"Smashing Idols": Looking Back at Sims from the 21st Century

Benjamin "BJ" Armstrong
U.S. Naval Academy

Just as the First World War was beginning in Europe, Captain William Sowden Sims lay at anchor in Guantanamo Bay, sure that his career was coming to an end. He had been serving the U.S. Navy for over thirty years, but in a tropical melancholy he was convinced that he was about to be forced into retirement. Sims commanded the Atlantic Torpedo Flotilla, considered a backwater of a command and not the type of assignment from which his career could recover. Granted, he had re-invented the way the U.S. Navy used small combatants and he had inspired a staff process that would set a new standard for America's maritime forces.[1] But, he did not seem to think those accomplishments would matter to the Admirals who ran the Navy. Prior to becoming Commodore, he had been assigned to the Naval War College not once, but twice. He had back-to-back orders as both a student and then an instructor. Newport was where the personnel detailers in the Bureau of Navigation sent the riff raff and the officers that they did not want in the fleet. In the Cuban sun, Sims turned to his Chief of Staff and good friend from their War College days, Dudley Knox, and asked him to see if he could collect photographs from the lieutenants and lieutenant commanders who skippered the destroyers in his flotilla. He wanted something to remember them by as his next set of orders approached and he considered his looming departure from the Navy.[2]

With the centennial of the First World War upon us, we expect to look back at the conduct of the war itself and the aftermath. We see the photographs of Admiral Sims standing with Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt in London, or with Admiral Jellicoe and his British counterparts, and it becomes very easy to focus on his leadership at the London Flagship and achievements during the war. It is easy to forget that he was never really supposed to be there, and he was never really supposed to have the power that he amassed in London. Examining the path that led Sims to his eventual position as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Operating in European Waters offers observations for the naval profession in the 21st century, alongside the strategic and operational lessons offered by study of the war itself.[3]

There were a number of times, over the course of William Sims' forty years of naval service that it looked as if his career was ending. The first was of his own choosing; when in 1890 he tired of the navy and thought about leaving. Unsure that he wanted to make a career out of the navy, and feeling undervalued as a junior officer in a system that promoted slowly, he began searching for other options. Rather than leave the service completely, he applied for and received a furlough from the Secretary of the Navy. Today's Navy calls these "career intermissions," and Sims took off his uniform and went to Paris for a year where he lived a Hemingway-esque life several decades before Papa himself. He studied the French language and culture, spent time in the cafes, became a regular at the French theater, and befriended a pair of expatriate American artists who took him to visit their Bohemian friends across Europe.[4] He came back from his year on furlough as a different man, and to a job as the Training Officer aboard a cadet training ship. Through teaching the mariner's trade to a group of excited young men, he rediscovered why he wanted to be a naval officer and, refreshed, he continued in the service.[5]

The second near-end of his career occurred after the turn of the century when he decided, as a Lieutenant, that it was time to reform the U.S. Navy's gunnery practices. He needed to make some enemies to do it. He angered plenty of officers senior to him, and the naval establishment nearly blacklisted him because of his insubordination. President Theodore Roosevelt saved him, to a certain extent. Roosevelt told the Navy to give him job of Inspector of Target Practice, where Sims fundamentally changed how the U.S. Navy trained for war. As a reward for his hard work at reform, Roosevelt then gave him command of a battleship, the USS *Minnesota*. But he was years ahead of his peers, and jumped several officers more senior to him on the navy list. He did not make friends from his special treatment.[6]

While in command of *Minnesota*, after Roosevelt had left office, Sims once again put himself in an uncomfortable position. At a dinner at London's Guildhall in December of 1910, honoring the visit of several U.S. Navy ships to the United Kingdom, Sims gave a toast. It was a toast that "reverberated from Berlin to Washington," when he suggested that the United States and Great Britain were, by nature and national character, natural allies who should come to one another's defense if challenged by another power. As 1911 was set to begin, there was only one other nation he could have been referencing: Imperial Germany. The toast, and its hearty reception by the Londoners and Naval Officers crowded into the hall, caught the attention of the newspaper reporters present. The proposal by a U.S. naval officer, that the Americans and British should ally themselves, was directly at odds from the official policy of the Administration of President Taft and countered the view of many Americans who still saw Britain as a potential adversary. The Department of the Navy formally censured Commander Sims, and relieved him of command of *Minnesota*. The leadership sent him into "genteel exile" in Newport, at the War College, which had become a place to stash underperforming officers or those who could not return to sea duty.[7]

Sims' career, enroute to his wartime command and leadership, rode through crests and troughs. He burned many bridges and made plenty of enemies in the service during the process. But he also inspired many officers who served under his command. For a portion of the junior officer corps going into the Great War, he had become a role model and an exemplar of effective leadership. He was a proponent of the adoption of mission command, connecting it to both the legacy of Admiral Nelson and the German ideas of *auftragstaktik*, and firmly believed in giving junior officers authority and responsibility. His legacy stretched across the interwar years as officers who had served with him like King, Halsey, and Stark rose to positions of senior leadership. Even after World War II, Captain B.B. Wygant wrote an article for *Proceedings* recalling his own service under Sims and suggesting he was the proper role model for the Navy as it entered the Cold War Era.[8]

Naval professionals look at the track, which brought William Sims to the docks at Liverpool immediately following the American Declaration of War in 1917, and see much that reminds them of the 21st century. Career Intermissions are again a part of naval personnel policy, even if it may be a small program with a questionable future. The adoption of mission command across the joint force was one of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Dempsey's key efforts. Some also might see the return of war gaming to a larger part of the curriculum at the Naval War College in recent months as a Simsian effort. Yet the despite these clear parallels, the fundamental question remains unaddressed. How does an officer survive a promotion and personnel system that has a little tolerance for risk and a low, or no, defect mindset? Sims repeatedly ended up with positions that should not have been career enhancing. He made many enemies in the service. Part of what we see from an effort to brief Sims' personnel record is the hard work needed to do even the less glamorous jobs well. Part of what we see is the role of contingency in the study of history, or put another way, the place of luck and timing. But even admitting to those elements of the history, it is still hard to say that today's naval officer corps would tolerate a modern version of William Sims, or that he would be allowed to

survive - even in backwater orders - to be available when he suddenly become the right man, at the right place, at the right time.

[1] Frank A. Blazich, Jr., "'The Ablest Men' American Naval Planning Section London and the Adriatic, 1917-1918, *The Northern Mariner*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 2016), 383-405.
[2] William S. Sims Papers, Box 69: Dudley W. Knox, 1912-1928. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
[3] For more on the World War I specifics see: David Kohnen, "U.S.Navy's Great War Centurion," *Naval History*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 2017). Chuck Steele, "America's Greatest Great War Flag Officer," *Naval History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (June 2013).
[4] BJ Armstrong, "How Did the Navy's Greats Become Great: The Power of Career Intermissions," *War on the Rocks* (14 May 2015): https://warontherocks.com/
[5] Elting Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942), 29-31.
[6] Benjamin Armstrong, "Armaments & Innovations - Continuous-Aim Fire: Learning How to Shoot" *Naval History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (December 2010).
[7] Michael McMaster and Kenneth Hagan, "His Remarks Reverberated from Berlin to Washington," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 136, No. 12 (December 2010), 66-71.
[8] Benyaurd B. Wygant, "Admiral Sims as I Knew Him," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 77, No. 10 (October 1951), 1089-1091.