



# The role of the French Navy in the projection of land forces since the Dardanelles expedition of 1915

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**More than strategic thinking, it is the necessary adaptation to France's strategic needs in a changing historical context, combined with essential technological breakthroughs, that has conditioned the evolution of the role of the French Navy in the projection of land forces.**

**In support of their thesis, the authors of this article will first show us how the Navy's traditional missions were already being carried out, then how it had to adapt to meet the strategic challenges of the 20th century and, finally, how this adaptation influenced its doctrine and means.**

In 1915, the Franco-British Dardanelles expedition failed largely because of the inability of the allies to coordinate navies and ground troops. This inability was largely due to the Navy's failure to adapt to joint cooperation and in particular to the projection of land forces.

We will define the projection of land forces, whether by naval and/or air means, as the generation, support and sustainment of an expeditionary land force from home territory or from a base pre-positioned to carry out a temporary mission. It goes beyond strategic lift, understood as the simple movement of a land force from one point to another and then conducting a self-sustaining land action without direct support from the naval or air component that transported it.

Thus, after the Ottoman Empire entered the war and lost contact with the Russian Ally, the Allies will attempt an ambitious manoeuvre to seize the Dardanelles and Constantinople, forced crossing points

to the warm-water ports of the Tsarist Empire, and at the same time force the Turkish government to surrender. This operation, which was to bring together troops from both the British Empire and France, supported in theory from the island of Lemnos and then finally from Cairo, had all the aspects of a projection of land forces. However, conceived solely as a maritime blockade force operation, the expedition launched in February 1915 would prove to be a failure at first, as the fleets were not able to reach the island of Lemnos. The fleets were unprepared for a commitment against a well-entrenched Ottoman land defence and especially against the threat posed by the 324 sea mines in the Straits. Losses were heavy; several leading ships, such as HMS Irresistible and Ocean or the battleship Bouvet, were sunk by Turkish coastal mines and batteries. Subsequently seeking to obtain the decision ashore, but without doctrine or the means to carry out and effectively support an amphibious operation, the Allied failure became a fiasco that cost the entente more than 250.000 soldiers killed, wounded or missing between April 27, 1915 and January 8, 1916, when the Allies evacuated the Straits. This evacuation, based on the lessons learned from the failure of the initial landing, was nevertheless very well carried out.

From then on, the role of the French Navy evolved from strategic transport to the projection of land forces. The question then arises as to what were the driving forces behind this evolution, both technological and doctrinal, which occurred without the Navy abandoning its traditional role of dominating the seas.

In reality, more than strategic thinking, it was ultimately the necessary adaptation to France's strategic needs in a changing historical context, combined with essential technological breakthroughs, that conditioned the evolution of the role of the French Navy in the projection of land forces.

Within this framework, we will first of all see how the Navy's traditional missions were already oriented towards the projection of land forces, then how it had to adapt to meet the strategic challenges of the 20th century and, finally, how this <sup>adaptation</sup> influenced its doctrine and means.

## Two traditional missions have defined the role of navies:

- The domination of the seas (combat against the opposing navy) and the strategic transport of land troops, which already contribute to the projection of land forces. Towards the end of the 19th century, under the impetus of the French "young school" [1] and Admiral Théophile Aube [2], the Navy moved towards a race war based on torpedo boats and the first submarines. But the return to squadron warfare and the two traditional missions was to take place at the beginning of the 20th century, <sup>and these</sup> missions remain today one of the foundations of the modern navy.

Theorized by Mahan at the end of the 19th century, in <sup>his</sup> work "The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783" The Sea Power doctrine defines the primary mission of the navy as the domination of the seas, aiming in particular to protect trade routes, allowing free movement. In France, this doctrine will be taken into account from the beginning of the 20th century, <sup>once</sup> the Entente Cordiale has made the British Royal Navy an ally against the German Kriegsmarine. During the Great War, the Navy will oppose the Austro-Hungarian

Navy and blockade it in the Adriatic Sea in order to allow the transfer of troops from North Africa to the metropolis. The conservation of the sea lanes will allow the British to receive reinforcements and resources from India[3]. 3] We can therefore see how naval superiority already allows the commitment of land forces from one theatre of operation to another. The maritime blockades put in place during the Great War and the Second World War followed this logic of domination of the seas, aiming to deprive the enemy of its supplies and to project troops into distant territories, Allied rear bases, first by eliminating its surface fleet and then by blocking its maritime access. Today, this ability to control maritime spaces in the context of localised intervention remains an imperative mission of the Navy in the context of the maritimisation of trade, but also in the face of a possible resurgence of a major threat. Moreover, the exploitation of marine resources, particularly those of overseas territories, requires the Navy to be able to defend these immense spaces [4].

- Strategic transport is the Navy's second traditional mission, made possible by the control of maritime spaces.. The freedom of movement linked to the vastness of space and the various maritime treaties ? the Montego Bay Convention of 1982 ? allows indeed to free oneself from the constraints of movement on land. Capable of transporting large quantities of men and equipment over long distances, fleets, using the resources of the merchant navy, are the tool of strategic movement. At the beginning of the 20th<sup>century</sup>, this mission was important for the Navy. France, which was extending its hold in Africa and the East, made it necessary to set up and support colonial troops. During the Great War, France can count on the Navy, which dominates the seas and allows the strategic transport of the 19th North African<sup>Corps</sup> and then of Black African troops to counterbalance Germany's demographic power. During the inter-war period, and then after 1945, the Navy had to once again transport and logistically support the expeditionary forces engaged in North Africa and then Indochina. Thus, the mission of strategic transport, made possible by the freedom and ease offered by sea transport, was a prerequisite for the projection of land forces.

Structured since the end of the 19th<sup>century</sup> by these two traditional missions, the French Navy focused its efforts until 1945 on deep-sea units, which had to challenge the domination of the seas by the German and Austrian navies, then the Italian and German navies. The design of these units, which was long and costly, had to be anticipated and therefore conditioned in return the various missions that the Navy could accomplish. Thus, the battleship units commanded in the 1930s - the Richelieu and the Jean Bart - will already be obsolete after the war, while the aircraft carrier has already become the new master of high seas combat. Starting in 1971, another mission was to monopolize some of the navy's resources: nuclear deterrence. Innovation and construction efforts were then directed toward strategic oceanic forces, sometimes at the expense of the deep-sea fleet, which limited the emergence of a fleet specializing in force projection.

After having seen how the Navy's traditional missions, already oriented towards the projection of land forces, structured its organisation and means, we will study how the Navy has been able to adapt to the events of the 20th century.

**The Navy has been able to adapt to the events of the 20th century.**

Designed and equipped to fight on the high seas and secure maritime lines of communication, the Navy will adapt to events and become more involved in the projection of land forces and operations on land. This adaptation will take place during the 20th century during the two World Wars, but also during periods of peace to ensure the defence of the colonial empire.

Once the domination of the seas was achieved, the Allied navies, including the French Navy, had to adapt to support strategic bypass operations. After its evacuation from the Dardanelles, the expeditionary force<sup>4</sup> reinforced by the Serbian army which was evacuated from Durazzo to Corfu by the French Navy<sup>5</sup> is redeployed to Salonika where it opens a secondary front against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which will lead to its collapse in 1918. The Navy played a major role in the redeployment and then the support of this expeditionary force, especially when the 300,000 allied soldiers were entrenched in Thessaloniki. All supplies for the troops came from the sea and from the rear base in Cairo. In 1940, in order to set up the continental blockade and deprive Germany of its Swedish iron supplies, the Allies launched the Norwegian expedition.

Despite a lack of prior preparation, particularly in the command and conditioning of support, this expeditionary force combined the actions of the navy, airborne and land forces. Land force officers directed fire from ships to silence the coastal batteries, and landing zones were recognized by the landing of advance detachments.

From 1943 onwards, the Navy was to participate in the liberation of France by supporting the landing of French elements in Corsica, with the infiltration of clandestine agents and equipment and then commandos by the submarine Casabianca.

In August 1944, the Navy supported the landing in Provence with naval fire support and the landing of the commandos who preceded the bulk of the troops.

This adaptation of means designed for combat on the high seas in order to conduct operations on land benefited greatly from the American experience in the Pacific. Thus, specialised vessels such as landing craft and certain amphibious vehicles such as the American Landing Vehicle Track (LVT) will be used by the Navy in Europe, but especially later in Indochina or Suez.

The Navy will also have to adapt its equipment during the inter-war and post-war periods to support colonial expeditions.

In 1925, at Al Hoceima in Morocco, a French fleet supported the landing of a Spanish force by fire and manoeuvre.

After the war, this support for the projection of the expeditionary forces was to gain momentum in the context of decolonisation. In Indochina, in addition to providing transport and strategic support for the expeditionary force from the mainland and North Africa, the Navy was to be directly involved in combat support with the creation of the French Navy, of river units, naval assault divisions (Dinassaut) equipped with landing crafts of all kinds, but also through the use of naval aeronautics as a complement to the Air Force: the aircraft carriers Dixmude then Arromanches will support the operations in Tonkin from 1946 to 1954, supported by the Lafayette and Bois-Belleau on loan from the US Navy [5].

4] At Suez in 1956, the Navy transported, landed, supported and sustained the Franco-British air-land operation using aircraft carriers. [Arromanches](#) and [La Fayette](#) of the



battleship [Jean-Bart](#)...four cruisers and several dozen other warships. The command of this three-month operation is organized between the Navy and the Army [6]. 6] Also in Bizerte, in 1961, a combined operation made it possible to maintain control of the naval base, with the Navy providing the aeronautical and naval fire support essential to the land forces, while taking part in the fighting on land. During these projections, lessons learned from past experiences were used and several points were improved. A joint command was set up and operations were planned and organized in advance by all stakeholders.

The Navy was thus able to adapt means initially planned for combat on the high seas and to use equipment from the experiences of the Second World War to best support the land forces. This adaptation took place during wartime, thanks in part to the experience and equipment of other navies, but also during periods of peace, due to the need to conduct expeditions to the territories of the colonies.

We shall see that this evolution will only finally be complete with the contribution of new equipment and, above all, by the definition of a joint doctrinal corpus devoted to the projection of land forces in which the role of the Navy is defined. Adapting to its mission of land forces projection, the Navy has been able to implement new means and then formalise this concept of employment with a specific doctrine in order to meet a strategic need.

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During the twentieth century, the Navy used many means. As early as the 1930s, the aircraft carrier made it possible to direct its artillery fire towards the ground and to acquire intelligence to guide the troops on the ground. With the development of on-board aeronautics, the aircraft carrier became capable of providing in-depth support to land operations, acting as a mobile air base. The post-World War II era will confirm this versatility of the aircraft carrier. As an instrument of maritime domination, it was also used for land force projection operations, making it possible to obtain the local air supremacy essential for landings or coastal operations, as in Suez in 1956 or Kosos in 1999[8].

8] The submarine, with its capabilities for infiltrating commandos, but now also for operational strikes thanks to the SCALP-Naval missile, is also an example of a conventional instrument that has adapted to play a role in support of projection.

In the field of liaison and command, the equipment of ships is constantly being improved to enable them to link up with land and airspace, thus enabling ships to play an increasingly important role in the coordination of air-land operations. Thus, the anti-aircraft and then air defence frigates play a key role as Air Defense Commander and Fleet Air Defense Identification Zone (FADIZ) Coordinator, centralising and disseminating all information on the airspace of operations [9].

9] Frigates also retain a direct fire support capability thanks to their on-board weaponry, but also an indirect one thanks to cruise missiles.

Finally, specifically designed for land force projection operations, amphibious vessels were developed in France from the 1960s onwards. Three generations of ships have increased the Navy's capabilities, right up to the Mistral-type projection and command ships, which provide all the support required for joint operations: joint command post with

land and air links, on-board hospital, amphibious flotilla, helicopter flight deck and large troop transport capacity.

In parallel with this new equipment, which is increasingly adapted to projection operations, the armed forces have designed and developed a joint operations doctrine that deals with the projection of land forces. This is the case, for example, for amphibious operations and the concept of sea-basing . The current French amphibious doctrine, which has its source in the national amphibious concept [10], is in line with NATO doctrine and provides for a single command structure for the duration of the operation.

Based on the capabilities of the BPCs, various operational possibilities are taken into account and described as ship-to-shore-maneuver (STSM) or ship-to-objective-maneuver (STOM) [11 ]. The integration of this type of mission into the Navy's organisation is also visible through the amphibious flotilla, an integral component of the naval task force.

The operations conducted over the last ten years confirm the relevance of this doctrine, as well as the Navy's full adaptation to the challenges of land forces projection. Whether during Operation Baliste in Lebanon in 2006, or during Operation Harmattan in Libya in 2011 [12], the Navy and the Army have demonstrated the high level of integration achieved and made possible in particular by the GCPs. Thus, the campaign in Libya made it possible to validate the concept of a naval air-mobile grouping[13] and the complementarity of the air, naval and air-land forces in the framework of a force projection operation.

The development of technological capabilities, first adapted from conventional means and then specific to force projection, coupled with a doctrine that is based on theThe development of technological capabilities, first adapted from conventional means and then specific to force projection, coupled with a doctrine that has been enriched by extensive French and allied experience, should enable the Navy to meet the current strategic challenges facing France.

### Conclusion

The persistence of the Navy's traditional missions - domination of the seas and strategic transport - linked to the maritimisation of trade and geostrategic issues, still makes it imperative to master the high seas combat, which allows the free use of maritime space and the exploitation of its opportunities. These missions condition the format of the fleet and its units. Nevertheless, the Navy has been able to adapt its means to the events of the 20th century. However, it is in the context of decolonisation that the changes have been the strongest, and these changes have accelerated with the disappearance of the major threat posed by the Eastern bloc. Henceforth, the projection of land forces is at the heart of the Navy's missions, as part of the naval task force. This force projection capability is indispensable to France in the framework of its power policy, since it enables it to act wherever the defence of its interests requires it: on its overseas territories, whose exclusive economic zone represents a wealth to be exploited, but also for the benefit of its allies, particularly in Africa. The continuous development of dedicated resources and the maintenance of specific know-how, particularly amphibious, is therefore a priority for the armed forces.

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Saint-cyrien of the promotion "General Vanbremeersch", Battalion Commander CHABAUD chose to serve in the foreign legion. He spent his first part of his career in the 1st REG, a period during which he was projected four times in operations. Assigned to the staff of the 6th BLB from 2012 to 2016, he served as treating officer then head of the projection section. On this occasion, he carried out two new missions in Mali and Central Africa. Since March 7th, 2016, he is a trainee at the CSIA and then at the War School.

Saint-cyrienne of the promotion "General Vanbremeersch", the Chief of Battalion PONS chooses to serve in engineering. She spent her first part of her career at the 31st RG, during which<sup>time</sup> she was twice projected into operations. Assigned to the Paris Defence Zone Headquarters from 2012 to 2016, she served as a desk officer in the Operations Control Cell. She was a trainee at the CSIA during the first part of the year, but has since chosen to leave the military institution.

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1] The young school is a current of French naval thought at the [end of the nineteenth](#) century. It proposes a break with the traditional current of thought of the time, which was to build more [and](#) more important buildings, by privileging on the contrary the use of smaller and more numerous ships.

2] The Navy at war 1914-1918. MSRC Symposium, June 25, 2014

<sup>3]</sup> Marine Studies No. 4: History of a revolution, the Navy since 1870

4] Maritimization: France facing the new geopolitics of the oceans. Information report No. 674 (2011-2012) by Mr Jeanny Lorgeoux and Mr André Trillard, submitted on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces, tabled on 17 July 2012

[5] [http://www.postedeschoufs.com/aeronavale/1946\\_1962/5%20L 'Indochine/L\\_indochine.htm](http://www.postedeschoufs.com/aeronavale/1946_1962/5%20L%20Indochine/L_indochine.htm)

6] "La Marine et la crise de Suez", Bénédicte Gimenez, bulletin n°8 Université Paris 1 - Panthéon Sorbonne.

[7] <http://lautrecotedelacolline.blogspot.fr/2013/12/bizerte-1961-la-derniere-bataille.html>

[8] «Coping with a hostile coastline: the French Navy in the Kosovo war, October 1998-June 1999». Dominique Guillemain.

[9] <http://www.colsbleus.fr/>

10] National Concept of Amphibious Operations (C.N.O.A.) No. 644/DEF/EMA/EMP.1 (DR)

11] Joint Amphibious Operations Doctrine Instruction No. 003500/DEF/EMA/EMP.1

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