

An Historical Precedent for Allied Command and Control of U.S. Navy Assets

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A United States naval officer heading to serve on the staff of a numbered fleet or task force forward-deployed might be shocked by the recent frequency with which United States Navy vessels are “handed over” to other nation’s commanders for command and control. The recent headlines are filled with “historical firsts” of this kind. This “unprecedented” ceding of control may cause U.S. Navy operational planners some discomfort. Yet, the concept taught throughout the courses offered by Operational Levels Programs (OLP) at the U.S. Naval War College of building the command and control structure and authorities to accomplish the force’s objective has a strong and relevant lesson of providing tactical control of U.S. Navy vessels to allied commanders reaching back over 75 years. This precedent should be a foundation upon which future operational planners frame their deliberations for command and control.

As 2016 closed out several “unique” command relationships provided great capability improvements to U.S. Navy fleet commanders. In June, the Chief of Naval Operations stated that command of the U.S. Navy’s Task Force 50 in the Persian Gulf by the Charles de Gaulle Strike Group was “the first time ever that a non-U.S. element has taken command of a task force...” In the Autumn of 2016, the USS Ross and USS Mason both served under tactical control of the de Gaulle Strike Group for extended periods of time. In November, Commodore Andrew Burns (Royal Navy), in a “watershed moment,” took command of a U.S. Navy Task Force in the Persian Gulf “for the first time in history.” The option to place U.S. naval forces under the command of an allied commander is uncommon to operational planners today. Yet, employing the right command and control architecture to accomplish the desired objective is **THE** underlying foundation to military operational success. U.S. naval officers planning today within our fleets and task forces should not be intimidated by the employment of this synergistic approach to command and control. In 1941, their predecessors used the exact same approach to achieve objectives in the face of far more dire circumstances.

As Christmas approached in 1941, the newly cemented alliance between the United Kingdom and the United States, formed in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war on the United States by Nazi Germany, faced possible destruction. The American and European presence in the Western Pacific evaporated under the onslaught of the Japanese. Germany, still with the upper hand over the Soviet Union and a stranglehold over Great Britain through the U-Boat blockade, was realistically capable of defeating both European countries and force the United States to stand alone from a North

American bastion. Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt met in Washington, D.C. around Christmas in meetings termed the “Arcadia Conference.” (Churchill lived at the White House for several weeks, and became known for wandering around the Presidential residence in his pajamas) One common understanding between the two leaders was the shortage of military assets would not be resolved until American industrial might could be brought to bear, a task that would take approximately 18 months to realize. Consequently, new command and control arrangements had to be implemented to combat the threats being faced.

On 15 January 1942, the Combined Chiefs of Staff of the United States and the United Kingdom directed the formation of what was the first Combined Joint Task Force, an international force with one common commander and three component commanders recognizable to any student of Joint Operations today. The American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDA) would fight the Japanese for approximately seven weeks under the command of the British Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell. The Dutch commanded the Land Component (CFLCC), the British the Air Component (CFACC), and Admiral Thomas Hart, U.S. Navy (formerly the Commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet) served initially as the Maritime Component Commander (CFMCC).

As the CFMCC, Admiral Hart commanded a force of 58 ships: 2 heavy cruisers, 7 light cruisers, 22 destroyers and 27 submarines. The United States provided a preponderance (26 ships), but British, Dutch and Australian ships contributed greatly to Hart’s combat power. Admiral Hart, based upon his authority to reorganize these forces and make a number of logistical and maintenance decisions for all the ships of the Combined Force Maritime Component had both operational and tactical control (OPCON/TACON) of the international assets of the ABDA.

Within a month, Hart, by direction of Churchill, Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff ceded command of the ABDA Afloat (Maritime Component) to the Dutch Vice Admiral C.E.L. Helfrich, who held the same OPCON and TACON authorities as his predecessor. As the allies prepared to prevent the Japanese occupation of the island of Java, U.S. Navy vessels operated not only under the OPCON/TACON of a British JTF Commander and a Dutch Maritime Component Commander, but also a Dutch Task Force Commander. At the Battle of the Java Sea in late February 1942, Rear Admiral K.W.F.M. Doorman of the Royal Netherlands Navy commanded a force of fifteen ships (five U.S., four British, five Dutch and one Australian) in a life and death struggle against Japanese naval forces north of the island of Java. In contrast to the experiences of U.S. ships being commanded by allied commanders in 2016, in February 1942 two U.S. Navy ships succumbed to damage inflicted by Japanese Navy units and sank: USS Houston and USS Pope.

Despite its best efforts, the ABDA was not a very successful organization. The command and control architecture put in place was new and unusual for the time. No previous attempts of integration of this type had been attempted by commanders in the Western Pacific. Language challenges and different tactical techniques caused great problems among the different national commanders. Yet, the ABDA was the best command and control architecture available to accomplish the objective of stopping or slowing the Japanese advance. The predecessors of our U.S. Navy operational planners today followed the foundational tenet taught within OLP of build the command and control to match the objective.

A U.S. Navy officer heading to the very demanding environment of a numbered fleet staff or a task force staff will see situations in which U.S. Navy ships can be placed under the command and control of other nations' commanders. Despite proclamations by many senior officers that these modern-day scenarios are unique and unprecedented, they are not. There is a very long-standing and salient historical precedent to which planners can turn to for insight into this operational approach. When combined with the tangible tool of "build the C2 to match the mission," any planner can integrate U.S. Navy vessels under the command of an allied commander with success.

*** All historical information for this article is drawn from Samuel E. Morison, [History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, The Rising Sun in the Pacific, Volume III](#), Castle Books, Edison, NJ, 2001 Edition of 1948 Copyright.

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