

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF BRITISH NAVAL LEADERSHIP DURING WWI – NEED FOR GREATER STRATEGIC ORIENTATION

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“By Maritime Strategy we mean the principles which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor. Naval Strategy is but that part of it which determines the movement of the fleet when maritime strategy has determined what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces; for it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval actions alone. Unaided naval pressure can only work by a process of exhaustion. Its effects must always be slow, and so galling both to our own commercial community and to neutrals, that the tendency is always to accept terms of peace that are far from conclusive.”

- Julian Corbett

One of the periods in history when Britannia could have been said to have ruled the waves, then it was the sixty or so years following the final defeat of Napoleon i.e. from 1815 to 1875. During this period British sea power exercised a wider influence than had ever been seen in the history of maritime powers. So unchallenged, and so immense did this influence appear that people spoke of a ‘Pax Britannica’, the only equivalent in history to be the centuries long domination of the world by imperial Rome. The factors responsible for the rise of Great Britain to this unchallenged supremacy were the Industrial Revolution, the weakening of the other European powers, the

possession of a world-wide chain of strategic bases by the British and a strong Navy protecting an ever-growing global trade.² John Bourne stated it unequivocally, *“Britain was one of the world's great industrial powers. Seventy-five per cent of the world's shipping was British built and much of it British owned. London was the world's greatest money and commodities market. British access to world supplies of food and credit and to imperial resources of manpower made them a formidable enemy, despite the 'contemptible little army' which was all they could put into the field at the outbreak of war.”*³ Some British historians observed ruefully that during the century long peace between

¹ Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1911), p 16.

² Paul M. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London, Humanity Books, 1976), pp. 149-160.

³ John Bourne, *Total War I – The Great War* in Charles Townsend (Editor), *Oxford Illustrated History of WWI*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p 13.

the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815) and World War I (WWI), the combat spirit of the Royal Navy officer corps declined precipitously.⁴

The aim of the paper is to bring out the necessity for strategic leadership in any Navy. The paper hypothesises that the need for greater strategic orientation of the leadership resulted in the Royal Navy not being able to convert its superiority into strategic successes for Britain during WWI.

Beginning of the End of Pax Britannica (1897-1914)

Britain's title of 'Mistress of the Seas' was not challenged due to extended peace for almost a century.⁵ The last time the Royal Navy (RN) had fired a shot in hostile intention after the Battle of Trafalgar was in 1855 off the Crimean coast. The rise of potent American and Japanese fleets in the last few years of the 19th Century and the first few years of the 20th Century did not ruffle the British as they were fleets of friendly powers. However, the threat was clearly seen from Germany

as the German fleet was young, alert and ambitious.⁶

Fisher Revolution

Admiral John Fisher took over the reins of the RN as First Sea Lord on 21st October 1904. To his credit were the introduction of a large number of personnel reforms, change from coal to oil fired ships, introduction of the flotilla defence concept including destroyers and submarines and the launch of the Dreadnought in February 1906.⁷ At 21 knots, it was the fastest warship at the time. Perhaps the most important strategic reform was the redeployment of Britain's nine fleets stationed in various locations around the world. Fisher believed that Dover, Gibraltar, Suez, the Cape of Good Hope and Singapore were the strategic keys locking up the seas of the world. The nine fleets were merged into five and based at each of the key points. The Home Fleet with eight battleships was made the most powerful. The essence of the re-organization was that 3/4th of Britain's battleships would be readily

⁴David M. Keithly, *Military Culture: Leadership and Introspection*, (2001) available at URL: <http://www.defencejournal.com/2001/june/military-culture.htm> (accessed on November 08, 2014).

⁵Richard Humble (Editor), *Naval Warfare – An Illustrated History*, (London, Time Warner Books, 2002), p 104.

⁶Paul M. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London, Humanity Books, 1976), pp. 205-238.

⁷Eric Grove, *The RN since 1815 – A New Short History*, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 89-92.

available against Germany. Admiral John Fisher was greatly influenced by Julian Corbett. However, in the eyes of many British naval officers, whether students in the War Course (generally of the rank of Lieutenant Commanders to Captains) or senior Admirals except for Admiral Fisher, Julian Corbett was an outsider. Eric Grove remarked in his introduction to the classic work *'Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, "degrees of admiration and resentment were compounded by Corbett's ideas being new and even shocking."*⁸

British strategy envisaged a predominantly naval war. A naval blockade would cause Germany to decline economically. The German Navy could choose not to break the stranglehold, but then Germany would lose the war. If it did choose to fight, it would be overwhelmed. British maritime superiority would be reinforced. Neutral opinion would be subdued. Fresh allies would be encouraged into the war. The blockade would be waged with ruthlessness. Military operations would be restricted to the dispatch of an expeditionary

force to help the French and on the periphery of the Central Powers.⁹

Changes at the Admiralty

This era was also marked with differences between the Army and the Royal Navy over the acceptance of each other's viewpoint on the British National military strategy. The Generals espoused the Continental plan whereas for the Admiralty the strategy centered on the Royal Navy. The recently formed Admiralty War Staff was a cumbersome body with a Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee, who insisted on handling every important matter himself. To resolve the differences, the British Prime Minister appointed Winston Churchill, the outspoken head of the Home Office, as the First Lord of the Admiralty. On 8th December 1912, Prince Louis of Battenberg assumed the post of First Sea Lord in succession to Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman post the latter's public controversy with Churchill. Historian Arthur Marder said "the whole politico storm did the Navy no good."¹⁰ Another historian

⁸Eric Grove, *'Introduction to 'Some Principles of Maritime Strategy', (London, Brassey's, 1998), p. xxvi.*

⁹Charles Townsend (Editor), *'Oxford Illustrated History of WWI', (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 23.*

¹⁰Arthur Marder, *'From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow', (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 259.*

Hew Strachan contends that Battenberg “lacked Fisher's dogmatism. Not the least of his attractions to Churchill (the First Lord) was his malleability.”¹¹ Churchill introduced a number of social reforms in the lower deck but his propensity to encourage juniors to comment unfavourably upon their seniors caused much offence with the Sea Lords and they threatened resignation over one such incident in late 1913. Churchill just about avoided another major crisis.¹² The First Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg, was forced to resign on 28th October 1914 after a vicious press campaign objecting to his German birth. Upon Churchill's insistence, Admiral Fisher again took over as the First Sea Lord.¹³ The combination of frequent change and weak appointees (Wilson, Bridgeman and Battenberg) in the four years preceding the war ensured that the professional leadership of the Royal Navy lost its direction. Power now lay with the service's civilian head ... Winston Churchill.¹⁴

Overview of the Naval Campaign

At the outbreak of war, the Royal and German Navies were comparable with the Royal Navy having greater number of ships countered by German technological superiority in armour and munitions. The Royal Navy had 31 capital ships as compared to 13 for the German fleet with both Navies having 12 more dreadnoughts and one battle cruiser under construction.

During the first few days of WWI, German merchant shipping was forced to move away from the sea or seek shelter in neutral ports. The German High Seas Fleet was in Kiel, but some German cruisers which were at sea in various parts of the world were hunted and destroyed. England declared blockade of the German coast. In February 1915, the Germans declared a similar blockade. The Grand Fleet twice encountered German ships in the North Sea at Heligoland (1914) and the Dogger Bank (1915) but none of the engagements were decisive. The Dardanelles campaign saw differences

¹¹Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol. I: To Arms*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 380.

¹²Eric Grove, *The RN since 1815 – A New Short History*, pp. 89-92.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁴Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Vol. I: To Arms*, p. 380.

between Churchill and Fisher come to the fore and finally Fisher resigned in May 1915. Subsequently, due to the controversy and continued poor results Churchill too was forced to go. Churchill was replaced by the former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour. Fisher was replaced by Sir Henry Jackson.

The only major encounter between the two navies was the Battle of Jutland that took place off the coast of Denmark on 31st May and 1st June 1916. Admiral Sir John Jellicoe commanded a British fleet of 150 warships and opposing the RN was the German fleet of 99 ships under the command of Admiral Reinhard Scheer.¹⁵ In spite of Britain's superior strength, Jellicoe after initial tactical brilliance, acted cautiously¹⁶ with the advent of darkness.¹⁷ He may have feared that he could lose the entire war in a day because the destruction of the British

fleet¹⁸ would give Germany control of the seas.¹⁹ This was accentuated by poor communications between the RN ships²⁰ and delayed passage of intelligence²¹ from the Admiralty to the Fleet.²² Although the Germans destroyed greater number of ships, they lost a greater percentage of their smaller Navy. The German surface fleet never again tried to contest British control of the North Sea.

The narrow escape at Jutland convinced Scheer that Germany had only one chance of victory i.e. to commence unrestricted submarine warfare.²³ The restricted success of the U-boat counter offensive brought an end to the Balfour-Jackson Board of Admiralty.²⁴ After Jutland, Admiral Jellicoe spent a year as First Sea Lord from 1916 to 1917, grappling the U-boat menace. Submarine warfare took place in the North Sea, the Black

¹⁵ Julian Corbett, *Official History of the Great War, Naval Operations, Vol. 3, Spring 1915 to April 1916*, (1921) available at URL: <http://www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-RN4.htm> (accessed on November 01, 2014).

¹⁶ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-18*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1931), p. 591.

¹⁷ Holloway H. Frost, *The Battle of Jutland*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1964), p. 375.

¹⁸ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-18*, p. 591.

¹⁹ Langhorne Gibson & J.E.T. Harper, *The Riddle of Jutland – An Authentic History*, (London, Casell & Co., 1934), pp. 144-146.

²⁰ Corelli Barnett, *The Swordbearers*, (New York, William Morrow & Co., 1964), p. 155.

²¹ Geoffrey Bennett, *The Battle of Jutland*, (London, B.T.Basford, 1964), p. 155.

²² John Irving, *The Smoke Screen of Jutland*, (New York, David McKay Co., 1967), p. 13.

²³ Arthur Marder, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, pp. 205-207.

²⁴ Eric Grove, *The RN since 1815 – A New Short History*, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 130.

Sea, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Baltic.²⁵ Germans resorted to unrestricted submarine warfare from January 1917 and brought Britain to the verge of ruin. Jellicoe's obsession with the necessity to keep the Grand Fleet strong led him to oppose the adoption of the convoy system until America's entry. After the Admiralty was compelled by the British cabinet to return to the convoy system in 1917, losses to enemy submarines dropped dramatically.²⁶ However, the British Prime Minister's sinking confidence in Jellicoe starting with his lack of enthusiasm for the convoy system and coupled with his differences with the First Lord of the Admiralty Geddes over the control of the air wing resulted in his dismissal on Christmas eve of 1917 and his deputy Rosslyn Wemyss taking over as the First Sea Lord in January 1918.

German violation of international law and sinking of American ships helped bring the United States into the war on the Allied side. The British naval blockade of Germany, massively

reinforced by the Americans from April 1917, played a vital role in German defeat. Ultimately, Britain needed US involvement to stem the tide and change the course of WWI.

Assessment of British Naval Leadership

There were few Admirals in the RN at the commencement of war who understood the nature of modern war. The British approach to World War I veered to over confidence. David Divine in his book 'The Blunted Sword' concluded "*the Admiralty discouraged, delayed, obstructed or positively delayed significant technological developments ever since the first marine engine and that the inertia and stubborn resistance to change resulted in stupendous waste, inefficiency and consequential losses including in WWI.*"²⁷ Except for Churchill, the politicians tended to accede to the advice of the Generals and the Admirals on the premise they were the experts and knew best, when, in fact, as the war progressed the lack of

²⁵Henry Newbolt, 'Official History of the Great War, Naval Operations, Vol. 4, June 1916 to April 1917', (1928) available at URL: <http://www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-RN4.htm> (accessed on November 01, 2014).

²⁶Paul Kennedy, 'Engineers of Victory', (New York, Random House, 2013), p. 30.

²⁷David Divine, 'The Blunted Sword', (London, Hutchinson, 1964), pp. 25-26.

strategic orientation would become apparent. However, Churchill was also guilty and did not keep himself abreast of operational infirmities which resulted in the failed Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaigns. The failure of these campaigns (at the Dardanelles and at Gallipoli) resulted in substantial casualties and was a serious setback to the Allied war command, including that of Churchill. He resigned his position with the Admiralty after being demoted, and headed to the Western Front to command a battalion.

The ineffective political leadership was a lesson Churchill would learn well and not to repeat during World War II. Some of the reasons for the lack of strategic naval leadership were as follows:-

- Lack of opportunistic training in the hard school of war and their seeming continued association with the days of sail.
- Changes at the Admiralty just before

the commencement of the War. In military matters Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was unsuited to the role of wartime leader. He ceded control and decision-making to the two strong-willed men in his government: Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, and Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty. At times, they did not comprehend operational constraints.

- The lack of joint planning between the naval and the military staff. Neither armed force had given much thought on how decisive fleet action would support the armies' strategies on land.²⁸
- Over reliance on the concentrated fleet concept and the big battle, a legacy of Mahan. This resulted in battles of attrition and static warfare, and the British fleet failed to deliver the expected Nelsonic victory of total annihilation.²⁹
- The British Admiralty, therefore, looked to comparative battleship

²⁸Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914-1918*, 'Vol. Two, (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1961), pp. 76-84 cited in Jan Breemer, *Burden of Trafalgar – Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of the First World War*, (1993), pp.33-34.

²⁹Herbert Summer, *Broadsides of Ink - A Study about the Controversies of the Battle of Jutland*, (1973) available at URL: http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc164081/m2/1/high_res_d/n_04743.pdf (accessed on November 08, 2014).

strength and losses as the primary means of strategic advantage,³⁰ and this was their indication as to which side had command of the seas.

- The Admiralty war plans envisaged blockade of the enemy coast. However the primary reason was to entice the High Sea Fleet to come out and give battle and not bringing economic pressure to bear.³¹

- The Admiralty reiterated that the big battle would protect one's shipping ignoring the historical experience of the aftermath of Trafalgar. Thus, the Admiralty made an ambiguous connection between the tactical means of battle and the strategic objective of the safety of the Sea lanes of communication.³²

- In addition to the above, they were also influenced by Julian's Corbett derision of convoying resulting in significant losses against unrestricted submarine warfare.

- The British Navy did not take advantage of communications thirteen years after the first wireless signal had been transmitted across the Atlantic and superior intelligence was not exploited sufficiently.

- Failed to perceive the impact of the submarine that had been proclaimed as an un-English weapon.

- The role of the airplane in a versatile use was neither envisaged nor realised.³³

- Poor operational execution of the otherwise clear strategic plan of Winston Churchill at Gallipoli due to lack of operational experience coupled with lack of surprise, not factoring for mines, and also deficiency of shells.

- Less importance to professional military education, a vital necessity to developing a strategic orientation and gain the intellectual credentials to interact at par with power structures

³⁰ Jan Breemer, 'Burden of Trafalgar – Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of the First World War', (1993), p. 15, (Newport, Naval War College, Newport Paper #6 available at URL: <https://www.usnwc.edu/Publications/Naval-War-College-Press/Newport-Papers.aspx> (accessed on November 08, 2014).

³¹ A.C. Bell, 'A History of the Blockade of Germany and of the Countries Associated with Her in the Great War, 1914-1918', (London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO), 1961), pp. 23-32 cited in Jan Breemer, 'Burden of Trafalgar – Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of the First World War', (1993).

³² Jan Breemer, 'Burden of Trafalgar – Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of the First World War', (1993), pp. 34-35.

³³ E.B. Potter (Ed), 'Sea Power, A Naval History', 2nd Edition (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1981), pp. 194-197.

and civilian authorities in the national and international arena.³⁴

Conclusion

The paper has sought to establish that the shortcomings of strategic leadership in the Royal Navy were one of the reasons responsible for lack of decisive advantage over Germany during the War. According to Samuel Huntington, *“The skill of the officer is neither a craft nor an art. It is instead an extraordinary complex intellectual skill requiring comprehensive study and training. The intellectual content of the military officer requires him to devote about one-third of his professional life to formal schooling, probably a higher ratio of educational time to practice time than in any other profession.”*³⁵ Creativity and originality – what General M. Galvin referred to as intellectual non-conformity – are crucial aspects of leadership that must be promoted in today’s services. A leader must not only

be creative himself; he should foster cooperative thinking to draw on potential strength in the ideas of subordinates.³⁶ Creativity is the ability to perceive problems and issues. It needs an awareness of geopolitics, geo-economics and geo-technology. Leaders also need to be au fait with the values and interests of other cultures. In contemporary times, even the quoted sentiments of Huntington cannot adequately describe the intellectual demands of naval leadership which will have to imbibe multifaceted disciplines of maintaining international peace, progressing Confidence Building Measures, responding to crises and resolving disputes. All these would need a multifaceted approach with a strategic orientation. As David Keithly succinctly commented: “Those who are unable to do so will find themselves overwhelmed by international conflicts, unable to comprehend cause and potential consequence.”³⁷



³⁴Vishnu Bhagwat, ‘The Emergence of the Indian Scholar Warrior’, (Mumbai, Times of India, May 1999).

³⁵Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Soldier and the State’, (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1957), p 292.

³⁶David M. Keithly, ‘The Forgotten Element of Leadership’, (USNIPS, Vol. 121, No. 12, December 1995).

³⁷Ibid.

About the Author

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