SPANISH AMPHIBIOUS ASSAULT AT AL-HUCEMAS, 1925

By Jonathan Finegold, 15 January 2008;

Disembark, whatever it costs: Spain’s amphibious assault at Alhucemas, 1925

“Alhucemas is the heart of the anti-Spanish rebellion. It is the road to Fez. It is the quick route to the Mediterranean, and it is the key to much propaganda which shall end on the day that we set foot on that coast.”

Although Spain began to occupy strategic parts of the Moroccan coastline in the mid-15th and 16th centuries, her interest for colonizing the area across the Straits of Gibraltar perhaps did not completely start until the Spanish-American war of 1898. The loss of what remained of her empire to the United States, preceded by years of revolution in Cuba, left the kingdom penniless. More importantly, it underscored Spain’s status as a second rate European nation – no longer in the same class as nations Spain once humbled, such as France or Italy. The yearning for a return to the Golden Age of Spanish history, when the Spanish Empire spanned four continents, may have driven Spanish colonialism in Morocco in the early 20th century. Certainly, the effects of Spain’s defeat in 1898 can be seen elsewhere – in 1903 the Spanish Armada saw a proposal for eight brand-new dreadnoughts declined by the Spanish government. It should be noted that it was only five years earlier when the entirety of the Spanish Pacific naval squadron was destroyed, and portions of the Spanish fleet operating around Cuba. The economic recovery in the first decade of the 20th century may also have factored into Spain’s renewed interests to maintain colonies, and is certainly what funded Spanish military operations in Morocco.

In 1899 an article in the Spanish newspaper Epoca said, “It is necessary to insist upon the fact that there is an immense difference between our colonies in Oceania and our possessions in Africa. If, in the case of the former, our mission may be considered as ended with the loss of the Philippines, the mission of Spain in Africa is not ended and cannot be ended, although our present weakness makes it necessary for us to pause to reorganize and concentrate our strength.” Although Spain’s actions in Morocco were limited due to fear of an English or French response in the form of belligerence, in 1904 Spain and France finally came to an understanding about territorial rights in Morocco – Spain was near guaranteed hegemony over Northern Morocco, and the drive to occupy this territory and to prevent French occupation of what had been ‘promised’ to Spain is what directed the majority of Spanish operations in the region. In the end, Spain could consider herself lucky that at the time there was plenty of competition between the English and the French, and the English were far more interested in having a second rate power control the opposite side of the Straits of the Gibraltar than France.

Regardless of the causes for Spain’s interventions in Morocco after 1900, her military operations in the country were to lead to, perhaps, the most important war in Spain’s modern history. Spanish militarism south of the Gibraltar between 1900 and 1912 was also to shape the Spanish Army and prepare it for what was to come in 1921. In order
to understand the events which unveiled themselves between 1921 and 1927, there must be a brief narrative on Spanish-Moroccan relations between 1890 and 1919.

Spain in Morocco: 1890-1919

The death of Moroccan sultan Muley el Hassan on 18 June 1894 and the proclamation of his brother, Abd-el-Aziz, as successor sparked renewed vigor in tribal rebellions and a number of attempts to take the throne by a myriad of pretenders. In 1902 a pretended to the crown known as El Roghi, or ‘the pretender’, managed to set up a rebellion near the Spanish city of Melilla. The Sultan’s attempts to defeat El Roghi’s rebellions were met with defeat, and El Roghi managed to persuade a number of local tribes to join his cause. Between 1902 and 1903, amidst conflicts between El Roghi and local leaders loyal to Abd-el-Aziz and royal troops a number of Moroccan leaders and troops took refuge in a small fort town called Farjana. After the sack of Farjana, Spanish Melilla became a refuge for many loyal to the sultan and the use of Spanish territory put Spain directly between the sultan and El Roghi. Nevertheless, El Roghi continued to press against areas still loyal to the sultan well into 1905.

In late 1905 the French set up a trading post at a small coastal village called Restinga, with aims to supply El Roghi with armaments. Besides the production and supply of arms, French occupants also began to force merchant caravans to trade directly with the French trading post, and not with Spain at Melilla. The French establishment threatened not only Spanish influence over the area, but Melilla’s status as a local market, and in 1907 royal Moroccan troops occupied the area and forced the French trading post to disband at the insistence of Spanish officials. Although the sultan’s force was defeated in early 1908 and the region reoccupied by El Roghi, Spanish troops quickly moved into the zone to prevent the reestablishment of the French trading post. A short time later, Spanish troops also successfully occupied the coastal town of Cabo Agua, under the justification that they had been invited by the local population to defend them against El Roghi.

Spain’s direct interventions in the conflict between El Roghi and Abd-el-Aziz were preceded by the sack of a Spanish merchant ship near Restinga by El Roghi’s forces. Furthermore, the French Navy directly intervened between a royal gun boat and El Roghi, forcing the sultan’s ship to retire from the coastal bombardment, in February 1906. The introduction of the French Navy in the conflict, especially in an area which was considered under the influence of Spain, and of a trading post threatened Spain’s future control over Northern Morocco. One can assume that the majority of Spain’s actions were preemptions of French machinations in Northern Morocco. Certainly, the establishment of the trading post at Restinga was a threat to the commercial supremacy of Melilla in the north. In fact, after 1907 Spanish military advances in Northern Morocco were driven by the fear of French encroachment in what was considered Spanish territory by right. However, the increase of Spain’s military presence in Riffian territory ultimately sparked conflict between the Rif and Melilla – so much that, in 1910 Melilla was occupied by no less than 50,000 Spanish soldiers.
The Riffian military importance in northern Morocco also grew with their defeat of El Roghi by 1908. The Riffian tribes which had taken part in the defeat of El Roghi’s forces allowed the sultan to take the pretender prisoner, concluding in his torture and his execution.\textsuperscript{11} El Roghi had previously leased a number of mines to the French and these were effectively shut down by the Riffian occupiers. France threatened to intervene, and hoping to prevent the introduction of French troops in the area Spain attempted to reopen the mines and construct a railway between the mines and Melilila. Riffian attacks on Spanish workers led to open conflict between Spain and the Rif, ending in minor Spanish conquests and some 2,300 casualties.\textsuperscript{12} Despite the Spanish victory, and increased international prestige, the conflict proved that Spain’s occupation of that area of Morocco would not be easy and would foreshadow difficulties in fighting the Rif’s tribes in the near future. In 1910, Morocco and Spain signed a convention in Madrid which virtually gave Spain uncontested rights to operate in northern Morocco. The convention also forced Morocco to pay Spain the costs of the war, and allowed Spain to set up a police force, made up of local Moroccan tribesmen – although led by Spanish officers – at the expense of the Spanish promise to withdraw troops from Moroccan territory when these police units were ready to take over.\textsuperscript{13}

Relative peace ensued between June 1910 and August 1911. However, in August 1911 Berber tribes led by El Mizzian and Spanish troops engaged in a number of engagements which would be known as the Kert War. The war ended in May 1912, with the death of El Mizzian in a skirmish, with only modest gains up to the River Kert made by Spain. Simultaneously, violence in Fez allowed the French to justify direct intervention and French troops began to operate as north as the Alcazarquivir region – considered Spanish. On 8 June 1911 Spanish troops occupied Alcazarquivir peacefully, leading to an official French protest. Nevertheless, the French were forced to withdraw complaints in the face of having to focus on other happenings elsewhere in Morocco. France’s and Spain’s issues over Alcazarquivir were finally resolved, to a degree, by the establishment of the French Protectorate in March 1912 and the French agreement to respect the establishment of a Spanish Protectorate in November of that same year.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the establishment of the Spanish Protectorate decreased Spanish fears of French encroachment, it now forced the Spanish to take on a more active role at pacifying and occupying the entirety of the protectorate. The failure to do so could result in an embarrassing reflection of Spain’s military capabilities. Nevertheless, the difficulties in humbling the Rif tribes between 1908 and 1910, and then again during the Kert War, did not lend themselves towards persuading the Spanish parliament to sanction further campaigns in Morocco. Instead, Spain continued her slow occupation of Morocco through ‘passive penetration’ – occupying territories only after these had been surrendered to Spanish authority through a political agreement. In 1913 Tetuán was occupied by Spanish forces, and declared capital of the protectorate. Unfortunately, the peaceful occupation of sectors of Morocco failed when Commander Fernández Silvestre provoked outright conflict with a western Morocco strongman, el Raisuli. This, together with the abuse of the Moroccan population in Tetuán by Spanish soldiers, prompted the beginning of a violent conflict around Tetuán and the region of Larache, which Spain had occupied to preempt the reconstruction of the French trading post at Restinga. Despite the outbreak of conflict
in 1913, the years of the First World War proved to be some of the most peaceful since the beginning of Spanish operations in Morocco.  

In December 1918 the parliamentary government of Spain decided to renew attempts at the occupation of the Spanish Protectorate through a gradual military advance. Between 1915 and 1918 El Raisuli took advantage of the uneasy peace between him and Spanish troops in the area to undermine Spanish influence in the western zone of the protectorate. Furthermore, during the First World War German agents had persuaded El Raisuli to reorient efforts to raid the French Protectorate, and the end of the war now mean that El Raisuli had a large stock of German surplus armament ready to engage Spanish assets. General Damaso Berenguer, previously Minister of War, was assigned to oversee operations in Morocco in 1919.  

January 1919, thanks to Berenguer, General Manuel Fernández Silvestre was named General Commander of Melilla and ordered to begin a series of advances out of Melilla, with the ultimate goal of capturing the Riffian capital of Ajdir.  

In order to promote the occupation of the Spanish Protectorate, and at the same time appease workers at home who were in no condition to be pressed into service, the Spanish Ministry of War founded the Spanish Foreign Legion in early 1920. The legion was put under the command and guidance of Lieutenant Colonel Millán Astray, who chose as his second in command Major Francisco Franco. Both of these men were notable officers in the Regulares – Spanish army units composed of native enlisted soldiers –, and both recognized the need for a body of men dedicated to victory in Morocco. Within days of the opening of the first recruitment posts in Barcelona, Madrid and Valencia, over 400 Spaniards joined the legion led by the hopes of food and steady pay. The legion offered adventure and a chance for glory, and from the very beginning was seen as an elite unit. Recruits were organized into banderas, a little less than battalion size, with two rifle companies, one machine gun company, a sapper platoon and a transport and supply unit. During training, the legion promoted unity and patriotism towards Spain and the effects were seen immediately.  

Although the Spanish ‘Foreign’ Legion was predominately Spanish in nature, a number of foreign volunteers did eventually arrive. Germans, North Americans, South American revolutionaries, Poles and Maltese joined the legion’s cause mostly to escape the depression of the interwar. The legion required no paperwork for recruitment and rumors persist that if a convict reached the legion before he was caught was accepted for service. Nevertheless, only 20% of the legion was composed of foreign fighters and none became officers until the advent of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Millán Astray created an aura of heroism, conservatism and medieval knighthood – the legion was a unit in which a broken man could regenerate himself through glory in war. A striking difference between the French Foreign Legion, in which the Spanish Legion was modeled upon, was the deep nationalism towards Spain embedded in her soldiers. Furthermore, Catholic fervor was commonplace in the legion, although Protestants were allowed to attend drill practice instead of mass on Sundays. Overall, the legion forged a vision in which death on the battlefield was the ultimate glory for a legionnaire. It’s no wonder that the most attributed motto to the legion was, “long live death”. One author wrote, “In the French Legion, death in battle was a virtue; in the Spanish Legion it was an obsession.” These attributes characterized the legion during the war in Morocco between 1921 and 1927, including during the landing at Alhucemas.
In view of this renewed vigor to outright pacify the Spanish Protectorate through belligerent military occupation, in May 1919 General Silvestre began his westward offensive towards Ajdir, near the Bay of Alhucemas. On 30 May, Silvestre crossed the River Kert and by 1921 the Spanish Army had occupied a number of positions around Annual. The military successes between 1919 and 1921 worked to bring Spain much glory and international prestige, but General Silvestre’s advance continued in such a way that the more he occupied the longer his lines of communication and supply became. In mid-1921, after some minor successes west of Annual, the logistical situation of General Silvestre’s army became dire. Nevertheless, General Silvestre remained undaunted in his task to reach Ajdir. And in this situation the Spanish Army found itself in the first battle of the so-called Rif War.

The first period of the Rif War: 1921-1924

What united the Rif’s tribes in an effort to dispel Spanish forces from the region is a topic of controversy. Many hold that the rebellion in the Spanish Protectorate was founded upon religious principles, and may be one of the first major Muslim nationalist movements in North Africa of the 20th century. In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper Al-Manar, Abd-el-Krim (leader of the Rif resistance during the war) declared that his intentions were to create a Moroccan Republic “with a resolute government, firm sovereignty and a strong national organization”. He declared these principles as key in the unification of the Riffian tribes, who were traditionally independent, and assuming a Riffian victory the Moroccan leader said that his intentions were to keep the Riffian peoples united under an Islamic banner. Certainly, the evolution from harkas – war parties – to a standing army during the early years of the Rif War seems to underscore Abd-el-Krim’s attempts to unite the Rif. Whether Abd-el-krim aimed to create a Moroccan state through religion or politics is beyond the scope of this article, but the important fact remains that Spain was fighting a unified from for the first time in its attempts to pacify the Rif Mountains of Northern Morocco. Perhaps one of the most important factors in Abd-el-Krim’s unification of the Riffian tribesmen was his overwhelming victory at Annual.

Annual turned into one of the main outposts of General Silvestre’s advance westwards by May 1925, despite its situation in a non-strategic portion of terrain. It represented the envelope of Spain’s operations and perhaps served as a forward base for the occupation of Abarrán. General Silvestre looked at Abarrán as a correction of his poor judgment in the occupation of Annual and surrounding outposts and hoped to reestablish a firm line of communications with Melilla. Despite these ambitions, a number of officers hoped to dissuade General Silvestre and General Berenguer from this goal as they saw the consolidation of existing gains as the more pertinent goal. Nevertheless, the operation to take Abarrán commenced on 1 June 1921. A distance of less than nine kilometers turned into seventeen given the rough terrain of that area of Morocco, but by the end of the day the first palisades constructed at Abarrán by Spanish forces – mostly native, led by Spanish officers – could be seen from Annual. The majority of the forces who had marched to Abarrán returned to Annual, leaving only two companies of native troops and a battery of light mountain artillery. The operation was concluded as a success and General Silvestre hurried to telegram the news to General Berenguer.
However, troops at Abarrán contact with Annual to declare the existence of a Riffian war party surrounding the newly constructed outpost. Almost immediately the first shots are heard, and although the returning column of troops hear the beginning of the violence the column continued its return to Annual. In vain, the artillery guns stationed at the outpost of Igueriben shot blindly at positions near Abarrán. Abarrán fell almost as soon as it was built and it would mark the first defeat in a series of reverses which formed the disaster at Annual. In response of the tragic events at Abarrán, General Silvestre decided to augment the protection of Annual by sending detachments to forward positions such as Igueriben. All the while, Abd-el-krim consolidated his position and united a greater war party for the inevitable counterstroke at Annual. By 12 July the positions of the Moroccan natives forming part of the war party dedicated to the taking of Annual could be seen in positions only a kilometer and a half away from Igueriben. After a ferocious siege, Igueriben fell on 21 July, leaving the road to Annual open.

The next day it was obvious that the Riffian war party was aiming to take Annual, and a withdrawal from the position was ordered soon thereafter. The native troops were ordered to deploy towards the enemy to make time for the main force to retreat eastwards. To the distress of the commanding officers of the Annual contingent, large portions of the native police, defending the left flank of the native force sent as a rear detachment, defected to Abd-el-Krim’s cause and put all the men trying to escape from Annual in a perilous position. Amidst confusion, the withdrawal turned into a retreat and then into a chaotic rout. Lack of cohesion and leadership provided enough of a disadvantage within the Spanish ranks to allow the Riffian warriors to slaughter a large percentage of General Silvestre’s army. In a space of a few days, an estimated twelve thousand men and General Silvestre were killed and an army of twenty thousand rendered ineffective. Annual was to be known as “the greatest defeat suffered by a European colonial power in an African colonial conflict in the 20th century.” In a matter of days Spain had lost the majority of the territory she had occupied in Morocco since 1908, a large portion of her armed forces, and the protection of Melilla. Furthermore, with the victory at Annual Abd-el-Krim was able to persuade a larger portion of the Riffian tribes to join his cause and he successfully pressed into service a large number of modern weapons captured at the various different outposts around Annual.

With the danger of Melilla falling to Abd-el-krim, the Spanish Legion was rushed from Tetuán to Melilla in order to break the siege. The campaign to recapture lost territory in July 1921 fell upon the shoulders of the legion and the Regulares, and this can be witnessed in the casualty rate which befell the men of the legion – 45% amongst officers and 38% among enlisted men. The alarm of Spain’s disaster was shared with the French. On 18 December 1921, France transferred to Spain eleven Renault FT-17 light tanks, six Schneider CA1 tanks armed with a relatively heavy 75mm howitzer and other crucial war material. This order had previously been denied to Spain, but even Paris respected the urgency of the situation after the fall of Annual. The legion, Regulares and newly arrived armor managed to restore Spanish territory up to the River Kert by early 1922 but failed to achieve a decisive victory over Abd-el-krim. Furthermore, the support base of the latter was still growing.

The parliamentary government’s inability to solve growing problems at home relevant to welfare, industrialization and agriculture, as well as the Morocco issue, propelled
General Miguel Primo de Rivera to power in a bloodless coup on 13 September 1923. Although Primo de Rivera had twice suggested the complete abandonment of the province prior to his coming to power, his reliance on the africanistas – or officers who fought in Morocco and were in favor of the pacification of the protectorate – as his power base forced him to look for a different solution. In October 1923, Primo de Rivera failed to come to an agreement with Abd-el-krim over the establishment of a peace treaty and instead he adopted a policy of ‘semi-abandonment’. In May of the next year, the Spanish dictator ordered the transfer of the majority of Spain’s air power in Africa to Melilla and began preparations to withdraw Spanish forces to areas easier to defend. Starting in October 1924, some 30,000 troops moved to a new fortified position south of Tetuán. Consequently, the majority of the Western Zone of the protectorate was abandoned in favor of consolidating military power along a shorter and more easily defended front, while troops in the Eastern Zone continued their operations against Riffian forces. Although this new policy received heated critiques from the africanistas, the semi-abandonment of the Ceuta and Tetuán region may have saved Spain from a second Annual. Although Primo de Rivera was always considered a promoter of the abandonment of the Spanish Protectorate and he publicly declared a lack of interest in renewing offensive operations against the Rif, he began the planning of an amphibious operation at Alhucemas Bay. It was concluded that the quickest way to end the war was to take the Riffian capital of Ajdir, and that meant a landing at Alhucemas. Although planning for an amphibious operation at Alhucemas began in 1924, the Riffian invasion of the French Protectorate in April 1925 provided a new dimension to the war which tilted the outcome of the war in Spain’s favor. Abd-el-krim provoked a Franco-Spanish decision to mutually end the Rif War and to complete the pacification of the Spanish Protectorate. Although the idea of landing at Alhucemas was not new, as the Spanish military had suggested it both in 1909 and in 1922, it became inevitable in 1925.

Preparations for the Alhucemas operation

Preparation of the invasion plans fell to General Ignacio Despujols and a team of experienced staff members of the Army of Africa. The planning team looked upon the lessons learned at Gallipoli, in 1915, to find success at Alhucemas. Gallipoli showed that a landing preceded by poor naval support, preparations and training could not be victorious. Furthermore, at Gallipoli ground units found little incentive to push against Ottoman beach defenses and officers proved to lack enthusiasm to force an advance. The British attempt to take the Dardanelles could also place the fault of the failure on the distance between beaches, which made mutual support difficult, and the inability to overwhelm Ottoman beach defenses through air or naval power. All of these aspects were taken into consideration by the staff which planned the Alhucemas operation and by those who trained the forces for the future landing.

Spanish forces destined to take part were split between two major columns, based on their geographic position. In other words, troops originating from the Western Zone of the protectorate were organized under the Western Zone Column and likewise for those from the Eastern Zone of the protectorate. All in all, between 18,000 and 20,000
men were earmarked for the operation and 18% of these were formed by four
*banderas* of the Spanish Legion. From the west, those who were to take part
included: a tank company of twelve FT-17 light tanks, seven *tabores* – units made up
exclusively by native Moroccans –, two legionary *banderas*, three infantry battalions,
three artillery batteries and accompanying logistics and engineers. The force
originating from the east was of similar composition, save for the tank company. At
the time, the majority of the work of carrying material related to logistics was
undertaken by mules. The state of mechanization in Spain was almost non-existent
prior to the Spanish Civil War.

Also earmarked to partake in the operation was a battalion of Spanish marines, from
the *Tercio de la Armada* (TEAR). These possibly belonged to the either of the two
Spanish battleships deployed for naval gun support and to accompanying
escorts. Although it’s known that forces belonging to ship based amphibious assault
marines took part at Alhucemas, not many details have been published. Sections of
marines on Spanish ships were called *troyos*, while larger columns (normally
belonging to capital ships, such as battleships) were called *columnas*. A battleship’s
*columna* could include up to 231 men, and these could count on six 76.2mm
howitzers. Each soldier was armed with a 7mm Spanish Mauser, which was standard
in the Spanish Armada at the time. Normally, a ship’s *trozo* hit the beach on auxiliary
boats carried by the ship. Whether these were used at Alhucemas remains unclear, as
although the gunboat *Álvaro de Bazán* is known to have used their *trozo* at
Casablanca in 1907, Spain did not have landing craft available until 1922.

Apart from the battleships *Jaime I* and *Alfonso XIII*, also destined to aid in the
landings were the seaplane tender *Dédalo*, five cruisers, three destroyers and a large
number of gun boats. The French sent the battleship *Paris*, two cruisers and four other
smaller ships to rendezvous with the Spanish squadron at Alhucemas
Bay. Furthermore, each invasion column would come with a small naval attachment
of their own, mostly for transport purposes. A number of the present ships tugged
twenty-six K type barges purchased from the British with the utmost secrecy in
1922. These are the same type of landing craft looked at Gallipoli, and some sources
indicate that the barges sold to Spain were survivors of the 1915 amphibious attack on
the Dardanelles. This naval reunion was of significance for a Spain which has lost
much of her navy during the Spanish-American War of 1898, and was reduced to
operating on terrain across the Straits of Gibraltar. In regards to battleships, it
represented Spain’s entire capital ship fleet – the third *España* class battleship, the
*España* proper, was lost in 1923 when it ran aground due to thick fog. The reunion of
such a large naval force, at least relative to the size of the Spanish Navy at the time,
underscores the importance of success at Alhucemas Bay.

Alhucemas was not to go into history without precedents, however. Originally, 25
January 1925 was to see an amphibious landing on the beaches of the Anjera region
of western Morocco. The Anjera tribe were positioned behind the defensive line south
of Tetuán which had been established in 1924, and Primo de River was looking to
secure the rear of his forces. Franco was chosen to lead a band of legionnaires ashore,
but bad weather forced Primo de Rivera to postpone the invasion until 29 March. This
time, overall command was put under General Federico de Sousa Regoyos and a
*tabor* of *Regulares*, as well as the IV and VI *banderas* of the Spanish Legion would
partake in the operation. The *Regulares* were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel
Álvarez Arenas, and the two *banderas* of the legion were put under the command of Colonel Franco. The Spanish Navy and Air Force spent 29 March strafing and bombarding the landing site, and the following day the landing forces began operating at 0100 hours. The two *banderas* formed the vanguard of the landing, hitting the beach aboard six K type barges and overwhelming the defenders. The operation was declared a total success and the Anjera tribe was forced out of the war.34

Apart from the Anjera landing, other troops prepared for the invasion by conducting mock amphibious landings on the beaches of Ceuta and Melilla, using K type barges. For Spanish troops, the key to success fell on the ability to remain composed once they hit the beach. Furthermore, both Gallipoli and Anjera had proven that success lay on the velocity of the initial landing and the ability of the soldiers to overwhelm the defenders. Given the required ferocity of the initial attack, clearly the four *banderas* of the legion would lead the landings at Alhucemas. Ultimately, it was decided to land outside the bay, near the peninsula which marked the beginning of the Western lip of the bay. The beaches would be consolidated into two nearby landing sites – La Cebadilla and Ixdain. The initial assault was to be reinforced by the twelve FT-17 light tanks, landing in three reinforced Type K barges.35 Primo de Rivera finally scheduled the landings to take place on 7 September, 1925.

**Moroccan defenses**

The defenders of Alhucemas Bay contrasted sharply from the original *harkas* which raided Annual in mid-1921. Abd-el-krim successfully turned a band of warriors into a regular army with monthly pay, uniforms and a unified chain of command. Furthermore, weapons captured in 1921 and weapons provided to Abd-el-krim from the international city of Tangiers and French territory – Algeria and the French Protectorate – gave the reformed Riffian Army modern armaments on the same level of those of Spain. This includes Spanish rifles and artillery guns. However, throughout the war the size of the regular army was too small to depend on itself to fight the Spaniards, and therefore Abd-el-krim still relied heavily on the availability of *harkas*.36 A great multitude of the men who made up the defending army at Alhucemas had earlier formed part of Spanish units of native police, *Regulares* or *harkas*, and these were trained and led by very capable officers. Nonetheless, these formed just a nucleus and a larger portion of the defending forces were still composed of recruited *harkas*. Apart from men, Abd-el-krim could count on no less than ten batteries, including four 105mm batteries. His ranks also included European mercenaries, and some defectors from the Spanish and French armies.37 In total, the Riffian defenses counted on some eight thousand men to defend the entirety of the Alhucemas Bay. The majority of these were positioned to defend the beaches inside the bay, not outside. Where the landings would take place, there was a one thousand man garrison, a number of machine gun nests and three artillery batteries.

As it became obvious that Spain was to attempt a landing somewhere at Alhucemas in September, Abd-el-krim attempted to force the postponement of the suspected invasion by launching an offensive towards Tetuán. According to author de la Cierva, Abd-el-krim promised that “if they disembark at Alhucemas, I will take Tetuán.” More than an honest attempt to capture the Spanish capital of their protectorate, the
operation was a diversion. Abd-el-krim hoped that his offensive towards Tetuán would force the Spaniards to keep forces earmarked for the amphibious operation in the Western Zone to halt his offensive. All the while, the autumn and winter weather would postpone any attempt to land at Alhucemas at a later date. In order to gather enough men for the Tetuán operation, Abd-el-krim redeployed a large number of men which could have instead been used to increase defenses at Alhucemas.28

A serious hamper on Abd-el-krim’s ability to orient the majority of his manpower towards the defeat of the Spanish invasion force at Alhucemas, and at the same time undertake operations near Tetuán, was the French invasion of Riffian territory which began almost simultaneously with the preparations for Alhucemas. Abd-el-krim suddenly found himself fighting on no less than three fronts – Tetuán, Melilla and the south – and Alhucemas was to become the fourth. Given the size of the regular army available to him, well trained forces were not a commodity in the sense that they could serve against all enemies. It’s very likely that the majority of the fighting on all fronts fell to the tribal harkas. Therefore, it is clear that although Abd-el-krim conducted a masterful use of the resources offered to him, he simply did not have enough assets to fight both against the Spanish and against the French. Furthermore, as the progress at Alhucemas would show, he was fatally incorrect to assume that the Spanish would land inside the bay.

Alhucemas49

The large Franco-Spanish fleet consolidated outside of the Bay of Alhucemas by late 6 September, but bad weather did not allow for the planned landing the next day. Consequently, the operation was postponed until 8 September. The landings were put under the overall command of General José Sanjurjo Sacanell, the lion of the Rif. On 6 September, two legionary banderas made a number of landings at Uad Lau, Kaaseras and Targa to obfuscate Rif attempts to guess where the Spaniards planned to land. These landings were preceded by ample coastal bombardment from naval vessels available in the Bay of Alhucemas, and were completed between 0830 and 1600 hours. The landings succeeded in confusing the defenses of Alhucemas Bay, as no reinforcements were sent to the defensive sites which would be the goal of the actual amphibious invasion. Furthermore, Riffian defenses remained concentrated inside the bay – the three landings may have reinforced Abd-el-krim’s opinion that the Spanish landing would occur in the bay, not outside the lip. It is also possible that the three landings may have given Sanjurjo invaluable information on the state of the bay’s defenses. It is true that Sanjurjo had spent much time reconnoitering the beaches of the planned landing site many days prior to the arrival of the Franco-Spanish fleet.

Regardless, on 8 September Primo de Rivera ordered the invasion to commence, despite the continuation of fairly bad weather and thick fog. At 0600 hours the Spanish fleet, and complementary French ships, began the systematic bombardment of the invasion beaches, as well as Moroccan defensive positions to the rear. Spotting was made available through a French artillery barrage dirigible, which formed part of the small fleet sent to aid the Spanish endeavor. Two hours later seventy-five Spanish aircraft joined the effort to soften the defenses by strafing and bombing both La Cebadilla and Ixdain. At 0900, the order was given for the ground troops to board
their K type barges and these were tugged towards shore. At some point during the transport of Franco’s VI \textit{bandera} the tug boats were ordered to orient the barges towards Ixdain beach due to the threat of unexploded ordnance at La Cebadilla. One thousand meters from shore the K type barges were let loose and these proceeded under their own propulsion.

Soon thereafter the invasion struck an obstacle, literally. The K type barges hit a shoal, forcing the transports carrying Franco’s armor to turn back. Although Primo de Rivera ordered a halt to operations, Franco ordered his men forward and into the water. The legionnaires of the VI \textit{bandera} and two native \textit{harkas} waded through neck deep water the last fifty meters distance between then and the shoreline. Unfortunately, the shoals also hampered the arrival of the necessary artillery and logistics and therefore the task of providing fire support to the legionnaires fell entirely upon the Spanish Navy. In that sense, Spanish naval guns preformed an extraordinary task of supporting Franco’s advance on shore with well-coordinated fire.

Upon hitting the beach, the \textit{Harkas} continue the advance on the right flank, while the legionnaires continue on the left. The determination and sheer velocity of the landing troops overwhelmed the defenders of the surrounding hills, allowing the capture of a number of artillery batteries and prisoners. Nevertheless, Riffian defenders responded violently with their artillery batteries and registered a number of hits on the Spanish battleship \textit{Alfonso XIII}, which was forced to withdraw to a position out of range of enemy artillery. Regardless, the capture of the heights near the beach ended the fighting for the beach and allowed the landing of the rest of the column coming from Ceuta by the following day. Casualties for the first day of operations amounted only to 124 men, including 7 officers. The ships carrying the column precedent from Melilla couldn’t disembark until 11 September due to bad weather and the return of the French fleet to Oran. Despite some setbacks, at 1300 hours on 8 September General Felipe Navarro declared by radio, “We have landed!”

The battle wasn’t won yet, however. In the face of troubles providing the landed men logistic support due to the shoals, rocks and bad weather, the Riffian defenders consolidated after their earlier defeat and launched a counterattack to dislodge the Spanish from the beach. The violent counterattack was blocked thanks to the defensive fortifications built by the legion, on the beach, and to supporting naval gun fire. The precision of Spanish naval guns made it impossible for the Moroccan defenders to successfully engage Spanish forces on the beach, and is perhaps one of the best examples of Spain’s naval gunnery in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. It remains true that the role of the Spanish Navy after 1898 transcended into a period of being a second rate service. Alhucemas proved to be the first major naval operation during the entire Rif War and perhaps the only major naval operation until after the Spanish Civil War. Despite this, their actions at Alhucemas on 8 September deserve more merit than they receive. The Riffian defenders launched a final counterattack on 11 September, but this too failed due to the tenacious defense of the Spanish beachhead. The ferocity of the defense of the beach dissuaded Abd-el-krim’s men from further attempts to retake the beach thereafter.

Dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera landed at La Cebadilla beach on 20 September. With the breakout operation postponed for about two weeks, leaving time to disembark all
Spanish forces and enough material to safely continue the offensive southwards, Moroccan artillery and sniper continued to hit Spanish soldiers on the beach and outlying hills. Consequently, the occupation of the higher terrain held by the defenders of Alhucemas Bay became the immediate target of Primo de Rivera’s soldiers. All the while, floating docks, constructed out of wood, had to be set up to allow the administration of food and water to the troops. These floating docks proved to be the primitive cousins of the well known Mulberry docks built for the Normandy operation of the Second World War. Water had to be brought from Melilla, although a series of pipes were constructed to relay water from offshore water tenders to the animals and men onshore – unfortunately, the piping was crudely manufactured and most of the water received onshore was polluted by salt water.

Despite these unforeseen logistics problems, renewed operations were planned for 22 and 23 of September. With winter forthcoming, Primo de Rivera hoped to begin breakout operations as soon as possible – hesitation and stalling proved to be one of the factors which brought failure upon the English at Gallipoli. The most relevant goal was the capture of a line south of the beaches, occupying the high points of the landscape to dictate the fortunes of future operations towards Ajdir. The ultimate target was Mount Malmusi, which was the target of heavy reconnaissance since 9 September. On 22 September, an offensive undertaken by a battalion of Regulares and parts of two battalions of the Army of Africa aimed to occupy a number of heights between them and Mount Malmusi. Heavy resistance slowed operations and ultimately the offensive was not as successful as originally envisioned.

Nevertheless, the following day the II and III banderas, under Colonel Goded, and Colonel Franco’s VI and VII banderas began an offensive of their own, with the goal of occupying Mount Malmusi and finishing the occupation of the peninsula of Morro Nuevo. Goded’s men met far less resistance than Franco’s in their endeavor. The capture of Mount Malmusi, a 500 meter high hill, meant opening the road to Ajdir and therefore, the battle for the hill became one of the most violent and bloody of the entire campaign. It’s said that when Franco’s men reached the top of the hill there was only one defender left alive, and this defender had to be stabbed to death by one of the legionnaires. Compared to the low casualties sustained during the landings, Mount Malmusi was many times as bloody – around 700 Spaniards dead, and an unconfirmed number of Riffian defenders. However, the capture of Mount Malmusi opened the road to Ajdir and by 30 September, after fierce fighting, the Spanish had swept most of the Riffian defenses between them and the Rif capital. Ajdir was captured on 2 October, 1925.

Although the war continued until early 1927, the amphibious assault at Alhucemas was the turning point for Abd-el-krim’s nationalist rebellion in the Spanish Protectorate. With some of his best men defeated at Tetuán and Alhucemas, the Moroccan leader could hardly continue defending against French and Spanish advances into the heartland of the Rif. Abd-el-krim surrendered to the French the next year, although operations would continue in Morocco until 1927. With the defeat of the Rif between 1921 and 1927 Morocco would fall silent until independence in 1954.

Conclusions
"A true amphibious operation is a planned tactical evolution, with the embarkation, ship-to-shore movement, landing, and subsequent operations ashore all part of a coordinated plan."

According to the definition above, the fighting at Alhucemas fulfills all the prerequisites of a true amphibious operation. The landings at Alhucemas Bay were the culmination of a coordinated plan, devised by Spanish military staff for a year’s worth of time, with an embarkation, ship-to-shore movement, landing and subsequent breakout operations. Arguably, the amphibious operation at Alhucemas is the first successful amphibious landing on a grand scale, and it is the first to use armor. Spain’s success at Alhucemas Bay offered a myriad of lessons which were taken into account during the planning of Operation Overlord, which took off 6 June 1944. The majestic coordination between ground units, naval artillery and ground artillery based at the island of Alhucemas – occupied by Spain since the mid-17th century – guaranteed success. Similar coordination is what has characterized subsequent amphibious operations during the Second World War, and even during the landings at Inchon during the Korean War. The amount of pride exerted by the Spanish Navy, Air Force and Army after Alhucemas is unimaginable; Alhucemas was the only decisive victory of the Army of Africa during the Rif War, and saved Spain’s national image after the disaster of Annual.

Alhucemas proves historic also due to the use of methods to confuse the site of the planned landing. The three superfluous amphibious landings worked to persuade Abd-el-krim to continue orienting the majority of his forces around the inner coastline of the Bay of Alhucemas, instead of redeploying larger bodies of men to the site of the actual landing – outside of the lip of the bay. Furthermore, Abd-el-krim had gambled and lost in his decision to launch an offensive towards Tetuán. Although he promised to capture Tetuán if the Spanish landed at Alhucemas, he never successfully completed his goal. Instead, Spanish forces successfully captured the Riffian capital of Ajdir and sealed the fate of the Rif rebellion.

It’s undisputable that the Spanish soldiers which disembarked at Alhucemas were better trained and better prepared than those who fought in Morocco between 1919 and 1921. The discipline and morale exhibited by the men who disembarked that fateful day was sufficient enough to stave off repeated Moroccan counterattacks, together with the use of precise naval artillery. Perhaps most importantly, Alhucemas highlighted the logistic difficulties of conducting an amphibious operating at a large scale and offered a fortune worth of insights in this respect. Spanish engineering cannot be underestimated, even though the ports built and piping systems constructed were crude and primitive compared to the logistic mechanisms used during Operation Overlord – one must remember that Alhucemas could only count on the example of Gallipoli, and after September 8 the operation was left in the hands of only the Spanish Navy, as the French Navy had left. Another issue which would arise in Normandy was the importance of the officer corps on the beach and the non-commissioned officers. Alhucemas was a success on that day thanks to the independent and audacious orders of Colonel Francisco Franco.

Alhucemas has been masked by the greater events which took place in Spain between 1936 and 1939, and by the Second World War. It should be noted, however, that Alhucemas and the war in Morocco shaped the future leadership of Spain and had
undisputed lessons taken into consideration during both future wars. Although not specific to Alhucemas, the Rif War may also be considered one of the first major nationalistic movements on the African Continent – movements which would soon shape modern history.


5 De Mesa, José Luis, *Intervenciones Humanitarias Españolas en Marruecos a Comienzos del Siglo XX*, SERGA, Nº 28, Marzo/Abril 2004, p. 10.


7 De Mesa, José Luis, *Intervenciones Humanitarias Españolas en Marruecos a Comienzos del Siglo XX*, SERGA, Nº 28, Marzo/Abril 2004, p. 10.


15 Ibid., pp.307-310.

16 Ibid., p. 310.


18 All information on the Spanish Legion, including the quote, is from *Bridegrooms of Death: A Profile Study of the Spanish Foreign Legion* by John H. Galey (Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1969. The Spanish Foreign Legion, today, is simply the Spanish Legion and is composed almost entirely of Spanish nationals.


22 One of the more recent narratives on the Battle of Annual is: Francisco, Luis Miguel, *Annual, 1921: Crónica de un desastre*, AF Editores, October 2005.

23 It remains unknown if General Fernández Silvestre was killed or committed suicide during the happenings at Annual.


34 Ibid., pp. 86-87.


38 Ibid., p. 89.
