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"A Matter of Interpretation"

Frank M. Snyder

Gordon, Andrew. *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996. 708pp. $48.95

NAVAL TACTICS USED TO BE DEFINED AS "actions that one takes in the presence of the enemy"; in that sense, this lengthy book is clearly "tactical" rather than either "strategic" or "operational." But the author has really written two books: one about the battle of Jutland, and the other about the careers of certain Royal Navy officers during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The "Jutland" story (found in the book's first 150 pages and its final two hundred) is an interesting retelling of what happened during that epic battle, including descriptions of the fleets that fought it, the command and control styles of the flag officers who commanded on the British side, and the arguments that followed. The Victorian and Edwardian book (250 pages that interrupt the author's description of the "Run to the North"), on the other hand, chronicles the evolution of tactical thought in the Royal Navy during the Victorian era, describing the formative careers of the British flag officers who were in command at Jutland and analyzing the Grand Fleet Battle Orders in effect during the battle.

When the long-anticipated battle took place between the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet and the Imperial German Navy's High Seas Fleet at the end of

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Captain Frank Snyder retired from the U.S. Navy in 1976, where his expertise had been surface warfare and command and control. From 1976 to 1979 he served on the Telecommunications and Computer Applications Committee of the National Research Council, National Academy of Science. In 1980, as a faculty member of the U.S. Naval War College, Professor Snyder created and taught the first elective course on command and control. At the request of the president of the National Defense University, he developed his course to be taught at all U.S. war and staff colleges. In 1988 it was published as a book by the Center for Information Policy Research, Harvard University, and a revised edition was published in 1993 by the National Defense University. Professor Snyder holds a master's degree from Stanford University. He is currently the Raymond A. Spruance Professor Emeritus of Command and Control at the U.S. Naval War College, where he continues to lecture on command and control, the planning process, and naval battles of World War II.

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May 1916, neither side scored a clear victory. Most of the 250 ships that took part had been built during a "revolution in military affairs," yet the battle's outcome depended ultimately on the effectiveness of the command styles of its principal commanders. The British public, still basking in the reflected glory of Nelson's epic victory at Trafalgar 110 years earlier, received the news of the battle's outcome in the spring of 1916 with great disappointment. Indeed, Admiral John Jellicoe himself used the word "unpalatable" in reference to the loss, by explosion, of several British battle cruisers—though not, as the author implies, to the battle generally.

A number of explanations have since been advanced to account for the failure of the Grand Fleet to sweep the High Seas Fleet from the North Sea: Jellicoe's deploying his twenty-four battleships on the "wrong" flank; faulty design of the British battle cruisers; poor shooting on the part of the British battle cruisers; poor reporting by the cruiser force; and, more recently, the unfortunate selection by the Royal Navy of a fire control system that performed poorly when ships were maneuvering. In this book the author directs our attention elsewhere: to the different command styles of admirals Jellicoe, David Beatty (commanding the scouting force that included the six battle cruisers), and Hugh Evan-Thomas (commanding a squadron of four "superdreadnoughts"); to the attempt by the British commander in chief, Jellicoe, to centralize authority; and to adherence to faulty doctrine (particularly with respect to avoiding torpedoes) by flag officers who had risen to high command during the long years of peace.

But in fairness to Jellicoe, the tactical situation he faced at Jutland was bound to be different from the one that Nelson faced at Trafalgar—where the outcome was decided by British sailors and marines capturing enemy ships once the admirals had broken the enemy's line in a way that nullified its numerical advantage and once each ship's captain had placed his ship alongside a ship of the enemy's. All this had changed by the time of Jutland. There would be no boarding parties; "steam tactics" had intervened. The issue would be decided by gunnery (unless, perhaps, torpedoes or mines became too threatening). It seemed the sensible thing to centralize the maneuvering of ships in order to concentrate gunfire and maximize defense against any underwater threats. There is, during peacetime, a natural drift toward centralization.

Just prior to the battle, four of the newest British battleships, under Evan-Thomas, were attached to Beatty's separately based battle cruiser "fleet" to replace temporarily a squadron of battle cruisers (faster than battleships but less heavily armored) that had been sent to Scapa Flow for gunnery exercises. This exchange of ships set the stage for a "conflict of style" (the original title of this book) between the commander of the four battleships and that of the battle cruiser fleet. On two occasions Beatty failed to communicate effectively with Evan-Thomas, with the result that his battleships were late in joining the action and in reversing course to the north.

The author discusses at some length several tactical decisions made during the battle that he feels have been obscured by the official records. One of these deals with Admiral Beatty's positioning of the four new battleships temporarily under his command; a second is the failure of the squadron of new battleships to move in the direction taken by Beatty when he made his first turn to cut off a German retreat; and a third is Beatty's order to Evan-Thomas to reverse course during the "transition" between the gunnery duel (known as the "Run to the South") and the "Run to the North"—the pursuit of British battle cruisers and the four new British battleships by the German High Seas Fleet (which was in fact being lured toward the main British battleship fleet). He also examines at length whether or not Evan-Thomas's battleships, as they turned northward in succession, came under fire from the German battleships. He concludes that they did.

The book summarizes the great controversies that took place during the 1920s, in which commentators on the battle (and even its participants) took sides, arguing on behalf either of Jellicoe and Evan-Thomas on the one hand, or Beatty on the other. The author tries to avoid taking sides and indeed finds plenty to praise and to criticize all around. Gordon believes that the arguments used by each side were based on doctrines that were incompatible with those used by the other. He seems to conclude, however, that while neither Beatty nor Evan-Thomas may be blameless for the tactical "disconnects" between them, Beatty's vision of battle tactics was superior to that of Jellicoe.

Thus he embarks on a study (entitled "The Underlying Reason Why") of the prior careers of these officers, in an effort to determine the origins of the "authoritative" command styles of Jellicoe and Evan-Thomas, and of the "autocratic" approach of Beatty (to use the terminology of Norman Dixon in his *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, which the author quotes approvingly). This part of the book seems to reflect the author's real focus, but although it contains a great deal of social history and information about life on the royal yachts, for example, it is less compelling than was probably intended, and it fails to demonstrate just how each officer's experiences affected his tactical thinking.

Instead, Gordon seems to attribute the Royal Navy's lack of tactical innovation to the writers of its Signal Book and also to the pursuit of steam tactics. The author comments that "in the new seamanship of iron and steam, mathematics were subverting the art of centuries, and vistas of possibilities opened up for tightly choreographed geometrical evolutions. The 'science' of Steam Tactics was the result, and every movement, every change of course, speed or formation, could be ordered and executed by flag signal. . . . [The] goosestepping doctrine was consonant with Victorian notions of order and propriety." (It should be noted that the Signal Book did have its uses. At Jutland, Admiral Jellicoe was able to order six columns of battleships to form a single line, start that line in the direction he wanted, and incidentally position seventy-odd cruisers and destroyers—all with a single three-flag signal. Gordon generalizes that "one can readily understand how the new steam-tactics were seen as representing the Royal Navy's triumphant assimilation of the industrial revolution. . . . [Naval officers] could now relinquish gracefully the old ways of thinking about warfare."

The author praises the previous attempts of Admiral Sir George Tryon (especially as commander of the Mediterranean fleet in the 1890s) to go beyond the Signal Book (or in the author's words, "to emancipate the fleet" from it). Tryon proposed to rely instead on single flags or pennants that would direct other ships to conform to the flagship's movements, indicating whether they were to maintain relative or true bearings on their guides. What Tryon seemed to be doing was use his flagship's course as part of the signal to his ships. The author considers it a tragedy for the Royal Navy's tactical thought that Tryon's system seemed to die with him when in 1893 he perished in HMS *Victoria* after a collision that resulted from execution of signals (from the Signal Book) that he had originated; however, he later credits Beatty with seeking "to liberate the battle cruisers from the Signal Book and thus from the priesthood of Signals officers."

There may be some merit in looking toward the distant past for "causes" of an admiral's tactical conduct or at least his "attitude towards authority," but it seems more likely that differences in tactical outlook derived from the fact that Beatty had been in action against the Germans several times in the North Sea, while Jellicoe and Evan-Thomas had not. Most of Beatty's experiences in battle in the North Sea had ended in disappointment and frustration, but he responded by continuing to simplify his methods of command and to stress to his subordinates that he was counting on their initiative and rapid action. If he failed to communicate any of this spirit to Evan-Thomas prior to the battle, then Beatty was at fault; in any case, his failure to communicate the essence of his battle experiences to Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet may have been an even greater fault. Perhaps he sensed that his relationship with Jellicoe was uneasy and that battleship officers were unwilling to believe that they had anything to learn from the isolated experiences of a few "lesser" ships. The author concludes that tactical doctrine ought to be developed in a way that pays much more attention to the lessons of combat—which he calls the "short bouts of empirical experience"—than to the "rationalism" that seems in peacetime to dominate development of doctrine. However, he overlooks the opportunity to apply that conclusion to the Grand Fleet Battle Orders, which assumed, erroneously, that the battleships would fight each other in single lines on parallel courses.

The book contains a wealth of detail, usually interesting, often fascinating, sometimes even relevant to the author's theses. The author uses over two thousand notes to cite 230 books, but unfortunately the notes are endnotes rather than footnotes, so the reader has to turn to the back of the book to find out just whom the author is actually quoting or to determine whether the endnote clarifies or modifies the text in some significant way. Although the table of contents lists the forty photographs, which all appear together, it fails to list the book's very useful twenty-eight maps and sketches of the battle and of Tryon's maneuvers. Finally, American readers need to be warned that the men the author often refers to as Sir John, Sir David, Sir Hugh, and Sir George are actually Admirals Jellicoe, Beatty, Evan-Thomas, and Tryon, respectively.

In the final chapter (which, in a work of nonfiction, should be read first) the author advances twenty-eight propositions that reflect the lessons that he would draw from the battle of Jutland, lessons he claims to have updated using the Royal Navy's experience in the Second World War and in the 1982 Falklands War (Admiral Sandy Woodward has written the book's foreword). Some of these propositions emphasize the differences between tactical doctrine arrived at during peacetime and that derived from combat experience, some warn against the evils of communications. Projecting the British experience at Jutland ahead to the present, he is appalled by the increase in the number of messages and is somewhat suspicious of the whole idea of information warfare (noting that "the real world, after all, still exists outside cyberspace.")

This book should appeal to readers who continue to nurture a historical interest in the battle of Jutland; they may find themselves challenged by the logic that the author uses to analyze decisions made and actions taken during the engagement. For those who emphasize both uncertainty and the unexpected in combat, it is almost reassuring to find an informed argnment about "what really happened" at critical points in a much-studied battle that took place over eighty years ago. Gordon generally agrees with the conclusions of such authorities as Professor Arthur Marder or John Campbell, whose volume III of *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* and *Jutland: An Analysis of the Fighting*, respectively, he often relies upon. Yet he does not hesitate to disagree with them when he feels that they have misread the historical record.

Finally, the book might be of interest to readers who wonder what it must have been like when, after many years of peace, the world's premier navy, a navy that had undergone (and indeed had pioneered) a significant "revolution in naval affairs," fought a major fleet battle against a navy that had been created only during that same revolution.