

## International Journal of Naval History

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August 2005

Volume 4 Number 2

Michael Palmer, *Command at Sea: Naval Command and Control since the Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. 377 pp. ISBN 0-674-01681-5  
maps, bibliography.

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The Holy Grail of naval warfare has always been the search for the ideal system of command and control. The problem is that nothing in the history of such operations offers an answer, merely a succession of examples, each of which is immediately and effectively contradicted by others. Michael Palmer uses this important new book to assess the opposing poles of centralised direction and decentralised initiative. This comprehensive study ranges from the Anglo-Dutch wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the most recent exchanges of fire in the Persian Gulf, by way of Quiberon Bay, Lissa, Tsushima and Jutland. The Admirals under review range from the sublime Nelson to the uninspired Byng, but certain problems recur with striking regularity.

Palmer opens his discussion with Nelson's unprecedented feat at the Nile, the capture or destruction of 11 out of 13 enemy battleships, a battle of annihilation. While he rightly argues that much of this success flowed from Nelson's pre-battle briefings, his exemplary approach to leadership and his willingness to devolve authority there is more to Nelson than that. Nelson knew this small group of captains well enough to rely on them, something that not all Admirals have been able to say. Secondly he fought all three of his great battles using quite different approaches to command and control. At the Nile the battle plan was very tightly scripted, because his aim was to defeat the French but avoid annihilation, to secure a durable peace so that the fleet could proceed swiftly to

attack Russia. When three ships ran aground he quickly re-ordered his line, and adjusted his aims to reflect the losses. This was a far more tightly scripted battle, in effect centralised. At Trafalgar he sought chaos, where superior seamanship and gunnery would provide victory, but only after he had administered the killing stroke, taking out the enemy command and control. Furthermore he picked the few captains in his fleet that he knew well to back up his attack, because he could rely on them to act as he wished. Finally, Nelson gave his trusted scouting force commander Captain Henry Blackwood in the frigate *Euryalus* authority to use his name to hurry the rest into battle.

Yet significant as his distinctive tactical choices were to focus on them would miss the key. Nelson did not go into those three battles concerned about winning. He knew he would win and chose the tactical system best suited to securing the type of victory that would best serve the national strategic and political ends. Like all great commanders he fought for higher aims than battlefield success, and had the wisdom to see that losing battles could be more important than winning. In 1805, as he pursued Villeneuve across the Atlantic, outnumbered at least two to one, Nelson resolved to fight, because he knew that even if he lost he would save the West Indies and the vital shipping by crippling the enemy.

By contrast Admirals in most of the other battles Palmer considers had to think about winning, or not losing, and therefore adopted more restrictive tactical systems. The line of battle in the age of sail was ideal for ensuring every captain knew his place. Those who chose not to use it did so because they were certain of victory, or foolish. Linear combat between fleets of approximately equal power were rarely decisive. Those who broke the rules in such battles were invariably punished. In the Anglo-Dutch Four Day's battle of 1666 the exercise of initiative (basically a serious breach of discipline) by a junior squadron commander proved disastrous. Only after linear combat has given one side the edge, through attrition is it possible to pursue and destroy. This is a simple truth of all battles, land, sea and air. The problem for fleet command in the age of sail was the transition from linear security, to dynamic pursuit. Rodney and Howe won battles, but failed to annihilate. Little wonder: they fought more capable opponents than Nelson.

The key to effective command is the ability to communicate simply, and effectively what needs to be done in terms already made transparent by sound doctrine,

command briefings and personal interaction. There is no doubt that Nelson was the finest exemplar of this art, and that it is an art, one that can no more be reduced to routine than musical performance, to cite Jon Sumida in his reconsideration of Mahan *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command*. Rather than looking to Mahan, Palmer develops the role of 20<sup>th</sup> century United States Naval Officer Dudley Knox, who followed Mahan in using Nelson as his example. The reason for this choice is obvious, Knox influenced the World War Two generation. His line 'initiative to a degree necessary for the united automatic action of a large number of units, cannot be safely allowed until the unit commanders are educated, trained, and indoctrinated' (Palmer p. 253) is the view of a system that recognised the need for devolved authority, but had ample cause to fear its impact. There are echoes of the Sampson/Schley controversy after the Battle of Santiago in 1898 in Knox's words. By contrast Nelson favoured devolved command because he recognised the limits to central direction, friction and the fog of war increased with every yard that separated the commander from his units. At Copenhagen he could control the battle because it was conducted within a very small confined area, bounded by shoals, ships and forts. But he did not try to direct his frigate squadron, which responded to the Hyde Parker's infamous signal of recall. The communication system simply could not handle complex ideas, or be taken in at a distance. The Trafalgar memorandum makes it clear that his doctrine and command briefings had established the major concepts of battle, but he relied on his officers to grasp the implications of the specific situation on the day. He did not follow the Trafalgar memorandum in the battle: he modified it by signal, and by action. Furthermore Nelson had to lead the attack at Trafalgar because, unlike the Nile, where he could rely on trusted subordinates like Foley and Hood the problems he faced at Trafalgar mean that he could not entrust the critical attack to any of those present on October 21<sup>st</sup> 1805.

The command problems facing modern navies are different. New communications technologies make it possible to communicate more often and more accurately. Andrew Gordon demonstrated in *The Rules of the Game* that this led to overly centralised systems, which suppressed initiative. In 1916 the British compounded the problem by trying to control the Grand Fleet from London. Without an adequate intelligence picture or the quality of subordinates Nelson had taken for granted Jellicoe did his best to deploy

a massive battlefleet in fogs both literal and metaphorical. Like Howe before him Jellicoe avoided defeat, secured the command of the sea, while learning that he needed a more permissive doctrine and better command briefings.

Knowing which command and control system to use, a choice which will be determined by tactical imperatives and the strategic situation, will finally be resolved by the communication opportunities. Yet, as Leyte Gulf, a battle that Palmer does not examine demonstrated, no system is better than the people who use it, or proof against the best commanders having a bad day. After all Nelson lost at Tenerife, and Napoleon at Waterloo.

After 1945 navies have seen no fleet to fleet encounters, and very little warfare. Peacetime service leadership is very different from command in war. Navies need managers and politicians to win the key budget battles, few warriors have come up the mark in that area. Nelson was a disappointing peacetime officer, too anxious and urgent for the give and take of diplomacy.

The mania for foolproof systems is a product of the foolish presumption that men in battle can be controlled by order and logic, to function reliably and precisely – human error, mechanical failure and the weather make naval warfare even more the province of chance than land operations, and it will ever be thus. Yet this mania for centralisation also reflects the very high stakes of the Cold War era of high tension nuclear deterrence. There was no room for human error in a politico/strategic context where the price of failure was the destruction of the world. The inevitable result was a stress on ever more sophisticated communication systems to enable the political leadership to exert more control, at ever lower levels of command. Palmer is at pains to demonstrate how this shift in command has posed real dangers for those at the operational level in post-Cold War contexts short of all out war.

The level at which centralisation occurs shifts in the final chapter where political restraint/control is held up as an anathema to the ‘decentralised’ approach developed by Dudley Knox before 1914, and employed by his contemporaries in 1941-45. There is in this more than a hint of special pleading here, but it is true, as Andrew Gordon demonstrated, that the ability to communicate has all too often turned into the desire to interfere. The conduct of Nimitz at Midway, and Andrew Cunningham at the Second

Battle of Sirte is the ideal answer, but only in a total war where political nuance has been set aside for the duration.

This is an important book, one that will secure a wide readership among professionals and students of command in many spheres of activity far removed from the specifics of naval warfare. The background of naval warfare and European politics in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is well developed to ensure naval officers and non-specialists follow the argument. Consequently there will be too much background for specialists, and they are in danger of missing the core argument. Naval command has always been a compromise between the ideal of perfect communication and explanation, and the chaos, confusion and incomprehension of warfare. Every advance in communications technology has been countered by the increased tempo of war and the growing dispersal of forces. The success of inspirational, engaged leaders like Nelson, who took their subordinates into their confidence, and equipped them to fight effectively using their own internalised resources, is a reflection of their superior professionalism. That such leaders were flexible in their choice of tactics is equally important. There is no simple answer, only hard work, close study and lifelong learning. Great leaders are born AND made.



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