The Penobscot Expedition: Commodore Saltonstall and the Massachusetts Conspiracy of 1779

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attack out to three hundred miles from naval bases, and to limit Soviet land-based air support. In 1946, Kuznetsov’s close associate Admiral Vladimir Alafuzov developed a positional scheme of supremacy under land-based air cover up to one hundred miles from naval bases, and conditional sea control by large surface vessels with limited air support in a “far zone” out to three hundred miles. This fell short of command of the expanses of the Barents, Baltic, and Black Seas or of most of the Sea of Japan. Only submarines with long endurance could operate in the open ocean, but Stalin preferred medium submarines, conceived for operations in near seas against an amphibious threat. The projected battleships would have had an operational radius only half that of their contemporaries in oceanic navies. Only current Italian battleships, also designed for near seas, had such limited autonomy. To operate across the open ocean was a ludicrous concept to Stalin in 1945, arguing for a defensive posture for at least ten to fifteen years to come. Stalin’s projected “large sea and oceanic navy,” to use the Soviet term, was likely created for a hoped-for more robust traditional strategic defensive in contiguous seas. The evidence in this book, if not its title, lends support to Herrick’s judgment of a Stalinist strategy of limited command of the near seas. To suggest that it was “the first step on the road to global naval power,” as does series editor Holger Herwig in the preface, would require Stalin and his navy to demonstrate a conceptual leap for which neither had shown a proclivity. Mind-sets resist change. Even in the navy of Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, who inherited Stalin’s schemes and built up Kuznetsov’s fleet, extensive deployments did not replace deeply held positional and defensive assumptions. Had Stalin’s “oceanic” fleet actually been built, whether a shift of orientation by him or his admirals toward “global naval power” would have occurred remains undemonstrated and problematic.

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In the various history books on the American Revolution, the Penobscot expedition is rarely mentioned in any detail, being overshadowed by the more widely known and successful battles and campaigns. Perhaps this is due to the dismal outcome of this early joint amphibious operation and to the desire by some, especially Massachusetts politicians of the time, to forget what had happened.

This hastily conceived expedition was launched from Boston in July 1779. The expedition was given the task of expelling the mounting British military presence on coastal Maine, centered around Penobscot Bay, but specifically at Castine. The expedition set off with full expectation of success on the part of the Massachusetts political leadership. But from the beginning, the force assembled was hampered by inadequate leadership, divided command authority, poor training and support, and a
significant lack of understanding of the tactical situation. In this book, George Buker, a retired Navy commander, professor of history, and an accomplished author, provides a significant account of this much overlooked effort by the combined forces of the Massachusetts and Maine militia, Continental Navy and Marines, and various privateer groups. Buker also provides an interesting glimpse of the internal politics and personalities of the colonies, especially in Massachusetts during the American Revolution. He further provides a complementary argument that the Massachusetts political authorities, when confronted with the dismal failure of the expedition, set in motion an inquiry that may have been a conspiracy of political self-interest.

The book appears well researched, with significant endnotes and bibliography. Reading almost like a novel, it tells the story of the Penobscot expedition in great detail and addresses the issues that led up to its failure and the resulting inquiry. In appropriately titled chapters Buker provides a historical overview leading up to the expedition, including the British policy, orders for military operations along coastal Maine, and, of course, the colonial response to the threat to the extended territory of Massachusetts, now the state of Maine.

As expected, the majority of the book deals with the actual operations, from outfitting and the order of battle to the assaults and resulting siege at Castine, to the hasty retreat and then rout of colonial forces when superior Royal Navy forces arrived, and finally to the sequel, in which the expedition’s personnel walked back to Massachusetts from Maine after burning their ships. After the failure of the expedition and the loss of almost forty ships, recriminations were made against various leaders, including allegations against naval force commander Captain Dudley Saltonstall of responsibility for the overall result; and against Paul Revere, an icon of the Revolutionary War who served in the expedition as a lieutenant colonel in charge of the artillery, of unsoldierly conduct. In the end, it was Captain Saltonstall who bore the brunt of the smear campaign by Massachusetts politicians to shift the blame.

In the final chapters, and through the lens of history, Buker argues that indeed a conspiracy by the Massachusetts politicians, through their committee of inquiry, manipulated the results of their investigation and attempted to influence the outcome of the court-martial of Saltonstall by Continental Navy authorities. Their efforts ensured the desired results of exonerating their native son, militia general Solomon Lovell, and provided the justification needed to assess the Continental government for a portion of the monetary cost. Buker, however, provides technical and tactical reasons that may have led to the failure of the expedition. Further, he indicates that only Captain Saltonstall fully appreciated the tactical and operational circumstances, as well as the limited capability of his resources and ships in the confined waters around Penobscot Bay. These considerations were evidently excluded or ignored by the politicians in their single-minded desire to find a scapegoat for the failure.

Overall, this is a fine historical accounting of this chapter in American history. My one large criticism is that the one simple map provided is inadequate for a full understanding of the operations. This reviewer has the benefit of having
been stationed in Castine, Maine, and is geographically aware of the area; I have walked the earthen ramparts of Fort George and the various other entrenchments around Castine. It would have been most helpful to the general reader had additional detailed military maps been included with each phase of the expedition. Well placed photographs of the area would have further added to the historical understanding of the events, as would photos of the various earthworks, trenches, the defensive canal, and Fort George, which all still exist as historical landmarks.

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The Pepperdogs ranks with The Hunt for Red October. It is a work of fiction constructed around reality, brimming with action and genuine insight into the emerging warfighting capabilities of the new ground soldier. West develops his story around a Marine reconnaissance team. That team, the “Pepperdogs,” is made up of six reservists of varying civilian backgrounds; all have extraordinary courage, physical and mental strength, expert tactical skills, and total team commitment.

The Pepperdogs set out on their own to rescue a team member captured by rogue Serbian guerrillas who specialize in casual atrocities. West’s story takes place in Kosovo, mostly in mountainous terrain and in the harshest of winter conditions. In pursuit of the kidnappers the team undergoes nearly constant attack, endures brutal weather, and creates an increasingly difficult political situation for senior national security leaders who believe the Pepperdogs are risking diplomatic solutions. There is at one point the suggestion that even the murder of one Marine would not be worth upsetting diplomatic peace initiatives. The Pepperdogs make political matters worse by leaving a path of destruction while ignoring direct orders to end their chase.

Setbacks are many, but perseverance and tactical teamwork always (well, almost always) gets them out of tight spots. One remembers those great moments when the cavalry arrived and everyone cheered. But this team is different from the cavalry; the Pepperdogs take performance-enhancing drugs and rarely need to rest. One team member creates an Internet website that provides the public with real-time information on their progress and problems. The public cheers them on, reducing the policy-making flexibility of political leaders. West skillfully introduces the Internet as a source of potential direct information from individuals in the battle to the public. That information would have obvious constraining effects on future national security decision-making latitude and would yield different perspectives on progress and problems.

The suspense and many sudden turns of fortune keep the reader glued to the story. One cannot help but choose sides between the Marine team and political leaders who wish to halt the pursuit of the kidnapped Marine. Even if the team succeeds and its members become public heroes, they may be court-martialed for disobeying orders.