

Tactics are for Losers

Military Education, The Decline of Rational Debate and the Failure of Strategic Thinking in the Imperial Japanese Navy: 1920-1941

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The period of intense mechanisation and modernisation that affected all of the world's navies during the latter half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century had possibly its greatest impact in the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). Having been shocked into self-consciousness concerning their own vulnerability to modern firepower by the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's 'Black Fleet' at Edo bay on 8 July 1853, the state of Japan launched itself onto a trajectory of rapid modernisation. Between 1863 and 1920, the Japanese state transformed itself from a forgotten backwater of the medieval world to one of the world's great technological and industrialised powers. The spearhead of this meteoric rise from obscurity to great power status in just over a half-century was undoubtedly the Imperial Japanese Navy, which by 1923 was universally recognised during the Washington Naval Conference as the world's third largest and most powerful maritime force.¹ Yet, despite the giant technological leaps forward made by the Imperial Japanese Navy during this period, the story of Japan's and the IJN's rise to great power status ends in 1945 much as it began during the Perry expedition; with an impotent government being forced to bend to the will of the United States and her allies while a fleet of foreign warships rested at anchor in Tokyo Bay.

The IJN's defeat was the result of a lethal concoction of three ingredients. First, the IJN was guilty of promoting a dangerously incoherent military strategy borne out of a destructive rivalry with the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). Second, faced with a geostrategic dilemma of their own making, the IJN embraced a flawed operational doctrine that sought to achieve a quick decisive victory over the United States in a short war. Lastly, the IJN suffered from a myopic view of history that manifested during the 1920s and 1930s as the IJN searched for advantages via tactics and technology in order to support their strategy. In the process, however, the IJN overlooked strategic lessons of the First World War that, if recognised, should have highlighted the glaring flaws in their approach. Together these elements set in motion the flawed decision making that would lead to Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945.

The advantageous timing of Japan's re-entry to the international stage, just as technological advancements in all fields through the industrial revolution were revolutionising naval affairs, meant that Japan was able to derive great benefit from the scientific advancements of others. Emperor Meiji proclaimed in 1868 that in order to meet the west on

¹ David C Evans and Mark R Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012). XX

equal terms, "...knowledge shall be sought from all over the world, and thus shall be strengthened the foundation of the imperial polity."² In order to professionalise and modernise the IJN, selected junior officers went abroad to study and absorb the knowledge of first-rate European naval powers. Royal Navy officers were seconded to Japan to develop and instruct naval tactics and fighting doctrine. In 1869 a Naval Academy was established and was followed in 1888 with the founding of the Japanese Naval Staff College - only four years after the US Navy founded its War College at Newport. Following changes in the curriculum between 1902-04 away from technical and scientific study to focus on strategy and tactics³ a true golden age of Japanese naval thought began. Only a few years later, the crushing defeat of the Russian Baltic Fleet by the IJN under Togo at Tsushima not only demonstrated the degree of professionalism and tactical mastery that had been obtained by the IJN in only a few decades of existence, but appeared to validate the prioritisation and reforms of the education system for the IJN's young officer corps.

The legacy of Tsushima would have far-reaching impacts for the operational doctrine of the IJN. Trained in the writings of Mahan, the IJN yearned for a decisive victory at sea that would underline the strategic importance of the battle fleet and thus not only justify the navy's capital procurement budget, but also guarantee an equal voice next to the Army in the development and execution of Japanese strategy. Yet through the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and the first year of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) this victory proved elusive.⁴ In an age not yet conversant with the concepts of sea control and sea denial, the IJN had thus far been unable to point to a decisive engagement as a measure of their independent effectiveness and thus to gain an equal strategic voice with the Emperor.

The post-mortem conducted by naval thinkers after Tsushima appeared to validate IJN operational doctrine and reinforced for Japan and the world the apparent primacy of the 'big-ships, big guns' approach to maritime strategy. The centrality of the decisive surface fleet engagement became the *raison d'être* for the IJN. Moreover, after Tsushima, the IJN at last gained equal standing with the IJA in the debates surrounding strategy, operational doctrine and force structure. Alternative views about the strategic role of Japan's Navy thereafter were considered threatening to the IJN's position of parity with the IJA and were thus discouraged and discredited at every opportunity.

² John Keegan, *Battle at Sea: From Man-of-War to Submarine* (London: Pimlico, 1993). 163

³ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 67-71

⁴ *Ibid.* 48, 101-2

With their newly-won strategic voice, the IJN sought to shape a maritime strategy for Japan as a means of securing the Navy's position of prominence in budgetary and planning matters. While the army was focussed westward on the Empire's 'continental lifeline' in Manchuria, the navy was focused south and eastward on the newly acquired pacific island mandates and beyond to the Dutch East Indies as potential future source of oil and other critical resources.⁵ Moreover, the demise of Russia as a naval threat in the Far East focused the IJN's attention on the USN as 'the only remaining country that had the potential to pose a naval threat to Japan in the western Pacific' and 'its most likely opponent in any future war.'⁶ After Jutland appeared to re-validate the lessons of Tsushima, the IJN accepted strategy of southward expansion, perimeter defence and decisive fleet engagement to gain mastery of the western Pacific became canon law. Even if that expansion risked conflict with the United States, Japan believed they had a proven fighting doctrine and the combat experience to successfully challenge for hegemony in the western Pacific. These differing views between the IJA and IJN of Japanese strategic interests were both self-serving and destructive. Nor were they ever rationalised in any Imperial strategic guidance.⁷ "Attempts to produce an integrated statement of national security, national defense, and foreign policy foundered on the...rocks of interservice rivalry."⁸ The failure of the Japanese high command to articulate prioritised strategic interests resulted in the IJN prosecuting an operational doctrine and force structure based on dubious assumptions aiming to further promote the IJN's southern expansion strategy.

As the IJN set about to build a fleet capable of delivering on this strategy, the Washington Treaty came into force limiting the ability to build more capital ships. As a result, the IJN refocused its shipbuilding effort on producing aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines of unrivalled quality. They invested heavily in fast, heavily armed destroyers and light cruisers that would conduct high-speed flanking attacks against an advancing US fleet, particularly employing long range munitions, advanced Type 93 'Long Lance' torpedos and night-attack tactics to erode the adversary's fighting capacity.⁹ The IJN sought to gain a

⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003). 102

⁶ Hiroyuki Shindo, "The Japanese Army's 'Unplanned' South Pacific Campaign," in *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*, ed. Peter J Dean (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2012). 107

⁷ Edward J Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (University Press of Kansas, 2012). 183

⁸ Ibid. 184

⁹ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 266-272

tactical and qualitative edge to overcome the quantitative inferiority that had been forced upon Japan by the treaty limitations.

With this tactically superior fleet, it was the IJN's intent to hold any USN challenge for supremacy in the western Pacific at such risk as to make the cost of the effort unacceptable, and thereby bring the US to negotiate a peace from a position of disadvantage. But this strategy was based upon a fatal assumption of being able to conclude the war in less than 18 months by forcing the USN into a decisive sea battle. This 'short-war' theory had gained precedence in the debates concerning the relevance of the First World War in an Asian context. Some believed that any future great power conflict would necessarily be a total war involving unprecedented industrial and national mobilisation, while others disregarded total war theory as a European aberration, and believed that *élan* and fighting spirit, not technologically advanced equipment and materiel, were still the critical factors to success in battle.¹⁰ The 1921 *Principles of Command* published for the army paid lip-service to "the recent great advances in material warfare" but concluded that 'victory in battle still depended on intangibles like devotion to duty, patriotism, and willingness to sacrifice oneself to achieve objectives'.¹¹ This theory conformed neatly with traditional Japanese *Bushido* code of martial beliefs handed down from the Samurai warlords, and thus on the surface appeared to confirm a theory of war in which the Japanese would have a distinct spiritual, indeed a divine, advantage.¹² Over time, the communication in official publications and directives about this operational doctrine took on near religious tones. Catch-phrases like 'using a few to conquer many', 'outraging the enemy' and 'fight the enemy on sight' were enshrined in the tactics of night combat, attrition and the decisive battle.¹³ Central to this dogma of the decisive battle and the various tactics to achieve it was a firmly entrenched belief '...that quality *could* overcome quantity.'¹⁴

The IJN was thus victimised by its own unconscious bias in attempting to derive lessons from the First World War. Analysis of the war in Japanese naval circles focused exclusively on the outcome at Jutland and paid no heed to the '...broader strategic, economic,

¹⁰ Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. 146.

¹¹ Ibid. 156

¹² Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 511 and Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. 147

¹³ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 50 and 512

¹⁴ Ibid. 512

and logistic matters that marked margins of victory and defeat between the war's participants.¹⁵ Most critical of these was the near absence of any consideration given to the problems of protecting merchant shipping as a critical vulnerability to Japan's war effort. Despite the enormous losses of shipping, and the subsequent financial and economic crisis caused by the German U-boat campaign in the First World War, Japan failed to recognise their own increased vulnerability as an island trading nation reliant on imports for most of the natural resources it required to sustain its population and armed forces. '[I]t was the great gun duel at Jutland, not the ravages of the U-boat, that had the greater impact upon the thinking of the Japanese naval high command.'¹⁶ This lack of clarity on the challenges of merchant protection and anti-submarine warfare highlights that a culture of anti-intellectualism had stifled debate and original thought in the IJN by the eve of the Pacific War, creating systemic barriers to informed analysis. The degree to which the IJN became wedded to the decisive battle strategy created a blind spot in their war planning that prevented them from seeing that a concentrated submarine offensive against the logistical lifeline of an island nation could also be decisive.¹⁷

The US submarine offensive against Japanese merchant shipping in the Pacific War was a decisive factor in the defeat of the IJN. As Keegan notes, US submarines not only accounted for the destruction of one-third of Japanese warships, they also accounted for two-thirds of the destruction of the Japanese merchant fleet.¹⁸ Colin Gray, similarly argues that the statistics of the Japanese merchant ship losses in the Pacific War '...are the statistics of national defeat. [...] Imperial Japan was both extraordinarily vulnerable to attrition of its seaborne commerce and was monumentally irresponsible in its operational handling of that commerce in wartime.'¹⁹ Despite the long years of the IJN arguing for the 'southward advance' few in the navy had given any consideration for how the long lines of communication were to be protected. The advance south was, after all, a strategy based on securing unfettered access to key strategic resources. Yet there was a cultural disdain throughout the IJN for the inglorious work of merchant ship protection that had grown as a by-product of the perceived centrality of the big-gun ship battle.²⁰ The prevalence of this

¹⁵ Ibid. 511

¹⁶ Ibid. 434

¹⁷ Ibid. 441

¹⁸ Keegan, *Battle at Sea: From Man-of-War to Submarine*. 267

¹⁹ Colin Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). 84

²⁰ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 436-7

attitude, and the complete oversight of the strategic lessons around merchant shipping protection and ASW from the First World War, demonstrate the dramatic reversal in the level of intellectual endeavour of the IJN between Tsushima and Pearl Harbour.

In seeking to derive relevance from the history of the IJN for the future of Australia's Navy, one is cautioned by the words of many distinguished historians and military professionals. Professor Jay Luvaas, for instance, advises that "...read incautiously and without meticulous attention to context, history is capable of furnishing precedent for nearly any lesson."²¹ One must guard against the temptation to see templated solutions in singular episodes of military history which risk obscuring the subjective circumstances of a given time and place. As General John Kiszely observes, "...such an approach may distort the clarity of historical vision. ... [F]alse insights, unsound conclusions, and erroneous lessons offer themselves everywhere like fools' gold to the unwary prospector."²² Sir Michael Howard also warns of the dangers of the cursory application of military history. 'One does not, or anyhow should not, study the past in order to discover the "school solutions" – that is the first "lesson" that professional historians have to drum into the heads of their pupils.'²³ Hesitantly, this essay attempts to do just that; to find relevance in a singular historical episode to illuminate lessons for the future of the RAN.

Cautionary notes notwithstanding, at the heart of the IJN's failures in the interwar years was just such a narrow interpretation of the lessons of recent military history. Convinced that Japanese culture was endowed with special, even divine, martial characteristics that could overcome quantitative military-industrial shortcomings, the IJN between Tsushima and Pearl Harbour became singularly focussed on studying those aspects of the First World War that appeared to substantiate their own view of events, particularly as it related to the pre-eminence of the decisive battle between surface fleets as the final arbiter of command of the seas. In this, it is fair to say, the IJN were not alone. Yet, while the British in particular had come to understand with perilous clarity the vulnerability of their island to economic warfare, the Japanese somehow managed to overlook these lessons.

²¹ As quoted in Richard Hart Sinnreich, "Awkward Partners: Military History and American Military Education," in *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 69

²² John Kiszely, "The Relevance of History to the Military Profession: A British View," *ibid.* 27

²³ Michael Howard, "Military History and the History of War," *ibid.* 13

Despite clear evidence to the contrary, the IJN leadership continued to believe that, as they had in their previous wars against China and Russia, they could fight a limited war for regional objectives.²⁴ Evans and Peattie describe this failing perfectly; '[T]he Japanese navy, despite its decades of "preparation" for war with the United States, failed to appreciate the nature of such a conflict.'²⁵ They and others have argued convincingly that Japan did not in fact prepare for *war* at all, but rather prepared for *battle*. '[T]he most serious strategic failing of the Japanese navy was to mistake tactics for strategy and strategy for the conduct of war.'²⁶ Clausewitz, writing a century earlier, points to exactly these dangers when he warns:

*Now, the first, the grandest, and most decisive act of judgement which the Statesman and General exercises is rightly to understand [...] the War in which he engages, not to take it for something, or to wish to make of it something, which [...] it is impossible for it to be. This is, therefore, the first, the most comprehensive, of all strategical questions.*²⁷

Despite the drastically different circumstances of the 1940s vis-à-vis the United States relative to the situation in their wars against China and Russia, and the lessons of recent history concerning modern industrial 'total' war, the IJN still believed they could fight a 'short war' for limited objectives. Mistaking the character of the war upon which they were embarking was *the* fatal error in Japanese strategic thinking.

Through the 1920s and 1930s, the IJN went through a subtle but persistent transformation that is critical in understanding the failure of IJN strategy. During this period, the IJN changed from what had been an organisation founded upon a culture of learning and an open exchange of ideas, into an organisation characterised by rigid adherence to strategic maxims and fighting doctrine that were judged to have led to victory in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Having learned '...to understand and then master the principles of Western naval tactics,'²⁸ the IJN later became resistant to alternative theories of naval warfare that challenged the pre-eminence of the decisive engagement between battle lines to determine command of the seas. During this period the IJN succumbed to a type of 'creeping formalism' that led to an 'atrophy of thought' and 'strategic orthodoxy' that stood in stark contrast to the open-minded, academic pursuit of knowledge during the decades before Tsushima.²⁹ As a result, the IJN during the interwar decades drew incorrect conclusions based

²⁴ Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War*. 252

²⁵ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 515

²⁶ Ibid. 515

²⁷ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. JJ Graham (London: Penguin Books, 1982). 121

²⁸ Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. 510

²⁹ Ibid. 510

on a perfunctory study of the First World War and deliberately cherry-picked evidence in support of a pre-conceived notion about the nature of future wars.

The study of the degradation of intellectual thought and debate in the IJN during the interwar period is illuminating for the future of the RAN in three important ways. First, we must guard against the allure of seeking tactical answers to strategic problems. The pace at which the technology of warfare has and will continue to evolve will offer tantalising and awe-inspiring advances in robotics, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles and cyber capability to name only a few. Yet, as Williamson Murray has argued, strategy and policy must lead tactics and technology, not the other way around. ‘The Germans in their conduct of two world wars, as well as the wretched results of America’s efforts in Vietnam, have made all too clear the results of allowing operational and tactical expediency to drive policy and strategy.’³⁰ The temptation will exist for the RAN, as it did for the IJN in the interwar period, to search for the panacea to our strategic woes in these technical developments. It would be professionally indictable for us to neglect to study and understand the emerging ways and means of executing our craft that these advances will offer, but it would be equally criminal to repeat the great offence of the IJN and mistake tactical advances for strategic responses to the challenges of our time. As Murray and Sinnreich highlight, ‘[i]t is the very repetitive quality of many of military history’s worst disasters that can make reading it so depressing.’³¹ This is not an epitaph any professional fighting force would choose.

Secondly, to safeguard the RAN against such shallow interpretations of military history as befell the IJN, the organisation must invest heavily in the strategic, political, historical, cultural and ethical education of its leadership. Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) must continue to be strengthened to encompass these fundamentals in more than a superficial manner. For most, the current ‘just-in-time’ structure of JPME throughout one’s career is likely to suffice. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing and expanding requirement for the RAN to have in its ranks military leaders who are also specialists in these fields, in much the same way that the RAN needs uniformed members with specialist academic qualifications in the scientific, technical and engineering fields. The current

³⁰ Williamson Murray, "Thoughts on Military History and the Profession of Arms," in *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 88

³¹ Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 3

strategic climate in the Indo-Pacific is characterised by multiple overlapping geo-strategic interests providing the very real potential for increased tensions and escalation. This climate of uncertainty will demand more than ever, and certainly more than was the case in the Indo-Pacific region of the 1920s, highly educated ‘warrior scholars’ who understand both the military and non-military aspects to the strategic challenges they will face. Such specialist training must not, however, be seen as an impediment to one’s future career prospects in the way that it currently is. The stigma that currently envelops one’s decision about stepping off the career ‘treadmill’ to pursue specialised, doctoral level education in strategic studies needs to be eradicated. As an agile, adaptive ‘thinking Navy’, the RAN needs to seek ways to promote and support higher learning and remove the potential barriers to this education that may deter aspiring leaders from pursuing as much.

Finally, a culture of learning and open-minded debate must be fostered such that dominant views are prevented from extinguishing divergent opinions. Exposure to and participation in the academic debates in the wider strategic studies community must be encouraged, not stifled. The forthcoming Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies seeks to revive a published and peer-reviewed journal for both ADF members and the wider community to write about and debate the important questions that face Australia today and into the future. It must be given adequate support from all of the services, including Navy, such that this becomes a thriving and intellectually stimulating medium for the support of professional debate and the exchange of ideas. Moreover, Navy will be required to take a leading role in shaping the strategic dialogue of the ADF in the coming years as the maritime domain continues to dominate the strategic narrative and political challenges for Australia for the foreseeable future. In summary, to continue to develop a navy for Australia that ‘Fights like a thinking Navy, and thinks like a fighting Navy’, and therefore avoid the pitfalls that befell the IJN in the 20s and 30s, we must broaden our field of view from the tactical to the strategical, there must be a renewed emphasis placed on the development of strategic thinkers within the ranks of our aspiring leaders, and we must promote and reward discussion, debate and academic endeavours in pursuit of a thinking, fighting, Australian strategy.