History MOC Warfighters Should Know, The “London Flagship:” Estimate of the Situation for U.S. Navy Operations in a World at War

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The shadowy presence of a German submarine blended with those of the U.S. Navy, as yachtsmen cheerfully sailed alongside in the approaches to Narragansett Bay. The United States remained neutral in the First World War when the German submarine SM U-53 brazenly entered the U.S. Navy anchorage at Newport, Rhode Island on 7 October 1916.1 Newport traditionally served as a homeport for the Atlantic Fleet. As SM U-53 churned up the channel in the busy waters of the Narragansett Bay, American warships stood proudly at anchor as navy whaleboats orbited among various facilities. Merchant ships sailed in and out of commercial ports in the Providence area, maneuvering in the channel to avoid the fishing boats, yachtsmen, and water taxis. The sounds of navy guns punctuated the scene as sailors completed basic training on the Newport Naval Station. The odd presence of a German submarine at anchor in the harbor created an interesting scene under the shadow of the U.S. Naval War College.

![Figure 1 - SM U-53 at anchor near the U.S. Naval War College in the Narragansett Bay on 7 October 1916.](image)

The unannounced arrival of SM U-53 at Newport caught U.S. Navy commanders by surprise. Having set anchor and shifted colors, the German skipper, Lieutenant Hans Rose, paraded his crew in crisp uniforms with brass buttons and Iron Cross medals, which shined as brightly as the polished brass fittings inside the submarine. Rose then embarked a water taxi and presented himself to the Newport Naval Base Commander and President of the Naval War College, Rear Admiral Austin M. Knight. “I was received in the roomy
naval station,” Rose recalled that Knight “was not quite sure what he ought to do, and feared to assume responsibility.” After this brief exchange, Rose visited USS *Birmingham* (CL-2), the recently appointed ComDesLant, Captain Albert Gleaves. In general, Rose described the U.S. Navy counterparts as having “a high degree of technical knowledge.” Rose also recalled that Gleaves apologized as “there was now a regulation in the American navy forbidding drink and allowing only cigarettes.”

The cheerful interplay the German and American sailors obscured the underlying implications. Given the strategic importance of the U.S. Navy facilities in Newport, Rose and the *SM U-53* crew succeeded in demonstrating the potential threat of German submarines in American waters. During his three hour visit, Rose welcomed Knight and Gleaves for drinks and a brief inspection of *SM U-53*. The niceties ended abruptly, when Knight and Gleaves received orders from the Navy Department. In accordance with the neutrality policy of President Woodrow Wilson, the Secretary of the Navy (SecNav), Josephus Daniels, directed Rose to depart immediately from American territorial waters. Having accomplished his mission, Rose sailed with *SM U-53* into the Atlantic as “a splendid yacht glided out beside us at a distance of only about ten yards.” He tossed a life ring and cried “good luck” before issuing orders to dive the boat. Rose maneuvered *SM U-53* into position just outside the three mile demarcation of American neutral waters. He subsequently claimed five merchant ships, which sailed under British, French, and Dutch registry.

The Navy Department lacked a strategic organization to synchronize the administrative establishment ashore with global U.S. Navy operations at sea. By 1906, the navy established geographically organized “fleets” in the Asiatic, Pacific, and Atlantic. Although these fleet headquarters helped focus regional operations, the U.S. Navy required a strategic commander empowered to plan and orchestrate maritime operations on a global scale. U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps forces remained heavily engaged in the campaign to secure the southern border with Mexico, fighting an insurgency in the Philippines, and throughout the Caribbean. American forces also maintained defensive garrisons surrounding the Panama Canal Zone. During the punitive expedition against Mexican insurgents at Veracruz in 1914, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps amphibious forces struggled to collaborate with U.S. Army forces ashore. Although the United States remained neutral, the U.S. Navy faced significant challenges at sea as the European powers engaged in the First World War.

American merchant shipping and U.S. Navy warships sailed under the neutral protection of the Stars and Stripes. Increasingly challenged on the high seas, the U.S. Navy stretched resources to defend global American interests. By the fall of 1914, Anglo-French naval forces pursued German commerce raiders into neutral American waters. American citizens also counted among the dead after the German submarine *SM U-20* sank the
RMS *Lusitania* in May of 1915. Given ongoing commitments in the Pacific, the U.S. Navy required a strategic commander to organize neutrality operations in the Atlantic. To these ends, the Aide for Naval Operations, Rear Admiral Bradley A. Fiske, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy (ASecNav), Franklin D. Roosevelt pressed the Secretary of the Navy (SecNav), Josephus Daniels, to endorse Congressional legislation to establish the office of Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). Daniels feared the potential erosion of civilian control, though reluctantly endorsed the legislation drafted in 1915 which described the CNO as:

> an officer on the active list of the Navy appointed by the President from among the officers of the Line of the Navy, not below the grade of Captain for a period of four years, who shall under the direction of the SecNav be charged with the operations of the fleet, and with the preparation and readiness of plans for its use in war.

This verbiage appeared as the “Navy Second to None” policy, as described within the subtext of the Naval Act of 1916. Daniels subsequently issued General Order 218 which clarified the organization of U.S. Navy seagoing forces. Under the overall authority of the SecNav, the CNO held control over the “fleet” [which is defined] as an organized body of ships under the command of a ‘Commander in Chief.’ Under the commanders in chief of fleets, the U.S. Navy deployed specially tailored and equipped “forces” as the major subdivisions of fleets and “squadrons” as major subdivisions of “forces.”

These words mattered, as the officially prescribed definitions provided the basis for strategic relationships among various U.S. Navy commanders in planning operations and in orchestrating tactical missions. Although the SecNav retained traditional authority in framing strategic objectives the CNO theoretically unified the strategic U.S. Navy command and held authority to unify the global operations of subordinate fleet headquarters, whether in peace or war. In practice, the CNO remained tied to the political battlefields of the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. Within the U.S. Navy, many thought that the “Chief of Naval Operations, in the form passed by Congress, represented the ashes of a once good idea.”

Figure 3 - The First Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William S. Benson, relaxes with members of his staff in 1918.
As the U.S. Navy sailed into the uncharted waters of coalition warfare, the relationship between the CNO and the seagoing fleet organizations of the U.S. Navy remained ambiguous. The first CNO, Admiral William S. Benson, anticipated direct U.S. Navy involvement in the First World War. In the spring of 1917, he selected the President of the Naval War College, Rear Admiral William S. Sims, to embark on a secret mission to the European warzone. The most junior ranking admiral in the navy, Sims carried the ambiguously defined task of establishing basic lines of communication between the Admiralty in London and the Navy Department in Washington. In this role, Sims acted under the immediate authority of the SecNav and the CNO. In the event of a formal declaration of war, he also carried the mission of organizing a U.S. Navy headquarters in London to serve as an, "advanced headquarters of the Navy Department in the field."

Benson empowered Sims with wide ranging authority to divert personnel from other U.S. Navy assignments. In anticipation of departing for London, he provided the Bureau of Navigation with a selectively assembled list of names. In particular, Sims sought officers with recent seagoing experience and "War College training." Having graduated from the two-year "Long Course" with the Class of 1913, Sims then joined the faculty and collaborated with Captain Frank Schofield to develop the doctrinal planning concepts found in the text of "Estimate of the Situation." Sims firmly believed in the strategic focus of the Naval War College curriculum, which also emphasized historical case study analysis and practical experimentation on the war gaming floors of Luce Hall. The Naval War College produced graduates steeped in the theoretical concepts of strategy, tactics, and command.

**War College Afloat**

Sims earned a reputation for challenging the norms of the service, inspiring junior ranking professionals to follow. Among others, Sims encouraged a younger protégé, Lieutenant Commander Dudley W. Knox to submit his thesis on questions of command to the Naval Institute Proceedings, which became the prize-winning essay in 1915 under the title “The Role of Doctrine in Naval Warfare.” When Sims detached from the Naval War College faculty and assumed command as the Commander, Destroyers and Torpedo Boat Flotillas, Atlantic Fleet (ComDesLant), he recruited a close circle of likeminded officers to serve on his seagoing staff. Commander William V. Pratt served as aide. Sims also dragooned Lieutenant Commander Ernest J. King to serve as his personal aide. King simultaneously served as skipper of the USS Cassin (DD-43). Sims refused to release King from duties on the ComDesLant staff. “Captain Sims himself was an officer of extraordinary energy, but given to speaking with exaggeration,” King observed that for Sims “all matters were clear white or dead black.” King explained that he “was never one of the group of Sims’s devoted disciples and followers.” On the other hand, King recalled developing particularly close friendships with fellow destroyer skippers during his assignment with Sims – including lieutenant commanders Harold R. Stark and William F. “Bill” Halsey, Jr.

Carrying wardroom traditions from the age of sail into an era characterized by technologically advanced warships of steam and steel, Sims presided over spirited historical debates to examine the nexus between strategy and tactics. In wardroom meetings with his destroyer skippers, Sims developed the practice of creating a "War College afloat." Sims engaged the ComDesLant wardroom in discussions of naval strategy, war gaming historical battles, and then engaging in decision analysis discussions. From these foundations, Sims and his staff developed totally new tactics for maneuvering destroyers in unison using a wireless communications system of fewer than thirty-one words. Following the flag of Sims, the Atlantic Fleet destroyers developed tactics which the U.S. Navy eventually adopted for application in larger warships.
Figure 4 - Commander William S. Sims, USN, during destroyer squadron maneuvers in the Atlantic approaches to the Narragansett Bay. Articulate and inquisitive, he encouraged fellow naval professionals to think critically. Sims emphasized historical studies as a means to examine contemporary questions of strategy, tactics, and command. He never hesitated to offer a strong opinion, all for the greater good of the service.

Given their common affinity for the Naval Academy, Sims encouraged his protégés to view the Naval War College as the true focal point of higher thinking among U.S. Navy professionals. "It was at the Naval War College that Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote his great works on sea power," King recalled, "the ablest officers were all anxious to take the course at the War College, even though there were still a few die-hards who fought against it." As the European powers engaged in the First World War, the Naval War College had already provided a forum for U.S. Navy professionals to recognize that navies provided means "not to make war but to preserve peace, not to be predatory but to shield the free development of commerce, not to unsettle the world but to stabilize it through the promotion of law and order."

Special relationships among individual personalities provided the basis for bureaucratic collaboration among various U.S. Navy staffs ashore and afloat. Upon relinquishing ComDesLant, Sims assumed command in the harbor defense monitor USS Nevada (BM-8). He continued experimenting with the “War College afloat” concept as Nevada patrolled the waters off Newport and New London, Connecticut. Having detached from command in Nevada, Sims anticipated promotion to rear admiral. At age fifty-nine, Sims remained a captain while awaiting a vacancy because the U.S. Navy maintained thirty admirals on the active list at this time. Sims eventually relieved Knight as the President, Naval War College in the spring of 1917. In this role, Sims planned to engage his students in strategic discussions about the ongoing war in Europe as related to the neutrality policy of the United States.

The German commerce raiding strategy and unrestricted submarine warfare operations pressed American neutrality strategy to untenable limits. German submarines sank a number of American merchant ships by the spring of 1917. For these reasons, Sims anticipated U.S. Navy involvement in the war at sea. At this time, British cryptographers unveiled a German plot to support Mexican insurgents along the southern border of the United States. The revelations found within the deciphered text of the “Zimmerman
Telegram” carried vast strategic implications for the United States. On the domestic front, many Americans of German and Irish decent sympathized with the Austro-German and Ottoman Central Powers. In some cases, Americans returned to Europe to fight in the German military. Although many also mistrusted the Anglo-French-Russian Entente with Japan and Italy, the sinking of the RMS Lusitania and other incidents involving German commerce raiders horrified American voters. Having been reelected for a second term on a platform of maintaining American neutrality, President Woodrow Wilson reluctantly ordered the SecNav and CNO to mobilize the U.S. Navy to implement “armed neutrality” operations in February.

Political dynamics within Congress remained an unresolved factor, as Benson framed a preliminary strategy for prospective U.S. Navy operations in the European warzone. He relied heavily upon the recommendations of Commander Dudley Wright Knox, then serving on the Operations Navy (OpNav) staff on assignment to the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), or “Op-16.” Within ONI, Knox created a Historical Section under the designation of “Op-16-E.” In this role, Knox created a direct relationship between ONI, the Navy Department Library, and the academic studies of maritime strategy at the Naval War College. The bureaucratic ties between the Navy Department and the Naval War College blossomed as Knox fused intelligence with planning future operations. His mentor, Sims, shared the vision of closer ties between the CNO, OpNav, and the educational and strategic analysis missions of the Naval War College.

Anticipating the formal declaration of war, Benson selected Sims for a secret mission to establish basic lines of transatlantic communication between the Admiralty in London and the Navy Department in Washington. In March of 1917, Benson empowered Sims with the collateral duties of serving as the CNO liaison to the French, Dutch, and Italian navies – along with the associated allies of Russia and Japan. Benson also reminded Sims of the complicated historical relationship between the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy. “Don’t let the British pull the wool over your eyes,” Benson warned Sims, “we would as soon fight them as the Germans.” Traveling incognito in civilian clothing, Sims embarked the SS New York under the assumed name of “W.S. Davidson,” wearing civilian clothes throughout the voyage to British waters. After the ship struck a mine, but safely reached port. Sims arrived by train in London shortly before the American declaration of war on 2 April 1917.

**London Flagship**

Sims recognized the prospective Anglo-American naval alliance potentially hinged upon establishing a basic spirit of trust. Having made arrangements with a tailor on Saville Row in central London, Sims purchased a fresh U.S. Navy uniform. For the purposes of his assignment, he assumed temporary rank as a vice admiral on 25 May. Acting on the authority of the CNO, Sims worked through the good offices of the Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Walter H. Page. Through Department of State funding, Sims secured offices for the U.S. Navy staff at 4 Grosvenor Square in central London. Sims further ingratiated himself by adapting the Royal Navy tradition of naming official buildings after historic ships, referring to his headquarters as a "stone frigate” known as the “London Flagship.” By default, Anglo-French commanders dealt “only with Admiral Sims’ Headquarters and Admiral Sims in turn directs and coordinates the work of all of the various groups under his general command.”
The CNO carried strategic responsibility over global U.S. Navy operations, which required Benson to remain at the Navy Department in Washington. Although Sims remained the most junior ranking admiral, he acted under the immediate authority of the CNO. To facilitate relations with the Anglo-French and Allied navies, Sims retroactively attained the temporary wartime promotion to the three-star status of a vice admiral on 25 May 1917. The following month, he assumed the title of Commander, U.S. Naval Forces in Europe with the establishment of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) headquarters under U.S. Army General John Pershing. Hastening to join the war, the AEF fell under a multinational headquarters wherein foreign commanders controlled the planning and execution of operations at the front. As AEF forces flowed to the European front, Sims concluded that the:

only effective way to 
through the weight of the U.S. Navy into the war without delay was to use its available units to strengthen the weak spots in other Navies and thus effect a more vigorous conduct of the war already so thoroughly underway in all areas. There would have been much wasted effort and time if any attempt had been made to take over any particular area and operate it entirely with U.S. Naval Forces.

The First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Jellicoe, encouraged Sims to take the lead in organizing U.S. Navy operations on the European front. Given the global scope of the British Empire and Royal Navy operations, Jellicoe viewed Sims as a broker handling the U.S. Navy portfolio. Jellicoe viewed Sims as a subordinate. To contrast, Sims acted as the representative of the CNO. As such, he assumed the role of ranking U.S. Navy representative of the AEF.

The Anglo-American naval relationship remained tenuous, as the strategy favored within the Admiralty contrasted with the vision articulated by Sims. Among other elements, Jellicoe held celebrity status from his performance during the Battle of Jutland. He favored traditional line-of-battle operations to contain the Imperial German Fleet in the North Sea. Jellicoe employed tactful condescension in dealings with Sims. Among other points of contention, they disagreed about the focus of Anglo-American naval strategy. While Jellicoe’s focus on battleships and fleet operations, Sims emphasized naval aviation and smaller surface escorts. Jellicoe also disagreed with Sims on the question of establishing an integrated transatlantic convoy system. Jellicoe agreed with Sims on the question of flooding the North Sea with mines. However, Jellicoe remained unwilling to release the
The Admiralty suffered from strategic shortfalls, as the Royal Navy continued operations on a worldwide scale protecting the British Empire. As the war on the European front remained the central focus, Sims pressed for a transatlantic convoy network. Jellicoe approved the plan, Sims offered to augment the Royal Navy with U.S. Navy destroyer escorts. Sims then communicated with the CNO, Benson, and the Commander, Atlantic Fleet (CinCLant), Rear Admiral Henry T. Mayo. As the U.S. Navy also required forces for the strategic defense of the Americas and in Asia, Benson initially withheld the battleships and cruisers of the Atlantic Fleet. At Sims request, Mayo placed the higher priority on sending the Atlantic Fleet destroyer squadrons to the European Front. The first U.S. Navy destroyers arrived under the immediate command of Captain Joseph K. Taussig and Captain Joel Pratt by June of 1917. Jellicoe tepidly approved the development of a transatlantic convoy system, though stipulated Royal Navy control over U.S. Navy destroyers in European waters. The First Sea Lord within the Admiralty held strategic responsibility roughly equivalent to that of the CNO at the Navy Department. Given the circumstances, Jellicoe assumed a superior role in dealings with Sims. Given limited lines of communication with the CNO and other U.S. Navy commanders in the United States, Sims faced significant challenges in negotiating the Anglo-American naval alliance on the European front. He later claimed the transatlantic convoy system and the North Sea “Mine Barrage” as his best achievements on the European front.

The Royal Navy absorbed U.S. Navy warships into the Grand Fleet upon arrival at the European front. In organizing the convoy escort and antisubmarine forces, the Commander, Western Approaches, Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, assumed tactical command over the U.S. Navy destroyers under Taussig and Pratt. From the London Flagship, Sims and his staff coordinated the administrative and logistical requirements to sustain these U.S. Navy operations. By default, Bayly controlled the mission as U.S. Navy destroyers performed the tasks of convoy and antisubmarine operations in European waters. However, this initial arrangement caused problems as other American commanders arrived at the front in the summer of 1917.

U.S. Navy forces in Europe operated under an ambiguous organization dominated by three separate headquarters. Considering the strategic role of the CNO, Benson described Sims an administrative liaison to the Admiralty and the AEF. Out of bureaucratic necessity, Sims viewed his mission as something more than that of a simple liaison. With the establishment of the AEF in June of 1917, Sims assumed an equivalent role to the ranking U.S. Army commander, Pershing. Sims and Pershing shared similar concerns about the hastily negotiated arrangements of placing AEF forces under Anglo-French commands. As many units comprised recent draftees and National Guard regiments, Pershing initially...
placed AEF ground forces at the general disposal of the Anglo-French armies for training purposes. Similarly, the Anglo-French navies trained the unseasoned U.S. Navy forces at the European front.

Within the combined multinational context of the preexisting Anglo-French combined command, Sims and Pershing held limited control over AEF forces at the front. Wireless communications changed the traditional relationship between headquarters ashore and warships at sea. Aviation, tanks, and submarines also presented significant doctrinal challenges, as the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army lacked practical experience with such innovations. By contrast, Anglo-French forces provided maturely framed doctrine for exploiting or countering new technologies. Among other technical innovations, the Royal Navy shared their Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (ASDIC) with the U.S. Navy. As the term actually referred to equipment rather than a “committee,” the U.S. Navy eventually adopted the acronym SOund Navigation And Ranging (SONAR).

Grand Fleets

Informal agreements negotiated behind closed doors among gentlemen defined Anglo-French and American command relationships at the European front. Within the Admiralty, Vice-Admiral Sir Rosslyn Erskine-Wemyss nurtured a personal relationship with Sims by sharing information derived from high-grade cryptologic sources. In turn, Sims agreed to restrict access to British intelligence sources. Having agreed to safeguard Admiralty sources, Sims selectively empowered Knox and Stark on the London Flagship staff to act as gatekeepers in disseminating intelligence among forces at the front. By implication, Sims orchestrated U.S. Navy operations without revealing intelligence sources by transmitting messages strongly encouraging certain courses of action. This system largely worked, as Sims also held the personal trust of many U.S. Navy commanders.

The Admiralty operations and intelligence organization vastly outclassed the equivalent subdivisions of the Navy Department. Given the novelty of electronic communications, the Royal Navy developed the “War Room” organization shortly before the First World War. Sir Alfred Ewing had also created cryptographic branch within the Naval Intelligence Division, subsection 25 (NID-25). This organization existed inside Room 40 of the Old Admiralty Building in central London. Ewing recruited personnel from outside the line ranks of the Royal Navy. He drew from members of Sir Julian Corbett’s Historical Section within NID-25, as well as, civilians with backgrounds in academe into Room 40.

The newspapers of Fleet Street in London provided another rich pool of recruits with the potential to work as intelligence analysts. Journalists affiliated with NID and Room 40 included Herbert C. Farraby, Hector C. Bywater, Hugh Cleland Hoy, and Walter Gill. Later,
Farraby and Bywater revealed details of Room 40 within the text of Strange Intelligence: Memoirs of Naval Secret Service. Gill also emphasized the role of cryptography and British intelligence in his memoir War, Wireless, and Wangles. Revelations found in literary works about British intelligence illustrated the unique dynamics which characterized relations among Royal Navy professionals and civilians. Room 40 analysts influenced operations at sea with intelligence. Analysts Frank Birch and Alfred Dillwyn “Dilly” Knox worked closely with paymaster Lieutenant-Commander William Clark and Lieutenant Ernest W.C. Thring, for example, to locate and destroy enemy commerce raiders and submarines. Clark and Thring interacted on a more equal footing with seagoing Royal Navy officers.

Since the age of sail, paymaster officers often fulfilled the administrative functions of collecting and cataloguing information and, by extension, often functioned as intelligence officers in the Royal Navy. Ewing and the analysts of NID-25 influenced Royal Navy strategy, but never received direct control over its operations. In 1916, Hall’s son, Rear Admiral Sir Reginald “Blinker” Hall, assumed command of NID. Having commanded the battle-cruiser HMS Queen Mary, he held significant credibility as the Admiralty as Director of the Intelligence Division (DID) in dealings with seagoing professionals. He introduced regimentation to NID-25 by arranging RNVR commissions for Room 40 analysts.

The relationship among British intelligence personnel and American counterparts shaped the broader relationship between the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy. After 1917, the NID influenced U.S. Navy operations through the filter provided by the London Flagship of Sims. Among those entrusted with detailed access to British sources, U.S. Navy Captain Dudley Wright Knox supervised the “Planning Section” within the London Flagship. “The business of the ‘Planning Section,’” Sims explained “was to make studies of particular problems, to prepare plans for future operations, and also to criticize fully the organization and methods which were already in existence.” Sims empowered Knox and the Planning Section, “to place themselves in the position of the Germans and to decide how, if they were directing German naval operations, they would frustrate the tactics of the Allies.” Yet, the prevailing culture within the U.S. Navy hindered progress, as “everybody sort of thought Naval Intelligence was striped pants, cookie-pushers, going to parties and so on.”

Mimicking the Royal Navy solution to filling the line with officers of intelligence, Sims empowered Knox to recruit civilians with the requisite education or technical expertise to serve in the London Flagship. Among his personnel, Tracy Barrett Kittredge accepted a civil service appointment with the staff. He earlier studied history and literature at the University of California at Berkley and then completed advanced studies in Exeter College at the University of Oxford. An American expatriate in Europe at the beginning of the First World War, Kittredge, also worked as Director of the Education Fund under Herbert Hoover on the Commission for Relief in Belgium. His fluency in the French and German languages provided additional expertise, which the U.S. Navy immediately required within the London Flagship. With additional endorsements from Commander Harold R. Stark in the Operations Division and Commander John V. Babcock in the Intelligence Division, Knox nominated Kittredge for a reserve commission in the uniformed ranks of the U.S. Navy Auxiliary Volunteer Reserve (USNAVR). Kittredge was among the first to receive a line officer’s commission with rank as a lieutenant (junior grade) in 1917.

Knox and Kittredge established a lasting bureaucratic alliance in their collective campaign to fuse U.S. Navy operations with the intelligence derived from the broader understanding of history. During the First World War, Knox relied heavily upon Kittredge to foster personal ties with Frank Birch and Alfred “Dilly” Knox (no relation) at the Admiralty. Sims described the importance of informal personal ties between the Admiralty and the London Flagship that “throughout the war Kittredge’s previous historical training, European experience, and fine intellectual gifts made his services very valuable in the Intelligence Department.”
Rather than formal lines of communications, intelligence provided by the Admiralty through the London Flagship flowed informally to the U.S. Navy forces at the front. Dissemination centered upon informal discussions between Babcock, Knox, Kittredge, and Stark within the London Flagship and their counterparts on the seagoing staffs or those deployed ashore at the front. Balancing the delicate system of gentlemen’s arrangements with Anglo-French allies against his original function as a CNO liaison, Sims also negotiated command relationships between the London Flagship and other U.S. Navy headquarters at the front. According to the Navy Register, Sims held lower lineal standing among forty-nine other rear admirals on the active list of the U.S. Navy.

Sims took a strategic approach in orchestrating U.S. Navy operations with tactfulness and intelligence. As he already assumed temporary three-star status as a vice admiral in 1917, he held the requisite rank to assert tactical control of rear admirals Henry B. Wilson in France, Joseph Strauss in the North Sea, and Albert P. Niblack in the Mediterranean, and later the Atlantic Fleet battleship division of Hugh Rodman. Other American admirals in the European Theater held responsibility to coordinate the movements of specific platforms, such as battleships, surface escorts, submarines and aviation forces. Naval artillery and amphibious forces generally fell under the senior AEF headquarters ashore, often under the preexisting Anglo-French commands.

Unresolved questions of control shaped the organizational relationship between the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy. Arriving with the battleships and cruisers of the Atlantic Fleet in December of 1917, the CinClant, Admiral Henry T. Mayo, found the gentlemen’s agreements which characterized relations among the Anglo-French forces completely unacceptable. Among other concerns, the Royal Navy Commander of Western Approaches, Bayley, controlled the mission, whereas Mayo exerted full and immediate authority over U.S. Navy warships. Meanwhile, Sims attempted to nurture good relations between Bayley and Mayo. Later, the SecNav, Daniels, attempted to explain that “[Mayo’s] fleet had been in the Atlantic most of the war, and when a portion of it went abroad and worked in such close cooperation with the British fleet and I sent a younger admiral [Sims] as commander of it.”

The superficial question of rank often influenced negotiations among Anglo-American naval officers. Sims remained junior in rank and lineal standing to Mayo, who held seniority by three years, was the seagoing CinClant, and served at the temporary wartime rank of a full four-star admiral. Sims apprised Mayo of the unique relationship between the intelligence subdivisions of the Admiralty NID and the London Flagship. “There is a direct telephonic communication between the British and French Admiralties,” Sims described the
“organization of the British Admiralty includes a highly efficient Intelligence Division.”

For security, he explained that “special telephone and telegraph wires have been installed between the Admiralty and the U.S. Navy Headquarters.”

Through wireless communications and secure correspondence, Sims offered Mayo the means by which to employ Atlantic Fleet warships with greater tactical precision. In essence, the operational forces under Mayo and the Atlantic Fleet relied upon Sims and the intelligence subsections of the London Flagship. In essence, Mayo understood that the Atlantic Fleet operated under the precarious arrangements with the “Allied Governments by which our ships can put into any of their naval bases and obtain urgent supplies just as if they belonged to the Navy of the country.”

Mayo recognized the overarching importance of maintaining a spirit of collaboration among the allied navies on the European front. To these ends, he sent the CinCLant Chief of Staff, Captain Ernest J. King, and the Fleet Intelligence Officer (FIO), Commander William S. Pye, to the flagship of Royal Navy Admiral David Richard Beatty, First Earl Beatty, during the Grand Fleet maneuvers in the North Sea in 1918. Beatty took an interest in King and Pye, offering complementary remarks to Mayo during meetings at the Admiralty in London. Beatty also understood the problems involved with mixing Royal Navy and U.S. Navy warships under a unified tactical command. In essence, Royal Navy doctrine and operating procedures frequently failed to synchronize with U.S. Navy practices.

Tactical communications among Royal Navy and U.S. Navy warships remained limited on the European front. British wireless equipment was of an inferior quality to that employed aboard American warships. Yet, Royal Navy equipment remained the standard for allied forces operating in European waters. The British “wireless” remained technically inferior to American “radios,” requiring U.S. Navy signalmen to adapt their equipment and procedures in order to communicate with Anglo-French and Italian warships. The Anglo-French allies provided the basic administrative support and supplies to the warships of the Atlantic Fleet. Yet, Mayo and his CinCLant staff sought an autonomous role on the European front.

**Figure 9 - The main battleships of the Atlantic Fleet arrived in European waters by December of 1918.**

**Estimate of the Situation**

Unhappy with the overall situation, Mayo deeply respected Sims and recognized the central role of the London Flagship. Mayo engaged the CinCLant staff to analyze the command relationships among the Allies, the AEF, and U.S. Navy forces at the European front. In turn, the CinCLant Chief of Staff, King, leading the staff in a thorough mission analysis, war gaming various options, and finally producing soundly framed courses of
recommended action. Having served under Sims as a lieutenant commander on the ComDesLant staff two years earlier, King applied “War College afloat” methods to produce “Estimate of the Situation with Regard to the Efficient Development of Operations of the Atlantic Fleet.” Mayo ultimately concurred with King’s observation that “Allied difficulties have mostly been caused by lack of foresight.”

Behind closed doors, members of the London Flagship and CinCLant staffs renegotiated the strategic command relationships among Allied headquarters for the greater benefit of U.S. Navy interests. Among the London Flagship representatives, Knox and Stark collaborated with King and the CinCLant staff in producing the CinCLant Estimate of the Situation. King’s CinCLant planning team included the Fleet Intelligence Officer (FIO), Lieutenant Commander William S. Pye, the Fleet Communications Officer (FCO), Lieutenant Commander Russell Willson, and his replacement, Leigh Noyes. The aide to the Commander, Submarine Force, Atlantic Fleet (ComSubLant), Lieutenant Commander Chester W. Nimitz, also contributed the CinCLant Estimate of the Situation.
Having applied U.S. Navy planning doctrine, Mayo envisioned an autonomous role for U.S. Navy operations on the European front. He followed an incremental approach, attempting to maintain good relations between the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy. In a memorandum to the First Sea Lord, Jellicoe, Mayo requested details on past mistakes as a prerequisite for discussions on “what is proposed to do.” Such requests appeared insulting to Jellicoe and his staff, who largely viewed Mayo and the CinCLant staff as unnecessary. Jellicoe complained to Sims about Mayo. Sims acted as an intermediary with Mayo and by safeguarding the interests of the U.S. Navy. The relationship progressively soured between Jellicoe, Sims, and Mayo. The situation contributed to the reassignment of Jellicoe, when Wemyss assumed the role of First Sea Lord in the spring of 1918.

The tentative alliance between the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy hinged upon the informal ties established among individual personalities. Working behind the scenes of high command, Sims and Mayo empowered their subordinates. Sims and Mayo allowed their personnel to act judiciously in producing results which may not have been ideal, but nevertheless proved acceptable in accomplishing their mission in European waters. Similar to the relationship between the Admiralty and the London Flagship, the Royal Navy commanders viewed U.S. Navy forces as an adjunct to the Grand Fleet. King recited an incident inside the wardroom aboard the Atlantic Fleet flagship, USS Pennsylvania (BB-38), when a visiting British officer suggested that the “United States should join the British Commonwealth so as to produce a union that could resist any [future] attack.”

Anglo-American relations always remained cordial on the European front, although the British frequently took a condescending tone in relations with their American counterparts. For roughly four centuries, the British Empire defined global maritime affairs. Britannia famously ruled the waves – and waved the rules to suit Britannia – for nearly four centuries. As the Royal Navy relied so heavily upon their AEF partners in the First World War, U.S. Navy commanders developed strong conclusions about maritime strategy, multinational naval operations, and combined command. Such experience shaped the perspectives of U.S. Navy officers like Knox, King, Stark, Halsey, Nimitz, and others who later defined American concepts of sea power after the First World War. The experiences of these personalities on the European front during the First World War influenced future U.S. Navy doctrine for future operations involving other navies. U.S. Navy professionals generally returned from the First World War with strong opinions about coalition warfare and maritime strategy. Among other major lessons, they concluded that Royal Navy strategy tended to focus on the British Empire, rather than the United States. They further conclude that such an arrangement “was to be avoided in future.”

Victory at Sea

The strategic relationship between the Admiralty and the Navy Department hinged upon Sims and the London Flagship. Continuing his role as a facilitator, Sims attained the temporary rank of four-star admiral during the Versailles Treaty negotiations in December of 1918. Gaining celebrity status during the war potentially provided inroads to become CNO, or a seagoing fleet commander, or perhaps a higher political office. Wishing to avoid competing with other more senior ranking admirals for such positions, Sims instead requested orders to return to as President, Naval War College. Upon receiving the SecNav endorsement, Sims noted that the decision “relieves them from the embarrassment of not knowing what to do with me.”
Figure 12 - Yale University recognized Sims for contributions to the United States with an honorary degree in 1919. During his second tour as President, Naval War College from 1919 to 1923, Sims expanded the academic ties with Yale, Harvard, and other institutions.

Sims intended to expand the Naval War College curriculum to prepare a new generation of U.S. Navy professionals to think strategically about maritime coalitions. Broadening the educational curriculum for American naval personnel was an essential advantage. Sims revised the Naval War College curriculum to expand upon methods in decision analysis to focus on historical case studies from the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar to the 1916 Battle of Jutland. Having returned from Europe to join the Naval War College, Stark and Nimitz recalled the emphasis Sims placed upon critically examining past battles. Upon completing his studies in 1923, Nimitz explained that his studies of the Battle of Jutland were so thoroughly detailed “he knew the battle by heart.”

In this mission to glean practical lessons from history, Sims recruited the assistance of Kittredge and Knox from the London Flagship. By 1920, Kittredge served as the archivist at the Naval War College. The works of Luce and Mahan remained central to the curriculum. However, Sims also provided funding for Kittredge to expand the Naval War College library and research collection to include works published by the British maritime theorists Sir John Knox Laughton, Spenser Wilkinson, and Julian Corbett. During his tenure, Kittredge also assisted Sims in drafting his memoir, Victory at Sea. In an affiliated work, Kittredge leveled a pointed critique in the 1921 study, Naval Lessons of the Great War. Together, these works provide an authoritative account of U.S. Navy strategy and operations in Europe.

Rather than emphasize U.S. Navy successes in the war at sea, Sims emphasized the failures of organization and strategy which placed the AEF in a subordinate role in relations with Anglo-French allies. The conclusions offered by Sims stirred significant controversy in the popular American media. From this context, the approach of Sims adopted in addressing problems affecting the service contrasted with that of the U.S. Army commander, Pershing. When discussing the role of civilians, Pershing once admonished his aide, Lieutenant George S. Patton, that American military professionals “are at liberty to express our personal views only when called upon to do so or else
confidentially to our friends, but always confidentially and with complete understanding that they are in no sense to govern our actions.”

In the interests of the U.S. Navy, Sims pressed a clearly strategic perspective in recognizing the global mission of the service in both peace and war. He believed the U.S. Navy had the capacity to stand “second to none.” In articulating this point, Sims severely criticized the SecNav, Daniels, and the CNO, Benson, for failing to provide strategic resources for U.S. Navy forces in Europe during the First World War. These accusations fueled a series of Congressional inquiries, which tarnished the popular image of the U.S. Navy. In frustration, Franklin D. Roosevelt worried about the image of Sims as “holier-than-now” and the broader perceptions of the “gold laced gentlemen” within the U.S. Navy after the First World War. Roosevelt agreed with Sims and supported his vision of the U.S. Navy. On the other hand, Roosevelt preferred a more nuanced strategic approach, which he later described in the vision of a “two ocean navy.”

Figure 13 - Sims spoke openly about the problems of organization within the Navy Department. However, his personal connections with the Roosevelt family proved useful. Franklin D. Roosevelt encouraged reformers within the service, though worried about Sims' penchant for voicing his controversial opinions in the American media.

In a broader quest for reform within the U.S. Navy, Sims highlighted the fundamental problem of education. He recruited Knox, from the London Flagship, to preside over a board comprised of veterans of the CinCLant staff, King and Pye. Working at the Naval War College, the Knox-King-Pye board produced the definitive “Report and Recommendations of a Board Appointed by the Bureau of Navigation Regarding the Instruction and Training of Line Officers.” Drawing from firsthand experience of the First World War, Knox, King, and Pye collaborated to develop a strategy for the postwar U.S. Navy. They suggested that the average U.S. Navy professional suffered from profound ignorance of broader strategic questions, as they were “‘educated’ only in preparation for the lowest commissioned grade.” The recommendations of the Knox-King-Pye board largely influenced the educational curriculum for U.S. Navy personnel in the 1920s and 1930s.

First World War adventures in European waters fueled strong professional alliances among U.S. Navy veterans of the London Flagship and Atlantic Fleet. Common wartime experiences inspired U.S. Navy professionals to address underlying questions of strategy and command. Similarly, the ASecNav, Franklin D. Roosevelt, drew clear conclusions from his experiences on the European front during the First World War. He frequently interacted with members of the London Flagship and CinCLant staffs. Significantly, Roosevelt remained very interested in the careers of Knox, Stark, and King. As President of the United States, Roosevelt solicited advice from Knox on questions of American naval policy after 1933. As the CNO after 1939, Stark also shaped the Roosevelt naval strategy
of Anglo-American collaboration. After 1941, Roosevelt empowered King to execute American maritime strategy, coordinate combined operations on a worldwide scale, and establish the U.S. Navy as the underlying foundation for the American concept of a United Nations after the Second World War.

Figure 14 - Sims openly encouraged American voters to view the U.S. Navy as a crucial element in the defense of the United States. To these ends, he also spoke openly about the problems of organization within the Navy Department. In this cartoon portrayal, Sims emphasizes the problems, rather than the success, of U.S. Navy operations in the First World War.

1 Akin to the “HMS” of the Royal Navy, or “USS” of the U.S. Navy, warships of the Imperial German Navy carry the Seiner Majestäts Schiff with the acronym “SMS,” which may be translated as “his majesty’s ship.” The German term for submarine, or Unterseeboot, generally followed with a numerical reference to a specific vessel. In this case, the German submarine may appear as “SM U-53.” As the term “U-boat” is derived from British propaganda, the phrase “German submarine” will be employed within this brief essay. See Michael L. Hadley, Count Not the Dead: The Popular Image of the German Submarine (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), 172-95.
2 Hans Rose, “With the U-53 to America,” in The Living Age (26 November 1926), 352.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 333.
6 Ibid.

Furer, Administration of the Navy Department, 29-30.

Ibid.

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Ernest J. King with Walter Muir Whitehill, Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952), 103 and 114-45.


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Frank Schofield, Estimate of the Situation (Newport, Rhode Island, 1912), 1-4.


Ibid., 91.

Ibid., 84-110.

Hattendorf, Sailors and Scholars, 89.

Ibid.

King, Fleet Admiral King, 106.

Washington, D.C., Library of Congress (LC), Dudley Wright Knox Papers (Knox), Box 13, Rough Notes and Article Drafts, “The Navy and Public Indoctrination.”

Hattendorf, Sailors and Scholars, 89-91.


In his memoir of the western front, for example, Ernst Jünger remarked about the presence of Americans in the German Army ranks. See Ernst Jünger, In Stahlgewittern (Hamburg, Germany: Deutsche Hausbücherei, 1926), 96.


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38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
42 Sims, Victory at Sea, 8-17.
44 Sims, The Victory at Sea, 8 and 105-110.
50 Still, Crisis at Sea, 40.
57 Ramsay, Spymaster, 161-70.
58 Sims, Victory at Sea, 253.
59 Ibid.
60 Kirk Reminiscences, 182.
61 NHHC, Kittredge, Box 1, Folder “Miscellaneous.”
62 Stanford, California, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Tracy Barrett Kittredge Papers, 1910-1957 (Kittredge Papers), Box 8, "Oxford and Early Essays," Folder 2.
Sims, Victory at Sea, 243.


Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 5.

Ibid., 117-20.

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King, Fleet Admiral King, 116.

King, Fleet Admiral King, 135.

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