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Francis J. McHugh

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EIGHTY YEARS OF WAR GAMING

A monograph prepared by Mr. Francis J. McHugh
War Gaming Department

The Naval War College term for the year 1886 began on 6 September. It ended 19 November, just 11 weeks later.

The Saturday, 20 November 1886, *Newport Daily News* reported the end of the College year and published a list of the lectures delivered during the term. One of them was titled "Colomb's War Game." It had been given by William McCarty Little, a retired naval lieutenant and unofficial member of the College staff.

As far as is known, Colomb's Game was the first naval war game. Invented by Captain Colomb of the British Navy in 1878, it appeared 54 years after Lieutenant von Reisswitz's "War Game of Prussia," the first of the land warfare games.

Colomb's game was played as a pastime by a small number of British naval officers, and variants were introduced into European navies including the Russian, Italian, and Austrian. In this country Little studied the game and, recognizing its potential, discussed the subject with Capt. Alfred T. Mahan, President of the Naval War College. The result was Little's 1886 lecture, the first scheduled talk on war gaming.

Little's lecture appears to have had no impact on students and staff and was

apparently soon forgotten. However, many years later the 1898 edition of Major Livermore's war gaming classic, *The American Kriegsspiel*, stated that the naval Kriegsspiel had been practiced in the United States since 1886 as "suggested at first by Lieut. Wm. McC. Little."

In 1887 Little became an official member of the staff of the College and in that capacity delivered six lectures on war gaming. These talks covered the entire field of war gaming and all its possible applications to naval warfare. They aroused the interest of the staff and students and, according to Knight's and Puleston's 1916 *History of the United States Naval War College*, led to the adoption of war games as part of the College course. After 1894 all students at the College participated in regularly scheduled games.

Games featuring the strategic employment of naval forces in a maritime campaign were played on charts with pins and symbols. Those dealing with battles between opposing forces were conducted with miniature ships on checkerboard-like floors called game or maneuver boards.

Prior to a game the staff of the College prepared a hypothetical military situation. One such imaginary conflict

resulted from an assumed attempt by Germany to begin a Panama Canal, while the United States was supposed to be building a Nicaraguan Canal. The Germans were assumed to have an advanced base in the Azores. The students were divided into two groups. One group represented the United States, or Blue Navy; the other, the German, or Black Navy. Both sides prepared campaign and battle plans as they would for an actual war. Opposing admirals issued orders, and the chart game began as cruisers scattered on scouting missions, and battleships, oilers, and transports formed cruising dispositions and steamed toward the Caribbean.

When the opposing fleets closed to within gunfire range, the chart game ended. Then miniature ships were positioned on the game board and the battle fought as a board or tactical game. The rules of the game were based on fleet and historical data and the knowledge and judgments of experienced naval officers. After the game the records were analyzed, and staff officers summarized the strengths and weaknesses of opposing strategies and tactics.

Other games helped prepare the Navy for the Spanish-American War and for possible conflicts with the superior British Navy in U.S. home waters. As the result of these latter games, the College in 1895 pointed out the strategic benefits that would result from a Cape Cod Canal.

Situations were also devised and games conducted to examine the defenses of the Pacific coast and island possessions against possible Japanese and German operations.

When classes were not in session at the College, the staff conducted its own games for such purposes as devising and testing scouting and battle plans for the fleet. Staff gaming ended in 1911 when the College shifted to a longer curriculum year.

With the beginning of World War I, situations that were likely to arise if the United States entered the war were studied and gamed. Following the war, data obtained from naval battles and operations were incorporated into the rules of the game, and a completely new system was devised for computing the effects of all naval weapons against all possible targets. New and larger game boards and gaming facilities were constructed, and new fleets of miniature ships obtained.

The circular dispositions used in World War II were devised on the game board, and the employment of carriers and aircraft in the games provided future fleet commanders with an insight into the capabilities of integrated sea and airpower. The Japanese, or Orange Fleet, often provided the opposition, and innumerable island-hopping Pacific campaigns were played. Some of these games included amphibious ships not in being at the time of play. This is one of the advantages of war gaming, for games, unlike fleet exercises, can employ the forces and weapons of the future as well as those of the present.

After World War II an electronic maneuvering board system was designed to replace the game boards. This system, now known as the Navy Electronic Warfare Simulator, or NEWS, was installed in the center wing of Sims Hall.

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH



Mr. Francis J. McHugh is an Operations Research Analyst for the War Gaming Department of the Naval War College. He has been associated with war gaming for many years and is author of *Fundamentals of War Gaming*. He has authored articles for the *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, the *Naval War College Review* and other publications.

The installation was completed in 1958. The following year a war gaming department was established to program and conduct games on the NEWS and to maintain this highly complex electronic war gaming system.

For the first 6 months of each calendar year the NEWS is used for conducting games for the students of the School of Naval Warfare, the School of Naval Command and Staff, and the Naval Command Course, a course for senior naval officers of friendly nations. The second 6-month period of each year is reserved for the fleet. During this time two types of games are conducted. In one type, fleet commanders and their staffs play at the College. In a second type, known as "remote-play," admirals and staffs play from their own operations control centers or from their own ships and are connected to the NEWS

by "secure" communications links. Remote-play games have involved east and west coast commands as well as operations control centers in Hawaii and Iceland. Some games have involved both Canadian forces and Canadian war gaming facilities.

The remote-play game is one of the most realistic and valuable types of war games ever devised. It is one of the many contributions that the Naval War College has made to the art of naval war gaming during the past 80 years. And if, at some future date, a building is constructed at the College for purely war gaming purposes, it will not be surprising if it is called "Little Hall" in honor of the naval officer who introduced naval war gaming to the College and who was the first to perceive its many possibilities.



The value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of past and present, but also their essential differences.

Sir Julian Corbett, 1854-1922