

# Naval History and Naval Leaders

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The close relationship between Sims and Jellicoe identifies that these were leaders who were equipped with the knowledge of how to win the First World War. The 'special Anglo-American relationship' between them is reflective of the virtuous cycle of how Corbett and Mahan influenced these leaders through the study of naval history. Mahan was greatly influenced by Professor John Laughton who while at the Royal Naval College and Kings College London began the development of 'scientific' naval history as the means for the 'higher education' of naval officers in matters of strategy and tactics, from theory to practice.

By pulling on threads and echoes of the First World War that can be found in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can reflect on the roots of naval education and the role that naval historians have in the education of naval officers and civilian decision makers. Just as Laughton was vital to the education of naval officers in an age of absence of large-scale naval warfare where actual practical experience could not be had but technical change was taking place, today historians seek the next generation intellectual revolution that protects the institutional wisdom gathered in a navy's past experiences. They can do this by creating and encouraging an environment through scholarly practice where naval history and the study of maritime strategy can deliver the thinking and leaders ready for the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Drawing together examples from the Great War, to the 1982 Falkland's War and beyond, examples can be found of challenges that naval historians warned of where fluctuating doctrine, overabundance of terminology and excessive, often unjustified, planning was due to the 'parachuting' of personalities and ideas from history to create strategy, tactics and doctrine with little or no evidence of understanding of these perspectives. This potentially resulting in the risk of a fundamental maritime disconnect, lackluster organizational self-reflection and reform just as historians have seen before. In recent times, these processes being no longer influenced by naval historians, has undermined the thinking environment and introduced numerous dangers such as rigidity into planning and doctrine, which could and has before, come back to haunt naval officers at critical junctures as events and changes in the world around them unfolded. This is in stark contrast to how the first pioneers of intellectual naval history, who's actions prepared and influenced naval personnel, resulted in a cadre of forward looking officers such as John Fisher, Sims and Jellicoe who were equipped with the necessary qualities to meet the grand challenge of the First World War and ultimately how they could deliver victory.

In contemporary times, historians, whose roles had been reduced in modern navies, started to ponder if 'talking' history and understanding history where two different methodologies that threatened the ability to deliver relevant inquisitive thinkers while ploughing historians, other academic disciplines and professionals into disagreement on the direction of naval education and wider spectrum of defense debates. This alternative approach convinced naval leaders and defense professionals by the 21<sup>st</sup> century to expect direct answers from history to modern issues whereas they could have been analyzing the subject in breadth, depth and context, just as Corbett and Mahan did over a century ago, to seek better understanding of our naval past and create the new solutions for the era they need to operate in. Laughton, Luce, Corbett, Mahan and others, melded perspectives

on the sea as a strategic environment which in turn could deliver individuals who could innovate and think for whatever challenges they faced, rather than being placed in a system of easily discredited and stagnating mantras where events, tempo of operations, tactics and technology may have already been over taken by unchallenged theory and practice. The more recent approaches resulted in ignorance to often uncomfortable and inconvenient similarities of challenges our forebears had faced and the isolation of the study of history. In addition to this, historians, past thinkers and leaders are regularly dismissed as products of their times or the eras they study, rather than being acknowledged as educators of the repository of naval experience and wisdom they guard for practitioners, thinkers, fighters, leaders and scholars alike, who should be all too often, inseparable.