the general for a decision. This mirrors the manner in which current U.S. amphibious doctrine places the com-

mander of the amphibious task force and the commander of the landing force on an equal footing during the planning phase of an operation.³ This is critical; it prevents the interests of either the landing force or the amphibious force from dominating the planning to the disadvantage of the operation as a whole.

The Germans also recognized that at certain times the landing force would support the Special Fleet and that at other times the fleet would support the landing force. The order from the commander of the Eighth Army established a “supporting-supported” relationship between the commander of the naval force and the commander of the landing

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force.⁴ This was an extremely important decision, and it was in keeping with the manner in which the Germans educated their officers. The Germans demanded an extremely high level of cooperation among their officers, even among those of different services. This culture of cooperation allowed the German army and navy to overcome any barriers posed by a lack of doctrine or experience in working together and helped to accomplish the mission in an exemplary fashion.

Doctrinal Similarities

Joint Publication (JP) 3–02, *Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations*, codifies this supporting-supported relationship.⁵ Since an amphibious operation is a cooperative effort, requiring that the needs and capabilities of both the landing force and the naval element be recognized and addressed, such a relationship is an excellent method to ensure that the necessary coordination occurs. There are other similarities between Operation *Albion* and current U.S. doctrine. JP 3–02 establishes three tenets of amphibious planning: commander’s involvement and guidance, unity of effort, and integrated planning. Operation *Albion* provides valuable lessons regarding each of these tenets.

Commander’s Involvement and Guidance. There is a quotation often attributed to Marine Major General Mike Myatt, the commander of the 1st Marine Division during

Operations *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm*, in which he described maneuver warfare as “centralized vision, decentralized decision-making.”⁶ The German planning for Operation *Albion* was an excellent illustration of this maxim. The high command created a special cell to conduct much of the initial planning. Once this had been completed, the planners were seconded to subordinate commands to assist with the detailed planning. Once General von Hutier outlined his vision for the operation, he left the detailed planning to his subordinates and supervised the operation.⁷ This supervision took several interesting forms. The Eighth Army required subordinate units to submit copies of their orders and planning documents. In addition, the Eighth Army sent General Staff officers to their subordinate units. The purpose of these officers was not only to assist with the planning, but also to act as the “eyes and ears” of the Eighth Army commander. The General Staff officers gained detailed knowledge of what was occurring in the unit to which they were assigned and their reports helped the army commander understand the challenges his subordinates faced. Von Hutier did not rely solely on these reports. He also traveled to Libau, the port of embarkation for the landing force, where he spent nearly 2 weeks “to make his personal influence felt.”⁸

Unity of Effort. All of the planners were focused on mission accomplishment. The fact that there was no common amphibious doctrine or experience in joint operations made this a necessity. Instead of spending a great

deal of time fighting over issues of interservice rivalry, army and navy planners spent time working on how to conduct the operation as efficiently as possible. A remarkable level of cooperation was required of, and achieved by, the staff officers. Such a harmonious effort was not a chance occurrence based on a fortunate mix of personalities. It was a product of German training, particularly for those who were part of the General Staff.

As a group, German officers were taught to focus on attaining the end result desired and accomplishing the assigned mission. This was particularly true for General Staff officers; an officer assigned to the General Staff was taught to think broadly and practically about war.⁹ This education was of inestimable value; it allowed the planners to conceptualize the operation within its broader context. As a result, they were able to rise above service parochialism and take advantage of the strengths of both the army and navy. Contrary to the typical characterization of Prussian officers, little stock was placed in doctrinaire approaches to problems. Every problem was unique and required a unique solution.

Integrated Planning. From the beginning, the German high command understood the need to create a planning group that contained both army and navy representation. It was apparent that whichever side, Russian or German, was better able to integrate the capabilities of its land and naval forces would have a nearly insurmountable advantage over its opponent. As a result of excellent planning

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German troops board transport ship, October 1917

and initiative on the part of those tasked with executing the plan, the German army and navy did a remarkable job of cooperating throughout the operation. The requirements of both were considered, and a plan was created that harnessed the strengths of each in

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order to accomplish the mission. The success the Germans achieved was the direct result of the high level of cooperation throughout the planning process.

Characteristics of Amphibious Operations

JP 3-02 also establishes four vital characteristics of amphibious operations: integration of navy and landing forces, rapid buildup of combat power from the sea to the shore, task organized forces, and unity of effort. Each of these characteristics is clearly demonstrated in Operation Albion and is worthy of more detailed examination.

Integration of Navy and Landing Forces. The supporting-supported relationship mandated by General von Hutier forced the army and navy planners to determine how the Special Fleet and the landing force could best work together. The Germans knew the Russian army and navy forces defending the Baltic islands were roughly equivalent to

their own in terms of size. The key to success, therefore, was to extract every advantage that cooperation could create. The level of integration achieved was clearly demonstrated as the operation unfolded. The landing force rapidly seized airfields and coastal batteries to facilitate naval action. For its part, the navy provided supporting fires to the landing force that played a key role in the German success.

Rapid Buildup of Combat Power from the Sea to the Shore. At sunrise on October 12, 1917, the German Special Fleet steamed into Tagga Bay on the northeastern side of Ösel. The fire from Russian coastal artillery was sporadic and was quickly silenced by fire from German ships. The Germans rapidly disembarked and began to ferry troops ashore. By 8:00 a.m., most of the advance guard (over 3,000 troops) was ashore.¹⁰ The Germans now turned their attention to striking inland to seize Russian airfields and to cut off the Russians’ escape route. Meanwhile, the remaining troops of the division-sized landing force continued to stream ashore along with their logistical support.

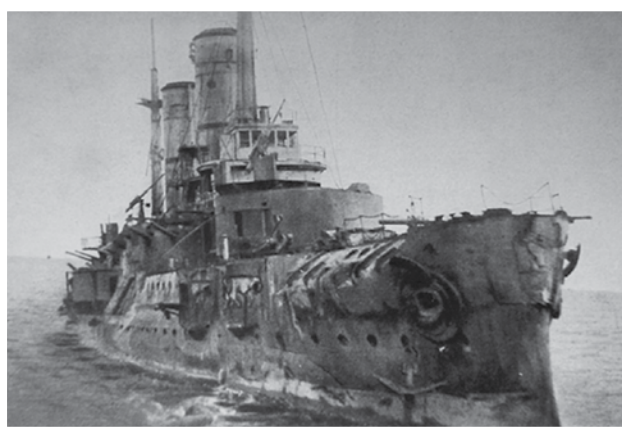
Task Organized Forces. The German planners had conducted extensive wargames to determine if the operation was feasible and, if so, what force would be required. The initial planning had been conducted utilizing a regimental-sized invasion force, but the force was increased to a division to ensure success.¹¹ One other issue was discovered during planning: if the operation was to be decisive and have maximum psychological impact on the Russian leaders in Petrograd, the Russian division defending the Baltic islands had to be eliminated. How could the Germans

prevent the division’s escape? The Russians would have a shorter distance to cover to the causeway that constituted their primary means of reinforcement or withdrawal than their German attackers. The decision was made to add a bicycle brigade to the landing force.¹² Some of the bicyclists were to conduct a secondary landing northeast of Tagga Bay and race east to block the causeway to prevent the Russians from withdrawing from Ösel. The requirements of the mission played a key role in determining the scheme of maneuver ashore, which in turn determined the composition and organization of the landing force.

Unity of Effort. All of the German commanders understood the plan and that the goal of the operation was not only to seize the Baltic islands, but also to prevent the Russian garrison from escaping. All elements of the German army and navy contributed to this effort. A battalion of bicyclists blocked the causeway and attempted to prevent the Russians from leaving. The Russians, desperate to get off Ösel, attacked in strength and opened the causeway. The German navy then intervened with gunfire to support the bicyclists and to make movement along the causeway difficult. Not long afterward, German forces pursuing the Russians attacked their rear. Caught between two hostile elements, the Russians surrendered. Such cooperation was typical during Albion, and it was the decisive element that permitted the Germans to conduct an amphibious landing and defeat a numerically equivalent force.

Unity of effort is absolutely essential to the success of an amphibious operation. JP 3-02 clearly identifies this fact by including

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Russian battleship crippled by German gunfire sinks in Baltic Sea, October 1917

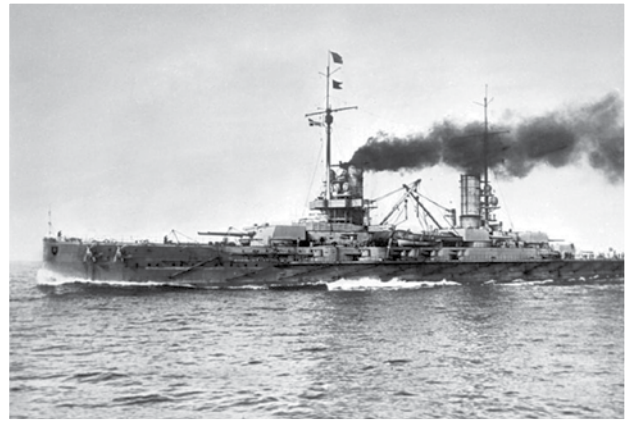
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German troops board transport ship to leave Saaremaa after defeating Russian army in Operation Albion



Russian cruiser *Aurora*, supported by land forces, participated in Gulf of Riga defense



SMS *Kaiser* provided cover for German torpedo boats entering sound at Ösel

it as a planning tenet and a characteristic of amphibious operations. Without unity of effort, the capabilities of the landing force and the amphibious task force will not be maximized and the weaknesses of each may be exposed. As Erich von Tschischwitz, chief of staff to the corps commander responsible for the landing, wrote, “An overseas expedition will always be undertaken at great risk. In

cooperation was the decisive element that permitted the Germans to conduct an amphibious landing and defeat a numerically equivalent force

order to succeed, it will be necessary to make thorough preparations [and] to insure skillful and clear-headed leadership.”¹³

Operation *Albion* was extremely successful. The Germans secured the islands of Ösel, Moon, and Dagö in little more than a week. For an operation of its size, the booty was immense. The Germans captured more than 20,000 Russian soldiers along with machineguns, artillery, and other impedimenta.¹⁴ The Russian army had been dealt a blow and the troops’ morale and confidence in their government reached its nadir. The Bolshevik Revolution occurred only 2 weeks after the conclusion of *Albion*. Although negotiations with the Russians would continue into early 1918, it soon became clear that the Russians wanted an end to the war. The Germans began to transfer troops to the Western Front.

Operation *Albion* is remarkable for a number of reasons. The operation was planned and conducted in approximately a month by a staff without experience in amphibious operations. *Albion* also demonstrates the high level of cooperation necessary for planners who are unfamiliar with the unique requirements of amphibious operations. In addition, it shows the contribution that excellent planning and staff work can make to the success of an operation. While JP 3–02 may not have come from a detailed examination of *Albion*, the operation clearly illustrates many important aspects of current U.S. amphibious doctrine. It is rich in lessons to be discovered and (given the fact that U.S. forces have not conducted large-scale amphibious operations in some time) rediscovered. For those interested in the conduct of amphibious operations, *Albion* is an example they would do well to consider. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 314–321.

² Adverse weather conditions did, in fact, slow German minesweeping efforts and delayed the amphibious landing for nearly a week. However, this may have contributed to the German success. Due to the size of the operation, the Germans were unable to prevent the Russians from learning of preparations for an amphibious operation. The Russians did not know the objective, although the Baltic islands protecting the Gulf of Riga were clearly a possibility. As the weather worsened, it is possible the Russians believed that any opportunity

for the Germans to conduct an amphibious assault in the Baltic had passed.

³ Joint Publication (JP) 3–02, *Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2009), II–3.

⁴ Erich von Tschischwitz, *The Army and the Navy during the Conquest of the Baltic Islands in October, 1917*, trans. Henry Hossfeld (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1935), 23.

⁵ JP 3–02, II–3.

⁶ Conversation between the author and William S. Lind.

⁷ von Tschischwitz, 23–25. This order is extremely interesting. In the Hossfeld translation, it takes only three pages. In spite of its brevity, it is a model of clarity. The order does an excellent job of establishing the guidelines within which Operation *Albion* was to be conducted.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹ The strengths and weaknesses of the German General Staff have been more fully analyzed elsewhere and the subject is beyond the scope of this article. Regardless of their limitations at the strategic level or at the intersection of politics and war, officers of the German General Staff were the best educated officers in the world and were matchless campaign planners.

¹⁰ von Tschischwitz, 55.

¹¹ Michael B. Barrett, *Operation Albion: The German Conquest of the Baltic Islands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102–103.

¹³ von Tschischwitz, 11.

¹⁴ Barrett, 229.