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The Pacific Naval War as One Coherent Campaign, 1941-1945.

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For years, those of us who have studied the war waged by the US Navy against the Imperial Navy of Japan have understood that US Navy prewar planning was excellent at the operational and strategic levels. This was due to the use of war games and simulations at the Naval War College, planning done by the small but able staff of the Chief of Naval Operations, and to the amount of time that the US Navy had to consider the operational and logistical demands of a trans-Pacific campaign.^[1]

We have also told ourselves that tactical setbacks such as those in the summer and fall of 1942 at Guadalcanal were at least partly the result of the Navy's prewar focus on *the big* major fleet engagement. Much of the tactical gaming, for example, was conducted to learn how best to maneuver divisions of battleships in order to defeat the Imperial Navy's battleship force in a daytime engagement. Little time was apparently devoted to solving the problems that would be faced by smaller task forces operating removed from a major fleet concentration.^[2]

Because the actual fighting did not follow the exact path or timetable that it did on the Naval War College game boards, those of us who study the naval war in the Pacific tend to discount all the work done before the war on battle fleet tactics. We say that the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor changed the relationship between the two opposing fleets and forced the US Navy to develop new tactics—built around the aircraft carrier during the day and formations of cruisers and destroyers at night.

But what if we take the battles that took place from 1942 to 1945 and collapse them into the space of a few weeks, as the participants in the prewar Naval War College simulations did. How would it look? The following paragraphs will first suggest that it would look a lot like the games staged before the war at Newport and then show why this is important to understanding the outcome of the war.

“The Great Pacific War”⁴³¹

Part I: The Approach Phase (1942-43)

The Naval War College operational-level war games in the 1920s and 1930s tended to follow a pattern: first, the two fleets (“blue” for the U.S. Navy and “orange” for the Imperial Navy of Japan) would “approach” one another, scouting and establishing bases in which they could refuel and repair their ships and submarines. In the 1930s, this “approach” phase grew more violent, as surface and carrier task forces (and sometimes land-based aircraft) sought to gain an initial advantage. Japanese forces, for example, would move to the Caroline and Marshall Islands as U.S. Navy units moved first to Hawaii and then south, to Samoa. The two fleets were like football teams after a kick-off. Each was trying to gain an initial advantage that would constrain the other’s game plan.

The problem facing the Japanese was simple: Japan’s economy could not sustain a long war with heavy casualties in ships and aircraft. Knowing Japan’s economic limits, U.S. Navy planners and war gamers assumed that Japanese forces would act quickly to gain the advantage—by using sabotage to close the Panama Canal, for example, and capturing the Philippines. In the event, this sort of quick initial strike is precisely what the Japanese did when they attacked Pearl Harbor *and* captured Manila and Subic bays.

The Approach Phase, First Segment: Carrier Attacks (1941-42)

We ask, however, that you set aside the Japanese surprise attack of 7 December 1941. The results were more dramatic than either navy assumed would be possible as they conducted their war games in the 1930s. Start instead with the Battle of the Coral Sea. The Japanese campaign plan to isolate and conquer a major forward base (Port Moresby in New Guinea) of the United States and its Australian ally was just the sort of move that prewar war gamers had studied again and again. The Japanese force was, to use prewar terminology, trying to keep the US fleet from having a secure forward sanctuary that would protect its flank.

Both fleets had great distances to cover, even to their own forward bases. For example, it's over 1800 nautical miles (3240 km) from Yokohama to Truk, Japan's great base in the Caroline Islands. From Pearl Harbor to Manila is almost 4800 miles, or 8640 km; Yokohama, by the great circle route, is actually closer (3400 miles; 6120 km) than Manila. Because of these great distances, the US Navy planned to secure bases en route to major objectives in the South and Central Pacific. Japanese naval forces tried to stop this. Both sides were trying to protect their own lines of communication and threaten those of the enemy.

Midway was the second major encounter of the Approach Phase. In prewar games and US Navy fleet problems, commanders on both sides tried to find and then destroy the other side's aircraft carriers because air superiority was an essential element of victory, even in a contest between battleships. But these war game air battles, usually fought at the outer edges of the ranges of attack aircraft, were often brief and almost always lopsided. The side that could strike first usually won a major victory, even if it did not have as many carriers as its enemy. That's Midway—a quick strike with decisive results.

The Approach Phase, Second Segment: Attrition Warfare (1942-43)

Before the war, planners in the two navies had very different concerns about the latter part of the "approach phase." Both groups assumed that, after initial skirmishes,

the U.S. Navy would take the offensive. The Imperial Navy would react by subjecting the U.S. battlefleet, its auxiliaries, and any invasion force it might be shielding to night attacks staged by destroyers and cruisers. At night, Japanese forces could close the range and compensate for their smaller numbers of ships by firing torpedoes into U.S. formations.

The US Navy planners believed that the Japanese would try to break through USN cruiser and destroyer screens and cripple heavier units such as battle ships and aircraft carriers steaming at the center of the American formations. There would likely be night after night of fierce combat among lighter units in both navies. In the daytime, surviving carriers would seek each other out, and available aviation would attempt to destroy enemy light forces within range. Submarines would stalk damaged ships. Japanese planners had to develop tactics and weapons that would allow them to avoid an *extended* campaign of attrition during the “approach” phase. U.S. Navy planners, by contrast, had to find means of maintaining the offensive *in the face of* anticipated nighttime losses.

The desperate fighting around the island of Guadalcanal in the late summer and fall of 1942 fulfilled the worst nightmares of planners in both navies. At the battle of Savo Island (8-9 August 1942), Japanese cruisers and one destroyer penetrated a US and Australian navy screen shielding supply and amphibious ships unloading invasion forces. Although the Japanese warships wreaked havoc on the screen, sinking three of four U.S. heavy cruisers engaged, they failed to take advantage of their tactical victory and withdrew without smashing the unprotected amphibious and supply ships. As in the games and exercises staged before the war, submarines went after disabled ships and ships retiring from battle. U.S. submarine S-44, for example, sank the Imperial Navy’s heavy cruiser *Kako* on 10 August as the cruiser, which had fought at Savo Island, was returning to base.

Soon thereafter, the surviving carrier forces attempted to destroy their opposite numbers in an effort to gain air superiority. At the Battle of the Eastern Solomons (23-25

August), they failed. That meant the surface ships would go at it again, as they did on 12 October in the Battle of Cape Esperance. The carriers clashed again at Santa Cruz, 26-27 October. The USN lost carrier *Hornet*, but the loss did not stop the US offensive because the US force held on to Henderson Field, an “unsinkable” aircraft carrier.^[4] Two weeks later, the surface forces fought again in two desperate engagements—the First Naval Battle of Guadalcanal (12-13 November) and the Second (14-15 November). These two fights were followed by another night surface ship scrap, the Battle of Tassafaronga (30 November).

By December 1942, the surface units of both navies had suffered severely in night engagements—six American cruisers and seven destroyers sunk, while Japanese losses were two battleships, one cruiser, and five destroyers. Prowling submarines and aircraft had also taken their toll. Carrier *Wasp*, for example, was torpedoed and sunk by *I-19* on 15 September. But American forces were still in control of Henderson Field, and Japanese naval, ground, and air forces had suffered severe losses contesting that control. Yet this attrition phase of the campaign would continue into 1943, with night battles at Kula Gulf (6 July), Kolombangara (12-13 July), Vella Gulf (6-7 August), Vella Lavella (6-7 October), Empress Augusta Bay (2 November), and Cape St. George (25 November).

This extended and vicious struggle is not what prewar planners in both navies anticipated. They saw the attrition associated with the “approach” phase as a preliminary to the main fleet engagement, and not as a separate campaign. In prewar games at the Naval War College, for example, it was understood that, if one side grabbed a base like Guadalcanal, the other side might have to attack it. However, neither side wanted to risk too much in such a preparatory struggle. Both hoped to limit their losses in this phase so as to be better prepared for the decisive fleet engagement.

As the war games and exercises held by the U.S. Navy before the war had suggested, the Japanese had the initial advantage in the “approach” phase. Japanese forces had the strategic initiative, as at Coral Sea and Midway, and Japanese surface ships

had an initial advantage in night battles around Guadalcanal. But U.S. forces had taken the initiative away from the Japanese at Midway and had retained that initiative through the rest of the “approach” phase. By the end of 1943, the U.S. Navy was prepared to initiate the next phase—the main fleet battle.

The Main Fleet Battle I: Philippine Sea (1944)

The Navy and Marines precipitated the main fleet battle by attacking in the Central Pacific—first at Tarawa, then in the Marshall Islands, and finally, in June 1944, by assaulting Saipan, in the Marianas. The Imperial Navy, provoked, fought a main fleet engagement at the Battle of the Philippine Sea (19-20 June 1944). This is just the sort of action that the prewar USN games and exercises explored, though with battleships instead of aircraft carriers as the main fleet units. But the result would not have surprised a prewar Navy war game participant—the side with greater force, better training, and superior technology won a major victory and breached Japan’s line of island defenses.

The Main Fleet Battle II: Leyte Gulf (1944)

The series of engagements that together make up the Battle of Leyte Gulf (24-25 October 1944) is the final fleet engagement. All the elements present in the prewar games and fleet problems were present at Leyte: a major night surface engagement, surface ships against carriers, carriers against carriers, land-based aircraft against carriers, and an amphibious assault. The Imperial Navy was defeated decisively and ceased to have any offensive power.

The Finish: Blockading Japan (1945)

The plan to strangle Japan by an air and sea blockade went back to at least 1919, and a strategic bombing campaign against Japan was made a part of the Joint Army-Navy “Orange” Plan of 1928.^{[\[5\]](#)} After Leyte Gulf, that plan was put into effect. The only surprise, as Fleet Admiral Nimitz observed years later, was the kamikaze. But the reason

why the kamikaze was a surprise was at least partly because almost everything else in the Pacific War had been anticipated in prewar board games and fleet problems staged at sea—from amphibious assaults to night surface ship actions to carrier battles. The USN’s submarine war against shipping was also a surprise (to both sides, perhaps). *Official US Navy prewar doctrine had not included it because unrestricted submarine warfare was a violation of the laws of war.*^[6] As a result, the submarine force had to learn, in wartime, what it had not been allowed to practice in peacetime.

Conclusion

Our argument is this: if you telescope the US Navy’s three-plus-year naval campaign to one of perhaps a year, it looks a lot like the Naval War College games and the prewar fleet problems. The actual length of the war is longer, but the sequence is remarkably similar—from the Approach Phase, to the night battles of attrition, then on to the Main Fleet Engagement Phase (in two parts, Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf), and then blockade.

Why does it matter? For several reasons. First, though students of the prewar Naval War College games have praised them for their accuracy and rigor, there has been a tendency to write off all the tactical work that focused on Blue vs. Orange battleship engagements as either irrelevant or embarrassingly conservative. Second, the prewar fleet problem records show that much was learned (and even more was revealed) in the mock combat that Navy ships, submarines, and aircraft went through. But because battleships were *the* main fleet units, the fleet problems have been seen as having limited relevance because the apparent preoccupation with battleship-against-battleship engagements failed to anticipate the rapidly growing importance of air forces of all kinds.

Our view is different. We think that *all* the prewar games and fleet problems were useful, even those that focused on an engagement between lines of battleships. There are two primary reasons we believe this. First, U.S. Navy strategy during the war was successful *because* commanders such as Commander-in-Chief Admiral Ernest King

and theater commander Admiral Chester Nimitz understood when and how to use their forces in each phase of the struggle.^[7] Second, U.S. Navy staff work in the Pacific War was excellent once war began. The ability of the Navy (and Marines) to organize many staffs (headed by talented officers such as Captain Forrest Sherman, who worked for Nimitz) and have them function effectively was an important “force multiplier.”^[8] The better staff and combat officers knew what sort of war they were fighting. The more talented shared a common concept of the conflict and its component phases.

Note that we are *not* saying that participation in war games and fleet problems was sufficient to allow the US Navy to develop competent planning and battle staffs. After all, the Imperial Navy of Japan conducted its own intensive war games and very realistic exercises at sea. But we are saying it was a necessary condition. It taught Navy officers to think in terms of approach tactics, attrition engagements, encounters between opposing carriers detached from the battle lines, main fleet battles, and the defense of amphibious assaults. Moreover, it linked thinking on the tactical level with thinking at the operational level, and it accustomed Navy officers to examine all the difficulties—both tactical and logistical—of waging a naval war thousands of miles from major bases.

We also suggest that war games and simulations, and the exercises based on them, are important because, like almost all games, they teach those who participate in them the rhythms of competition—the ebb and flow of the stages of conflict. It is true that the war games at the Naval War College did not, in the late 1930s, take sufficiently into account the dramatic effect aviation was about to have on the tactics of war at sea. But the introduction of high performance land- and sea-based aircraft did not disrupt the fundamental flow of the “blue vs. orange” games at Newport. The basic flow of the conflict remained the same: the U.S. Navy would advance, or approach, and the Imperial Japanese Navy would try to gain an advantage during that phase of the struggle that it could exploit in the next phase, the main fleet engagement. U.S. Navy officers accepted this flow, or movement, of events. It affected all their thinking about tactics and command. It conditioned them properly for the Pacific war to come.

War games will never completely capture what happens in war, but they are valuable because they can promote the thinking that is the precondition of victory and impress on those who play them a tacit sense of the rhythm of future conflict.

^[1] War planning is described in detail by Edward S. Miller in *War Plan Orange, The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991).

^[2] War plans and reports of the operational and tactical simulations conducted at the Naval War College are in Record Group 38, National Archives.

^[3] The phrase “the Great Pacific War” is taken from Hector C. Bywater’s *The Great Pacific War: A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-33* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925). For more on both the book and the author, see William H. Honan, *Visions of Infamy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).

^[4] It was Professor Wayne P. Hughes, Jr., of the Naval Postgraduate School, who pointed out the critical nature of Henderson Field to U.S. tactics in his *Fleet Tactics, Theory and Practice* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986).

^[5] See Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p. 164.

^[6] *Tentative Instructions for the Navy of the United States Governing Maritime and Aerial Warfare*, May 1941, Navy Department (Washington, DC), p. 14. 50, and p. 34. 115.

^[7] See Clark Reynolds, “The U.S. Fleet-in-Being Strategy of 1942,” in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (January 1994).

^[8] VADM John Towers did not want to see Sherman leave his staff and join Nimitz. See *Admiral John H. Towers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), Chap. 14. But Sherman had distinguished himself as a junior officer at the Naval War College in 1926-27, and his star never dimmed after that.

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