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Dale C. Rielage

Trent Hone

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COUNTING THE COST OF LEARNING

Dale C. Rielage

Learning War: The Evolution of Fighting Doctrine in the U.S. Navy, 1898–1945, by Trent Hone. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018. 432 pages. \$34.95.

There are two widely popular narratives of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific during World War II. On the surface, they are contradictory.

The first narrative thread is that in the interwar years the U.S. Navy created an extraordinary laboratory for innovation and learning. Its perceived success finds validation in Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz's assertion that rigorous and repeated Naval War College wargames had ensured that "nothing that happened during the war was a surprise . . . except the kamikaze tactics."¹

But there is also a second, less triumphant story. The U.S. Navy's victories at Coral Sea and Midway were darkened by repeated defeats in the waters off Guadalcanal. Most recently chronicled in James Hornfischer's *Neptune's Inferno*, the loss of ships and sailors in the face of competently handled Japanese naval forces reveals an organization that failed in the crucible of combat.

Both narratives, of course, describe the same navy. While conflicting historic narratives are commonplace, the gap between these two views is more than an academic exercise for serving naval officers. As the U.S. Navy contemplates how to meet the challenge of great-power competition, the perceived lessons of the interwar years have become a touchstone. Following the lead of the wider Department of Defense, the Naval War College is seeking to reinvigorate wargaming. The U.S. Pacific Fleet has resurrected the name, and to some extent the model, of the interwar Fleet Problem exercises as a practical laboratory for advanced war fighting. If the intellectual ancestors of these structures produced hidebound conventional wisdom rather than high-velocity learning, much of the service is potentially on the wrong track and needs to look at other examples.

In his extraordinary new book, *Learning War*, Trent Hone seeks to reconcile these two views, producing a nuanced understanding of the U.S. Navy as an organization. In doing so, Hone manages to view the familiar through new eyes,

a feat he accomplishes by making two distinctive choices in his analysis.

First, Hone focuses his attention on the surface navy, reversing the view of many standard works that emphasize the emerging naval aviation arm.

Dale C. Rielage is a senior civilian with the Naval Intelligence Activity, assigned as Director, Intelligence and Information Operations, U.S. Pacific Fleet.

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Hone rejects as simplistic and incomplete the conventional view that the loss of the battle line in the attack on Pearl Harbor forced conservative admirals to embrace, if only out of necessity, the potential of carrier aviation. Before World War II, naval aviation was a small, although controversial and important, part of larger questions of naval strategy and tactics. As a result, the U.S. Navy's thinking on naval aviation formed only a part of how it adapted to the stresses of combat during the first years of World War II. Senior officers' understanding of naval combat, including the employment of naval aviation, was formed through the lens of a fleet focused on its surface line.

Second, Hone approaches the U.S. Navy as a "complex adaptive system." Applying his professional background as a management consultant, he approaches the interwar Navy as if it was a business client working to adapt to a dynamic competitive environment. Through this approach, he touches on the commonly cited mechanisms—the General Board, the Fleet Problem exercises, and Naval War College wargames—but transcends them to address more-fundamental issues of institutional culture. While previous authors have described the relationship among these institutions as a "virtuous cycle," Hone expands beyond that simple description. Large institutions are inherently complex systems, which evolve through the interactive behavior of their individual elements and their wider environment. He eschews the neat cause-and-effect narrative of most histories, describing instead a network of officers with differing understandings of the profession, the environment, and their roles. This network interacted, adapted, and learned in a nonlinear way. Even if this formal systems approach is new to the reader, every naval leader who has guided or shaped meaningful change will recognize its elements instinctively.

Adaptability—which is to say, effective evolution—is not a given in complex institutions. Within the considerable latitude of USN doctrine, Hone discovers a strong diversity of tactics, techniques, and procedures within and among individual commands and warfare communities. To modern eyes, this diversity represents a troubling lack of standardization. In Hone's view, it was a strength, ensuring that the U.S. Navy entered the war with "clouds" of possible options that became seeds for rapid evolution. As Nimitz suggested, while not everything that came to pass in the war was expected, very little was unanticipated. Effective evolution requires a place where it is "safe to fail." The Fleet Problem exercises and wargames provided that opportunity. Hone, however, approaches these events as opportunities to test and share dynamic thinking rather than create it, focusing on the innovative culture of the officer corps.

This war-fighting diversity was bounded by a body of doctrine that created a common understanding among senior and midgrade commanders of how to view and react to tactical and operational situations. Hone takes the doctrine

discussion a step further, describing the “tactical heuristics” that guided the U.S. Navy (p. 123). Heuristics can be thought of as rules of thumb or habits of thought that rapidly suggest an “adequate, though often imperfect, answer to difficult questions.”² For Hone, the cumulative effect of the interwar Navy’s culture, learning, and doctrine caused the officer corps to internalize three tactical heuristics: a bias toward aggressive action, an emphasis on quick and effective gunfire, and a culture of decentralized command and control.

In the early days of the war, when confronting expected challenges such as the Imperial Japanese Navy’s long-range torpedoes and night-fighting tactics, these heuristics guided the reactions of the fleet. While they inherently suggested imperfect solutions, in the dynamic environment of combat they were more right than wrong. For example, while gunfire was more or less effective given the tactical situation, generations spent training officers to open fire quickly at maximum ranges focused the fleet on attacking effectively first—a habit that translated into the employment of naval aviation.

Thus, Hone arrives at one of the most difficult issues for serving officers seeking to understand the U.S. Navy’s performance in the early days of World War II: how to understand the two views of the U.S. Navy’s performance in the Pacific. What Hone suggests is that there is no dichotomy in the two accounts. Rather, the early defeats represented a dynamic and adaptable institution of learning in the harshest of environments. The diversity of thought and views allowed for a range of approaches to combat, with the best ones emerging as models for the fleet. The success of the U.S. Navy was not that it correctly anticipated every part of the World War II combat environment. Rather, it was successful because it was in the position to learn from the reverses that would have rendered a less adaptable navy a permanent loss.

Hone also suggests that, unfortunately, the factors that created this adaptability could not scale to meet the needs of modern industrial warfare. In 1938, there were just over 6,500 USN officers, growing to almost 39,000 by December 1941. By the end of the war, there would be more than 325,000 commissioned officers. In the massive wartime expansion, new officers and sailors could not be allowed the time and space to learn in the old familiar ways. Out of necessity, the Navy moved from exploration (learning new approaches) to exploitation (using patterns that had proved successful). This approach was remarkably successful in the critical task of transmitting knowledge and culture to inexperienced personnel. While there remained pockets of innovation—Hone reexamines the introduction of the combat information center as one such example—the interwar approach could not survive through the conflict.

As the U.S. Navy considers a return to great-power competition, the parallels to the interwar years are attractive. As in the 1930s, navies are working to

understand and exploit new technologies: cyber warfare, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, and long-range sensor networks. Multiple peer competitors are making their own plans and assessments about the future. With the purchase of every new ship or system, the Navy makes a multidecade bet on how the old assumptions will change. Unfortunately, Hone does not paint a reassuring picture of the post–World War II Navy. Despite the peace, the Cold War required the U.S. Navy to remain a large institution, requiring standardized and repeatable approaches. Exercises and games that had been sandboxes for experimentation became mechanisms to refine and reinforce established solutions.

Nonetheless, the postwar Navy did learn and adapt to nuclear weapons, nuclear power, electronics, space, and long-range strike. If Hone is correct that the interwar model was unsuitable for the modern U.S. Navy, then the question of how the U.S. Navy learned and evolved after World War II presents a worthy subject for a separate book.

Until that volume comes along, *Learning War* represents one of the most profound contributions to the discussion of high-velocity learning in a naval setting in print. Few historians have captured the past in a way that raises so many ideas and challenges for the present. As a result, no serious consideration of the U.S. Navy in World War II will be complete without reference to this volume.

Quite simply, if you are a serving officer and propose to read even one work of naval history this year, this book should be the one.

NOTES

1. Chester W. Nimitz [FAdm., USN], speech to Naval War College, October 10, 1960, folder 26, box 31, RG15 Guest Lectures, 1894–1992, Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, RI, quoted in John M. Lillard, “Playing War: Wargaming and U.S. Navy Preparations for WWII” (PhD dissertation, George Mason Univ., 2013), p. 1.
2. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2013), p. 98, quoted in Hone, *Learning War*, p. 12.