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The Bonny Landing: The anatomy of Black Africa's first amphibious operation, July to September 1967

Adeyinka Makinde

The amphibious landing of troops at Bonny during the Nigerian Civil War is often described as a landmark feat accomplished by the military of a modern Black African state. It was the first of five landings which along with the instituting of a naval blockade formed the basis of the encirclement and eventual defeat of secessionist Biafra. This article captures the transformation of an erstwhile civilian marine department into a naval force which endured sabotage and defection prior to successfully transporting, landing, and affording covering fire for the federal Third Infantry Division. The article explains the military and political objectives, and also reveals the pivotal role played in its planning and execution by James Rawe, an expatriate British naval officer who was a veteran of the Normandy landings.

Key words Nigerian Navy, Biafra, secession, amphibious warfare, civil war, naval blockade, military coup, combined operations

The Nigerian Navy was barely a decade old when it was called upon to perform the first amphibious landing of troops by a modern Black African armed force in July 1967. Nigeria did not have a maritime organization dedicated to warfare until 1956.¹ Although Nigeria's 850-mile-long coastline lies adjacent to the strategically important sea lanes within the Gulf of Guinea,² its British colonial ruler preferred the Royal Navy to provide an umbrella of military protection while it operated a civilian-orientated Marine Department for the country. The Marine Department of the Niger Coast Company which was formed in 1894 was succeeded in 1914 by a Marine Department which consisted of the merged Marine Departments of the Northern and Southern Protectorates.³ As independence dawned, pressure from segments of the native political class to create a conventional navy grew. Therefore the creation of the Nigerian Naval Force, was an effort to establish an armed institution dedicated to protecting the soon-to-be independent nation's littoral borders from external aggression.⁴ The body was renamed the Royal Nigerian Navy in 1959 and it finally became the Nigerian Navy in 1963 after the country became a republic.⁵

1 Nigerian Navy Ordinance, 1956 (No. 28 of 1956). This was followed by the Nigerian Navy (Establishment of Force) Notice, 1958 by which the Governor-General 'established the Nigerian Navy with effect from the 1st day of May 1958.'

2 Excluding the coast of what was the British Southern Cameroons which is now part of southern Cameroon.

3 Stapleton, *African Navies: Historical and contemporary perspectives*, 67.

4 *Ibid.*, 72–4.

5 'Royal Nigerian Navy,' *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Aug. 1959; Nigeria (Republic) Act 1964.

Unlike the Nigerian Army whose predecessors had accumulated a good deal of experience in campaigns in various parts of the African continent and as far as Burma, the Nigerian Navy had no such tradition of campaigning save that of the limited activity of the old Marine Department against German Kamerun forces during the First World War fought by the European powers.⁶ And unlike the army, the Nigerian Navy was not required to perform peacekeeping duties during the upheavals in the Congo in the early 1960s.

A coup led by middle-ranking officers of the army on 15 January 1966 was followed on 29 July 1966 by a reprisal coup which caused greater bloodshed. During these upheavals the navy remained a stable organization under the leadership of Commodore Joseph Wey, the marine engineer who had become the first indigenous Chief of Naval Staff in 1964.⁷ During the crisis, naval personnel from all regions continued to serve side-by-side but there was an unavoidable uneasiness given the prevailing circumstances in the country. The drift towards an internal war and the fear that naval force would be used in such a war if it was waged against the Eastern region led to acts of sabotage.⁸ In the meantime there were defections of officers and men to the Eastern region before its secession on 30 May 1967, under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Ojukwu.⁹

The build-up to the first amphibious landing was preceded by important military tasks which were undertaken by the navy. Prior to the declaration by the Federal Government of a 'police action' on 6 July 1967, the promulgation of the Territorial Waters Decree (No. 5) of 1967 which extended the limit of Nigeria's territorial sea from the customary three nautical miles to 12 nautical miles paved the way for the navy to mount an economic blockade against the seceded eastern region.¹⁰ The objective was to blockade the littoral space where oil was exported with the prime targets of this action being the harbours in Port Harcourt and Bonny. The strategic dimension of the blockade was to prevent arms being smuggled into the secessionist state and the economic dimension related to stopping international trade with the former Eastern region. From the early part of July, no ships were allowed to be loaded at any ports including the oil terminal and the Federal Military Government warned oil companies against paying royalties into a suspense account when royalties became due in July. If they persisted in doing so, the government informed them that the Nigerian Navy would be used to prevent the departure of any tanker.¹¹ The next step was to mount an amphibious landing of Federal troops, a move that would be orchestrated by the Nigerian Navy. Commodore Wey was handed a list of possible sites by Major General Yakubu Gowon, the head of the Federal Military Government.¹²

6 The old marine departments ferried British forces embarked on colonial campaigns of subjugation including those concerned with the conquest of the Benin Kingdom and the Aro Expedition.

7 Commodore Wey also attended the peace talks held under the auspices of the Ghanaian government in the town of Aburi in January 1967

8 Navigational aids, communication apparatus, armaments, gunfire pins and engine parts were either totally removed or disabled. Adekunle, *The Nigeria-Biafra War Letters*, 93.

9 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 224.

10 The decree, which was issued in March 1967, modified section 18(1) of the Interpretation Act of 1964.

11 'Pay now or no oil, says Nigeria,' *The Guardian*, 15 Jun. 1967.

12 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

Orchestrating an amphibious operation where the enemy is waiting is considered to be among the most onerous and dangerous military operations.¹³ The conventional pattern of an amphibious assault would be to begin by bombarding the defensive positions of the enemy, which in the Nigerian case would be limited to naval bombardment. Once the opposition is 'softened', troops will be taken to the shore on transport vessels and landing craft in successive waves during which time beachheads are seized and a perimeter established to enable the introduction of heavy reinforcement of armaments and vehicles, along with stores. The landed force is then able to advance inland, in the process transforming maritime warfare into a land campaign.¹⁴

It is important to emphasize the point that Nigeria was a young nation which had not developed any substantive naval traditions in the modern sense. It did not have what might be described as a 'military intellectual complex' from which to draw from decades or even centuries of tried and tested naval operational concepts. The Nigerian Navy had its small but increasing naval warfare personnel trained at foreign institutions most notably at the Britannia Naval College in Dartmouth, England but it lacked relevant indigenous institutions including that of a Naval War College and specialist departments in higher education organizations where the built-up intellectual resources of naval and civilian thinkers composed of analysts, strategists and senior officers would have laid down the theoretical foundations of Nigerian sea power.¹⁵ And even though it could be argued that national military doctrines would be focused on combating external threats rather than on an internal war, the fact remained that the Nigerian Navy had no experience whatsoever in planning and implementing a seaborne landing operation.¹⁶ Although the possibility had existed prior to the Bonny assault of an inter-service operation of the Nigerian armed forces: one over political tension with Cameroon,¹⁷ and another relating to a planned invasion of Togo to aid President Sylvanus Olympio in the event of a war with Nkrumaist Ghana, the Nigerian Navy and Army had never performed a combined operation.¹⁸ Apart from the aforementioned deficiencies, the Nigerian Navy did not have an indigenous 'military industrial complex' from which it produced its own weapons including naval ships. The reliance on foreign manufacturers and suppliers would be an issue which would hover over the navy for the duration of the war.¹⁹

The figure at the heart of the conception, planning and execution of the Bonny Landing was Commander James Rawe who at the time of the crisis was serving as Principal Staff Officer and Commander of the Naval Base in Apapa, Lagos. The son of a linguist in the service of British naval intelligence and grandson of a naval architect who became the superintendent of the Ottoman Sultan's arsenal, Rawe was

13 Speller and Tuck, *Amphibious Warfare*, 71–85.

14 Ishizu, 'Amphibious Warfare: Theory and Practice,' 141.

15 The Naval War College Nigeria was established in 2017.

16 Operation Menace, Operation Iron Clad and Operation Torch were conducted by European and North American militaries. The Union of South Africa, using men of the South African branch of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR/SA), performed an amphibious invasion of German South West Africa in 1914.

17 'Steam Up Over Man O' War Bay: Nigerian objections to base,' *The Guardian*, 1 Apr. 1960.

18 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

19 *Ibid.*

a veteran of the Second World War when as a teenage midshipman of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, he served as the navigation officer of a landing craft that had landed the first wave of American troops on D-day at Utah Beach.²⁰ Later he became a pioneer officer of the Nigerian Naval Force.²¹ When war beckoned, it was acknowledged that he was best placed to take the lead in devising an operation because he was the only officer serving in the Nigerian Navy who had faced gunfire while landing on a beach. Additionally, his extensive hydrographic duties had given him a formidable degree of knowledge about the coastline of Nigeria, including the rivers and creeks of the Niger Delta.²² Thus, he became the author of what would be known as Naval Operation (Order Number 1) of 1967 and subsequent operational orders. Also, in conjunction with the newly promoted Rear-Admiral Wey, he formulated an overall naval strategy.²³

The preparation

The first segment of the top-secret paper produced by Rawe which was titled 'General information and remarks on landings' focused on pre-landing operations, which would in modern parlance be described as 'shaping the littoral battlespace'. He outlined the necessity of having intelligence on the physical terrain of the proposed landing site and the resistance that was likely to be met. Among other considerations, he emphasized the absolute necessity of degrading any prepared enemy positions and examined the methods which would be employed in the battlefield. The weaponry and manpower available to both adversaries were also considered. Finally, he looked at failures in a select number of amphibious operations undertaken by combined forces during the Second World War.²⁴ The heavy loss of life among Royal Navy personnel during the operation at Walcheren had a profound effect on the young James Rawe who knew many of the naval officers who took part in the operation and several friends of his died. Although he did not participate in the operation as he had at Normandy, he learned lessons from the mistakes made by the operation commanders, one of which was relying too much on the element of surprise.²⁵

The city of Port Harcourt was a strategically important town which featured high on the list of possible candidates. Its harbour facilities as well as its connection with Nigeria's then burgeoning oil production marked it out. But Port Harcourt was over 40 miles up from the Bonny fairway buoy, and it would take between four to six hours to get there, depending on the tide, after entering the Bonny River. The task force would surely be sighted which would give the enemy plenty of opportunity to prepare defensive positions. Moreover, the approach to Port Harcourt for the last 20 miles becomes narrow which would enable the opposition, if armed with mortars or rocket-propelled short-range weapons, to inflict heavy damage on the convoy. Even

20 'Captain James Rawe, naval officer who served on D-Day and later helped to develop the Nigerian navy – obituary,' *Daily Telegraph*, 30 May 2023.

21 In 1974 he won damages in court when an author insinuated that he had been a soldier of fortune during the Nigerian Civil War.

22 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

23 James Rawe via Timothy Rawe, Pers. Comm., 20 Feb. 2023.

24 They were Dieppe, Omaha Beach and Walcheren. Rawe, 'Landing by Sea on Enemy-held Territory', 2.

25 Timothy Rawe, pers. comm., 20 Feb. 2023.

if the naval force successfully beached, the civilian vessels would make for large easy targets and the supply chain of ships would have to take enormous risks during a 40-mile journey until the banks of the Bonny River were cleared of the enemy. 'From a naval point of view', Rawe concluded, 'to embark on an attack on Port Harcourt, direct, would invite disaster.'²⁶

Opoobo ostensibly presented a more promising location but there was great uncertainty about the depth of the waters in this area. The river was not used commercially and the last survey had been done in 1961. The lack of water on the bar would mean that only the landing craft would be able to enter the river and that the landing would have to take place without naval fire support. Adding to the potential problems was the question of weather conditions. River bars are vulnerable to the effects of heavy rain, fierce winds and crashing waves. If the weather was bad in the Opoobo area, it would mean that even the navy's landing craft would most likely be unable to enter the river. It would be too much to risk the only landing craft ending up stranded on one of the sand spits on either side of the river channel. Still another impediment was the lack of intelligence on the presence and visibility of marker buoys and the beacon. The marker buoys would of course enable the task force to negotiate the navigable parts of the river, while the beacon would aid the ships in fixing their positions prior to entering the river.²⁷

The elimination of Port Harcourt and Opoobo left Bonny as the only site where from 'a naval point of view', as Rawe put it, 'a landing would have a fair chance of success'. The water was deep all the way up to the town; the wideness of the river would give ships room to manoeuvre; there were several spots which were suitable for the landing craft to beach; there were jetties at which ships could berth and supply stores even if the landing craft was disabled; naval vessels would be able to provide fire support to the troops being landed; and enemy vessels intending to bring reinforcements down the river would be stopped. Additionally, occupying Bonny would seal off Port Harcourt 40 miles up the river and landing on an island and taking it had the added advantage of an island being easier to defend than an area of mainland.²⁸

A successful landing and the subsequent capture of Bonny would, Rawe noted, yield great benefits for the federal war effort. Firstly, it would release the navy from blockade duty off Bonny River and allow it to concentrate on other areas. Secondly, the navy would have an area close to the base of operations and would be in a better position to support the army. Thirdly, military forces could be built for an advance on Port Harcourt.²⁹ There was also the obvious political and economic importance of capturing Bonny Town and the adjacent oil terminal. Shell-BP was still mulling over whether to pay the secessionist state royalties. Capturing Bonny would make it quite clear to Shell-BP that it was Federal Nigeria that would control the export of oil.³⁰

26 Rawe, 'Landing by Sea on Enemy-held Territory', 3.

27 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

28 *Ibid.*, 4.

29 *Ibid.*, 4.

30 Prettie, 'Britain still trying to keep up flow of oil from Nigeria,' *The Guardian*, 11 July 1967. See also Raji, and Abejide, 'Oil and Biafra: An Assessment of Shell-BP's Dilemma During the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970.'

Table 1 Naval vessels available to carry out and support the naval landing

<i>Vessel type and name</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Speed</i>	<i>Endurance</i>	<i>Gun armament</i>	<i>Draft</i>
Frigate <i>Nigeria</i>	1	314ft	24 knots	3,300m at 20 knots 5,000m at 15.5knots	1 x twin 4 H.A./L.A. 4 x 40/60 Bofors	11.5 ft
Patrol vessel <i>Ogoja</i>	1	185 ft	18 knots	5,000m at 10 knots 2,000m at 18 knots	1 x 3" 1 x 40/60 Bofors 4 x 20mm Oerlikon	10 ft
SDB <i>Enugu</i> <i>Benin</i> <i>Kaduna</i>	3	110ft	13 knots	2,000m at 12 knots	1 x 40/60 Bofors 2 x Vickers 303 M.G.	7 ft
LCT <i>Lokoja</i>	1	188ft	8.5 knots	3,000m at 8 knots	2 x 20mm Oerlikon	Light 1' 2" F 4' 3" A Loaded 3' 8" F 5' 2" A

Key SDB = Seaward Defence Boat, LCT = Landing Craft Tank

The third and final section of Rawe's paper set out the vessels which were available to serve as a task force. None of the vessels, naval or merchant, had been built in the country, the result of Nigeria not having developed an industrial base. The Nigerian Navy owned ships which had once been in the service of the navies of the United States or Western European countries such as Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, and France. The lack of a manufacturing base invites the dangers associated with over-reliance on foreign suppliers, as well as with the costs associated with maintenance.³¹ Still, the navy had more vessels at its disposal than the secessionist side which had acquired NNS *Ibadan*, a minesweeper which had been on patrol off the Eastern region during the crisis. Arraigned against that sole vessel would be a frigate, a patrol boat, three seaward defence boats (SDBs) and one landing craft. Although he did not include it among 'available vessels', NNS *Penelope*, Rawe's old survey ship, was converted into a fighting vessel. Two merchant ships named MV *Bode Thomas* and the MV *King Jaja* would also be available to serve as troop carriers and to transport stores (table 1).³²

After considering all the issues of the three sections it was up to the Federal Military Government to determine whether, as Rawe put it, the information and assessment 'are such that the military necessity of the landings outweigh the risks involved'.³³ The decision to stage the landing in Bonny was soon confirmed and Rawe drew up a mission plan which specified the role to be played by the Commanding

31 In the case of an American-made patrol boat which was gifted to the Netherlands during the Second World War, Rawe circumvented the arms embargo imposed on both sides by the US through an arrangement where shells were sent to Holland and then re-directed to Nigeria.

32 Rawe, 'Landing by Sea on Enemy-held Territory', 4-5.

33 *Ibid.*, 2.

Officer of each ship from the moment they were issued with sailing orders to the landing operation. Command responsibilities were clearly delineated and issues such as communication procedures, logistics, medical and tidal information were dealt with.³⁴

The preamble to Rawe's operation order succinctly outlined the situation. Bonny Town area was 'occupied by enemy forces approximately 300 strong in prepared positions'.³⁵ The mission was to 'transport, land and afford the support of naval fire power to federal troops, in order to facilitate the capture of Bonny Town and the island'. The three seniormost commanders of the mission were identified as Captain Nelson Soroh, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Adekunle and Commander James Rawe. Soroh was designated as the Officer-in-Charge of the operation, Adekunle, the General Officer Commanding the Third Infantry Division was the Officer Commanding Land Forces, and Rawe was given the roles of Naval Liaison Officer and Forward Control Officer. Rawe's plan provided for the task force to land troops in three waves. The first wave would consist of troops on the landing craft NNS *Lokoja* which would beach on the northern part of Bonny Town. The second wave of troops would be landed by NNS *Nigeria* when the situation permitted. And the third wave would be landed after Bonny Town was captured.³⁶

During the seaborne assault, Soroh, the Commanding Officer of *Nigeria*, would exercise control through the Forward Control Officer, Rawe, the Commanding Officer of *Penelope*. Rawe would lead the task force into battle while *Nigeria*, a prized asset which the navy would not place in unnecessary risk in shallower and more confined waters would bombard enemy placements within Bonny. In doing this, Rawe was adhering to the naval maxim cautioning against risking big ships for which the protagonist will not get an equivalent amount of military value. Only when the enemy positions covering the Bonny River were silenced would *Nigeria* enter the river and command be transferred from the Forward Control Officer to the Officer in Charge of the Operation. After completing the landing operations, sea and land commands would then divide.³⁷

The movement of vessels was also carefully choreographed for the three different stages of the operation. First was the initial movement of vessels from Lagos to the theatre of operations. Second was the movement of vessels to the area of operations and third was the function of the vessels during the landing operation.³⁸

The movement of vessels from the naval base in Lagos had to be staggered as each of the types of ships had different capacities of speed. NNS *Lokoja*, sailing at a speed of eight knots, was scheduled to leave first. It was destined for Escravos but would rendezvous first with the MV *Bode Thomas*, a ship of the Nigerian Ports Authority, at Ogidigben and embark the assault troops. After this it would sail to meet the main body of the task force at Escravos Fairway Buoy. *Penelope* sailed after *Lokoja* moving at seven knots and would rendezvous with the task force at Bonny Fairway Buoy. *Nigeria*, alongside *Ogoja*, *Enugu* and *Benin* were scheduled to leave very shortly after *Penelope* at a speed of 12 knots and scheduled to rendezvous with *Lokoja* at

34 Naval Order (No.1) of 1967.

35 A company was stationed in Bonny. Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 103.

36 Naval Order (No.1) of 1967, 1.

37 Ibid., 1.

38 Ibid.

Escravos Fairway Buoy. From Escravos, they would proceed to rendezvous with *Penelope* at Bonny Fairway Buoy.

After the ships assembled on the Atlantic Ocean, at the mouth of the Bonny River, the movement of the vessels into the area of operations would begin. As is the tradition in military planning, Rawe, converting a nautical chart created by the Nigerian Ports Authority into a theatre of operations map, divided the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and that of the Bonny River that is adjacent to Bonny Island into separate designated areas. At the same time, Bonny town was divided into a number of sectors in which the ship commanders were assigned tasks relating to shore bombardment.³⁹

In summary the battleplan was that NNS *Ogoja* under Lieutenant Commander Aduwo was scheduled to move northwards into Area Sierra, while NNS *Enugu* and NNS *Benin* to be commanded respectively by Lieutenant Commander Abdullahi and Lieutenant Commander Adegbite would advance further into Area Tango. The landing craft *Lokoja* commanded by Commander Joe and escorted by *Benin* would then proceed into the next zone designated as Area Uniform. *Penelope* would operate flexibly with Commander Rawe communicating orders to the ships and simultaneously apprising *Nigeria* of the combat situation while *Nigeria* remained in the southernmost areas in the Atlantic Ocean respectively named Area Papa and Area Osca. *Nigeria* would use its large guns to bombard enemy positions, with bombardment being supplemented by those ships carrying Bofors guns. The Oerlikon guns and the Vickers guns could be used to provide covering fire for advancing federal troops. *Lokoja* was expected to land between the two northernmost jetties of Bonny Town with the exact position of the landing to be decided by Joe. Joe was expected to fire 'one red Very light' in the final stage of his beaching run.⁴⁰ Throughout all of this, Rawe in *Penelope* would act as the forward control for both sea and land forces until Soroh entered the Bonny River in *Nigeria*.⁴¹

Rawe reminded all commanding officers that their ships were to be prepared to defend themselves against air attack and to post lookouts to give warning of approaching aircraft. They were expected to engage with any enemy in their vicinity, and where this was not the case, they were to forward pertinent information to 'control', that is Rawe's ship. Voice traffic was to be kept to a minimum and ship captains were reminded not to fire into the high-density Sector Foxtrot unless essential. In addressing the issue of logistics, Rawe stipulated that all vessels were to have their 'full outfit of ammunition' and to fuel 'to no less than 95 per cent of capacity'. They were to top up on water which was to be subject to 'strict rationing', and no vessel was to leave Lagos without at least seven days rations of fresh and dry food. The ships were supposed to have first aid medical supplies with access to a doctor and other medical personnel on *Nigeria*. Tidal information specific to the high water and lower water estimates regarding both Bonny Bar and Bonny Town was also given, covering four periods during the day on 24, 25 and 26 July.⁴²

The Nigerian armed forces faced a range of challenges in mounting its first combined operation. Apart from the logistical and intelligence aspects, there was

39 Annexe 'A' to Naval Operation (No. 1) of 1967 (Overlay to Admiralty Chart 3287).

40 Pyrotechnic flare.

41 Naval Order (No.1) of 1967, 2.

42 *Ibid.*, 3-5.

the daunting task of harmonizing the roles needed to be played by the navy and army, within a short period of time. This of course needed to be achieved with the backdrop of the sabotage of equipment by about-to-defect naval personnel from the Eastern region, which was perceived by the Biafran side to have reduced the Nigerian Navy to a state of impotence.⁴³

In a conversation between the secessionist leader, Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, and the respective deputy high commissioners of the United Kingdom and the United States in Enugu, Ojukwu had expressed contempt when informed by both men of the rumours of a planned federal invasion from the sea. Ojukwu insisted that the Nigerian Navy was not patrolling off the coast of the former Eastern region, and in a separate utterance he warned that his forces would line the bottom of the creeks of the Niger Delta with the ships of the Nigerian Navy if they ventured close to the coast.⁴⁴

But Ojukwu was wrong. In his 2004 memoir, Adekunle noted that due to 'the excellent relationship between the navy personnel and their foreign suppliers', the navy was able to replenish her stock 'in a very short time'.⁴⁵ The navy also competently organized second level maintenance by well-trained technical staff. And in an intelligence triumph, the navy and its sister service undertook to carry out their preparations under the greatest level of secrecy. Adekunle recalled that all non-essential civilians from Ikeja cantonment were dismissed, and a regime of mail censorship and telephone tapping was imposed.⁴⁶

While the country lacked an industrial military complex, it was able to adapt and innovate solutions for a range of issues using local resources. For instance, it was clear that the troops would need life jackets. But the question arose as to the amount of buoyancy a soldier with full kit, steel helmet and rifle would need to stay afloat. Rawe therefore arranged for Major Tony Ochefu to bring a soldier to the naval base in full kit. The soldier was fitted with a canvas jacket with blocks of polystyrene and a rope was tied around him before he was dropped into the ocean from a harbour. It took four drops to calibrate the required amount of buoyancy by incremental additions of polystyrene.⁴⁷ Also, *Lokoja* was provided with matting and expanded metal to cover any soft spots on the beach to help with the landing of vehicles.⁴⁸

The navy was also faced with the task of undertaking combat exercises, as well as building up the requisite esprit de corps with their counterparts in the army. On both accounts, Rawe would prove influential. He had been part of Combined Operations during the Second World War, completing the commando training course near Fort William in Scotland. Thus, his training and experiences had made him a great believer in the need for integrated operations and the need for the branches of the armed forces to work closely together and to know how the other arms operated. It was

43 Osakwe and Udeagbala, 'Naval Military Operations in Bonny during the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970,' 234.

44 Ibid. When shortly after secession he was asked at a London press conference about the threat posed by the Nigerian Navy, Matthew Mbu, the Biafran foreign minister quipped 'What navy? I was minister for the Federal Navy.' See Stremblau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 72.

45 Adekunle, *The Nigeria-Biafra War Letters*, 93.

46 Ibid.

47 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

48 Rawe, 'Landing by Sea on Enemy-held Territory', 4.

also important to Rawe that the service branches trusted each other.⁴⁹ This ethos was in keeping with the ideas set down by Julian Corbett, the British naval historian and geostrategist who lay stress on army–navy co-operation.⁵⁰ The exercises which were conducted at Tarkwa Bay sought to go through drills in a practical manner and strove to create a cohesion between the navy and army. In his memoir, Adekunle described the naval manoeuvres undertaken as having included ‘ship pitching, embarkation and disembarkation in daylight and darkness’,⁵¹ while Soroh recalled that the army was trained in handling dinghies and outboard engines because they needed boats for moving their men in the creeks as soon as they were put ashore by the naval ships.⁵² And to solidify the sense of camaraderie between naval and army officers, a series of joint mass dinners was organized.⁵³

Rawe would succeed in building up a solid working relationship with Adekunle, a talented but decidedly mercurial figure, with whom many officers had difficult relations. Starting with the Bonny operation and continuing the pattern in subsequent ones, both men would formulate their battle plans after which they would meet to coordinate their operational orders. As Rawe later recalled they both shared ‘danger and discomfort’ and had ‘complete trust in each other when in the face of the enemy’.⁵⁴ However, Adekunle’s working relationship with Soroh would be less than stellar. He was taken aback by Soroh’s apparent contentment at leaving Rawe alone to draft the operational orders.⁵⁵ The strained relations between both men would cause difficulties, notably in the aftermath of the capture of Bonny and later during the assault on Calabar when Adekunle stopped responding to signals from *Nigeria* which were expected to be relayed back to Supreme Headquarters.⁵⁶

The battles

Thorough preparedness for battle does not totally obviate the danger of having to cope with unexpected setbacks. It was Moltke the Elder to whom the saying ‘No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength’ is credited.⁵⁷ Thus, the German field marshal believed in developing a series of options for battle instead of a single plan. But with its modest collection of ships including only one landing craft tank, the Nigerian naval task force would be restricted in terms of fall back plans.⁵⁸ Yet, as the task force began their staggered journeys, they would have been comforted by the fact that the enemy had far fewer men and material to oppose them.⁵⁹ Sailing orders were given on 22 July 1967, and

49 Timothy Rawe, pers. comm., 20 Feb. 2023.

50 Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

51 Adekunle, *A Soldier's Story*, 91.

52 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 228.

53 Adekunle, *A Soldier's Story*, 91.

54 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

55 *Ibid.*

56 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 247.

57 Von Moltke, ‘Second Part: Article from 1871 on Strategy,’ *Moltke's Military Works: II. Activity as Chief of the Army General Staff in Peacetime*.

58 Rawe did not dwell on back up plans in his paper and operation order. He was clear about the circumstances in which a landing could not be made and insisted that the plan be a ‘straightforward’ one.

59 ‘The side with the most ships almost always wins.’ See Tangredi, ‘Bigger Fleets Win’.

the rendezvous of all participant vessels at Bonny Buoy happened without a hitch at dawn on the designated D-Day: 25 July. At first daylight the order to execute was given by Captain Soroh who began pounding enemy positions from *Nigeria* as Commander Rawe on *Penelope* led the landing force into the Bonny River.⁶⁰

As the flotilla proceeded it encountered the former NNS *Ibadan* which had been rechristened BNS *Ibadan*. The captain of the secessionist ship Lieutenant Commander P. J. Odu recalled that three ships were in the process of bombarding Bonny when contact was made.⁶¹ *Ibadan* was retreating into the Bonny River in the direction of Port Harcourt when Rawe ordered Lieutenant Commander Aduwo to detach *Ogoja* from the convoy and give chase.⁶² *Ogoja* opened fire with its 3-inch and 40 mm guns and Odu, in his words, with his 'comparatively puny Bofors anti-aircraft gun' replied by firing a salvo.⁶³ But *Ibadan's* gun kept jamming at intervals, 'after every third or fourth round'.⁶⁴ So Odu decided to turn his ship around whenever it jammed to keep its distance from Aduwo's ship. But it eventually entered shallow waters and was unable to manoeuvre back to the open sea.⁶⁵ Now stranded, it became a stationary target. A cannon from *Ogoja* scored a direct hit on *Ibadan's* engine room, creating an intense fire which melted the ladder below deck and trapping the men there to certain death. Above, the smoke billowed out through the funnel on the deck which was itself littered with bodies.⁶⁶ Surveying the wreckage from his bridge, Aduwo could see Odu clearly through his binoculars. He went on the megaphone to appeal to him to join him on *Ogoja* and was preparing to send a lifeboat to collect Odu and his surviving crew.⁶⁷ But Odu and his men escaped into an adjoining mangrove swamp.⁶⁸ Aduwo rejoined the task force to report to Rawe that an enemy vessel had been sunk, adding 'I hope the captain got away – he was a friend of mine'.⁶⁹

With *Ibadan* sunk, the bombardment of Bonny continued with suspected enemy positions being cannonaded by *Nigeria*, as well as by *Benin* and *Enugu*.⁷⁰ It was effective enough to disorientate and dislodge the Biafran forces stationed there and Bonny was captured within two hours of the first salvo of cannon fired by the Nigerian warships.⁷¹ There were around 200 casualties, most of whom were secessionist soldiers.⁷² There had been some mishaps which the opposition had been unable to exploit. For instance, both *Lokoja* and *Benin* ran aground at different points during the operation. *Lokoja* became stranded while attempting to land a second batch of troops and could not get out until high tide, while *Benin* suffered the same fate on the second day of the operation and could not extricate itself for six hours.⁷³ These

60 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

61 Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 114.

62 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

63 Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 115.

64 *Ibid*.

65 *Ibid*.

66 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

67 Osakwe and Udeagbala. 'Naval Military Operations in Bonny', 236.

68 Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 115.

69 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

70 *Ibid*.

71 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

72 James Rawe via Timothy Rawe, Pers. Comm., 20 Feb. 2023.

73 Yusuf, *The Nigerian Navy*, 3.

incidents would have been disastrous if the enemy had more formidable resources to have exploited them. Bonny island was not the only location taken. Peterside beach, which was opposite Bonny island, was captured by a party of troops who landed in rubber dinghies and small craft. Dawes Island, 20 miles north of Bonny in the direction of Port Harcourt also came under federal control.⁷⁴

A central tenet of Julian Corbett's theory on sea power was his insistence that the primary goal of naval warfare must always be to secure the command of the sea or to prevent the enemy from securing it, whether directly or indirectly.⁷⁵ This reasoning is as applicable to the contested Bonny River area as it is to the high seas. While cognisant that what passed as the Biafran Navy could not compete symmetrically with the Nigerian Navy, the latter would find that they were dealing with a cunning and resourceful opponent which would soon come close to regaining Bonny. For instance, the Biafran Navy found a floating dock which, as Odu recalled, was to be used as a tool to slow down or deter the Nigerian Navy from capturing Port Harcourt by sea. The idea was to use the floating dock as a forward observation post or to anchor it in the main channel so that Nigerian Navy vessels could be run aground while trying to avoid it.⁷⁶

The presence of helicopters appropriated from oil companies and converted to bomb-carrying aircraft were a nuisance to Nigerian troops, and while vulnerable to Nigerian ships armed with anti-aircraft machine guns, they could contrive ways to menace lone vessels. A helicopter positioned itself directly above *Penelope*; a tactic that meant that its Oerlikon machine gun could not aim at it. The helicopter began to release its payload of bombs while *Penelope* zigzagged to evade them. Rawe kept the helicopter at a higher distance than it would have wanted by firing at it with his FN FAL rifle. He knew that the helicopter carried a total of seven bombs and so it was a question of counting the number of explosions which created fountains of spray until it ceased its mission. *Penelope* returned to Bonny unscathed, but the incident provided the navy with the lesson that its ships would have to operate in pairs.⁷⁷

The continuing operations proved that the navy and army could work together as mutually supporting joint forces. But the Nigerian forces also found themselves needing to cope with the physical and psychological traumas associated with war. As Rawe recalled field medical assistance was 'non-existent' during the Bonny operation, and one occasion when the federal soldiers sustained casualties, he remembered that Adekunle 'borrowed a bottle of brandy and went around the deck lifting the heads of the dying men saying there is nothing we can do for you but inviting them to have a drink before they left'.⁷⁸ He also noted one disadvantage of giving the soldiers life belts. The bodies of 'those who had been killed during the initial landing drifted up and down the river with the tide, often with the seagulls sitting on their heads, and this did nothing for the troop's morale'.⁷⁹ Two weeks after the start of the Bonny operation, the navy could claim a successful landing, the reclamation of Nigerian

74 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 231.

75 Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 87.

76 Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 111. The floating dock was later disabled during an encounter with patrolling Nigerian Navy vessels led by Rawe.

77 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

territory, as well as the degrading of the enemy's manpower and resources. Over 100 prisoners were taken to the naval base in Apapa. Apart from equipment such as those taken out of the floating dock, Rawe and his crew salvaged the 40mm gun and engines found on *Ibadan*.⁸⁰

Although the Nigerian navy and army had demonstrated an amphibious operations capability, the achievement at Bonny came perilously close to being undone two months later when secessionist forces launched Operation Sea Jack, a determined attempt to retake the town.⁸¹ One contributing factor for this malaise was arguably the breakdown in the relationship between Soroh and Adekunle, while Rawe had been on leave. Adekunle claimed, not without merit, that the navy was not making aggressive patrols of the Bonny River and that this lack of aggression had emboldened the Biafran navy to send boats on attack runs down the river to shell Bonny. At one point he sent an irate signal which asserted that if Soroh was not prepared to order aggressive patrols of the Bonny River that he had better go back to Lagos as naval ships were not supposed to adorn the area for their good looks only.⁸²

But the fault did not reside only with the navy. The rapid expansion of the Nigerian Army had meant that there was a problem of finding senior officers to command battalions.⁸³ This was compounded by the fact that the 3rd Infantry Division had withdrawn its best officers, first to stage a landing at Escravos to counter the secessionist invasion of the Mid-West in August 1967, and secondly, experienced officers and men were transferred from the Bonny theatre to prepare for the landings in Sapele, Warri and Koko. Those who were left were mainly poorly trained and poorly led.⁸⁴ Biafran intelligence on the number of naval ships operating on the Bonny River was used effectively. Shelling operations on Bonny via converted vessels were undertaken at night when the numbers of ships on patrol were reduced.⁸⁵ The number of these missions was particularly pronounced when *Ogoja*, the most feared component of the Nigerian fleet, was absent from the area.⁸⁶

In late September 1967 while the federal side was expelling secessionist forces from the Mid-West, Bonny was attacked when left in the hands of a lieutenant colonel of the 7th battalion of the Third Infantry Division. Neighbouring Peterside only had a company commanded by a captain. At Peterside, a battalion-strong group of secessionist soldiers had been landed after been conveyed there by large barges and launches.⁸⁷ The federal side was vastly outnumbered by the secessionist attackers and in danger of being overwhelmed when naval headquarters was informed. *Nigeria* was despatched and was joined in the battle by *Ogoja*. Soroh recalled arriving in the midst of a furious gun battle in which Peterside was ablaze and some federal

80 Ibid.

81 Odu, *The Future that Vanished*, 121. Operation Sea Jack commenced on 25 Sept. 1967.

82 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Udeagbala, 'A Comparative Study of the Nigerian and Biafran Navies During the Nigerian Civil War', 101.

87 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 241

combatants were being literally 'pushed into the water'.⁸⁸ In the frantic and desperate circumstances of the confrontation, Aduwo had to refuse a request made by a federal troop commander to take him onboard *Ogoja*, compelling the officer to stand and fight.⁸⁹ The enemy was eventually driven back largely through the firepower provided by naval warships. According to Soroh's memoir, the army commander at Bonny admitted that the timely intervention of the Nigerian Navy had spared the Federal army a defeat at the hands of the Biafran forces.⁹⁰ Bonny and Peterside were held on to, but the secessionists took over previous advance positions held by the Federal side including Dawes Island and they were able to construct a boom across the Bonny River.⁹¹ Biafran forces would not be removed from the approaches to Bonny until January 1968, and Port Harcourt did not fall until May of that year.⁹²

Conclusion

The operation in Bonny was a triumph of James Rawe's ability to process prior experience into a practical plan of action which the officers and men of the Nigerian navy capably executed. The plan, which he had insisted be kept as 'straightforward as possible'⁹³, successfully followed what at the time was the conventional approach to staging an amphibious assault, that is, by utilizing a concentration of troops to force a landing in the presence of the enemy. While subsequent operations presented greater challenges related to unfavourable topography, the confined circumstances of riverine warfare, and enemy deceptive tactics, surmounting the hurdle of landing forces on enemy territory presented a tremendous psychological boost to the federal forces and a commensurate blow to the secessionist military.⁹⁴ It demonstrated that the navy and the army could mount a successful combined operation and paved the way for further landings, all of which provided the basis for the encirclement and eventual defeat of the secessionist state. The capture of oil installations at Bonny proved to the oil companies, most notably Shell-BP which controlled over 80 per cent of oil production, that the federal government and not the secessionist side would control access to petroleum in the Niger Delta. This prevented the Biafran side from being in a position to use monies garnered from oil revenues to pay for the import of arms and ammunition.⁹⁵ The combination of landings and blockade were of inestimable importance. As Rawe would later opine,

If it were not for the Third Division and the navy capturing all the ports and coastline held by the rebels, the course of the war would have been very different. Ojukwu's propaganda had moved world opinion on his side. If he had ports available for the import of heavy weapons, [supplied] by foreign powers such as France, and if the navy had not stopped his export of oil, the Federal government may have found the rebels very hard to beat.⁹⁶

88 Ibid, 241-2.

89 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

90 Soroh, *A Sailor's Dream*, 243.

91 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

92 Odu wrote of his pride in preventing Port Harcourt from being taken 'from the Bonny River', 154.

93 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

94 The difficulties are mentioned in Rawe's memoir.

95 De St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*, 141.

96 Rawe, *That Reminds Me*.

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