“Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” This oft-used quote from General Dwight D. Eisenhower reminds us that the act of planning is invaluable. Through planning we can inspect our decision-making processes, determine if our current force is sufficient for the assumed threat, and, if not, guide future naval and military procurement, research, and development. However, due to tight training timelines our tactical-level focus is on handling the current threat instead of an enemy that might be lurking even five years in the future. Similarly, Maritime Operations Center (MOC) training and certification is often coupled with theater security cooperation (TSC) events and multilateral exercises, as there is precious little time to devote to operational-level training and theory while simultaneously dealing with current-day crises. Focused planning must exist at all levels and in multiple venues, however, ranging from the planning directorates of MOCs to the Naval War College (NWC) to the Pentagon. The use of wargaming as a planning tool has seen increased attention over the past two to three years, but its value in the planning process is not a new and revolutionary concept. Indeed, we can see a prior example of wargaming’s effect on real-world operations conducted 75 years ago this past June: the Battle of Midway.

Before we look at Midway, some background information is required, to both set the scene for some of Midway’s successes and failures and to point out where the concept of wargaming influenced interwar planning. This pivotal battle was influenced in several ways by the use (and misuse) of wargaming in the years preceding the event, and it is important to understand where wargaming fits in the puzzle.

Hostilities and events in the late 1930s foreshadowed the coming world war. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, withdrew from the Washington Naval Treaty in 1936, and invaded the rest of China in 1937. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, while Germany assisted in Spain’s Civil War the same year. Through 1938 Germany continually absorbed countries citing concerns for the protection of ethnic Germans, while the major European powers attempted to appease Hitler in an attempt to avoid war. Japanese aggression, meanwhile, was largely ignored by an American public unwilling to shed its isolationist lifestyle. At best, the United States opposed Japan’s operations in China by proxy through volunteer fighters and the sale or leasing of military hardware. As events unfolded it became more and more apparent that, should full warfare break out, it would be all-encompassing and wide-ranging.

In particular, one incident caused a renewed focus on joint war planning. On December 12, 1937, the patrol craft USS Panay was attacked and sunk while anchored in the Yangtze River by Imperial Japanese forces. After the sinking of the Panay the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO),
Admiral William D. Leahy, directed the Director of War Plans, Captain Robert Ghormley, to lead the Operations Navy (OpNav) in examining the existing color plans in order to ensure that the assumptions made by U.S. Army planners corresponded with those of the U.S. Navy.

Joint war plans, especially immediately after World War I, were focused on singular adversaries represented by different colors. The war plan against Germany was Black, Great Britain was Red, and Japan was Orange, among others. Ghormley recognized the color plans fell short, particularly in its lack of coordination between the services. Each service’s concept of the Orange Plan, for example, was vastly different and completely at odds with each other. The army War Plans Division chief, General Stanley D. Embick, proposed pulling back to the western coastline of the U.S., with the Navy providing the first line of defense between San Francisco and Hawaii. The Navy, however, had been using war games at NWC and annual Fleet Exercises to refine a more aggressive course of action toward Japan. Beginning in 1938 joint plans meant to appease both military branches were developed that called for an initial defensive position, turning to offense whenever possible.

The NWC’s studies were of critical importance during this time period; the college’s curriculum centered on wargaming emerging concepts and Naval Board concerns. Prominent naval thinkers and leaders of the late 1930s and early 1940s had been students at NWC, including Ernest King, Chester Nimitz, and Raymond Spruance. They each brought their individual experiences into the games and classes, and subsequently their ways of thinking were influenced by the conduct of the games. Admiral Nimitz would comment after the war that Newport gamed everything WWII had to offer except kamikazes. The comment was poignant because Nimitz was referring to the flexibility he learned while in Newport. The myriad of issues presented in

Figure 1: War Game in Pringle Hall. Source: John B. Hattendorf, B. Mitchell Simpson III, and John R. Wadleigh, Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the U. S. Naval War College (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1984), 110.
the games and the innovative ways to solve those issues were instrumental in his handling of the Pacific theater of WWII.

King, Nimitz, and Spruance were not the only ones influenced by the college’s wargames. The underlying assumptions found in the fleet reorganization and RAINBOW plans of 1941 reflected the ideas found in NWC theses produced by Nimitz, King, Admirals Harold Stark (Leahy’s successor as CNO) and Husband Kimmel (Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, or CINCPac, when Pearl Harbor occurred) and Captains Ghormley and Richmond Kelly Turner, Ghormley’s successor in the OpNav War Plans Division. Turner fleshed out the RAINBOW plans and produced five different naval options. Considering the traditional influence of the joint color plans, Turner strongly emphasized the differences in presenting the newly reframed RAINBOW plans. Rather than color codes, war planners in the Navy Department referred to “War Plans” with the acronym “WPL.” References to any given WPL followed with a numerical reference associated with a specific variation. The OpNav staff generally knew RAINBOW-5, the naval plan most closely associated with Roosevelt’s “Europe First” strategy, under its official designation as “WPL-46.”

Given wartime realities after the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt recognized few alternatives other than to approve a strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare in the Pacific. He directed the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, to send Nimitz to coordinate operations as CINCPac. The most junior ranking admiral in the U.S. Navy at the time, Nimitz earned a reputation as a submarine specialist. His influence also transcended the ranks, as he had presided as the flag detailed in the Bureau of Navigation. In this role, Nimitz earlier advised Stark in selecting King to serve as CINC Atlantic Fleet (CINCLant). In anticipation of assuming duty as CINCPac, Nimitz participated in discussions culminating in the appointment of King as CINCUS.

With NWC scholars in key positions in the Pacific Theater chain of command, Newport’s wargames became real life. From experience in the previous world war, King fully understood the potential of wireless communications and logistics in efforts to coordinate naval operations at sea from within headquarters ashore. The theses he wrote in the correspondence courses he completed with NWC in 1924 and those written during resident studies after 1932 reflect King’s deep understanding of intelligence, communication, and logistics. Additionally, NWC wargames after 1929 looked at the tyranny of distance complicating logistics efforts across the vast Pacific. Naval War College studies and wargames provided firm foundations for King to adapt to the unexpected challenges of combined and joint command.

Having endured the Pearl Harbor surprise, King worked in tandem with Nimitz to establish clear intelligence connections between the Navy Department in Washington and the CinCPac headquarters in Hawaii. King reorganized his staff (now as CominCh, or Commander-in-Chief, with CNO duties included) in Washington to coordinate global operations with intelligence. He pressed Nimitz to establish a similar organization in Hawaii. Somewhat reluctantly, Nimitz followed orders by establishing the Intelligence Center – Pacific Ocean Area (ICPOA) by April of 1942. Under this organization, the naval district staffs fell together with their seagoing
counterparts on the CinCPac staff. The ICPOA also clarified bureaucratic lines of communication with U.S. Army operations, communications, and intelligence organizations. As the ICPOA was inspired by the British Admiralty’s Operational Intelligence Centre (OIC) system, the ICPOA also provided means for combined collaboration for operations and intelligence. Code breaking and intelligence efforts were pivotal in determining where the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was heading after Pearl Harbor, allowing Nimitz’s forces to intercept the IJN in the Coral Sea in May and at Midway the following month.

Midway also proved that wargames could be misused to devastating effect. The last Japanese rehearsal prior to the attack was advertised as a wargame but was in reality a scripted walkthrough of the battle plan. The plan was sent out just before the game was played, allowing planners and subordinate staff very little time to read and critically evaluate the plan. Admiral Yamamoto’s chief of staff, Rear Admiral Ugaki, ran the game with a heavy hand, re-floating aircraft carriers that were sunk by an unexpected B-17 flight from Midway and otherwise squashing dissent or concerns about the plan. In effect Ugaki cultivated the continued overconfidence and resulting impetuosity brought on by early victories over American and British forces. The B-17 flight, however unexpected or unbelievable, exposed a weakness to the plan: the lack of protection for IJN carriers in case armed planes were caught on deck when American planes appeared. Ugaki’s use of the wargame as a check-in-the-box and his disregard for divergent thinking against the plan was indicative of Japanese naval planning of the time: finely choreographed movements against a scripted adversary being led to slaughter. When planes did appear over the carriers on June 4th, 1942, fully-fueled and loaded airplanes were bombarded as they sat on deck, just as the B-17s did during the wargame, with a very similar effect. The Americans, like any Red adversary in a well-run wargame, do not operate by a script.

So what does this mean for the modern world? Fleet MOCs today create supporting component plans for COCOM OPLANs and CONOPS for JTF-led activities, just like Nimitz and Yamamoto did during World War II. In today’s fiscally-constrained environment, planners and operators must combine fleet and personal experiences with innovative, relatively low-cost techniques. The NWC also offers the ability for alumni to reach back to planning experts for additional advice and ideas to tackle unique problems or planning issues. The Assist and Assess Team (AAT), also based at NWC, offers continuity across MOCs as they bring lessons learned and good practices from one fleet to the rest of the navy. This combination of experience, reachback capability, and sharing of information will be instrumental in refining plans and CONOPS, testing the limits of American naval capability, discovering new tactics and uses for existing systems and doctrine, and remaining flexible in a highly dynamic operating environment.

Innovative COAs and CONOPS are most effective when they have been wargamed. The COA Analysis process must be vigorously utilized to test ideas against an expected (and believable) reaction from the adversary. Wargaming helps to investigate the decision-making process to prepare planners and operators for flexibility in scenarios. By increasing familiarity with a particular problem and the planners’ answer to that problem, wargaming improves focus
on the scenario and encourages new ways of dealing with dilemmas offered by the situation. Wargaming can also be used to flesh out commanders’ new ideas, investigate possible concepts of operations to support them, or inform him or her why a particular concept may not be useful to tackle a given problem. Planners must take full advantage of testing theories and concepts against an enemy designed to hurt those theories. Finally, wargames expose potential risks that must be considered and could require mitigation in order to reduce unforeseen circumstances that could challenge COAs.

COA Development and COA Analysis can also inform unilateral and multilateral exercises. Concerns about C2 and tactical theories presented in wargames can be tested in real time, much like the interwar Fleet Exercises validated or refuted theories presented on Newport’s game floor. Wargames can also include allies and partners, improving interoperability at all levels of planning as their insights and concerns can be added and tested at far cheaper costs than exercises like TALISMAN SABRE or RIMPAC. But rather than attempt to replace critical multilateral TSC-based exercises, wargames can help to refine those exercises to make them more meaningful and useful to all parties. New concerns and tactics can be brought to the exercises; participants can test whether the theory presented on the game board is valid or needs further refinement based on physical evidence.

American naval successes in World War II have molded maritime operations for the past 75 years. Technology, equipment, and potential adversaries have changed, but basic concepts and successful strategies have weathered the tests of time. Military planners must remain flexible to counter unforeseen circumstances, and that flexibility can be taught using wargames integrated with exercises and planning efforts. Efficient use of inexpensive wargames provide concepts to be tested later in expensive exercises and TSC events, maximizing time spent with allies and partners and cycling results back into informed planning.

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