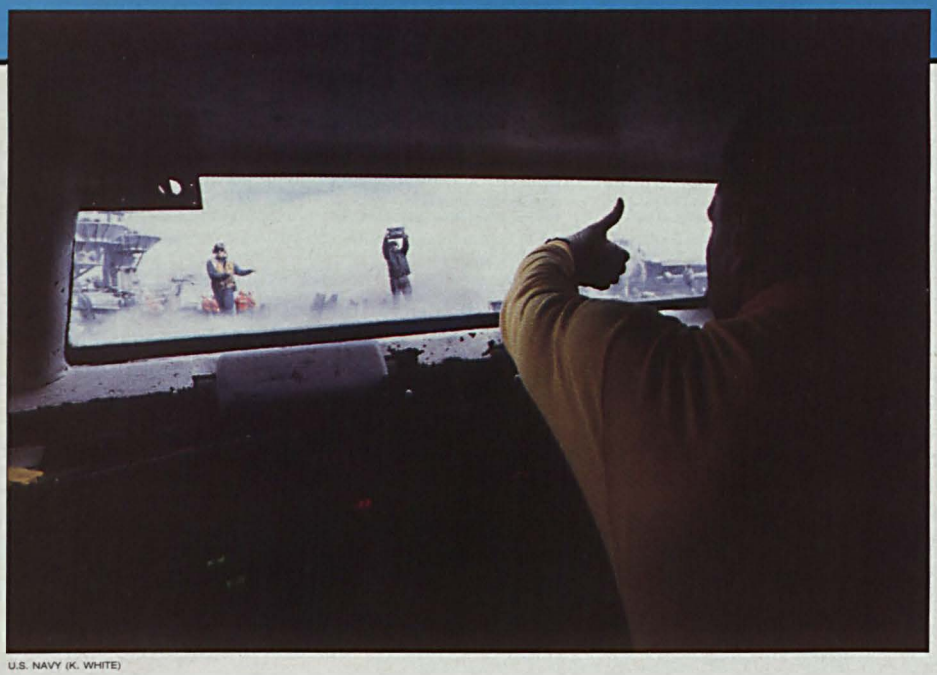
No Time to Rest



U.S. NAVY (K. WHITE)

U.S. NAVY (J. HENDRICKS)

Recent negative press reports—from budget cuts to lapses in integrity and common sense, leading to the relief of some officers—are symptoms of a more serious problem confronting the Navy today: the prospect of a growing peacetime culture within the Navy that is marked by a zero-defect mentality, careerism, excessive focus on administration, increasing technical specialization, and a neglect of history and military theory. Sentiments heard in the Navy today that "the war is over," "we are at peace," and "being a warrior is somewhat anachronistic" reflect such a culture.

The Navy has experienced peacetime culture before. After every major war in our history such a culture has emerged to cause misfortune and unnecessary loss in the early stages of the following war; however, we no longer are in a position where such a culture is acceptable. Both the volatile nature of today's international system and the swift and deadly reality of modern warfare argue for our strongest effort to avoid repeating past mistakes. History cannot give us all the answers, but it can help us place the present in perspective, give us a tool to aid in choosing our future, and in general illuminate our judgment on the issues that confront us.

Shortly after the Civil War, Stephen B. Luce began to question the Navy's training system. It seemed to him that the engineering training provided at the Naval Academy, though of superb quality, only partially fulfilled the needs of our officers. He knew there had to be more to being a sailor than designing ships, building them, steaming them, and managing them efficiently. Effective naval officers needed a broader perspective on history and naval theory. His efforts resulted in the establishment of the Naval War College.[1]

His arguments were revolutionary in the 1870s. All navies were struggling with the impact of the industrial revolution on tactics and strategy. Because they lacked active combat experience, the navies of the world found themselves adrift in a sea of technology without the guiding star of a relevant doctrine. The U.S. Navy, however, led the way by establishing a school to study non-technical issues and to educate its officers in the broad strategic context that gives purpose and substance to navies. The Naval War College gave officers the tools needed to choose among competing technologies in times of peace and dramatic change.

In a period of fiscal austerity, when ship construction had all but ceased and U.S. naval officers watched their European counterparts build more advanced ships, Luce convinced the Navy that even though ships could not be afforded, the education and training of officers could be—and that education could pave the way for a new Navy. His insight and perseverance gave us the likes of Mahan, Knox, Fiske, and Sims. His efforts began the long process of building a Navy equal to the task of world naval leadership.

The Navy, though, had to fight its strong engineering bias one day at a time. Despite Luce's nearly 50-year campaign, the Navy sent few officers to the War College, and then only for a short course of study. That course was in itself more technical than strategic and bore little resem-

By Commander Gerard D. Roncolato, U.S. Navy

Peacetime is not down time for the men and women of the U.S. Navy, because we continue to cultivate warriors in our officer corps. We must never again forget the lesson of history: Beware of a peacetime naval culture.

U.S. NAVY (J. VIDRINE)

blance to the excellent courses offered at our war colleges today. In his last presentation to the War College, Luce lamented our naval culture's resistance to change:

> Your profession is the art of war. . . . You give two years to marine engineering and but seventy-eight days to the study of the art you pretend to profess! This is not astigmatism. It is the total eclipse of the mental vision. You cannot even see the grim humor of it.[2]

Writing in 1915, Lieutenant Commander Dudley Knox echoed Luce's concerns when he argued that steaming and shooting, traditional U.S. Navy strengths, were not enough.[3] More needed to be done, and it centered around the control of ships in battle. What was technically challenging for one ship was much more complex and difficult when numerous ships sailed together into battle.

According to Commander Knox, the need for focused tempo in the chaos of battle dictated a decentralized style of command. Modern communication gear alone did not give a fleet commander control over his ships. Subordinate commanders were required to ". . .frequently act on their own initiative in anticipation of the desires of higher authority."[4] The only way to control without communicating was to build a shared understanding of how the commander wanted the battle to be fought if he were there.

This was very similar to Lord Horatio Nelson's "band of brothers" concept. Individual initiative and boldness were encouraged, buttressed by a common understanding of mission and tactics. Above all, subordinates would be expected to think—not just to transmit and obey orders.

Commander Knox's sage advice was listened to only briefly. By 1918 the Navy was settled back into its old ways: engineering focus, neglect of history and theory, and a disregard for the decentralized doctrine Commander Knox espoused. Yet, his words have value today, and are well worth considering:

> Obviously, then, harmonious and coordinated effort under the pressure of immediateness and during the stress of hostilities, on the part of commanders between whom communications are precarious, is difficult, if not impossible, unless there exists a bond of highly developed mutual understanding and common convictions.[5]

The Interwar Years

In the years between World War I and World War II, the Navy reverted to its traditional culture. Over a period characterized by constrained budgets and rapid technological change, naval tactics ossified and became detached from the strategic realities emerging in the late 1930s. War planning became centralized in Washington, and fleet operations bore less and less resemblance to the plans they ostensibly were supporting.

Throughout the interwar period, the Navy honed its plan for war against Japan, War Plan Orange, to perfection.[6]

A small but skilled staff anticipated amphibious operations and the need to replenish at sea and laid out timetables, ports, and later airfields and logistics in exacting detail.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, it became apparent that any war with Japan would be long and that the Philippines could not be held. A Navy that had staked much of its budgetary justification on the defense of those islands never could bring itself to admit that it could do little to prevent their capture. Consequently, the plans—reflecting this inability to deal with reality—began to ignore the cold, hard facts.

As the plans evolved, they became increasingly complex and detailed, and in time they failed to address the operational or tactical issues they raised. Nor did they contain any provision for the nature of a war with Japan: Was it to be limited or total? Was Japan to be invaded and forced to submit? Was economic blockade to be the course of action? Unable to answer these questions, the plans simply ignored them.[7]

Nevertheless, the war plans developed in Washington were the bright spot in that Navy of the 1920s and 1930s. Other areas were not so bright. A review of the fleet exercises of the period reveals the real nature of naval thinking at the time.[8] The exercises focused on concentration of the battle line for a decisive engagement against the enemy. Carriers were used for scouting, to make sure the engagement would take place. Cruisers and destroyers had their place in support of the battle line, a place that was meticulously debated over the years. Our commanders had studied the Battle of Jutland in 1916 carefully and were doing everything in their power to ensure that when the U.S. Navy fought such a battle, it would be decisive.[9]

Over the course of the interwar period, naval doctrine, detached as it was from strategic realities and guidance, became increasingly dogmatic. Possessed of only a narrow technical education and lacking a firm grasp on strategic principles, naval commanders and planners assiduously improved on each previous year's plan, going through the motions year in and year out. Seldom was the question asked "why?" Seldom were the assumptions underlying that dogma questioned. Initiative, boldness, and flexibility took back seats to perfection and precision.

The wisdom of Clausewitz and Mahan was largely lost—both had long since become dogma, seldom read and even less often understood. A peacetime Navy that was focused on engineering, administration, and managerial perfection had little desire to consider the operational implications of emerging technologies, even in the light of everchanging geostrategic circumstances.

Innovations occurred, to be sure, but those innovations largely were technical—radar, for instance, or the development of the aircraft carrier. Other innovations, such as the development of underway replenishment and amphibious warfare, were driven by the war plans that called for extended operations distant from home bases and for the acquisition of new bases overseas.

As in the post-Civil War era, the officer corps focused on naval technology at the expense of their study of the art of war. Good ships were designed and built, were administered brilliantly, and steamed with perfection. That same officer corps, however, was not capable of fighting its ships in the flexible manner war would demand. The prevailing concept of naval war was limited to a specific scenario that took place in daylight with good visibility, on the open ocean, and with a concentrated fleet

It is informative to read the commentary carried in the *Proceedings* during those years.[10] Many officers placed careers on the line to sound the alarm as the years passed. Careerism ran rampant; administration was the passion; and micromanagement was the rule. Risk taking was strictly avoided and initiative positively crushed in a zero-defects culture. Consideration of tactical issues took a back seat. Writing in 1939, Rear Admiral Yates Sterling reflected on his time in Washington, telling of his conversation with a fellow officer who advised him to:

> . . . go after the Bureau of Navigation [now Bureau of Personnel]; from that you can get anything you want.' This officer further told Stirling: 'I tied up with two other high-ranking officers and you'd be surprised how effective that was. . . . Remember by yourself you can get nowhere.' I am sure that many officers who obtain high commands are not the best that can be selected from those available.[11]

In the end, the emergence of the bureaucratic officer, poorly educated beyond his narrow technical field and hobbled by an oppressive administrative system, sapped the remaining life out of our war plans.

The crowning achievement of 20 years of planning came down to the Pacific Fleet's war plan WPPac-46 of July 1941. Ostensibly developed by the Fleet to support the approaching war against Japan, it was totally at odds with the approved military strategy that required a defensive in the Pacific until Germany had been defeated.[12]

WPPac-46 called for a dispersed and sequenced fleet sortie in response to war with Japan, with an eventual concentration near Wake Island in the central Pacific. Once there, the fleet would engage the Japanese Navy in a decisive battle that would quickly determine the war's outcome. The plan had to be initiated in advance of actual combat operations, required logistic shipping the Navy did not own, demanded full readiness of all fighting commands within a day of execution, sent cruisers to steam independently off Japan to sink shipping, dispersed forces so that they were not mutually supportive, exposed the fleet to attack in detail in drawing out the enemy fleet, and required patrol aircraft we did not have. It was stunningly shortsighted. In hindsight, we can see that the plan was a fantastic flight from reality; it represented the sorry culmination of interwar naval doctrine and culture.

To the Pacific Fleet planners of the day, WPPac-46 made sense. Why? Because it was the best way to employ our technology, it incorporated lessons from the only recent major naval battle: Jutland, then only 25 years old. It was the way we had trained, and indeed, the only way we could fight. Subordinate commands never had been allowed the latitude to operate independent of the fleet, and it was by concentrated fleet action that the decisive battle was to be fought and won.

The officers involved in the planning simply could not see possibilities beyond those enshrined in their plans.

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE MUSEUM

Stephen B. Luce's vision of a truly effective naval officer, one with a broader perspective on history and naval theory, was transformed into the Naval War College. The founder, in civilian clothes, is seated center, right, in this Class of 1902 photo.

They were a product of the peacetime culture. Technically educated, administratively proficient, bureaucratically astute, but untrained in history and theory, they proved unable to rise above a narrow vision of future war. After 35 years of planning for a war in the Pacific, the result was a long-shot attempt to ". . . achieve momentary superiority for a climactic gun battle, the legendary grail of the Orange plan."[13]

The Cost of a Peacetime Culture

By early 1941, there emerged a realization that the Navy had lost its way, had lost focus on its purpose to fight and win the nation's wars, and had failed to instill those qualities in its officer corps that would be needed in combat. Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, the ultimate micromanager, let it be known that the culture he had done much to perpetuate was flawed:

> I have been concerned for many years over the increasing tendency—now grown almost to 'standard practice'—of flag officers and other group commanders to issue orders and instructions in which their subordinates are told 'how' as well as 'what' to do to such an extent and in such detail that the 'custom of the service' has virtually become the antithesis of that essential element of command—'initiative of the subordinate.'[14]

By January 1941, Admiral King knew that he no longer could do everything himself. Once he realized the degree of corrosion in traditional values and the implications this culture had for our ability to fight, he acted. He knew that if the Navy did not change course, that if subordinates were not ". . . habituated to think, to judge, to decide, and to act for themselves in their several echelons of command—we shall be in a sorry case when the time of 'active operations' arrives."[15]

The change Admiral King felt necessary in January 1941 did not take hold firmly in the Navy until the middle of 1943, after many fine ships and many brave men had died. Admiral King saw the problem—but too late, and he was forced to change a deeply rooted culture too quickly. From submarines to surface combatants, the Navy was not ready for war. Even in the aviation community, which had for so long championed a new style of warfare, ill-suited commanders had to be weeded out and procedures for multi-carrier operations developed before the full potential of naval aviation could be realized.[16]

For too long, the officer corps had focused on bureaucracy, careers, technology, and administration—all things necessary in and of themselves, but carried to an extreme they failed to prepare the corps for war. Out of that stilted mentality grew crippling qualities of risk avoidance, centralization, a drive for perfection (and certainty), an unwillingness to accept mistakes, and a reluctance to take action unless specifically directed. Those qualities fit in nicely with the set-piece decisive engagement envisioned in all the interwar naval exercises. Reality was considerably different, and the Navy was not prepared for it.

Real war was not the single decisive battle envisioned by those who had religiously studied Jutland. Instead of concentrated fleet action, the Navy fought battles with what was available, often scraped together just for that single clash. The contests were numerous, short, violent, and often fought at night in coastal and littoral regions. Real war demanded the traditional qualities of warriors: creativity, imagination, initiative, boldness, a willingness to act, decentralization, and a tolerance for mistakes. These qualities were singularly lacking in the early days. Commanders failed repeatedly to trust their subordinates. Formations were rigid (the result of interwar doctrine); control was centralized; adaptability and agility were almost nonexistent.

Even after months of night fighting in the Solomons, for example, the Navy suffered a significant tactical defeat at the Battle of Tassafaronga in late November 1942. In that engagement, a radar-equipped U.S. force of five cruisers and six destroyers surprised eight Japanese destroyers. The U.S. commander knew where the enemy was, had a plan, and had carefully reviewed that plan with his subordinates. He tried to control events too closely, however, and delayed his initial attack to confirm the situation. He then compounded his error by opening fire with cruiser guns before his torpedoes had run their course. The Japanese reacted instantly, launched a large torpedo attack, then radically altered course. As a result of the U.S. commander's efforts to attain some level of certainty, four U.S. cruisers were knocked out of action; the Japanese lost only one destroyer.[17]

Cultures change slowly. Despite Admiral King's admonitions and despite the experiences in the Solomons, the Navy's peacetime culture did not fully give way until mid-to-late 1943 when the likes of Merrill, Burke, and Moosebrugger mastered the flexible tactics needed to fight

the Japanese. Those tactics could not be implemented until the qualities of leadership described earlier had been inculcated in the officer corps. It took nearly three years to build those qualities.

Where We Are Today

The culture that has defined the peacetime Navy since the Civil War, at least, remains in our blood. We have to be on the lookout for a rise in careerism, an intolerance for dissent, insistence on zero-defects management, excessive administration, a focus on engineering and technology to the neglect of warfighting, and a disregard for history.

Positive action is being taken. Documents such as ". . . From the Sea" and "Forward . . . From the Sea" have laid out a new direction for the Navy. These papers are given substance by *Naval Warfare, NDP-1*, which for the first time stipulates maneuver warfare as the standard for naval operations.[18] *Naval Command and Control, NDP-6*, goes the next logical step, and outlines the organizational and personal qualities needed for successful naval combat.[19] Other documents are in preparation that tie the top level documents to our daily operations.[20] Taken together, these documents signal a significant change in current naval culture—a change that hearkens back to the days of World War II, when we learned of war's requirements in the crucible of desperate combat. They set the stage for a transformation in our naval culture and go far to ensure that preparedness for war will be maintained in times of peace. The new two-week Command Leadership course being taught in Newport, Rhode Island complements these documents. This is not a war college course, but a practical course dedicated to preparing commanding officers to lead sailors in combat. It is the beginning of a renaissance in the Navy, focused on combat readiness and the personal qualities needed to support it.

This progress is only a beginning. The Navy as a whole remains largely unaware of the foundation being laid by and the potential value of the documents mentioned above, and only a handful of officers have as yet attended the leadership course. Meanwhile, the threat of a peacetime culture strives to move onstage, even as its counterculture is being created.

Perhaps this threat of a peacetime culture is what lay behind the CNO's Good Order and Discipline standdown of November 1995. He stated that things were going well, but that there were disturbing signs. Many of those signs are the same ones Admiral King saw in 1941. We are wise to notice the signs of history and learn from them, lest we repeat them. It should not take a revisit to Tassafaronga to keep us on track.

We must renew the emphasis on the study of history and of naval theory at every level in the Navy—from seaman to admiral. History tells us that war demands initiative, boldness, decentralized decision-making, and speed. War demands commitment to the mission, the Navy, and the nation. Those are the qualities we have to cultivate in peace. Combat operations demand these things, and operations other than war also demand them. Boldness and decentralization—properly conditioned by an understanding of naval theory and history—are exactly what is required in this era of uncertain peace. We must, therefore, continue our present efforts to cultivate warrior qualities in our officer corps.

The Navy of today is not the Navy of the interwar period. Our ability to analyze doctrine and policies is far superior. A greater percentage of the officer corps has attended junior or senior war colleges, acquiring there a much broader perspective on the missions of the Navy and the challenges it faces. The next time we fight, our countrymen will not again tolerate the poor performance we delivered in the opening months of World War II. The cost was simply too high. We cannot again afford the luxury of a peacetime culture. We must, therefore, continue to build a corps of officers and sailors who understand war and technology, who go into battle fully aware of the stakes, and who are able to think and act on their own.

We are warriors. Others can be managers and bureaucrats. The qualities inherent in our profession can not be laid aside during peace to be picked up like a weapon for war. They must be central to everything we are, core to the concept of being a naval officer. They must be carefully nurtured in times of peace so that we remain ready to answer the call, whenever it comes.

---

[1]An excellent and brief presentation of Luce's writings can be found in *The Writings of Stephen B. Luce*, ed. John D. Hayes and John B. Hattendorf, (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1975).

[2]Stephen B. Luce, "On the Relations Between the U.S. Naval War College and the Line Officers of the U.S. Navy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* vol. 37, no. 3, 1911, p. 787.

[3]LtCdr. Dudley Knox, "The Role of Doctrine in Naval Warfare," USNI *Proceedings* vol. 41, no. 2, March-April, 1915, pp. 325-365.

[4]Ibid., p. 328.

[5]Ibid., p. 331.

[6]See Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1991).

[7]See Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. 19-24.

[8]See for example CINCUS "Report of Tactical Exercises, U.S. Fleet Concentration, 1929," Serial A16-3 (5-95) (SC53); CINCUS, "United States Fleet Problem XI, 1930," Serial F.P. XI (48); and CINCUS, "First and Second Advanced Light Force Practices, and Advanced Submarine Force Practice, 1939-40," Serial A5-2 (1)/(0686).

[9]This was the battle regularly studied at the Naval War College during the interwar period. See Spector, p. 19. The situation during the interwar years was very similar to what we face today with the example of Desert Storm. An analysis of earlier battles would have placed Jutland in some context other than the mere exchange of broadsides.

[10]An excellent review of these comments is contained in Bichowsky, *Is the Navy Ready?*, pp. 53-152.

[11]Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1942), p. 498.

[12]The strategic war plan was labeled "Rainbow 5." Miller, *War Plan Orange*, contains a superb discussion of WPPac-46. See pp. 286-312.

[13]Miller, p. 302.

[14]RAdm. Ernest J. King, "Exercise of Command—Excess Detail in Orders and Instructions," *CINCLANT Serial 053*, 21 January, 1941. Contained in Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1980), p. 493.

[15]Ibid., p. 493.

[16]The U.S. Navy lagged behind the Japanese in the development of multi-carrier task forces. Discussion with Mr. Frank Uhlig.

[17]Crenshaw, *The Battle of Tassafaronga*, pp. 199-200.

[18]Department of the Navy, *Naval Doctrinal Publication 1: Naval Warfare* (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Washington, D.C., 28 March, 1994).

[19]Department of the Navy, *Naval Doctrinal Publication 6: Naval Command and Control* (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Washington, D.C., 19 May, 1995).

[20]Specifically, *Navy Vision, 2020*, and *Naval Operational Concept*, both of which are in preparation by the Navy staff.

Commander Roncolato is the prospective Commanding Officer of the USS *The Sullivans* (DDG-68), now building in Bath, Maine.