

2010

## In My View

W.J. Holland Jr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Holland, W.J. Jr (2010) "In My View," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 63 : No. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss1/22>

This Additional Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## IN MY VIEW

---

### **“THE HEART OF AN OFFICER”**

Sir:

Every successful officer considers his career path as that most appropriate and useful. So it is—for him or her. Certainly the successes of Admiral Stavridis and Captain Hagerott testify to the worth of their credentials to make the arguments in their article [see James Stavridis and Mark Hagerott, “The Heart of an Officer: Joint, Interagency, and International Operations and Navy Career Development,” in the Spring 2009 issue, pp. 27–41]. But the thrust of their argument, based upon their own histories and experiences, is not congruent with the mission of the Navy. Officer selection, training, education, and experience are not, and should not be, intended to prepare officers to serve as joint combatant commanders. The Navy needs to produce only a handful of senior officers each year for these tasks. But several hundred officers are required as commanding officers of battle groups, amphibious ready groups, ships, aircraft squadrons, and the shore stations supporting them.

These commanding officers are those who execute the actual function of the Navy—to serve at sea or in direct support of those who do. The Navy’s job is at sea, there to perform effectively and efficiently over long periods. The individual components that perform the functions are highly technical in form and substance. While a grasp of history, political science, and sociology is useful and mastery of language is extremely beneficial, these are not areas that help officers to operate and maintain complex machinery. The nod to nuclear power in their essay is an acknowledgment of this fact, but their relegating such expertise to that specialty damages the capability of the rest of the fleet.

The decision to require line officers to master the technology of ship’s propulsion—made over a hundred years ago—set the stage for a grasp of technical details in commanders. The proposal to relegate these details back to engineering duty specialists carries the second-order effect of removing technical competence from line officers just when the technologies of warfare have become more

complex than those of ship's propulsion. The expertise demanded of submarine officers in the understanding of the physics of their propulsion plant also generates understanding of the physics of sound in the ocean—a comprehension vital to that warfare specialty.

Every officer needs an honest appreciation of the laws of physics, theories of thermodynamics, the fundamentals of preventive and corrective maintenance, and some comprehension of computer technology. Previous episodes in which concerns with the machinery of the ships were relegated to the sidelines resulted in such a poor state of material conditions and upper-level supervision that Admiral Holloway, then Chief of Naval Operations, had to require special engineering training for all officers going to command at sea; the establishment of the Propulsion Plant Examining Boards and years of attention were needed to restore surface ships to reasonable standards of readiness. Today and for the future the bottom line remains: if officers cannot get their ships under way and operate them effectively, their ships are liabilities, not assets.

Legislative demands have eroded the goals of technical excellence over the past thirty years, at the price of achieving jointness. But “jointness” has little meaning at sea—other services have few functions there and even less interest. The proposal of Admiral Stavridis and Captain Hagerott to generalize the majority of naval officers serves to further this erosion.

Admiral Stavridis's career demonstrates that there are especially talented individuals who respond to the educational opportunities and who can excel at joint commands. There will always be such individuals. Constructing career paths to make every officer a potential combatant commander shortchanges the true epitome of the naval profession—Command at Sea.

W. J. HOLLAND, JR.

*Rear Admiral, USN (Retired)*

*Vice President, Naval Historical Foundation*