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Geoffrey Till

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THE HATTENDORF PRIZE LECTURE, 2018

History, Truth Decay, and the Naval Profession

In 2018, the Naval War College awarded Dr. Geoffrey Till the Hattendorf Prize for Distinguished Original Research in Maritime History. The following piece is derived from a lecture that will be delivered as part of this honor.

Why in this age of constant technological, economic, social, and political change should navies actively concern themselves with the naval past? Herein I will try to answer this question, one often asked by skeptics anxious to insert into the developing courses of professional military education (PME) material that seems so much more relevant to the contemporary problems they face. The result easily can lead to efforts to cut history out of the syllabus or, more insidiously, to reduce it to the level where it becomes little more than a means of socializing new entrants and developing team spirit, necessary and laudable though those aims might be. After all, it has been said, with some justice, that a navy that does not know its history has no soul.¹

I will start by reviewing some of the basic problems that today's navies face. Then I will consider the contribution that naval history might make to dealing with those problems, first as a quarry of processed experience and second as an intellectual exercise. Finally, I will seek to show the particular value of history in developing naval professionalism in a challenging social media age. By way of conclusion, I will look at some of the responsibilities that all this lays on historians.

CONTEXT: SOME CURRENT PROBLEMS FOR NAVIES

The basic point is that navies need to understand their function.² This isn't easy, these days. The potential tasks of navies have expanded, have grown more complex, and increasingly are seen as relatively more important, as the burgeoning navies of the Asia-Pacific region so amply demonstrate. For the navies of the twenty-first century, it is no longer enough to understand the war-fighting and deterrent war-prevention roles, analyzed by the likes of Mahan and Corbett at the beginning of the last century, as they are affected by the international, technological, and social realities of this one. That is difficult enough.

Now we have to add a whole series of nontraditional, “postmodern” tasks associated with Maritime Security (with capital letters). These include the challenges presented by drug runners, trafficking in illegal migrants, international terrorism, humanitarian action, disaster relief, environmental protection, search and rescue, capacity building, security sector reform, and so on. In many cases, early and effective engagement in these so-called Phase 0 activities will head off the need to exercise traditional war-fighting skills later on.³ But preparing for what the British military currently calls *contingency* is an inherently complicated business.⁴

One problem in the pursuit of guidance for making unavoidably difficult decisions about relative operational priorities is that of having to “see through a glass darkly.” It is uniformly and intrinsically difficult for foreign ministries, treasuries, or defense and naval staffs to predict the future or to gauge its requirements. This difficulty is demonstrated by the problems that all navies face these days in getting their kit because the lead times normally required to produce sophisticated naval weapons, sensors, and platforms and their probable service lives are likely to be very long. A great many of the ships of the fleets of the 2030s are already at sea or at an advanced stage of design.⁵ This, together with rising costs and reduced budgets, makes the acquisition of naval matériel increasingly difficult. One set of victims of the procurement process (taking a leaf out of Jane Austen’s book) have remarked recently, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that defence equipment acquisition is one of the most challenging of human activities . . . a uniquely demanding bureaucratic morass littered with military, technological, economic, and political pitfalls.”⁶

Future-oriented procurement strategies tend to suffer badly from the unpredictability of the future economic, budgetary, and strategic environments. All too frequently, this development risk produces cycles of boom and bust that make sustained planning over, say, a thirty-year period almost impossible for manufacturers and their customers. Typically, this will result in constant delays, cost increases, and iterative tinkering with original specifications—and eventually in the failure or chronic delay of the program in ways that mean that the navy tends to acquire new matériel in a piecemeal, opportunistic way rather than as part of an overall strategic plan. This manner of acquisition may undermine a navy’s capacity to perform its present roles, not to mention its future ones. No navy has shown itself immune to such pressures and constraints; all navies need to be encouraged to think about how best to get around, if not to overcome, such difficulties.

Another problem is that, to some extent at least, the requirements of these possible contingency tasks conflict with those of the more familiar war-fighting ones. The funds expended on a carrier, for example, could generate any number of capable offshore patrol vessels. Again, the more sailors train for things such

as the detection and apprehension of drug runners, the less they can train for antisubmarine operations. Given that resources, both human and material, are finite, choices have to be made.

Paradoxically, this is partly an unexpected product of success. Because of the fundamental flexibility of sea power, navies can deliver everything from bombs to babies, so they often are called on to do more or less everything at sea and quite often on land as well. Since the world's navies thus have shown themselves to be of such utility across the full spectrum of possible maritime operations, their success has increased the painful matter of operational and strategic choice dramatically in the setting of priorities for which they prepare. This is not an entirely new problem for them, of course, since navies always have had to take on functions other than those of simply obliterating one another, but there is a strong argument for saying that their resulting dilemmas of choice are much greater now than they ever have been before.

Worse still, all these possible roles and requirements are in a state of constant change. A force at sea, even one already engaged in prosecuting its dedicated mission, can find itself also having to confront and respond to a whole host of different high- and low-intensity challenges across the spectrum, especially when, as they usually do, events combine to confound initial expectations about the nature and almost certainly the length of the original mission. As is so often said in such dynamic situations, it is unwise to assume your plan's survival once contact with the problem is made. Thus when a number of Western powers thought they were intervening in the civil war in Libya in 2011 merely to avert a humanitarian crisis in Misrātah and elsewhere, the situation morphed into something much more demanding, which has yet to be resolved.

Mahan and Corbett do not seem to have much guidance to offer on such matters, because the focus of their thought was largely on higher-intensity operations, although they were perfectly well aware of the requirement for, and the potential challenge of, lower-intensity ones. They assumed that once a navy's major high-end tasks were dealt with satisfactorily, the rest could look after itself. But now the "rest" quite often has become the major focus of concern.

This is because today's situation has become more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA, for short!), partly because some of today's leading states want it to be, and so pursue "a multidimensional and multidisciplinary strategy that consciously blurs the classical distinctions between warriors and non-combatants, front and rear, peace and war, state and proxies, and fact and fiction; and which employs a variety of tools—military technology and operations, information and cyber, economic pressure, ethnic bridgeheads and sensitivities—in order to manipulate both rival societies and [the states'] own."⁷ Although such techniques are certainly not new, the extra attention they warrant

today creates an ambiguous, confusing, and, frankly, potentially demoralizing situation. But if understood, they provide opportunities as well as challenges.

So how can the study of past events in naval history, as part of a well-rounded package of PME, possibly help navies prepare for the issues they will face? We will look at this from two different angles: naval history as a quarry of potentially relevant data and—arguably more important, especially these days—naval history as an intellectual process.

THE POWER OF EXAMPLE FROM THE PROCESSED PAST

History is processed experience. Naval history is a source of innumerable examples of the way things have been done in the past. For all the historians' reluctance to think of the lessons of history, or even their norms, the past is a source of previous experience that might well help present practitioners in comparable but not identical situations to understand their problems better and to think through what they should do to solve them.⁸ Although, as frequently has been said, history does not repeat itself—it rhymes.⁹ As Michael Howard reminded us back in 1962, there are patterns: "Wars still resemble each other more than they resemble any other human activity."¹⁰ Naval professionals, arguably, should know those patterns, but in their search for what the Russians call the "norms" of military experience, or what they generally should expect, it is vital that they also should spot the differences as well as the similarities between their situation and perhaps only superficially similar ones in the processed past.

Looking at something such as the sinking of the Royal Navy's *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* off Malaya by Japanese aircraft in December 1941, for example, teaches us all sorts of things about the need for interservice cooperation, sustainable balances between resources and commitments, not underestimating your adversary, and so on. For all its dangers, not least the evident danger of mythmaking, there is much to be said for the simple notion of seeing the past as providing previous examples of the problems of the present and future.¹¹ Such historical case studies are also ideal means for advancing understanding by way of counterfactual questions: What would have happened, for example, if the British in the autumn of 1941 had sent hundreds of tanks and aircraft to Singapore instead of to Russia? Why didn't they?¹²

The point also can be exemplified by reverting to the problems of naval procurement already discussed. While the past is indeed another country, today's planners in the defense procurement field are facing problems and issues that are not that dissimilar from those faced by their predecessors. Those responsible for the design and procurement of today's *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers in the United Kingdom hardly can fail to have been aware of the demoralizing experience of their predecessors in the 1960s. This second time around, at the

broadest level, the needs to be sufficiently clear about the projected roles of the ship, to keep unavoidable interservice competition down to manageable limits, and not to get too far away from what would seem to be financially viable in the circumstances of the time all seem to have been hoisted in.¹³ The difficulty of their task, though, clearly provides an incentive for growing the smart customer, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that study of the way in which such difficulties were handled in the past will provide at least some guidance for the present and the future.

Another area in which history as processed experience—a source of example—can be argued to have something to offer is in leadership. Leadership, of course, varies enormously in its character and its function. On the face of it, the kind of leadership required to command in battle is not necessarily the same as that required to lead a design team in a submarine-acquisition project or to run a shore establishment. But is that true? Again, looking at past examples of these kinds of leadership at the very least should encourage discussion and increase understanding of this otherwise very slippery concept.¹⁴ In short, looking at previous examples of a campaign, problem, or issue enables people at least to ask the right questions and so to develop a broader understanding. It cannot be said too often that the dissimilarities between the past and present cases are likely to be at least as important as the similarities in this process.

One of the reasons for this is the crucial role of the broader context in determining outcomes. For this reason, Michael Howard emphasizes the importance of studying history in context as well as in width and depth.¹⁵ Naval history can be a powerful way of reminding professionals of the importance of context, so it should be designed to encourage them to take a wider view of the impact of the international, technological, social, and financial backgrounds to their operations. “Was the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 lost on the beaches of the peninsula or around the conference table in London?” is the sort of question that, as historians, we should be getting students to think about if they are to understand not only the purpose, planning, and conduct of operations but the management of defense more widely. Getting people to look above the parapet and not to be focused exclusively on the all-too-demanding problems of their part of the ship (to meld a few analogies, in the spirit of jointness) is, or should be, an essential objective of PME.

As an aside, it is also hard to think of an approach better designed to encourage reflection about the three levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic—and the manner in which they interact. Encouraging students to track the consequences of the strategic decision-making process in London all the way down to the deficiencies in preparation on the landing beaches of the Gallipoli Peninsula (such as the lack of sufficient medical facilities, water supply, and so forth) and

then to follow the tactical consequences back up through the hierarchy of decision to those ultimately responsible for making strategic-level decisions hardly can fail to help develop a more rounded understanding of military operations.

The list of areas like this in which naval history as processed experience can provide helpful examples for constructive reflection by today's warriors of course could go on almost indefinitely, but there's also another aspect to history as a quarry of illustrative, if not explanatory, material to be noted. That aspect is to consider the past as prologue to the present, and maybe to the future, too.

History helps us to understand the context and explains how we have arrived at where we are today, and therefore it also helps us to understand the present rather better, and from that to design sustainable policies for the future.¹⁶ Take, for example, the increasingly contentious issue of the historic freedom of navigation for warships. Naval activity is, and always has been, framed by contemporary interpretations of the law, and vice versa; understanding the background to those changing interpretations is an essential part of the professional sailor's intellectual kit bag. Or at least it should be, if sailors are to hold their own in the expressions of differences of opinion at sea and in the defining of operational priorities. Arguably, the ability to comprehend, to deploy, and to make use of the law of the sea has become an ever-more-crucial component of twenty-first-century sea power. At all levels of command, understanding its development and its importance confers advantage.

At the moment, some aspects of this remain matters of contention as the U.S. Navy and other Western navies try to defend the basic notion of freedom of navigation against what they see as a continentalist tide that is seeking, in effect, to territorialize the sea by insidiously claiming more and more jurisdiction over what once was regarded uniformly as the high seas. This has given rise to a host of regrettable incidents. All concerned in the matter of freedom of navigation, most particularly of warships, really need to understand the issues—what's at stake, in other words—and how this situation has arisen.

Knowing what the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea says, for example, about the rights of warships in others' exclusive economic zones is not enough, because the wording of the convention (being a political bargain) has enough ambiguity in it to allow (just about, and at a stretch) different interpretations—and there are strong operational and emotional reasons why some countries seek to exploit, or even ignore, vague or unhelpful provisions of the pact altogether. International law, after all, is nothing more than a set of political agreements that apply to a certain time and place, and is in any case susceptible to change through subsequent state practice. As one of its leading experts has remarked, "The history of the law of the sea has been dominated by a central and

persistent theme—the competition between the exercise of governmental authority over the sea and the idea of the freedom of the seas. The tension between these has waxed and waned through the centuries, and has reflected the political, strategic, and economic circumstances of each particular age.”¹⁷

For this reason, simply knowing and enforcing the law are not enough. What navies ought to be doing as well is not just pontificating about what they think the law says on freedom of navigation for warships but explaining why upholding it is a good thing for everyone. This task cannot be left to lawyers alone. Only naval history can show us exactly why this apparently arcane principle is important enough to risk lives for, and all concerned need to know it, not least those whose lives might in the present or future be in question because of it.

The same kind of developmental approach can be applied, of course, to all other aspects of sea power, in which knowing how we got to where we are provides probable guidance to where we should go next; although sadly, but perhaps inevitably, lessons identified are not necessarily learned. This approach also has been lampooned by skeptics who liken it to trying to drive down a twisting country road while peering through the back window of the car. This overstates the point. The truth is that when driving, while we look through the front windscreen most of the time, it's good to keep an occasional eye on the rearview mirror as well.

Christopher Andrew, the historian of the British Security Service, has drawn attention to the lamentable consequences of such people not knowing their own history and identifies what he calls a “historical attention-span deficit disorder” (HASDD, for short) as the root cause of the problem. Hal Brands and William Inboden recently have done the same for those who would practice statecraft, arguing the unwisdom of neglecting “a fount of information and insight for leaders grappling with the challenges of statecraft in a messy world.” But this argument should not be overdone either, for all but the most obsessive of historians would admit that history isn't the *only* thing that matters.¹⁸

NAVAL HISTORY AS AN INTELLECTUAL EXERCISE

The second angle on the value of naval history for PME is not as a quarry of data, material, and example, but more as an intellectual discipline that encourages the development of thinking and of analytical, and very possibly behavioral, skills that should help make naval professionals smarter. As a former commandant at the U.K. Joint Service Command and Staff College (JSCSC) used to say, the modern airman, soldier, and sailor have to respond to perhaps unprecedented levels of strategic ambiguity. They have to improvise creatively, as jazz musicians do around a central theme, responding dynamically to changes set by others and to

the effects of contingency, chance, and general chaos. No more can they fall back on the laboriously choreographed musical scores set by the kind of constantly rehearsed operational plans that characterized, for example, the Cold War.¹⁹

Instead they have to be prepared for surprise; as Mike Tyson once graphically remarked, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”²⁰ Hence the need for what is described gruesomely as the end state of a student at the JSCSC: “to have developed a mind that is flexible and able to analyse and conceptualise in a military context in order to make timely and logical decisions in all types of subsequent appointments.”²¹

To cope with a complex and often bewildering future in which you easily can get punched in the mouth by unexpected events, those students will need the capacity to analyze incomplete and ambiguous data. They need to be able to think through problems and their consequences, and, most importantly, to keep thinking them through, long after their staff course, or indeed their latest operation, has ended. They need to be independent learners. Some at least of what is taught in a one-year staff course certainly will have a limited shelf life, because the world moves on. Accordingly, students have to be encouraged to develop the independent interest and the habits of thought and of continuing inquiry that animate the best historians. This helps produce that very necessary characteristic that some would call insight.²² This can, and should, include as a “golden thread” a continuing interest in the naval past and its developing relationship with the naval present and the naval future.

Charles Darwin indeed reminds us that it was not necessarily the strongest but the most adaptable that won the evolutionary race. Naval history helps develop an openness of mind to uncomfortable ideas that confound and upset one’s own emerging conclusions. This really amounts to an early acceptance of the notion that there is no final and complete answer to anything. To paraphrase Napoléon, we have to tie knots and carry on, always progressing hopefully to what some have called a higher level of ignorance.²³

In this, naval history can help, or maybe it should help, elevate thinking from the empirical to the conceptual—from the concerns of the tactical, technological nitty-gritty of yesterday’s or today’s battle to that wider, shaping context that links the levels of war and conflict. All the same, both the empirical and the conceptual are necessary parts of the mix. We should not, however, allow the perpetual fascination with the drums and smoke of battle to obscure the more-abstract realities that in many cases determine outcomes. Naval history, in short, can and should help us understand the critical business of strategy and policy making.²⁴

Using history in this way is a much more widely practiced activity than is often realized. By the time strategists and policy makers have reached such elevated

positions, they have engaged with history, absorbing views about the relevance of the past, even if only through a process of osmosis. Either consciously or unconsciously, they use history as a guide for how to think about future policy in a whole variety of ways.²⁵ The design teams developing the Royal Navy's Type 26 global combat ship or those responsible for shaping a navy's training programs cannot insulate themselves from the past, however hard they may try. They adapt and adopt its conceptual consequences as they both reflect and help create strategic thinking, in a continuous iterative cycle of reflection and action. It is quite likely that in many cases they do not realize they are doing it! Internet bloggers and the young naval enthusiasts who come together to create online think tanks such as the Center for International Maritime Security, on the other hand, do so quite consciously, aiming to study the past as a guide to the future, and their influence undoubtedly will seep out in all directions. History, in short, is unavoidable, and it shapes not just conclusions but also approaches and ways of thinking. The real question is not whether to admit its relevance to today's problems but how to make the best use of it.

For all that, unfortunately, a sizable constituency of thought in the United Kingdom felt bound to react to what they considered to be Britain's frankly embarrassing Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) of 2010 with the fear that the country was no longer capable of "doing" strategy, or even thinking about it constructively—an impression apparently confirmed, in their minds at least, by the experience of the later stage of the second Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This concern was triggered initially by the Royal United Services Institute address of December 2009 by the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, in which he claimed that Britain had lost the habit of making strategy.

But one thing that's struck me in my present role, and that I think requires urgent action over the next year, is the degree to which we seem to have lost an institutionalised capacity for, and culture of, strategic thought. I'm not saying that we don't have people who can think strategically, or that we haven't evolved a proper strategic basis for our actions. But we've seized on ability where we've found it, and as a result our formulation of strategy has been much harder than should have been the case. We've been hunter/gatherers of strategic talent, rather than nurturers and husbandmen.²⁶

It was followed up through a series of inquiries by the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee and highly critical articles from a large number of academics. Their concerns were reinforced by the uncertain consequences of Britain's engagement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The suggestion was that the United Kingdom had not thought through what its involvement in

these wars was supposed to achieve, nor the requirements or likely consequences of this involvement, largely because it had lost the habit of consulting the rear-view mirror and developing the agnostic and questioning ways of thought that develop from that. Did anyone ask for evidence that Britain's intervention in the intense factionalism of Afghanistan would be any more successful this time than it had been the first, second, and third times that Britain had tried it?²⁷

While the urgency of the need to cut government expenditure and to require the Ministry of Defence to start filling in the "black hole" in its finances perhaps offers some excuse for the failings of the SDSR, this is less true of Britain's operational failings. These are hard to explain except in terms of the speed of events to which the United Kingdom felt it must respond (allowing insufficient time for consultation and strategic reflection) and, perhaps, the lack of defense experience among the political class. Nor is the quality of the advice that the military offers to ministers exempt from academic and insider criticism.²⁸

Nor, sadly, is this inability to do strategy all that uncommon. A good case can be made that it applied to the Germans and especially the Japanese in the Second World War; they managed to combine tactical and operational brilliance with a strategic insouciance in a manner that now appears quite breathtaking. The point is that failing to take full advantage of what the historical approach has to offer means missing a chance to reduce the prospects of strategic failure.

But once again, how, more exactly, can history help? Such help probably lies much less in the delivery of the facts, or answers, and prescriptions for the future than in identifying the questions about strategy that those conducting it, or those trying to understand it, should ask. A brilliant recent review of four very good books about the causes of the First World War (a subject one might think conclusively studied for a century now) found that "they [did] not even come close to agreeing . . . [and that] historical consensus on the causes of the First World War appears no closer than it was 50 or 75 years ago, nor does it appear a shared view will ever be achieved. . . . This means we must be both cautious and humble when generalizing about war and peace and making policy recommendations based on our understanding of the conflict."²⁹ Much the same, if on a less elevated plane, still could be said about interpretations of the course and consequence of the Battle of Jutland and a host of other such familiar naval subjects. The Dutch historian Pieter Geyl made the essential point that "history is argument without end."³⁰ But this is not an apology. In the training it provides for the kind of intellectual dialectic of argument and counterargument that deepens understanding, history makes a major contribution to our capacity to analyze.

Lawrence Freedman, in his recent magisterial book on strategy, makes a similar point.³¹ The intrinsic diversity and ambiguity of our subject—the conduct of military operations, not least at sea—mean that it is very easy to get things

fundamentally wrong, but it is sadly hard to get them right, and harder still to achieve an overall consensus on what is right and what is wrong. Analyzing past examples to see whether we can work out why some things went well and some did not at least should identify the questions that we, or anyone else trying to do strategy or to make policy in the naval realm, should be asking. In this, the process of naval history—the asking of questions, the analysis of data, and the testing of hypotheses—is more important than the product, the answers. Making the journey, in other words, can be more useful than arriving at the destination. This is what Dwight D. Eisenhower meant when he famously observed regarding preparing for battle, “I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”³²

TRUTH DECAY

There is now—in the age of all-pervasive social media—one final justification for naval people to have more than a passing familiarity with the disciplines of naval history. That is the contemporary phenomenon of what some have called *truth decay*.³³ By this they mean the impact that easy accessibility to and the potentially overwhelming power of social media is having on people’s trust in authority and in traditional forms of expertise. Imperfectly controlled, this platform empowers cranks, bigots, and those who willfully would deceive by according them the same apparent status as experts. “Don’t you see,” asks one of the characters in George Orwell’s novel *1984*, “that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?”³⁴ It is increasingly difficult for people, deluged with showers of contradictory information, deliberate misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories, to know what to believe, which encourages them to fall back on that very human trait of believing what they want to believe and forming up into dissonant tribes, unable to relate to, or even understand, the others.

Collectively, this threatens the social order. Some would go further: “We are facing nothing less than a crisis in our democracy based on the systematic manipulation of data to support the relentless targeting of citizens, without their consent, by campaigns of disinformation and messages of hate.”³⁵ In the words of the recently released European Union code on dealing with disinformation, “open and democratic societies depend on public debates that allow well-informed citizens to express their will through free and fair political processes.”³⁶

As citizens, naval personnel and navies in general are as vulnerable to this as any other social group—perhaps more so given their generally very high level of computer literacy and the stringent time demands of their profession. As ordinary citizens, they too have an interest in the general well-being of the society in which they live and that they try to protect against more-traditional forms of

threat. Moreover, whether they like it or not, they are living in a world of competing narratives than can often be state directed.³⁷

Illustrating the point, in 2009 the Kremlin established the “Commission to Prevent the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests” to counter Baltic and central European narratives about Soviet occupation and wartime collaboration.³⁸ For its part, Singapore has established a “Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods,” thinking it is important to support social cohesion by cultivating an informed public and encouraging a culture of fact-checking.³⁹ Staying afloat in this whirlpool of conflicting currents requires a continued capacity for independent judgment. Navy people (whose basic job is to defend the states and the societies that pay for those navies) also may be thought to have an even greater incentive than ordinary citizens to be at least aware of, and ideally able to help to defeat, these insidious challenges to domestic stability.

Moreover, navies themselves are vulnerable to such campaigns of targeted disinformation. Their missions and activities can be traduced by adversaries, with deleterious impacts on public esteem and their operational effect.⁴⁰ More sinister and dangerous still, sailors—often living a tight shipboard life, even ashore—always have proved vulnerable to the effects of uninformed gossip. In these continuing circumstances it is easy to imagine the possibilities of greater access to social media morphing into a kind of mega-scuttlebutt, with possibly disastrous consequences for a navy’s cohesiveness and morale. For the same reason, this could be a significant target of opportunity for imaginative adversaries, both foreign and domestic. Thus, it does not seem unreasonable for navies to regard this possibility as a new battleground for them to take seriously.

Once again, how might a familiarity with naval history, both as processed experience and as an intellectual discipline, offer some modest help against these potentially ominous developments? It will be modest, because in an age when most people get their news from Facebook and Twitter feeds, and in which traditional journalism may well be in terminal decline, this is a fundamental problem way beyond easy solutions.⁴¹ But nonetheless, for naval personnel, history may help a little. First, perhaps history can show that this is an old, almost-familiar problem, now reappearing in a new and potentially more virulent form. This could be done, for example, by looking at the role of misinformation in naval mutinies and other such disasters, as a way of alerting naval personnel to the dangers they confront, and maybe to ways of dealing with them—or even employing them against their adversaries.⁴²

More importantly, perhaps, the discipline of history itself encourages open-mindedness, the careful weighing of evidence, and the asking of questions, and it provides other such intellectual defenses when confronted with purported information and what very well could prove to be fake news. Any kind of serious study

could serve this function, of course, but naval history is more accessible and, for other reasons discussed earlier, is especially relevant to the naval profession.

While much of what has been said may be true for all disciplines and subject areas and for all types of history, for national leaders, strategic decision makers, and operational commanders, the obvious salience of specifically naval history for sailors, given the undeniable continuities of operations at sea over the centuries, means naval history is particularly useful in this regard. Moreover, for sailors at all levels, naval history, whether conscious and constructed or not, is unavoidable. Whatever historians might think of it, naval students, strategists, and policy makers will go on using what they at least think is history as a guide to future behavior.

This being the case, it lays considerable responsibility on naval historians. First, as John Hattendorf has reminded us, historians need to recognize that their subject does not end in 1945 or with the closing of the Cold War (assuming that conflict has even ended!).⁴³ History is yesterday as well. This poses unavoidable evidential problems. Analysis, therefore, has to be preceded by the availability of primary material. In any case, much of what in the past would have produced survivable paper copies (or much less survivable photostats) now appears only as transitory e-mails, exchanges in chat rooms, and so on. Since “recovering the unrecorded past” is at least as important as it was, tomorrow’s historians and their naval students will need their twenty-first-century skills as well as the more traditional ones employed by yesterday’s historians.⁴⁴

Second, historians need to encourage their navies to be receptive to the past, to preserve and process the records (or what these days passes for records) of what they have done to build a bank of experience for the future. They need to nurture those veterans who actually had that experience and are willing to talk about it, if they only had the encouragement to do so. The results of this testimony need to be preserved in accessible form and made available for appropriate use. Today’s practitioners need to know that something similar to their current preoccupations probably has happened before.⁴⁵

Third, historians need to encourage thinking about things in the round: paying due regard to context and avoiding narrow fixations on monocausal explanations. They need to understand the technological and logistical realities of what it is actually like to be at sea—hence the particular value of ex-sailors who are also historians. They also need to avoid unconscious hindsight and to sympathize with their subjects, who clearly could not enjoy its advantages.

Fourth, they need to ensure that what they deliver is accessible, interesting, and even enjoyable. My experience at a variety of service educational establishments is that naval students usually do rather enjoy doing naval history—or at

least freely concede that they found that engaging in a modicum of historical research was worthwhile. In this, historians are likely to be pushing on an open door; at the very least, they should do everything possible to stop it from shutting. One way of doing this is to ask the speculative “What if?” counterfactual questions referred to earlier. The process of isolating and altering one variable in the historic equation invites speculation about the difference it could have made to some past and completed event, and often will stimulate both insight into and enthusiasm for the subject.

Finally, they should make their subject policy relevant, wherever possible. For some this will be difficult. Some historians, knowing how their findings can be distorted to suit a different time, seek—for the best of professional reasons—to insulate their discipline from the contaminating fingers of strategists and policy makers and would have nothing to do with their world. However understandable, this purist approach is unwise for all but a few keepers of the sacred flame.

The pressure of other urgent PME requirements means the default position of those responsible for its implementation is all too likely to reduce the teaching of history as much as possible. The long and generally depressing story of the Royal Navy’s neglect or misuse, or both, of its own really rather spectacular history (and its sometimes dire operational consequences) unfortunately illustrates the point.⁴⁶ Historians need to counter this modernist tendency to the extent they can.

In sum, history, similar to the poor and taxes, is always with us, whether we like it or know it or not. We cannot avoid it. This being so, it is plainly the duty of naval historians to do their best to ensure that what they deliver is valid as both processed experience and an intellectual discipline. They owe this to the future as much as to the past.

GEOFFREY TILL

Dr. Till is the Dudley W. Knox Chair for Naval History and Strategy at the Naval War College. He is the author of over two hundred articles and book chapters. The fourth revised edition of his book, Seapower: A Guide for the 21st Century, was published in 2018.

NOTES

1. Glenn Davidson [VAdm., Canadian Maritime Command], "After the War—Canada's Navy Post 1945," *RUSI Journal* 152, no. 3 (June 2007), p. 88.
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5. Thomas Rowden [RAdm., USN], "Building the Surface Fleet of Tomorrow," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 140/1/1,331 (January 2014).
6. Ken Hambleton, Ian Holder, and David Kirkpatrick, "Ten Chronic Challenges in UK Defence Acquisition," *Defence Studies* 13, no. 3 (September 2013), pp. 361–71.
7. Ariel E. Levite and Jonathan (Yoni) Shimshoni, "The Strategic Challenge of Society-centric Warfare," *Survival* 60, no. 6 (December 2018), pp. 91–118.
8. Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1991), chap. 1.
9. A remark often attributed to Mark Twain—probably incorrectly.
10. Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *RUSI Journal* 107 (February 1962), pp. 4–8.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Paul Schuurman, "What-If at Waterloo: Carl von Clausewitz's Use of Historical Counterfactuals in His History of the Campaign of 1815," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 7 (November 2017), pp. 1016–38.
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17. D. P. O'Connell, quoted in James Kraska, *Maritime Power and the Law of the Sea: Expeditionary Operations in World Politics* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 1.
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32. Quoted in William W. Blair, "President Draws Planning Moral," *New York Times*, November 5, 1957.
33. Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (London: William Collins, July 2018).
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46. For an excellent summary of this, see Dr. Harry Dickinson, "Teaching Naval History," in *Dreadnought to Daring: 100 Years of Comment, Controversy and Debate in the Naval Review*, ed. Peter Hore (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen and Sword, 2012), pp. 284–98.