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## THE STUDY AND UTILITY OF NAVAL HISTORY

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*Milan Vego*

*The study of history lies in the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practice.*

REAR ADMIRAL ALFRED T. MAHAN (1840–1914)

*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 S. CORBETT (1854–1922)

**H**uman tendency is to ignore what happened in the past as being “irrelevant and useless.”<sup>1</sup> This is especially pronounced in navies (and air forces), because of their reliance on advanced technologies. Yet experience abundantly shows the critical role and importance of comprehensive knowledge of naval and military history for all officers and especially for those who aspire to reach the highest command and staff duties in their respective services. Almost without exception, all successful war-fighting admirals also have been serious and lifelong students of history. Knowledge and understanding of all aspects of war in general, and the art of war at sea in particular, cannot be obtained in combat—the life of any officer is too brief. Hence, the best and the only proven way to obtain that knowledge is through long and systematic study of naval and military history.

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The terms *maritime history* and *naval history* sometimes are used as though they are interchangeable. They are not. *Maritime history* is much broader and deeper than naval history because it encompasses the full range of human relationships with the seas and oceans. It consists of a number of subordinate areas of study, such as maritime economic history, the history of merchant shipping, the history of shipbuilding, the history of fisheries, and maritime law—and naval history is itself a

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subset of maritime history.<sup>2</sup> In narrow terms, *naval history* can be described as a study of all aspects of the tactical, operational, and strategic employment of organized naval forces and the naval-related shore establishment across the spectrum of conflict, from routine activities in peacetime and operations short of war, to high-intensity conventional war.

## THE STUDY OF NAVAL HISTORY

### *The Purpose*

The true purpose of history is to describe the truth, though truth is never unalloyed and we can only strive to provide objective truth as closely as possible.<sup>3</sup> History can point us in the right direction but cannot provide details about how we should reach a destination. It also can show us what to avoid, but it cannot tell us how to do so. At the same time, history can highlight the mistakes humanity is most likely to make and repeat. It offers to its students lessons on how to learn by the experience of others.<sup>4</sup>

History is a unique discipline. Its study demands a different intellectual process from those used in other disciplines—many of those other disciplines depend on history to provide the basis for their own assertions!<sup>5</sup> Various events are examined in all their complexity and in several different dimensions—social, political, and others—to determine a pattern of causation. Unlike other realms of study, history deals with both particulars and universalities.<sup>6</sup> It deals with life as it happened, rather than with “idealized conceptions or with artificially categorized segments of life.”<sup>7</sup>

Political, economic, and social ideas do not emerge from a vacuum. They are given meaning only by the historical circumstances within which they occur. They also do not spring from some source of eternal truth. Humans who contribute to and are affected by specific historical events conceive these ideas.<sup>8</sup> Military history is a part of general history. No matter what one’s attitude toward war is, war is an integral part of human history. Prior to 1945, there never had been a century without a war and there never had been a time of peace that lasted a hundred years.<sup>9</sup> Since the end of World War II, the world has entered an era of almost continuous low-intensity conflicts, though few high-intensity conventional wars. Military history, with its 3,500-year span, is the only discipline that can illuminate the totality of the phenomena of war.<sup>10</sup> A study of past wars is fundamental to preparation for the next one, because current military problems cannot be solved without an understanding of the past from which they stem.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Importance*

Solid knowledge and understanding of naval and military history provide numerous advantages for naval officers aspiring to reach the pinnacle of their profession. History teaches us to be wary of broad generalizations and quick solutions.<sup>12</sup>

It broadens one's vision and deepens insights. History impresses on one's mind how easy it is to make mistakes and how far-reaching these mistakes can be.<sup>13</sup> In studying history, there is individual judgment, but no formulas, tenets, or rules. Carl von Clausewitz warned against misusing history by expecting it to provide a "school solution" rather than to educate the minds of military commanders to expect the unexpected.<sup>14</sup> He was adamant that the study of military theory, and by extension military history, should guide the commander in his self-education—not accompany him to the battlefield.<sup>15</sup>

History's great naval thinkers—such as Alfred T. Mahan of the U.S. Navy, Raoul Castex of the French navy, Sir Herbert W. Richmond of the Royal Navy, Wolfgang Wegener of the Imperial German Navy, and British naval historian Sir Julian S. Corbett—also were great students of history; otherwise, their theories would have been useless. Mahan wrote:

History by itself is better than formulated principles by themselves; for in this connection, History, being the narrative of actions, takes the rôle which we commonly call practical. It is the story of practical experience. But we all, I trust, have advanced beyond the habit of thought which rates the rule of thumb, mere practice, mere personal experience, above practice illuminated by the principles, and reinforced by the knowledge, developed by many men in many quarters. Master your principles, and then ram them home with the illustrations which History furnishes.<sup>16</sup>

Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce, USN, remarked that knowledge of military and naval history shows us what errors have been committed in war and how they may be avoided. Mistakes are inevitable in war as in any other endeavor, but studying the art of war is crucial to making the fewest and least consequential ones.<sup>17</sup>

One cannot but profit by studying the experiences of others.<sup>18</sup> It is unwise to depend on happy inspiration on the spur of the moment. It is preferable to rely on the experiences of others, acquired by the study of history. Napoléon I said that "often what one believed to be a happy inspiration proved to be merely a recollection."<sup>19</sup> Some of the most successful commanders suffered setbacks and even defeats; the study of history should make us humbler. Proper study of history enhances one's ability to think critically and highlights the need for clear thinking.<sup>20</sup>

### *Ignoring or Neglecting History*

Experience shows that when naval officers—and flag officers in particular—ignore or neglect history, it invariably has adversely affected the preparation for war, the development of doctrine, and performance in combat. Some major navies—for example, the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy—have tended to neglect the study of naval history and the art of war during long periods of relative peace and in the absence of peer competitors. Additionally, major navies usually have

led in the invention and application of new naval technologies. This reinforces their already strong bias to placing paramount importance on matériel and their relative neglect (sometimes gross) of the study of naval history. Prior to 1914, it was believed widely in the Royal Navy that strategy and history had nothing to do with each other; leaders believed that study of naval history could be deferred until aspiring officers reached flag rank. Moreover, it was believed widely that not everyone should study history and that admirals did not necessarily need to understand naval history.<sup>21</sup> The British prime minister Lord Salisbury (1830–1903) said in 1895 that (British) naval experts could be found to support almost any view on what should be done, a quality some attributed to “the absence of any kind of historical teaching in the [Royal] Navy.”<sup>22</sup>

At the Royal Navy College in Dartmouth (established in 1863), history was taught as a string of disconnected events instead of as an analysis of causes and effects. All too often, history lectures were presented as mere collections of events and dates. This approach to teaching naval history discouraged attempts to derive lessons of history with a discerning eye. Yet when taught and studied properly, “history admits no superior in the mental training of officers whose profession is war.”<sup>23</sup>

Prior to 1914, the frenzied pace of technological naval advances led to the ascendancy of the so-called matériel school over the historical school in most of the major navies of the day. This, in turn, “killed” meaningful strategic thought.<sup>24</sup> The Royal Navy’s officers had scant knowledge of the tactics and strategy in the new era of fast technological changes. There was no staff or war college for the study of these subjects, and there was not much encouragement for young officers to read naval history to learn the principles of strategy and tactics.<sup>25</sup> Captain A. C. Dewar (brother of Vice Admiral K. G. B. Dewar, a leading reformer of the era) asserted that the Royal Navy was deficient in the study of strategy, tactics, and war. He wrote in 1913 that except for Philip Colomb’s *Naval Warfare*, “the officers of the greatest navy in the world have produced no work in the last thirty years of any really distinctive merit.” What he called “this sterility” might have been attributable to the “inexorable demands” of routine that absorbed all an officer’s available time. Yet this was hardly a sufficient excuse. It also might have been owing to an “absolute inability to think in terms of war on the part of minds constantly distracted by the study of mechanism and the minutiae of naval routine.”<sup>26</sup>

This sorry situation in the Royal Navy apparently did not improve during the interwar years. Admiral Herbert Richmond (1871–1946), another important reformer and a noted historian, claimed that the Royal Navy neglected study of the humanities in the education of its officers. Although there were excellent lectures given by prominent historians at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, they lacked accompanying critical analysis of campaigns.<sup>27</sup>

Like warfare in general, naval warfare is shaped by human nature, the complexities of human behavior, and the limitations of human and physical conditions. Although it should be of obvious importance, naval leaders throughout history often either ignored the critical importance of the human factor in naval warfare or gave it short shrift. In the late 1880s, few U.S. naval officers realized the importance of the human element in warfare. For most of them, war was a type of managerial exercise, a mathematical equation, or an engineering principle. Hence, the study of war was considered unimportant.<sup>28</sup> The prevalent view in the U.S. Navy was that “everything [was] done by machinery.” Mahan aptly pointed out that not even “the subtlest and most comprehensive mind” on the planet could devise “a machine to meet the innumerable incidents of sea and naval war.”<sup>29</sup>

Like the Royal Navy, the U.S. Navy long neglected the study of both naval history and the art of war. Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce (1827–1917) founded the U.S. Naval War College in 1884, and he called then-Captain Mahan to be a lecturer at the school. By the mid-1890s, the Naval War College had secured its existence.<sup>30</sup> Admiral Luce noted that history has been called “Philosophy teaching by example,” and went on to write that “history admonishes by its warnings. It is by the knowledge derived from the history of naval battles that we will be enabled to establish a number of facts on which to generalize and formulate those principles which are to constitute the groundwork of our new science. . . . It is only by a philosophical study of military and naval history that we can discover those truths upon which we are to generalize.”<sup>31</sup> Yet some officers still questioned the value of studying the art of war; one unnamed high-ranking USN officer reportedly quipped, “We can sail our ships, fire our guns accurately, we can keep correct positions in the line of battle. There is nothing else of consequence.”<sup>32</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, USN officers did not always appreciate the full value of military history in their studies.<sup>33</sup> The institutional appreciation for naval history’s importance improved during the interwar years. The curriculum at the Naval War College included study of many naval wars and battles, notably the Battle of Trafalgar (October 1805), the Crimean War (1853–56), the American Civil War (1861–65), the Spanish-American War (1898), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and World War I (1914–18). Furthermore, the students spent much of their time studying the Battle of Jutland (31 May–1 June 1916) in detail.

In the postwar era, the U.S. Navy’s interest in history varied greatly. In recent decades, the increased focus on matériel has led to the dominance of technocracy. Because of overemphasis on pure science, the critical importance of liberal arts, including history, in educating the future leaders is given short shrift. There is a widely held belief among many proponents of information technologies that history is irrelevant to the problems facing the Navy today. This situation has many

similarities to the state of the Royal Navy prior to 1914—which led to its early underwhelming performance in World War I—and in the interwar years. The consequences of such neglect will not be different today.

### *Learning from Naval History*

Study of naval and military history is the best way to understand the aspects of warfare across the spectrum of conflict. Studying past wars at sea, on land, and in the air provides necessary context for understanding the Clausewitzian nature of war. Any war, by its *nature*, includes hostility, violence, bloodshed, fear, fatigue, unpredictability, friction, fog of war, chance, luck, and even irrationality. These features are timeless. In contrast to its nature, the *character* of war is affected by transient factors, such as drastic changes in the international security environment, ideology, demography, religion, international law, and finally, technology. Study of naval history shows that radically new technologies affect all three components of naval art (strategy, operational art, and tactics) to different degrees. No new technology can replace any component of naval art. Novel technologies only can change the character of war at sea. The role and importance of psychological factors in warfare also can be learned and understood fully from the study of military history.<sup>34</sup> Without these intangibles, military history is dull and dry, and no one can learn anything from it.<sup>35</sup> The study of naval and military history shows that study of the phenomena of war requires the use of scientific methods. However, the conduct of warfare is largely an art and not a science, contrary to what many proponents of matériel believe.

Study of naval history emphasizes the need to have a balanced view of the importance of naval strategy, operational art, and naval tactics. By studying history one can learn that naval strategy is not developed without due regard to the larger framework provided by policy and national security strategy. Study of history shows the paramount importance of policy and national strategy. It shows that one's ends, means, and ways must be consonant with one another; otherwise, setbacks or even catastrophic defeats are inevitable consequences. No matter how many victories at sea are achieved and how big they are, they essentially are useless unless they serve a sound and coherent national policy and strategy. If one believes that the historical experiences are irrelevant under the pretext that the situation today is vastly different, then there is no alternative but to create the entire strategy on the basis of personal experiences or the opinion of living authorities.<sup>36</sup> Experience also shows that naval tactics never should be allowed to influence significantly—much less dominate—operational art or even worse, naval strategy.

Study of naval history shows that national and military strategy invariably should dominate operational art; otherwise, the results will be fatal.<sup>37</sup> It illustrates

that poor performance at the operational level can lead to tactical defeats, which may have not only operational but also strategic consequences. Japan's Combined Fleet suffered a decisive defeat in the Battle of Midway in June 1942 despite possessing what should have been an overwhelming superiority of force, because of a flawed operational plan. This example perhaps best demonstrates how the superiority of one's forces easily can be squandered when operational thinking on the part of commanders is lacking.

Experience demonstrates that the accomplishment of operational and strategic objectives depends on the results obtained by tactical actions. Naval strategy should ensure that tactical combat is conducted under conditions favorable for accomplishing strategic objectives. Bad naval tactics can invalidate a sound strategy. Hence, a sufficient level of tactical competence always is required to accomplish strategic or operational objectives in a war at sea. The U.S. Navy did not match tactical skills with the Japanese surface forces during the protracted struggle for Guadalcanal (August 1942–February 1943). However, the Allies ultimately won because they matched means and ends at the operational and strategic levels better than the Japanese. Study of naval history shows repeatedly that great operational victories only can delay but not prevent ultimate defeat if there is a serious mismatch or disconnect of the ends and means at the strategic level. A comprehensive study of past wars at sea, major naval or joint operations, and maritime and littoral campaigns is a major source for developing the operational perspective of future flag officers.

Study of naval history shows that a naval tactical action should not be fought unless it is both part of the operational framework and directly contributes to accomplishing operational or strategic objectives. Tactical victories are meaningless if they are fought outside the operational framework determined by operational art. As part of the larger Battle of Leyte Gulf, Admiral William F. Halsey (1882–1959), Commander, U.S. Third Fleet, won a tactical victory in the battle off Cape Engaño over a much smaller and weaker Japanese carrier force on 25 October 1944. However, that victory essentially was useless, because it was fought outside the operational framework—wherein Third Fleet was to provide effective distant cover and support to the Allied forces in Leyte Gulf. Only Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) vice admiral Takeo Kurita's (sudden) decision to turn north when his heavy surface force was on the verge of defeating the U.S. Task Unit 77.4.3 escort carrier group in the battle off Samar on 25 October saved the Allies from suffering an ignominious defeat that would have resulted if he had proceeded southward to Leyte Gulf.

Study of naval history shows a great danger in confusing naval tactics with strategy and strategy with the conduct of war, as the IJN did during the interwar years. The IJN was fixated on fighting a single decisive battle in the manner of



the Battle of Jutland. That preoccupation guided its tactical doctrine and ship designs, resulting in a powerful surface force that was both one-dimensional and brittle.<sup>38</sup>

The lessons of history are not confined only to naval strategy and operational art; they also apply to naval tactics. Proponents of the paramount importance of matériel firmly believe that naval technologies change everything in tactics. In this view, history is largely irrelevant today and in the future. Yet, while new technologies change the character of naval warfare, they do not change its content—that is, the human factor. The timeless importance of such decisions as offensive versus defensive posture, decentralized versus centralized command, and using initiative versus waiting on orders can be found in a long series of naval battles fought since the ancient era. The importance of a thorough understanding of the commander's intentions, of individual initiative, and of refusing to acknowledge defeat is to be found in the past wars at sea.<sup>39</sup> Experience shows that the principal reasons for success in tactical combat are having a plan prepared beforehand, articulating a broad and flexible intent, leaving details of the execution to the subordinate commanders, and not adhering to a formalistic scheme. In other words, the reasons for great defeats have been failure of leadership, poor seamanship, and the lack of courage.<sup>40</sup>

Experience repeatedly shows the need to use an overwhelming force against the most important part of the enemy forces, to achieve success in a naval battle. Admiral Luce observed that study of naval history shows that whether it was Athenian commander Phormion (in the battle of Naupactus in 429 BC) or Marcus Agrippa (in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC), Horatio Nelson or Oliver Hazard Perry (in the Battle of Lake Erie on 10 September 1813), the victory generally has been with a leader who had skill to throw two or more of his own ships on one of his enemy's.<sup>41</sup> Alexander the Great found a fleet necessary to reduce Tyre (in 332 BC). When the Cyprian and Phoenician galleys appeared, the Tyrians sank triremes from their own force in the channel to block the entrance to their harbors. Some 2,200 years later, the Russians executed a like maneuver in Sevastopol (in 1854–55) when faced with British and French fleets.<sup>42</sup>

A thorough study of naval history would show that one's tactical success cannot be consolidated without a quick and sustained pursuit of the remnants of the enemy forces. Many naval commanders have failed to seal their victories by unremitting pursuit—for example, Admiral George B. Rodney (1718–92) in the West Indies during the American Revolutionary War (1775–83). Admiral Thomas Mathews (1676–1751) abandoned pursuit in the battle of Toulon in 1744 during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) for another objective. The French admiral Anne-Hilarion de Tourville (1642–1701) failed to pursue the squadron of defeated English admiral Arthur Herbert (Lord Torrington) (1648–1716) in

the battle of Beachy Head on 10 July 1690. The British admiral William Hotham (1736–1813) failed to defeat the numerically smaller French squadron in the battle off the Hyères Islands (on the French Mediterranean coast) in July 1795; and Alexander Hood (1st Viscount of Bridport) (1726–1814) also did not finish off the French squadron in the battle off Île de Groix (off the Brittany coast) in June 1795.<sup>43</sup> In the Battle of Jutland, 31 May–1 June 1916, the British Grand Fleet achieved an operational success, but tactical victory belonged to the numerically inferior and better led and trained German High Seas Fleet. Admiral John Jellicoe (1859–1935) did not pursue the German battle fleet, because he believed that he would encounter the dreaded U-boats or mines.<sup>44</sup>

Tactical lessons learned from naval history show the critical importance of mission command, as exemplified by Admirals Michiel Adriaanszoon de Ruyter (1607–76), Edward Hawke (1705–81), and Horatio Nelson (1758–1805), and some other, lesser-known naval commanders. They all commanded by issuing general directives rather than detailed orders. Nelson trained his captains to work together as a team and to seize opportunities without waiting for orders. He blended their wills into one, while leaving to each freedom of action within the respective captain's particular sphere.<sup>45</sup> Prior to both the Battle of the Nile (or Aboukir) in August 1798 and the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, Nelson called all his captains and admirals to a roundtable discussion on board his flagship during which he explained in detail his intent for the forthcoming battle. His subordinates served him well, and they achieved two great victories.<sup>46</sup>

Contrast Nelson's command style with that of Admiral Mathews ahead of the missed opportunity at Toulon and the Italian admiral Carlo Pellion di Persano (1806–83) prior to his decisive defeat in the battle of Lissa in July 1866. Mathews gave his second in command, Richard Lestock, a curt "good evening" prior to the battle of Toulon when he called on the admiral for instructions. Persano told Admiral Giovanni Vacca, "We had no prepared plan of actions." He never called together either his captains or his admirals. Compare this attitude with the devolution of command by Admiral Heihachirō Tōgō (1848–1934) in the Battle of Tsushima.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in the Battle of Jutland, the commander in chief of the High Seas Fleet, Admiral Reinhard Scheer (1863–1928), applied the *Auftragstaktik* (mission command) by allowing subordinate commanders to exercise the initiative within the scope of the higher commander's intent.<sup>48</sup> Scheer only issued general instructions and left his subordinates to carry them out according to circumstances.<sup>49</sup> The Royal Navy's officers under Jellicoe were not educated and trained that way.<sup>50</sup> The British junior flag officers were reluctant to communicate information to Jellicoe and act on their initiative when they had the chance to engage the enemy. The British ships' captains failed to keep their squadron commanders informed.<sup>51</sup> Jellicoe exercised close and personal control over the

movements of the whole battle fleet without imparting any general idea to his numerous squadrons and flotillas.<sup>52</sup>

Historical experience illustrates that a weaker opponent who carries out a direct attack on seaborne trade or merchant shipping can threaten or even destroy a country's sea power. However, such an attack rarely has been effective to the point of victory unless it has been organized centrally, conducted on a large scale, and coupled with a defeat of the enemy's battle fleet.<sup>53</sup>

Study of naval history also shows how having a highly trained force is critical for success, from the flag officers down to the seamen. One's naval forces can be numerically larger and excellently armed and equipped but still be ineffective because of deficiencies in training owing to unsound doctrine. Combat training is conducted both in peacetime and during hostilities. However, deficiencies in combat training during peacetime cannot be corrected quickly—if at all—once the hostilities start. In the battle of Lissa on 20 July 1866, a numerically stronger Italian squadron suffered a decisive defeat at the hand of a smaller, less technically advanced but better led and trained Austrian squadron. The Italians had forgotten that the true strength of a fleet resides not in the excellence of weapons alone but also in the training and quality of personnel. The Italian fleet lacked organization, discipline, and sea training. Its crews were raw and unskilled in gunnery, and officers were inexperienced.<sup>54</sup> In the War of the Pacific (1879–83), one of the major reasons for Chile's success was the superior quality of its personnel. Its officers had solid professional education and shipboard training; many of them spent time training and serving with advanced European navies.<sup>55</sup>

In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the Russian and Japanese fleets were numerically almost equal, but the Japanese sailors were better educated and trained.<sup>56</sup> The state of the Russian fleet in the Far East was abysmal. Training of the Russian ships in gunnery and navigation was neglected for many years. Reportedly it took up to twenty-two hours to move the fleet out of Port Arthur.<sup>57</sup> The main reason for the Russian defeat was the lack of skills and the poor training of the officers and crews. The Russians also did not learn that the most important thing in naval combat is the spirit and decisiveness to win.<sup>58</sup>

Until the Battle of Midway in June 1942, the Japanese navy included superbly trained and combat-hardened carrier pilots.<sup>59</sup> However, the loss of four fast carriers in that battle along with many of their experienced pilots left an aviation arm with much less training and experience and significantly reduced quality and combat effectiveness. By the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944, the quality of training and experience and skills of the Japanese commanders and pilots of the fast carrier forces was much inferior. Most of the Japanese carrier commanders had only two or three months' experience.<sup>60</sup> The Japanese pilots, new to the force, were poorly trained—often with only three to six months of formal combat

training.<sup>61</sup> In one carrier division, no pilot had more than one hundred hours of flying experience.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, a pilot in the U.S. Navy had two years of training and three hundred hours of flying time before he was fit to fly from a carrier. Most of the U.S. carrier pilots were combat veterans.<sup>63</sup> The U.S. Navy also had a much more effective method of training for its pilots. After the Battle of Midway in June 1942, the U.S. Navy used its best pilots to train new pilots. In contrast, the Japanese kept their best pilots in operational units, where they gradually were lost through attrition in combat, along with the experience that could have been passed on to pilot trainees.<sup>64</sup>

The exceptional early performance of the German U-boats in both world wars largely was owed to the high standards of training in the branch. In the case of the lead-up to the Second World War, after the Kriegsmarine's first U-boat flotilla was created in 1935, German admiral Karl Dönitz insisted on strict and demanding training for his U-boat officers and crews. As far as possible, U-boat commanders and crews were trained under realistic wartime conditions. Hence, the U-boat crews were trained thoroughly in all aspects of their potential combat employment.<sup>65</sup> The six-month training schedule was divided into graduated periods. Dönitz claimed that in 1935, each U-boat had to carry out sixty-six surface attacks before it was allowed its first torpedo-firing practice. At the beginning of the war, the Germans had some three thousand well-trained submariners. However, already by the end of 1941, attrition of personnel and wartime demands forced training standards to be reduced.<sup>66</sup>

Prior to 1914, the Royal Navy's doctrine was not to fight at night. The British believed that they would achieve naval victory through formal artillery duels in daytime. In contrast, the Germans were not only very effective at daylight combat but also a great deal more effective at night fighting than the Royal Navy was.<sup>67</sup> In the Battle of Jutland, Jellicoe's only chance after the day action on 31 May was to close in on the German battle fleet west of Horns Reef and engage in a night action. Yet he was not ready to do that, because of the British weakness in fighting a night battle.<sup>68</sup>

During the interwar years, the IJN put an extraordinary emphasis on the intensity and quality of training. Its Combined Fleet was a highly trained combat force, which was evident in the first months of war in the Pacific. All the maneuvers and exercises of the Combined Fleet were conducted under conditions expected in a war. As a result, the skills and war-fighting capabilities of the IJN were improved greatly.<sup>69</sup> After 1927 and until the outbreak of war in December 1941, the Combined Fleet underwent rigorous night training.<sup>70</sup> The most demanding phase of the preparation for war started in 1934. Leaders in the practice exercises emphasized training in severe weather conditions.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the U.S. Navy entered the Pacific War in December 1941 with poor torpedo tactics and inadequate proficiency in night fighting. These deficiencies were not corrected until

well into the war.<sup>72</sup> This was the main reason for a series of defeats and losses in the struggle for control of the surface in the Solomons in 1942–43. Also, the U.S. Navy's training standards were not uniformly high—for example, surface forces were not as well trained as naval aviation crews.<sup>73</sup>

Study of military and naval history impresses on readers how critically important it is to have well-educated officers and senior commanders. It provides timeless lessons on the role and importance of leadership at all levels of command. Officers and commanders can gain further knowledge and understanding through the critical reading of biographies and memoirs of the great captains of the past.<sup>74</sup> By studying history, one can get a sense of the pressure and responsibility on commanders in uncertain situations when critical decisions must be made.<sup>75</sup> Understanding the performance of a great naval commander from the past requires a full grasp of the situation in which he found himself, and a clear view of the situation as he saw it.<sup>76</sup> One needs to search for the motives that governed the commander's actions and acquaint oneself fully with the instruction he was given and the conditions under which he made decisions and acted.<sup>77</sup> The greatest utility of military history for officers is that by studying the work of successful commanders, they can best understand what courses of action have borne success or failure.<sup>78</sup>

Study of naval history provides numerous examples of the commander's willingness to take responsibility. To instill, create, and develop the habit of taking responsibility is far from easy. It is very easy to follow uncritically orders issued by a higher commander and thereby not take the responsibility for the consequences in executing such orders. Naval history provides numerous examples of the need to possess moral courage, and it is on those pages that one can find stimulation and guidance.<sup>79</sup>

#### UTILITY OF NAVAL HISTORY

Study of naval history is useless if one's knowledge cannot be applied in practice. Historical knowledge can be put to good use both by navies as institutions and by individuals. Among other things, a major part of naval theory is derived from in-depth analysis of the past wars at sea. History does not and cannot predict the future. However, it can teach us not to repeat the errors and blunders of our predecessors. The analysis of historical events should lead to the development of a naval theory that shows the relationships and relative importance of various elements of naval warfare and its patterns. Naval theoretical concepts should be created on the basis of certain commonalities derived from the multitude of examples from naval history. And naval theory, in turn, provides a major input to the development of naval doctrine.

The study of naval history is important for the general public, statesmen, and naval officers. For the public, the knowledge of naval history should be an integral

part of the knowledge of history as a whole. Generally, a concerned citizen does not need to read about past operations and campaigns but should be aware of the role the navy has played in the national life.<sup>80</sup> Knowledge and understanding of naval history are very important for statesmen, because they make strategic decisions in both peacetime and wartime that deal with the employment of the armed forces, including naval and maritime forces. Statesmen, especially, need to understand the role and importance sea power has had in history. Leaders use naval forces as tools to accomplish the objectives of policy and strategy. Among other things, history shows statesmen that a nation's strength at sea is heavily dependent on a favorable geographical position and economic strength.<sup>81</sup> History shows the great need for having maritime alliances or coalitions and for understanding those that were successful and those that failed, as well as the reasons for those outcomes.<sup>82</sup>

Study of naval history is extremely important for the navy as a whole and especially for its officers and future flag officers. In general, the more a navy lacks organic combat experience, the more critical it is to educate its officers on the study of the art of war at sea as a substitute to learn from the lived experiences of others.<sup>83</sup> Although study of naval history cannot replace combat experiences, it is the most vital means available in peacetime to prepare an officer for war. The life of a naval officer is too short to obtain experience in all aspects of warfare in combat (if, indeed, that officer experiences combat at all!). But even acquired combat experience necessarily is much more limited than knowledge and understanding provided by the study of naval history. War games, field trips, and exercises are excellent tools for improving the quality of one's operational and tactical training. However, only the study of naval and military history can provide insights into all aspects of warfare.<sup>84</sup>

Naval history is extremely valuable for preparation for higher command in a war.<sup>85</sup> However, officers sometimes do not understand the value of the use of naval history as a preparation for higher command. In all professions there are more of those who seek to know the facts than those who draw conclusions from these facts.<sup>86</sup> Study of naval history should not be limited to what happened in wars at sea, but it also should open one's mind to an understanding of the navy as an instrument of policy and to an understanding of the interplay between domestic and foreign policy and the role and importance that naval and military forces have in a war.<sup>87</sup>

Naval officers do not have such a profound power of synthesis, imagination, and foresight that they do not need to use the experiences of those who have conducted wars at sea in the past. An officer who neglects to learn or ignores the value of naval history is bound to put too much importance on his or her own ideas.<sup>88</sup> Study of naval history would help an officer to understand what motivated some famous admirals to make their decisions. What were the sources of their

unanticipated difficulties? How did they balance advantages and disadvantages in a given situation? What was their train of thought in reaching conclusions and making their decisions?<sup>89</sup>

Biographies and autobiographies of famous admirals reveal how often successful naval leaders used experiences of others to resolve the problems they faced successfully. Admiral Edward Vernon (1684–1757) referred to the practice of the wars during the reign of British queen Anne (1665–1714) in his advocacy of formation of a western squadron in 1745. Admiral John Norris (1670/71–1749) opposed a proposal to use the fleet to force El Ferrol's narrow fortified channel in June 1740, using precedents from Cartagena, Cádiz, Camaret Bay, Vigo, and Rio de Janeiro to support his opinion that such an operation must be always of a combined nature. During the Crimean War, Captain B. J. Sullivan opposed forcing the entrance of the Russian naval base at Kronshtadt by quoting the experiences of Admiral James Saumarez (1757–1836) in the battle of the Bay of Algeciras (July 1801), and Admiral Nelson in the siege of Calvi (July–August 1794) and battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (July 1797). Admiral Pierre-André de Suffren (1729–88) studied the tactics of Admiral De Ruyter and actions of Suffren's two predecessors: Bertrand-François Mahé de La Bourdonnais (1699–1753); and Anne Antoine, comte d'Aché (1701–80).<sup>90</sup>

Some may object that all these commanders applied lessons from predecessors fighting with the same or nearly the same technology and armaments as they themselves possessed. In the modern era, however, ships and weapons are substantially different and more advanced. It is a legitimate question to ask whether lessons from battles fought by wooden ships, for example, are applicable today; they are. By understanding the past one will be less likely to make misleading analogies.<sup>91</sup> There is also a certain permanence of tenets, such as methods of forcing the entrance into a defended harbor or strait or the defense against an invasion, coastal operations, the attack and defense of trade, or the way in which sea command is exercised.<sup>92</sup>

Because very few naval commanders have experience commanding large forces in combat, the best way to educate them is through the study of the successes and failures of great naval and military leaders. There have been some notable exceptions to this, such as Admiral Nelson, a deep thinker who studied the situation carefully prior to making his decisions. He was arguably unique in his ability to discern the right thing to do, and at the right moment.<sup>93</sup> One might argue that almost all successful military or naval commanders were guided by common sense and waged their wars well without being deeply versed in the study of the art of war, but in many cases, victories were achieved despite poor leadership, only because the opponents were even worse. More than once Britain was successful by virtue of its enemies' weaknesses and mistakes rather than

through its own disciplined strength. Nor were all Britain's wars conducted skillfully, as the examples of the War of the Austrian Succession, the American War of Independence, and the Crimean War illustrate.<sup>94</sup>

The most successful military commanders, such as Napoléon I and Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke Sr., were also well-known as students of history. Napoléon I said, "Wage an offensive war . . . as did Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Prince Eugene and Frederick. Read and read again the history of their eighty-eight campaigns. Model yourself upon them; in this way only can you become a great leader and penetrate the secret of the art. Your reason thus enlightened will cause you to throw aside maxims opposed to these great men."<sup>95</sup> He also said, "Tactics, manoeuvres, the science of the engineer officer and of the artillery officer; these can be learned in text books; but the knowledge of grand tactics [operational art] is acquired only through experience and by the historical study of the campaigns of great captains."<sup>96</sup> Moltke said that to make a rational decision, we should "develop freely, practically, artistically, the mind and the will, with the help of a previous military culture resulting either from the study of history or from one's own experience."<sup>97</sup>

Some of the greatest naval leaders were also great students of history.<sup>98</sup> Several of the U.S. Navy's best admirals—Ernest J. King (1878–1956), Chester W. Nimitz (1885–1966), Raymond A. Spruance (1886–1969), and R. K. Turner (1885–1961)—were known for their comprehensive knowledge of naval history. King studied both naval and military history. He was especially impressed with Mahan's book *Types of Naval Officers Drawn from the History of the British Navy*, containing essays of famous British admirals in the eighteenth century. Among his heroes were Admirals Jervis, Nelson, Tromp, Suffren, and Farragut.<sup>99</sup> King read not only Mahan but books on Napoléon I and the American Civil War. He admired Napoléon I and studied several of his marshals. Moreover, he was one of the rare naval officers who studied land warfare.<sup>100</sup> King also wrote a number of articles that appeared in the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings* as a junior officer.

Admiral Nimitz was also a student of history. By his own account, the eleven months he spent as a student at the Naval War College (1922–23) had the largest impact on his wartime command. He immersed himself in reading naval and military history, strategy and tactics, and biographies. He also took part in war games where the main potential enemy was always Japan. His student thesis was on the Battle of Jutland.<sup>101</sup> Later in his career, Nimitz took great interest in amphibious operations and concluded that they would be the primary feature of a war between the United States and Japan.<sup>102</sup> Nimitz apparently had a lifelong interest in naval history. With Professor E. B. Potter, he coedited the acclaimed work *Sea Power: A Naval History* in 1960.<sup>103</sup>



Admiral Spruance acquired a solid knowledge of naval history during his years as a student (1926–27) and an instructor at the Naval War College (1931–33; 1935–38). Spruance was highly interested in the art of naval warfare. He also was stimulated intellectually at the Naval War College by taking part in war games and gained a reputation as a thinker within the Navy.<sup>104</sup> As an instructor and head of the Operations Department (1937–38), Spruance also lectured on sea power, naval history, and employment of large naval forces in the struggle for sea control. Admiral R. K. Turner served as a captain in the Operations Department, under the direction of his friend Admiral Spruance. He was well-known as the author of lectures on strategy, operations, and tactics. Turner was a firm believer that carriers and amphibious warfare would be dominant features in a future war. This contrasted with the mainstream view of the supremacy of battleships.<sup>105</sup>

There are also several dangers in studying naval and military history. Very often, historical examples are misused to win bureaucratic battles in support of a specific weapon program. Often, these so-called lessons have entrapped those using them without recognition of critical changes to conditions that alter how or whether the lessons can be applied.<sup>106</sup> Perhaps it is even more serious to continue to rely on such lessons without trying to adjust, refine, or even abandon them when considering the new situation. The writings of Admiral Mahan are perhaps a classic example of lessons that not only were accepted uncritically but also were followed dogmatically long after their straightforward usefulness had passed. Mahan was not a theoretician but a historian of sea power. He did not use historical examples to illustrate a theoretical construct; rather, he used naval history to derive lessons that could be applied universally.<sup>107</sup> Another pitfall in studying history and deriving lessons is focusing on a single defining moment and then absolutizing its significance at the expense of all others. In studying military history, one should avoid applying a historical example of one era to completely different contemporary conditions.

Experience shows the inestimable value of studying naval and military history for all naval officers and prospective flag officers and their staffs in particular. The best way to understand all aspects of naval warfare is through lifelong study of naval and military history. Study of history should start very early on in one's professional career. It is simply too late to start such a study after an officer is promoted to a flag rank. In general, not only are flag officers responsible for commanding their forces in combat, but they also have numerous administrative responsibilities. This leaves little if any time for studying the art of war. Almost all great war-fighting admirals in the modern era were known as lifelong students of history. Among other things, thorough study of history is the best means of

understanding the importance of sea power in a war, the role and importance of technology, and the impact of other factors on the character of war at sea. It shows the importance of understanding the dominant role of policy and strategy on the conduct of war at sea. The relationship among naval or maritime strategy, operational art, and tactics cannot be properly understood without in-depth study of naval warfare of the past eras. Study of naval and military history highlights the timeless importance of naval leadership at all levels and shows how critically important it is to have highly trained and skillfully led naval forces; otherwise, success in a war would be wanting.

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#### NOTES

- Portions of this article expand on or modify work that appeared as Milan Vego, "Learn and Use History's Lessons," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 143/2/1,368 (February 2017).
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