

International Journal of Naval History

April 2008

Volume 7 Number 1

Craig C. Felker, **Testing American Sea Power: U.S. Navy Strategic Exercises, 1923-1940**, Texas A & M University Press, 2007. 192 pp. illustrated.

Review by Andrew Lambert
King's College, London

This study of how military organisations learn has been written by a naval officer and naval academy teacher with an eye to the present. Felker examines the place of exercises in US Navy preparation for war between the Washington Treaty and Pearl Harbor. The 'Fleet Problems' annual exercises the Chief of Naval Operations used to examine strategic issues, reflected the underlying assumptions about where the next war would be fought, against who, and in what way. Individual Fleet problems have achieved a degree of notoriety, especially those in which carrier aviation was used to strike the Panama Canal, or Pearl Harbor, but Felker is the first to study them as a series, and assess their wider meaning. He begins by establishing the Navy's basic sea control orthodoxy, a set of ideas developed and taught to the Navy by Alfred T. Mahan, in lectures that were still being delivered long after Mahan's death. In this period Mahan's step by step programmatic approach to securing sea control, and his focus on the concentration of force for decisive battle were tested by the emergence of new weapons systems that challenged assumptions based on his teachings. Over time carrier aviation, submarines and expeditionary warfare were integrated into the exercises, although the results were mixed. Aviation proved to be a success story. Admirals who used their carriers in a conservative manner – tied to the battle fleet to support a gunnery battle - usually 'lost' the exercise to more ambitious officers, and by the mid 1930s carriers had assumed a central role in American strategy. The synergy between these exercises, the growing technical capabilities of carriers and aircraft and the Naval War College War Games is well known, but the focus on Fleet problems provides a fresh perspective, and the names of a number of otherwise unknown admirals who 'lost'.

What is missing is an appreciation of how far these exercises ensured the new battleships were fast ships, to re-connect the carriers and the battle line. Inter-war exercises with 19 knot battleships and 33 knot carriers were a temporary anomaly, not a permanent fact. Because war broke out in late 1941 the Navy went to war with carrier task forces but without fast battleships. The balanced fleet of 1944-45 is far better reflection of what the Navy had learned from the inter-war exercises.

Early attempts to develop fleet submarines capable of cruising with the battle fleet failed, largely for technical reasons, and the submarine was successfully reconfigured as

an independent attack platform. Anti-submarine exercises were half hearted at best, after the high profile loss of several boats, while the clear waters off Hawaii made it all too easy. While Felker is right to stress that the catastrophic failure of USN ASW doctrine in early 1942 reflected the absence of any exercises defending slow merchant ship convoys there were deeper failures. British experience in 1914-1918 and the extensive reports of Admiral William S. Sims USN conclusively demonstrated the critical role of convoy. In a rare example of naval thinking at variance with Mahan his advocacy of the convoy had been ignored. By contrast the other 'afterthought' to be ignored between the wars, amphibious warfare, was an area that Mahan had underplayed. He assumed that such operations would occur after sea control had been established, and so did the inter-war USN. The Marine Corps took a different view, but the Marine forces in the 'Fleet Problems' were either entirely notional, or restricted to minor operations. The legacy of this neglect was a steep and costly learning curve in the Pacific. The failure to take such 'maritime' issues seriously raises a central question. What was the USN for?

The answer is simple. It was a military force to project American power against Japan. Although exercises occasionally paid lip service the Royal Navy as an opponent this was only to ensure the 'enemy' fleet was equal in size to the American force. There were no exercises in the North Atlantic, only the Caribbean and the Pacific. Mahan's geo-political views that the future belonged to an Anglo-American consortium gradually overrode a century of anti-British rhetoric, ensuring the battle of the Atlantic would be won despite American convoy doctrine.

In purely naval terms the 'Fleet Problems' enabled the USN to make massive strides towards the operational concepts that would dominate the Pacific War, fast carrier task forces and the offensive use of submarines to interdict enemy commerce. In addition they served other, less obvious functions. They provided a generation of naval officers with first handed experience of planning and running large scale operations on a strategic scale. While the USN learned how to wage war the basic Mahanian concept was not stretched to include maritime issues, like the defence of merchant shipping, or strategic amphibious warfare. Here British thinkers, from John Colomb in 1867, to Julian Corbett in 1911 provided a more rounded appreciation of how sea power worked. Mahan's model had been kept simple for didactic purposes; in *Sea Power and the French Revolution and Empire* of 1892 he divided the naval role in total war between securing command, achieved at Trafalgar and exploitation command for strategic effect, which happened afterwards. The inter-war USN held to this one thing at a time model, unaware that it was a didactic tool, not a rounded historical analysis of the rich and complex events that occurred between 1793 and 1815. Instead the USN was still focused on bringing the war to a single climactic event. Trafalgar came at the end of long, complex campaigns involving expeditionary warfare, the attack and defence of commerce and high level diplomacy. In this respect Mahan had failed, the role of an educator is to develop in his pupils the ability to think for themselves, not simply repeating the lessons. He knew this as well as Clausewitz, but in both cases those who followed preferred rote to reflection.

In 1939 the Fleet Problem forced the Admirals to consider a complex, interlocking diplomatic and strategic problem. This time the doctrine failed. The

American fleet failed to achieve its objectives. This was not surprising, the 'Fleet Problems' made a major contribution to preparing American naval power for war with Japan, but they did very little to prepare American maritime power for war with Nazi Germany. In giving these famous exercises their due Felker will encourage both historians and modern planners to reconsider their own assumptions. There can be no better testament to a job well done.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2008, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved