

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

Panel Commentary

*Hal M. Friedman, Senior Modern History Instructor
Social Science Division, Henry Ford Community College
Dearborn, Michigan*

The papers by Douglas Smith, H. Michael Gelfand, and Robert Schneller are important contributions to American naval history in sub-fields of history that have either been ignored or gone relatively uncovered by traditional naval historians. Each of the papers gets at the education of American naval officers in the 20th century not just in terms of their war fighting capabilities or their institutions' effectiveness in preparing them for war. Instead, each of the authors is really looking at the United States Naval Academy and the United States Naval War College as educational institutions in and of themselves. More importantly, these papers place these institutions in the historical context of American higher education in the early to late 20th century. The authors and their subjects are, therefore, trail blazers in both the sub-fields of American naval and educational history, and they should be studied as such.

Douglas Smith's paper on the U.S. Naval War College in the interwar years is one of the few accounts dealing with what was at that time the Navy's closest equivalent to a civilian liberal arts graduate school. More importantly, Smith's paper clearly details how the curriculum at NWC may have prepared U.S. naval officers for the Pacific war. It is also a case study, to some extent, in how education is offered and consumed in an organization that is undergoing profound technological and institutional change. To be sure, as Smith points out, the curriculum, with its emphasis on battleship operations, may have focused on the wrong material to properly prepare mid-grade and high ranking officers for the carrier-centered fighting in the Pacific war. However, the focus on flexibility in warfare may have been the key to creating an officer corps that could change its orientation from battleship to carrier operations in a relatively short span of time in the winter of 1941–1942.

What is probably needed now from Professor Smith is to expand the paper in three areas. First, to what extent were Marine Corps officers a part of the NWC strategic culture, either as students, instructors, or both? After all, it was Marine Lieutenant Colonel Earl Ellis who literally wrote the book on how to island hop across the Pacific and defeat Japan. What role did he play? What role did his mentor, Major General John Lejeune, play in the creation of this interwar pedagogical culture? What about future amphibious assault commanders such as Holland Smith or Alexander Vandegrift?

Second, to what extent did or did not the Naval War College curriculum have links with or even copy civilian educational techniques, especially John Dewey's philosophies? War gaming at Newport sounds like the naval educational equivalent of Deweyism or what

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

was called “collaborative learning” in the 1970s and 1980s, and what is now being called the “new teaching paradigm”. More on this educational context, if any exists, would be helpful in a larger study.

Finally, to what extent does U.S. victory in the Pacific still need to be discussed, at least in part, as luck? Focusing on things like war gaming, the introduction of new technologies, or individual great men are important aspects to determining victory or defeat in war. But so are other intangibles such as luck and the obvious logistics advantages the U.S. eventually had over Japan. Not to study the U.S.’s victory in the Pacific in part as luck gives it some mystical aura, which I doubt actually, existed. One part of the bottom line is that the U.S. was lucky that Japan made certain mistakes, that American leaders did not, and that the U.S. had the time to put its industrial might into full swing.

H. Michael Gelfand’s paper on the introduction and then integration of women as midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy similarly shows an educational, as well as naval, institution under the stress of change. Moreover, Gelfand’s paper places the Naval Academy more clearly in the ranks of the nation’s undergraduate institutions, particularly with the 1930 incident of two women disguising themselves as midshipmen, the 1972 reception given to Gloria Steinem, and the editorial comments of the midshipmen in *The Log*. More particularly, Gelfand’s paper speaks to the pain and pressure needed to change American educational institutions in the 1800s and 1900s, whether civilian or military, and the, at times, glacial speeds with which that change seemed to occur.

What is most fascinating about Gelfand’s paper, which might be more centrally emphasized in any larger work he does, is the concept of unprofessionalism. In a U.S. military which has historically prided itself on its professional conduct, Gelfand’s primary sources demonstrate a student body of male midshipmen who are demonstrating the worst kind of military unprofessionalism; i.e., the subtle obstruction of orders coming from above to integrate women into the Academy’s culture. In fact, his conclusion suggests a continuation of that phenomenon to some degree to this day, as does the U.S. military’s general conduct toward President Bill Clinton’s orders to integrate gays and lesbians more openly into the American military in the 1990s. What would be helpful in a larger study would be some sense of the national context. To what extent, for instance, were non-military American institutions of higher education moving quickly, or not so quickly, in the same direction as the United States Naval Academy in terms of integrating new student bodies into their institutions? Even more importantly, what were the attitudes of faculty and students at those institutions *vis-à-vis* the administration initiating the changes? What was fueling the call for change at these civilian institutions? Was it political pressure, fiscal necessity, cultural change, or some other factor? How similar or different were the reasons at the civilian institutions from those impacting on Annapolis?

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

Robert Schneller's work on the integration of African-Americans into the Brigade of Midshipmen demonstrates the intimate connection between political pressure in a nationwide context, the key support of policymakers in Washington, D.C., in this case President Lyndon Johnson, and actual change taking place "on the spot", in this case at the Academy itself. Schneller clearly demonstrates from primary sources how quickly the Navy's leadership sought to carry out the President's instructions after 1965 and how difficult it was, and still is, to get a sizable number of African-American applicants to Annapolis.

In addition, Schneller touches on several military and educational issues, which, it is hoped, will be expanded in a larger work. More specifically, to what extent was political pressure driving the Navy's desire for more African-American applicants? On the other hand, to what extent were the needs of the Navy driving the agenda as the nation entered a period in which white males in their late teens and early to mid-twenties began to shrink as a pool of applicants? Also, what were the exact choices made in standards and curriculum when the Naval Academy began to recruit from a segment of the nation's population which it had not recruited from before? Was there a "watering down"? Did the curriculum actually become more challenging, or was the issue entirely more complex than either of these possibilities? Any larger work might contain a bit more material and detail on these areas.

All three of these papers, I think, are cutting-edge in terms of their topics. They have largely helped demonstrate that American naval history is more than just strategy, tactics, technology, and bureaucracy. In fact, the United States Navy has been, to some extent, an educational institution or at least an institution that has had to face the same 20th century challenges that its civilian counterparts have had to face. I think all three of these works would make fine monographs that will take historians of the United States Navy further down a new road. I encourage each of these authors to continue and complete these works to their logical conclusion.