

2011

In My View

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Recommended Citation

Hone, Trent and Forbes, Joseph (2011) "In My View," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 64 : No. 4 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol64/iss4/21>

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IN MY VIEW

ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AT SEA

Sir:

I was pleased to see Thomas Mahnken's piece on asymmetric warfare and the battles off Guadalcanal ["Asymmetric Warfare at Sea: The Naval Battles off Guadalcanal, 1942–1943" in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, pp. 95–121]. Dr. Mahnken makes a number of worthwhile points, and his conclusions about the importance of integrating technology with tactics and operational concepts are well founded; these are very important and valuable lessons.

The article could have been considerably strengthened by more effective use of primary-source material or more recent secondary sources. Although Dr. Mahnken's conclusions are generally sound, the Navy's preparations for night combat prior to the battles of Guadalcanal are far more sophisticated than is generally believed, and the reasons for failure correspondingly more complicated. In order to understand adequately the lessons of Guadalcanal, it is necessary to examine these preparations in more detail.

As Dr. Mahnken points out, the Navy prepared for a campaign in the Pacific that would culminate in a decisive daylight fleet action. However, the Navy also recognized the potential of night torpedo attacks and, rather than shying away from such actions, actively practiced them. The "Night Search and Attack," an established tactic of using destroyers to seek out and attack enemy formations at night with guns and torpedoes, dates back at least to 1921.¹ The records associated with the development of these tactics illustrate that while the main fleet, and particularly the battle line, was instructed to avoid night action, light forces were encouraged to seek it out.

Through much of the interwar period, night search-and-attack procedures were relatively unsophisticated. Destroyers often attacked individually or in small groups; coordinated action proved to be difficult.² Continued practice paid dividends, however, and by 1937 a new set of procedures had begun to

emerge. Fleet Problem XVIII of that year saw a series of well-coordinated and successful attacks; the doctrine employed in those exercises was refined and integrated into a new and more thorough set of doctrinal publications describing the procedures for night search and attack.³

By the eve of war, the Navy had a set of procedures that rivaled that of the Japanese in terms of complexity and sophistication. New formations had been introduced, the “Vee” and the “Wedge,” for the cooperation of cruisers and destroyers at night. Both of these formations placed cruisers in the van; their firepower would be employed to penetrate an enemy screen. The destroyers behind them, arranged in three parallel columns, would charge through the gap and attack the enemy ships at the center of the formation with gunfire and torpedoes.⁴ Neither of these formations was linear; like the Japanese, the U.S. Navy recognized the limitations of long linear columns at night.

Why then were these procedures not employed off Guadalcanal? Admiral Nimitz asked as much in his comments on the battle of 12–13 November 1942.⁵ They were part of the existing doctrine, yet none of the task force commanders off Guadalcanal used them. It is impossible to understand fully the Navy’s failures without answering this question.

In order to do so, we must first examine the process for developing task force doctrine in 1942. The Navy had developed sophisticated plans and procedures for large battles, termed “Major Tactics” in the doctrinal publications of the time. It left “Minor Tactics” in the hands of individual task force commanders. They were expected to develop specific tactics for their forces, corresponding to their capabilities and the likely enemy forces they would encounter.⁶

This is exactly what happened off Guadalcanal. The linear formation with destroyers attached closely to the van and rear of the cruiser line was the brainchild of Admiral Scott, who employed it successfully at the battle of Cape Esperance. Scott departed from existing doctrine primarily because of the risks of friendly fire.⁷ Fratricide had been a repeated problem in prewar exercises and had been narrowly avoided in the battle of Savo Island. Unfortunately, the linear formation did not succeed in this regard, and it was quickly—and appropriately—discarded after the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.⁸

Absorbing lessons from earlier actions, Admiral Kinkaid developed a plan prior to the battle of Tassafaronga specifying that his destroyers were to operate out ahead of the cruisers in a separate formation and use radar to get into torpedo-firing position.⁹ It fell to Admiral Wright to execute Kinkaid’s plan, and although it did not go well, he stuck with the concept of not employing a single column and sent his van destroyers out ahead.

The approach of relying on task force commanders to develop specific doctrines and procedures explains many of the issues encountered in the battles off

Guadalcanal. In most battles, the ships were thrown into battle without adequate time to develop plans or doctrines. These forces were “scratch teams,” hastily cobbled together to repulse Japanese advances. They lacked cohesion and were unable to train together for significant periods of time. The critical failure was not a lack of sophisticated procedures or doctrine but rather a breakdown of peacetime organizational structure under the pressures of a two-front war, which disrupted unit cohesion.¹⁰

However, Scott’s departure from existing doctrine also illustrates why the Navy was able to adapt so quickly to new procedures, like the successful approaches of Admiral Merrill and Commander Burke. As unit cohesion increased and greater time was provided for training formations as a unit before battle, the flexible nature of doctrinal development combined with the initiative of individual task force commanders to allow the best procedures to come to the fore. Similar flexibility led to the rapid introduction and adoption of vastly improved procedures for the integration of radar into tactical doctrine, in the form of new gunnery procedures and the CIC.

What Merrill and Burke recognized, and potentially Kinkaid before them, was that destroyers could use modern radars to approach torpedo-firing position and, if they held fire with their guns, devastate enemy formations before their presence was discovered. The major doctrinal change was waiting to open fire with guns until the torpedoes had found their mark. This was not practiced before the war, because in prewar exercises the destroyers’ torpedo targets were the heavy ships at the center of enemy formations. To get to them, the destroyers would have to use their guns to penetrate the enemy screen; there was no way for them to conceal their approach.¹¹ But this assumption did not hold in the Solomons in 1943, and tactics appropriately changed.

Dr. Mahnken has correctly recognized the flexibility inherent in the Navy’s doctrinal approach, but it deserves more attention, particularly for the part it played not only in the victories of 1943 but also in the failures of 1942. The two are inexorably linked. Without the ability to allow task force commanders to develop their own doctrines, accounting for their forces and individual circumstances, the Navy would not have been able to leverage its technological advantages as quickly as it did. However, this very same flexibility forced on individual commanders a reliance that they were unprepared to meet under the pressures of a global war in late 1942. This factor, more than any other, is to blame for the failures off Guadalcanal.¹²

The implications of this are very important and go beyond how best to integrate technology, tactics, and force structure. The solution the Navy introduced is worth describing. While still encouraging flexibility and individual initiative, the Pacific Fleet developed in 1943 a more detailed doctrinal manual that

outlined the best approaches for combat with small units, as well as large ones. This was *Pacific Fleet Tactical Orders and Doctrine U.S. Pacific Fleet*, or PAC 10, of June 1943. It provided a “playbook” that would allow commanders who lacked the time or ability to develop their own procedures to employ set plans for battle. This approach was adopted by the entire Navy with the publication of *Current Tactical Orders and Doctrine, U.S. Fleet*, USF 10A, in February 1944. With these documents the wartime Navy discovered a harmonious balance of flexibility and standardization that allowed success in the Pacific War.¹³

TRENT HONE

NOTES TO MR. HONE’S LETTER

1. *Instructions, Destroyer Squadrons, U.S. Atlantic Fleet*, 21 November 1921, entry 337, box 107, record group 38, National Archives [hereafter: RG38, NA].
2. “F.T.P. 88, Destroyer Tactical Instructions, United States Navy, 1929,” USN Technical Publications, pp. 61–71, entry 336A, box 37, sec. V, RG38, NA; “United States Fleet Problem XIII, 1932, Report of the Commander-in-Chief United States Fleet,” Adm. Frank H. Schofield, p. 11, roll 14, target 1, Fleet Problem XIII, CINCUS Report, 23 May 1932, RG38, NA.
3. “Light Forces, White Fleet, Operation Plan No. 6-37,” 1 April 1937, roll 22, target 2, Fleet Problem XVIII, US Fleet, White, and Black Statements of the Problem, with Estimates of the Situation, Plans, Orders, Instructions, and Organization, RG38, NA; “Night Search and Attack Operations, Destroyer Tactical Bulletin No. 5-38,” Commander Destroyers Battle Force, 1938, entry 336A, box 129, RG38, NA; “Night Search and Attack, DTP 2-40,” Commander Destroyers Battle Force, 1940, entry 336A, box 130, RG38, NA; “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack,” Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, W. S. Pye, 24 December 1941, Naval Historical Center, World War Two Command File, box 250.
4. “Light Forces in Night Search and Attack,” Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, W. S. Pye, 24 December 1941.
5. “Preliminary Report of Action, 12–13 November 1942,” p. 8, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, 28 December 1942, World War Two Action and Operational Reports, box 19, RG38, NA.
6. See Trent Hone, “‘Give Them Hell!’ The US Navy’s Night Combat Doctrine and the Campaign for Guadalcanal,” *War in History* 13, no. 2 (April 2006), pp. 171–99.
7. “Report of Night Action 11–12 October 1942,” p. 2, 22 October 1942, World War Two Action and Operational Reports, box 17, RG38, NA.
8. See Hone, “‘Give Them Hell!’”
9. “Operation Plan No. 1-42,” Commander Task Force Sixty-Seven, 27 November 1942.
10. See Hone, “‘Give Them Hell!’”
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. See Trent Hone, “U.S. Navy Surface Battle Doctrine and Victory in the Pacific,” *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 67–105.

CAPTAINS OF THE SOUL

Sir:

In his article “Captains of the Soul: Stoic Philosophy and the Western Profession of Arms in the Twenty-First Century” [*Naval War College Review*, Winter 2011, pp. 31–58], Dr. Michael Evans, in what might be regarded as overkill, cites the Old Testament, the Alcoholics Anonymous “Serenity Prayer,” the TV series *Star Trek*, Latin quotes, the poems “Invictus” and “Ulysses,” and other poetry and poets and novels and novelists, Albert Einstein, the pleasure-loving, self-indulgent Winston Churchill, ancient Greek philosophers, and many other persons and sources, so numerous it would be tedious to list them by name, on behalf of the contention that modern Western professional military officers could use Stoic philosophy to deal with “an asymmetric enemy who abides by a different set of cultural rules,” i.e., the Muslims in counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Current behavioral values, Evans claims, place Westerners at a disadvantage when fighting followers of Islam, who follow cultural imperatives based on a strict code of honor.

But Evans, in spite of all his sundry citations, fails to provide even one example of how on the field of battle in counterinsurgency warfare, or in trying to win the hearts and minds of contested populations, the unreformed, unreconstructed honor code of Islam (which, for example, to protect family honor requires the male relatives of a woman who has been raped through no fault of her own to murder her, and which requires that Muslim girls in a burning building must remain inside and die if they are not properly attired to go outside) places Muslims at an advantage and Western militaries and Western democracies at a disadvantage in asymmetric warfare. Evans says an erosion of public honor in Western term societies has impacted upon “the Western military’s professional ethics and its institutional notions of duty and sacrifice” [page 33]. But he cites no example of how this has manifested itself in the actual conduct of counterinsurgency by Western professional military officers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The only military problem that Evans describes in his article proposing the adoption of Stoic philosophy by Western professional military officers is that of neuropsychiatric disorders among 20% of U.S. service members—not just officers—who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. Evans doesn’t disclose what part of that 20% affected are officers and what percent of all officers are affected.

Evans has not demonstrated how these “invisible wounds of war,” post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), and depression, which are the result of having served in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been the actual causes of specific disadvantages U.S. forces have experienced during the conduct of operations in those

two countries. Let's keep in mind that the "post" in post-traumatic stress disorder means "after," "subsequent," "later."

Evans admits that there are "fundamental gaps" regarding the causality of military mental-health problems. Yet he cites the opinions of an American brigadier general, who is not an expert in psychology, and a military philosopher, who is also no expert in psychology, that Stoic characteristics could be of value in combating combat stress—not post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. These unsubstantiated opinions don't support Evans's contention about the adoption of Stoic philosophy by military officers. He doesn't even show that stress in combat is always necessarily dysfunctional and counterproductive.

In closing, I would like to point to an observation by the ancient Athenian orator and statesman Pericles in his funeral oration over the Athenians killed fighting Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Although the Spartans may not have had an intricately developed system of Stoic philosophy, they were certainly stoical in how they lived. "Unlike the Spartans, we do not harden ourselves with a stern and harsh discipline beginning in childhood. On the contrary, we live as we please and take a pleasurable exercise whenever it suits us to do so." Yet this difference in lifestyles did not seem to put the Athenians at a disadvantage when facing the Spartans in battle.

JOSEPH FORBES