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# The Dawn of the New Japanese Navy: The Story of a Japanese Officer's Attendance at the US Naval War College

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Vice Admiral Kenichi Kitamura (Ret.)  
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**T**he Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) celebrated its thirtieth birthday in the spring of 1982. Thanks to the efforts of our elders and seniors, and the many who have followed in their footsteps, the MSDF has developed steadily and soundly to reach the level it is today.

The Japanese people have achieved a miraculous economic renaissance during the past thirty years. Meanwhile, the strategic situation of the world has drastically changed; largely the result of a shift in the military, especially naval balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Therefore, it is both timely and appropriate that the MSDF review how steadily and properly it has followed the course which was set at its inception, and whether it will be able to cope with the future by continuing on its present course. In the process of such review and reflection, Admiral Sadayoshi Nakayama—former Chief of the Maritime Staff (CNO)—insists that the officers of the MSDF should recall their elders' resolution during the early years of its history. In particular, Admiral Nakayama believes that the attendance of the MSDF officers at the US Naval War College since 1956 has been most constructive to the development and improvement of the MSDF, which was then still in its infancy. He recently suggested that it would be useful if I wrote a paper for the "younger" generation of the MSDF on the start of the Naval Command Course at the US Naval War College. This course of study was opened in 1956 to senior naval officers of the free nations through the far-sighted decision of Admiral Arleigh Burke, then Chief of Naval Operations.

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Vice Admiral Kitamura served as Commander in Chief of the Self Defense Fleet before his retirement, and is now Director of the Japanese Center for Strategic Studies.

It was through the Naval Command Course that Japan was first permitted to send an officer student to the US Naval War College. Even though the Imperial Navy could send several midshipmen to Annapolis, no students were admitted to Newport. However, it was fortunate for the Imperial Navy and Japan that Lieutenant Saneyuki Akiyama\*—sent to the United States to study naval tactics just after the Sino-Japanese War (1894)—could study privately under the tutelage of Captain A.T. Mahan at the Naval War College. What he learned from Captain Mahan contributed to the success of the Japanese Combined Fleet in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and the Japanese victory in turn illustrated the adequacy of Mahan's strategic concepts.

Today the MSDF stands at a turning point, and I hope that this article may help the readers to understand how enthusiastic our elders and seniors were to bring up the new navy. For this reason I have titled this article "The Dawn of the New Japanese Navy."

***The Establishment of the Naval Command Course.*** In November 1955, the late Admiral Ko Nagasawa, then Chief of the Maritime Staff (CNO) of the MSDF, visited the United States with Rear Admiral Nakayama at the invitation of Admiral Burke. In his planning of the trip, Admiral Nakayama recommended that Admiral Nagasawa seek from Admiral Burke a favorable consideration for the attendance of a MSDF officer at the US Naval War College. The fact that this issue was Admiral Nagasawa's only request during his official call on Admiral Burke demonstrated the great importance he attached to it. According to Admiral Nakayama's remarks, Admiral Burke replied that the request might be difficult to accept, for the Naval War College was then still closed even to the British Navy.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1956 I was informed by Admiral Nakayama that a special course for senior foreign naval officers of the Free World nations might be opened at Newport. I was also told that I might be assigned as a student, if the MSDF should be invited. In mid-June I received an order to attend the course, which was to start in mid-August, only two months later. I flew from Tokyo to San Francisco on 9 August, traversed the continent by train and arrived in Newport on the 13th. The entrance ceremony was held on 17 August 1956.

***Editor's Note.*** The author moves from 1956 to 1974 when he is requested to write a report on MSDF officers participation at the Naval War College.

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\*After returning to Japan, Akiyama was assigned as an instructor at the Naval War College. He took charge of a lesson on tactics and developed Japan's own naval tactics in the process. Just before the Russo-Japanese War broke out, he was assigned as a senior staff and operations officer of Admiral Heihachiro Togo, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet, and most of the students whom he had taught were assigned also as staff officers of several Fleet commanders under Admiral Togo. Akiyama was said to have made very significant contributions to the victory of the Japanese Fleet in the battle of Tsushima. He later became a vice admiral.

In 1974 I was asked by Admiral Nakayama to write a report on the MSDF officer's attendance at the US Naval War College. Given this, I wrote to Captain Troy E. Stone (then Director of the Naval Command College), requesting the historical information that was available. I received his reply, dated 1 November 1974, which can be summarized as follows:

- There is little in the files of the Naval Command Course (NCC) that indicates what specifically motivated Admiral Burke to start the Naval Command Course, or what was the timing of his decision.

- Although the navies of several countries inquired about sending officer students to the Naval War College, it was Vice Admiral Friedrich Ruge of the German Federal Navy who, in great part, influenced Admiral Burke to establish the Naval Command Course.

- Admiral, then Captain, Colbert was a student in the Naval Warfare Course just before the first NCC class arrived and was selected as the first Director of NCC. Other officers were involved in preliminary negotiations between the Naval War College and the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, but no one singly stands out.

- The first invitations were sent to various navies in May 1956, but there is no mention in our files of a formal decision to continue the course after a trial period of five years, although it was continued.

Captain Stone also enclosed several articles concerning NCC, including "A Naval Command Course: A Multinational Seminar" by Captain Kenneth H. Lyons, USN, and "Reflections of a Foreign Student" by Commander E. H. Van Rees, Royal Netherlands Navy. According to Captain Lyons' article, the establishment of this course was decided after a study of a short period and preparations were made hurriedly. The main thrust of Captain Lyons' article follows:

"Admiral Burke, in the fall of 1955, directed the President of the Naval War College to study the problems of establishing a course of instruction for senior foreign officers. In early 1956, a small group of US naval officers met at the War College to try to work out the details. Their studies indicated that the idea was sound and feasible with the proper financial backing from the Navy Department. Orderly progress would allow the course to begin in August 1957. Then they met with a group from the Office of the CNO. Not only was the financial backing available, Admiral Burke was impatient! He did not acquire the nickname '31-knot Burke' from sitting on his ditty box. Orderly progress be damned! All ahead flank speed! If possible, the course was to convene with the regular US resident student course on 17 August 1956. Planning and execution went forward concurrently and on many fronts. Blueprints were scarcely dry when carpenters and plumbers began to work from them in Sims Hall. Classrooms, lecture rooms, conference rooms, administrative offices, a library, projection booths—all must be provided and soon. At the same time, there was continuous consideration of the

curriculum. The new school was subsequently named the Naval Command Course. Then the CNO extended invitations to selected maritime nations of the Free World to nominate one well-qualified senior naval officer to attend this course.”

In August 1956, Admiral Nakayama was assigned as Commander of the Second Escort Flotilla, homeported at Sasebo, where he met an American captain. The captain said that he had worked at the Naval War College to prepare for the NCC, before he was assigned to the Seventh Fleet, and he was very much concerned whether the course was going well. His remarks were in accord with the descriptions of both Captains Stone and Lyons.

Taking advantage of Admiral Burke’s visit to Japan in August 1974, I asked him why he decided to establish the NCC. I was deeply impressed at his very modest reply:

“I remember that Admiral Nagasawa asked me to accept a Japanese officer student’s attendance at the US Naval War College. I could not say ‘Yes’ at that time. But later our studies on this problem arrived at the conclusion that the idea was sound and feasible, and I decided to start it. I thought that the US Navy might hardly be able to teach officer students of foreign navies, but that each navy would send a very capable officer student, and so the students would mutually teach and learn, and the US Navy could also learn from them.”

***The Development of the Naval Command Course.*** The initial name of this course was the “Command and Staff Course for Foreign Naval Officers.” The director was Captain Richard G. Colbert—later President of the Naval War College and subsequently Commander, South Europe Command, (Nato)—with seven staff officers: 2 captains, 3 commanders, 1 MC lieutenant colonel and 1 lieutenant commander and a civilian professor. The students numbered twenty-three, a single officer from each of twenty-three countries: 5 Asian, 9 European and 9 Latin American.

The class-size of 20-to-30 students was said to have been dictated by space limitations. But it turned out to be appropriate for the unity of the students. It facilitated knowing each other, and all of the students and staff could easily fit on a single bus or airplane, and stop at the same hotel or motel during a field study trip. The size was also most suitable in the conduct of war games by dividing the students into two opposing groups.

While the curriculum had been well conceived, it seemed not to have been examined in detail. The students were requested to write and submit comments and proposals about each study phase or field study trip. Our comments and proposals were reflected in subsequent curricula or trip programs and in those of future classes. Thus, the course has continually been improved.

I am not sure whether I read in the CNO's invitation or heard after arrival in Newport, but I remember that this course was tentatively opened as a trial course for a five year period. It was well-understood that the continuation of this course would be decided later, depending upon the evaluation of the effect by the US Navy and the students themselves.

We soon found that this course was very educational and useful, and repeatedly advised its continuation. It still functions as the Naval Command College, although, as Captain Stone wrote to me, there is no mention in the files of the college of a decision about its continuation. And thanks to the favorable consideration of the US Navy, the MSDF has continuously been invited every year. In 1977, the twentieth anniversary and reunion of the NCC was held in Newport and I was privileged to attend. We, the alumni of the first class, were presented with words of appreciation as contributors to the continuation and development of the course.

As I mentioned above, this course was initially called the "Command and Staff Course." But this name was unpopular among the students because it gave the impression that it was a junior course. As a matter of fact, most of the students who came from smaller navies were of rather senior rank in their respective navies. Consequently, the suggestion to change its name was first initiated by the students. Several names were proposed and examined jointly by the staff and the students, and we came to an agreement to call it the "Naval Command Course." It has been called the "Naval Command College" since the class of 1972.

***The Great Contribution of the Naval Command Course to the Unity of the Free World Navies and, in particular, to the Development of the MSDF.*** This course was very useful for the foreign students to understand the strategies, tactics, methods and practices of the US Navy. It also helped us to get familiar with American ways of living and thinking—through our association with the US naval officers at the Naval War College, their families as well as the citizens of Newport and other places where we visited.

It was also no less valuable that this course provided us with golden opportunities to gain and promote mutual understanding of international affairs. We discussed international law, allied defense treaties in which one or some of our countries were concerned, and current international problems. Each of our respective countries has its own domestic conditions and national interests as well as its own history, culture, traditions and customs. Each of the students has his own opinions based on such different backgrounds, and, sometimes unconsciously, has a individualistic way of thinking. And there exists the continuing challenge of dealing with the language. It is not easy to catch the real nuances of a foreign language through a dictionary but the experience of dealing with this problem with the other students is invaluable. Despite these difficulties, we soon came to

realize a difference in perspectives and soon considered security problems not only from the viewpoint of our own country, but also from a global or regional standpoint. Thus, a consciousness of a Free World navy community having the US Navy as its core, and a spirit of mutual cooperation was naturally and gradually developed among the students.

Such a spirit now prevails among the Free World navies and no one feels it strange. But imagine, this program was opened only five years after the signature of the Peace Treaty between Japan and the allies, and eleven years after the armistice of World War II—during which the allied and the axis navies fought severe sea battles with each other. Consequently, the contribution of this course to fostering such a spirit at this point of time can hardly be fully appreciated. Such a spirit of international naval unity has probably never been seen in the past maritime history of the world. It is of great significance, particularly today when maritime interdependence among the nations of the Free World has been on the rise.

In the fall of 1971, the US Naval War College held a seapower symposium which I attended and I had the pleasure of hearing a very impressive address by Admiral Burke. When it was over, the ardent applause by the audience lasted so long that the admiral was left standing on the platform with tears in his eyes, and I also could not help being tearful. I believed that it was because the foreign officers attending the symposium looked upon Admiral Burke as the father of the Free World navies. In this sense, the US Navy itself may be the best beneficiary from this course.\*

***The Expectation of the MSDF Leaders toward the Naval Command Course.*** The MSDF made it a basic policy at its start to adopt temporarily all the existing methods and practices of the US Navy, then digest them and develop their own. Our initial contact with the US Navy only provided low-level and piecemeal information as the courses attended were for junior officers and sometimes even for petty officers. Consequently, only the Naval Command Course provided the MSDF with an opportunity to make a systematic and comprehensive study of the strategy, tactics and concept of operations of the US Navy as a whole.

Meanwhile, as regards our own MSDF Staff College, only a year and a half had passed since its establishment in early 1955. Its foundation had not yet been solidified and its teaching materials were still insufficient. How the courses and curricula should be changed or improved was also to be reexamined.

Because the MSDF as a whole was still in such a state of affairs, our leadership held a great expectation on the future value of this course. When

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\*At the twentieth anniversary mentioned before, a monument dedicated to Admiral Colbert's contribution of this course was erected at the Naval War College. It was impressive that Admiral Burke and Mrs. Colbert unveiled it.

each study phase [at Newport] was over, I wrote to both the CNO and the President of the Staff College on its outline, adding my opinions concerning the improvement of the Staff College and the general policy of the MSDF.

On 22 January 1957, when about a half course was over, I received a long handwritten letter from Admiral Nagasawa, the CNO. He stated that it had been written out in three weeks because of his busy schedule. The fact that the CNO wrote so long a letter to a student of a commander rank, showed clearly how great was the expectation he entertained toward this course. I will quote hereinafter some parts of it.

**A**dmiral Nagasawa made mention of Dr. Jyo Nijima, a famous scholar, who sailed to the United States on board a ship as a navigator in the early Meiji era, attended a college in Amherst, Massachusetts, and came back to Japan upon graduation. Later he established Doshisha University and was made its president. Admiral Nagasawa wrote, "While the time and situation may be different between then and now, we share responsibilities similar to our elders' in the Meiji era. One of our most important responsibilities is to bring up such a new navy of great originality as to be able to meet the requirements of a new era and to take now correct steps that will be fairly appraised in the future. In this sense, officer students now attending several US naval schools are our hopes. In particular, I really expect you to make keen observations about essential problems, being neither merely numerical nor materialistic." He also wrote, "I always emphasize that we should, at the first step, thoroughly study and practice the methods, practices and way of thinking of the U.S. Navy, and then build up our new navy with freshness and originality. Such a mental attitude is essential for restraining ourselves from being nostalgic for the Imperial Navy in the past as well as for enabling the MSDF to cooperate efficiently with the US Navy in future."

Admiral Nagasawa, however, did not forget to write, "For this purpose, senior officers especially should try their best to perfectly digest American methods, practices and ways of thinking. Upon such a basis, the MSDF could develop into a real new navy of our own originality and independence, adopting the merits of both the Imperial and U.S. navies without being affected by their demerits." And he continued, "You may have had many opportunities to see how pragmatic and calculating the Americans are. You may also have found that they have such a progressive and moralistic temper as to move bravely forward, aiming at an ideal. They seek rationality in contradiction. You have noticed that their way of strategic thinking based on their superiority complex and the great potential of their country sometimes causes an oppressive feeling and provokes repulsion among the students from smaller countries. However,



American instructors might have re-examined themselves about you pointed out in relation to such an atmosphere.”

About that time, I also received Admiral Nakayama's letter, asking my personal opinions about the improvement of the educational system of the MSDF Staff College. He also stressed in the letter the necessity to develop those officers who pursue their own convictions, caring for neither praise nor blame.

Following the thoughtful instructions and encouragement of both admirals, I tried my best to learn as widely and deeply as possible from the US Navy, putting myself in an American officer's place. It was of course not only that I studied the strategies, tactics and procedures of the US Navy but rather that I endeavored to understand the American way of thinking itself that underlay them.

After graduation from the Naval Command Course, I was assigned as Chief of the Planning Team of the Operation Division, the CNO Office (1958-61), and then Chief Staff and Operations Officer to the CinC, Self Defense Fleet (1961-63). During those periods of duty I took charge of preparing: the Standard Procedures for Planning, the supervision of Naval Operations, the basic doctrine of naval warfare of the MSDF, and the concept and practices of naval defensive operations of the Self Defense Fleet. It goes without saying that the knowledge I acquired at the Naval Command Course, that is, the insights gained about the strategies, tactics and procedures of the US Navy, were very useful for me to prepare those publications and to carry out daily tasks concerning the buildup program of the MSDF, the training and exercise of the Self Defense Fleet and so forth. In particular, I got accustomed to estimating the situation in accordance with American rationalism and to considering the security issues from not only a viewpoint of our own country but a global or regional standpoint of the Free World as a whole. This helped me considerably to understand the rationale behind the US Government and Navy, and to develop a strategic concept for the MSDF.

***The Selection of the Next MSDF Student.*** Recognizing the significance and usefulness of this course, I repeatedly recommended to the CNO to send a student officer of ability and promise. In a letter to the CNO, dated 21 December 1956, I recommended: “It would be better to select the next student from officers who are rather senior to me.” By way of justification, I wrote: “Many junior officers having attended several US naval schools must have come back with great aspirations for the future of their respective fields. But I wonder how far their expectations have been met. Despite the fact that the MSDF now has many problems that are difficult to solve, and that most of them are of a political nature, it also cannot be denied that some of them are caused by senior officers' lack of understanding of modern naval

warfare and technology, and by their resultant lack of self-confidence and enthusiasm. Therefore, it is of immediate importance and necessity to improve the knowledge and ability of senior officers." I understood that, while the primary mission of this course would be to study professional matters, it would also be an essential means of improving mutual understanding among foreign officers, and especially with US naval officers. And so I continued: "Consequently, it would be more necessary and desirable to select the next student from senior officers who will soon take charge of plans and policy of the MSDF." Captain Takaichi Itaya who was four classes ahead of me at the Naval Academy, was selected. He later made the CNO and then the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Council.

**In Conclusion.** Both Admirals Nagasawa and Nakayama placed great hopes on this course and kindly encouraged me as has been mentioned. The Japanese government, however, treated officers attending American military schools coolly and paid us no additional allowance above our regular salary which was insufficient then even to support our own families. It goes without saying that such bad treatment made it difficult for me to fully enjoy a college-like life, for the NCC was more sociable than other courses. But in the firm belief that we had to bring up the MSDF to become a really new and reliable navy, I had such a steadfast resolve to make myself a pioneer that even such adversity did not discourage me, but rather stimulated me. I worked hard to learn as much as possible from the US Navy.

Having retired from the MSDF, my feelings are as follows: It may be easy simply to say, "I will be a pioneer." But as a matter of fact, a pioneer would be just like the tip of a drill or a cornerstone. When worn out, the tip would be replaced by a new one, and the latter might be abandoned before long, and so on one after another, while a cornerstone would scarcely appear above the surface. Unless one ventures to challenge such severity and difficulty with a resolve to become the tip of a drill or a cornerstone, one could hardly fulfill a pioneer's role.

The MSDF has accomplished steady progress so far. But the strategic situation of the world has witnessed a drastic change, primarily due to a shift in the military balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, and to a remarkable improvement of military technology. Given this situation, Japan may have to reexamine its defense role and the strategic concept for its national defense within the US-Japan security framework. The MSDF will then be required to reflect in its basic concept of defensive operations, weapon systems, tactics and procedures, structure and size of its operating forces, etc., necessary changes that are reflected in changes to its mission. The MSDF can be said to stand now at a turning point. It will be necessary for all of us to recall our seniors' firm resolve and realize that the appearance of a new pioneer might be called for again.