

Rear Admiral Henry John May and the Royal Navy War Course 1900-1904

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In 1900, the Royal Navy instituted formal advanced instruction for selected officers to better prepare them for higher rank and professional demands. The war course represented a concession to pressure for a staff or war college comparable to other navies and armies. During the tenure of its first director, Henry May, curriculum content and delivery focused on subjects appropriate to practitioners interested in contemporary naval affairs. This article reassesses objectively the war course's efficacy leading to eventual establishment of the Royal Naval War College.

En 1900, la Marine Royale a institué une instruction formelle avancée pour certains officiers afin de mieux les préparer aux exigences professionnelles et aux grades supérieurs. Le cours de guerre représentait une concession à la pression pour obtenir un état-major ou un collège de guerre comparable à d'autres marines et armées. Pendant le mandat de son premier directeur, Henry May, le contenu et la prestation du programme se sont concentrés sur des sujets appropriés aux praticiens intéressés par les affaires navales contemporaines. Cet article réévalue objectivement l'efficacité du cours de guerre menant à la création éventuelle du Collège de Guerre de la Marine Royale.

Professional militaries invest considerable time and resources in developing officers to steward the institution and meet the demands of modern warfare. At higher levels, they learn to appreciate the complexities of strategy based on sound knowledge of tactics and operations.¹ Because the military arts and sciences are

¹ Randall Wakelam, "Education and the General: Educating Military Executives," *The New Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), 285-312

so specialized, staff and war colleges consisting of blended military and civilian faculty reside in most countries.² These institutions exchange ideas and personnel to develop thinking about professional problems and follow common methodologies in curriculum delivery and instruction tailored to practitioners.³ Oriented toward action and decision, militaries use knowledge for practical application, and not solely for knowledge's sake. Professional military education (PME) necessarily balances currency and relevancy with academic rigour and analysis.

Appreciation of higher tactics and strategy, as expressed through the fields of history and doctrine, have underpinned study at staff and war colleges since beginning days on the principle that such subjects could be taught and learned, to make better officers. It helped that the Royal Navy possessed a culture of success.⁴ Since closure of the United Kingdom's service-specific colleges, senior officer education for the Royal Navy occurs at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, in partnership with King's College University of London, or reciprocally by exchange at comparable foreign staff and war colleges. Officers are managed through careers, and given educational opportunities appropriate to their rank, competencies, abilities, and future promotional prospects.⁵ The war course instituted by the Royal Navy at the turn of the last century under the direction of Rear Admiral Henry May shared many of the same qualities and objectives as present-day PME. Notwithstanding, prominent naval historian and strategist Julian Corbett described the war course's preoccupation with naval tactics and technical considerations rather than strategy as "a false start."⁶

The original war course provided a foundation for the higher naval education that came afterwards in the Royal Navy. Joseph Moretz offers a reappraisal of how

Strategist Journal 1, no. 1 (2016): 61-62; James Goldrick, "Thoughts on joint professional military education," *Australian Defence Force Journal* 201 (2017): 84.

² Katherine E. Brown, "Constructing and Maintaining Academic Identities in Professional Military Education," in *Higher Education Research Network Journal*, ed. David B. Hay (London: King's Learning Institute, 2011), 13; Kate Utting, "Beyond Joint – Professional Military Education for the 21st Century: The United Kingdom's Post-Defence Training Review Advanced Command and Staff Course," *Defence Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 313-315.

³ Steven Paget, "'A Truly Global Approach': Opportunities for Increased Internationalization in Professional Military Education," *Canadian Military Journal* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 23-30; Steven Paget, "'Interoperability of the Mind': Professional Military Education and the Development of Interoperability," *RUSI Journal* 161, no. 4 (2016): 42-50; Charles D. Allen, "Quo Vadis? The Education of Senior Military Officers," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2015): 40-43.

⁴ Richard Harding, "The Royal Navy, History and the Study of Leadership," in *Naval Leadership in the Atlantic World*, eds. Richard Harding and Agustín Guimerá (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017), 9-17.

⁵ Elizabeth Emma Bewley, "Informing Royal Navy People Strategy: Understanding Career Aspirations and Behaviours of Naval Personnel" (PD diss., London Metropolitan University, 2016); Elfryn Jones, "Officer Career Planning in the Royal Navy," *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 201 (1969): 33-44; Anthony King, "Unity is strength: staff college and the British officer corps," *British Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 1 (March 2009): 139-140, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2008.01221.x>.

⁶ J.S. Corbett, "The Naval War Course," *Evening Mail* (London), 11 June 1907.

mid-rank naval officers were educated and trained on the war course during the interwar period which challenges conventional historical understanding.⁷ Naval tactics and practical application of professional knowledge still constituted a significant part of that service-oriented instruction. Corbett was somewhat out of favour after the First World War, even though British naval professionals Herbert Richmond, John Creswell, and Russell Grenfell turned to history for understanding and insight in their writing and lectures.⁸ Henry May belonged to a wider fraternity of serving officers involved with teaching and thinking about naval problems for practical application. Given the overwhelming attention that the First World War and preceding “Fisher era” have received in existing scholarship building upon the pioneering work of Arthur Marder, contributions by somewhat obscure officers to naval tactics and higher professional education generally get undervalued.⁹ Rear Admiral Henry May, in spite of his intellectual pursuits and excellence in teaching, unfortunately died ten years prior to 1914 and consequently is lesser known.

May’s relative obscurity provides an interesting contrast to Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, his contemporary and closest American equivalent at the US Naval War College. May, described as quiet, studious, and efficient, had neither the long list of published works nor the attention which those have received. Mahan’s published work targeted external and internal audiences, in an effort to convince a land-centric nation that future prosperity and strength lay with embracing sea power.¹⁰ May, on the other hand, belonged to the dominant navy of the period that for too long took supremacy for granted and waited to implement necessary changes and higher education for officers. The late Victorian navy, to which May belonged, transitioned between eras of immense technological and strategic

⁷ Joseph Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly: The Higher Education and Training of Royal Navy Officers, 1919-39* (Solihull: Helion, 2014), chap. 3.

⁸ H.W. Richmond, *Naval Training* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 11; Herbert Richmond, *Sea Power in the Modern World* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1934); Christopher Bell, “How are we going to make war?: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond and British Far Eastern War Plans,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 20, no. 3 (1997): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399708437690>; John Creswell, *Naval Warfare* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1936); Russell Grenfell, *The Art of the Admiral* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).

⁹ Jon T. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); David G. Morgan-Owen, “Continuity and Change: Strategy and Technology in the Royal Navy, 1890-1918,” *English Historical Review* 135, no. 575 (August 2020): 892-930, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceaa194>; Angus Ross, “HMS *Dreadnought* (1906) – A Naval Revolution Misinterpreted or Mishandled?” *The Northern Mariner/Le marine du nord* 20, no. 2 (April 2010): 179-186; Matthew S. Seligmann, “Naval History by Conspiracy Theory: The British Admiralty before the First World War and the Methodology of Revisionism,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 7 (2015): 966-984; Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The pre-Dreadnought era and the origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008).

¹⁰ A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1890); Alfred Thayer Mahan, Allan Westcott (ed.), *Mahan on Naval Warfare* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999); D.M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought 1867-1914* (London: Cassell, 1965), 79-81.

complexity.¹¹ The war course presented an intermediary, comprehensible to naval officers seeking understanding of the present, as well as a critical inflection point for the evolution of naval tactics and strategy. Peter Kemp and Andrew Lambert have stressed the interaction between history and tactics in development of Royal Navy doctrine, to meet contemporary challenges of the day.¹² May was well read, spoke French, and became an acknowledged expert on naval tactics. He maintained the confidence and backing of the institution and related his knowledge and ideas to an internal professional audience. In time, Mahan became revered in the American navy for his writings, teaching, and presidency of the US Naval War College, while May has been utterly forgotten as director of the original Royal Navy war course. Though naval biography may no longer be fashionable, May and his work undertaking early education on the Royal Navy war course are worth reclaiming.

In terms of naval expert and practical teacher, Rear Admiral Henry John May should be acknowledged as much as Mahan for his part in setting-up the original war course. His contributions to the Royal Navy's first attempt at formal advanced instruction for selected senior and mid-rank officers created an environment to convey and share relevant knowledge that students found engaging and suitably paced. That he delivered such a course almost singlehandedly, a one-person staff college, was noteworthy. The excellence of May's concept of instruction allowed the Royal Navy to catch up to other foreign navies and keep abreast in the field of advanced education for officers. At the turn of the century, the Royal Navy strove to become a modern and professional force able to operate at sea with developing ideas on strategy, tactics, and doctrine. May prepared a generation of mid-rank officers for the challenges of higher command and responsibility.

This article has a threefold purpose. First, to explain why a war course was chosen instead of a naval staff college in the Royal Navy. Second, to describe how May became first director and primary instructor on the war course. Third, to assess what constituted the learning experience from the perspectives of student and teacher in PME content and delivery. May's successful methodology and approach informed subsequent efforts at educating higher rank Royal Navy officers in tactics and strategy. His legacy was quality teaching and a practical bent that made sure professional content delivered was suited to the needs of the

¹¹ Barry Gough, *Pax Britannica: Ruling the Waves and Keeping the Peace before Armageddon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Richard Humble, *Before Dreadnought: The Royal Navy From Nelson to Fisher* (London: MacDonal and Jane's, 1976); Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Antony Preston, "The End of the Victorian Navy," *The Mariner's Mirror* 60, no. 4 (1974): 363-381; Jan Ruger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² P.K. Kemp, "War Studies in the Royal Navy," *RUSI Journal* 111, no. 642 (1966): 151-155; Julian Stafford Corbett papers, CBT/6/9, Caird Library National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM); Andrew Lambert, "History is the Sole Foundation for the Construction of a Sound and Living Common Doctrine": the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, and Doctrine Development down to BR1806," in *The Changing Face of Maritime Power*, eds. Andrew Dorman, Mike Lawrence Smith, and Matthew R.H. Uttley (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), 33-34.



The Royal Naval College in Greenwich, circa 1994. (Provided by the author)

contemporary navy and its serving officers.

Does the Royal Navy Need a Naval Staff College?

The choice to have a war course instead of a naval staff college demonstrated tentative acquiescence toward the very idea of advanced professional learning within the Royal Navy. As always, the first challenge was location. The Royal Navy “schoolhouse” was distributed across various existing establishments providing naval education and instruction for entry-level cadets, junior officer ranks, engineering officers, and specialist training. The cadet Royal Naval College, through which May and officers of his generation passed, dated from 1863, replacing an earlier one in Portsmouth. Gradually, more scientific approaches to provision of practically oriented education came in the form of structured courses and examinations. The *Naval Chronicle*, reviewing Rear Admiral Charles Shadwell’s higher education committee in 1871, dryly asked why the Royal Navy had no naval staff college because there “is no educated Englishman who has more time at his disposal for cultivating the art of statesmanship than the victim of half-pay, the Naval Officer.”¹³ Portsmouth, historical home of the Royal Navy, already offered practical courses of instruction. Establishment of a Royal Naval College in Greenwich during 1873 opened up further promise, but was used for other functions.¹⁴ Limited space available elsewhere in establishments, depots, and dockyards restricted hosting a naval staff college.

¹³ “A Good Idea,” *Naval & Military Gazette and Weekly Chronicle of the United Service*, 5 August 1871; “A Staff College for the Navy,” *Western Times*, 12 August 1871; Rear Admiral A.P. Ryder, “The Higher Education of Naval Officers, with special reference to the report of Admiral Shadwell’s Committee,” *RUSI Journal* 15, no. 65 (1871): 734-805; John Beeler, “‘Fit For Service Abroad’: Promotion, Retirement and Royal Naval Officers, 1830-1890,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 81, no. 3 (1995): 308-309.

¹⁴ H.W. Dickinson, “The Origins and Foundation of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich,” *Historical Research* 72, no. 177 (February 1999): 108-110; *Report of the Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Establishment of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich* (1877), Foreign Navies collection – British Navy.

The next challenge was cultural since many officers in the long century, schooled in the traditions and stories of Nelson, eschewed any further formal education beyond that provided early in careers. Belief was common that command and leadership in the navy were learned practically and through social belonging rather than academic study.¹⁵ Activity in that direction took away from experience at sea, which somehow made good officers naturally suitable for higher rank and responsibility. Following annual naval manoeuvres in August 1899, Commander Frederick Elton, an officer on the retired list, expressed his opinion that a naval staff college was unnecessary because “the British Navy may believe a good First Sea Lord of the Admiralty to be worth a shipload of Chairs of Naval Strategy.”¹⁶ Except in a small minority, the officer corps generally undervalued the importance of education and academic study in formal settings beyond scientific and technical subjects. The extent of an anti-intellectual bias pervading the Victorian-era Royal Navy, Chris Bell argues, was closely tied to the privileges of class and social standing, which only began to break apart in the decades following the First World War.¹⁷ Some British naval officers maintained that they did not need further education since elevation to higher rank and responsibility was more profitably gained by experience.

The final challenge was financial. Throughout the late nineteenth century, external and internal controls over the Admiralty restricted spending and outlays.¹⁸ Faced with hard choices regarding personnel and keeping ships operational, Admiralty officials viewed a naval staff college as an extravagance, notwithstanding the merits behind the argument. Paying officers to stay on shore to study, read books, and listen to lectures for extended lengths of time, even if they wanted to, raised awkward questions about public accountability and expenditure of funds.¹⁹ Notably, First Lord of Admiralty, George Goschen, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, remained non-committal.²⁰ Several interlayered internal factors

¹⁵ Christopher Dandeker, “Bureaucracy Planning and War: The Royal Navy, 1880-1918,” *Armed Forces & Society* 11, no. 1 (Fall 1984): 139-140; “Our Naval Officers,” *Lancashire Daily Post*, 30 January 1894; “Naval Strategy,” *Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette*, 21 July 1899.

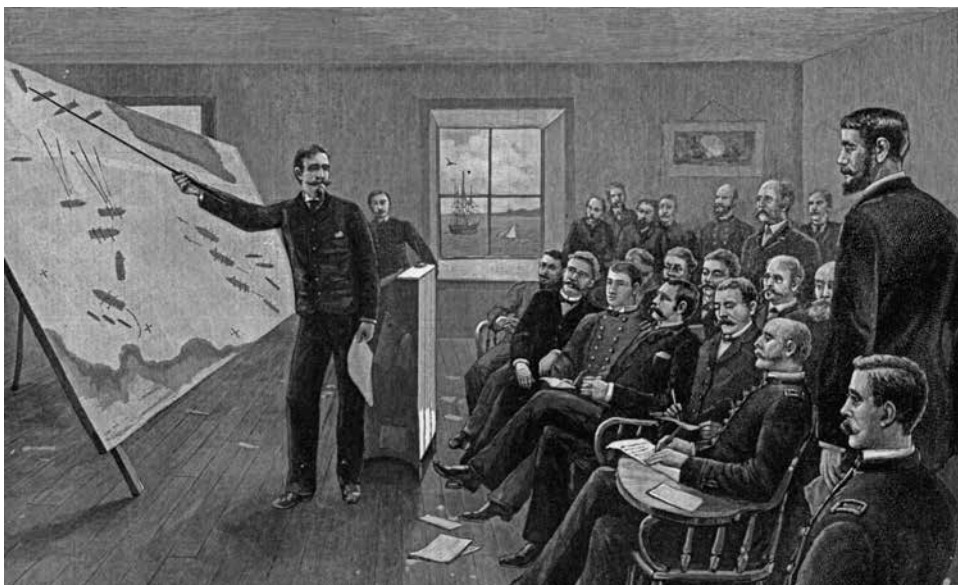
¹⁶ “Naval and Military Strategy,” *Morning Post*, 4 August 1899; “Naval and Military Strategy,” *Morning Post*, 11 August 1899; “Staff College for Naval Officers,” *Morning Post*, 14 August 1899; “School of Naval Strategy,” *Morning Post*, 31 July 1899; “Teaching of Naval Strategy,” *Portsmouth Evening News* (Portsmouth), 21 July 1899; Service record, Commander Frederick Elton, ADM 196/40/0/165, The National Archives, Kew (TNA).

¹⁷ Christopher M. Bell, “The King’s English and the Security of Empire: Class, Social Mobility, and Democratization in the British Naval Officer Corps, 1918-1939,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 697.

¹⁸ C.I. Hamilton, “British Naval Policy, Policy-Makers and Financial Control, 1860-1945,” *War in History* 12, no. 4 (2015): 375-378; John Francis Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 168-169.

¹⁹ Harry W. Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy: 18th and 19th Century Education for Officers* (London and NY: Routledge, 2007), 148-149; “A Naval Staff College,” *Morning Post*, 6 October 1896.

²⁰ *Morning Post*, 9 February 1897; Eric J. Grove, *The Royal Navy since 1815: A New Short History* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 75-76.



Classroom lecture on naval tactics at the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 26 January 1889, 413)

worked against creation of a naval staff college, even as foreign navies benefited from such institutions.

The Royal Navy trailed behind navies in other countries opening higher learning institutions for advanced officer education. In fact, it never really started the race in the first place. From 1872, the Imperial German Navy's *Marineakademie* in Kiel delivered first a three and then two-year advanced course taking inspiration and teaching methodology from Prussia's established staff college (the first admiral commanding the navy was a general).²¹ Kaiser Wilhelm, who took special interest in naval and imperial affairs, personally lectured on naval tactics. This participation demonstrated wider enthusiasm for advanced education and naval topics. The United States Navy founded a naval war college in 1884 under the stewardship of Admiral Stephen Luce and Captain Mahan.²² It included study of

²¹ James Russell Solely, *Report on Foreign Systems of Naval Education* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 159-160; "Does our Navy need a Staff College," *Morning Post*, 2 October 1896; Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914* (Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002); David H. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy 1856-1888: Forerunners to Tirpitz* (London and NY: Frank Cass, 2004); Michael Epkenhans, "Imperial Germany and the Importance of Sea Power," *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, ed. N.A.M. Rodger (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 27-40.

²² "The Study of Naval War," *Army and Navy Gazette*, 24 September 1892; Ronald Spector, *Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1977); John B. Hattendorf, "Stephen B. Luce: Intellectual Leader of the New Navy" and Robert Seager II, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: Christian Expansionist, Navalist and Historian," in *Admirals of the New Steel Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition 1880-1930*, ed. James C. Bradford (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990), 3-72.

international law and strategy and became a recognized PME institution separate from the lower naval academy in Annapolis. American speakers from the naval war college often gave public talks during visits to London and Portsmouth, sometimes in connection with book tours. In 1896, France's *Marine nationale*, a relative late-comer by comparison, established the *École des hautes études de la marine*, and subsequently the *École supérieure de marine* in Paris giving a twelve-month course of instruction by 1900. The French theoretical concept of *Jeune École*, championed by admirals Théophile Aube and François Ernest Fournier, influenced naval construction and tactical deployment anticipating commerce warfare and torpedo attack.²³ That even the French now had a naval staff college simply highlighted the paucity of formal arrangements for higher PME within the Royal Navy, still the leading navy in the world at the time and for some years to come. Escalating tensions and diplomatic discord with France hardly changed the Admiralty's low opinion of the *Marine nationale*.²⁴ Even discounting foreign navies as potential rivals, the Royal Navy only had to look to the British Army's staff college at Camberley as model for its own war course.

Camberley, almost as good as the German equivalent, set a higher standard for British imperial forces. Opened in 1858 after the Crimean War, the staff college offered a two-year course for captains and majors.²⁵ Admission was by competitive examination for a limited number of spots. In the two years prior to 1901, twenty-eight officers passed the admission entry examinations demonstrating how hard it was to get in, and fewer than half that graduated.²⁶ Subjects included strategy, military history, tactics, French, administration, voluntary mathematics, geography, tutorial work in mathematics and other studies, besides the semi-compulsory gentlemen sports of polo (riding) and hunting (shooting). Like the Germans, British officers attending the staff college conducted exercises and worked through set problems.²⁷ Once qualified, staff trained graduates served in the British and Indian armies fighting colonial and small wars of the late Victorian period.

²³ Rémi Monaque, *L'école de guerre navale* (Vincennes: Service historique de la Marine, 1995), 20-21; Hugues Canuel, "From a Prestige Fleet to the Jeune École: French Naval Policy and Strategy under the Second Empire and the Early Third Republic (1852-1914)," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (2017): 108-109; "French Naval Officers," *Globe* (London), 18 December 1895; Paul Halpern, "The French Navy, 1880-1914," in *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. Phillips Payson O'Brien (London and NY: Routledge 2001), 39-40; "Naval Staff College," *Morning Post*, 25 January 1899.

²⁴ Matthew S. Seligmann, "Britain's Great Security Mirage: The Royal Navy and the Franco-Russian Naval Threat, 1898-1906," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 6 (2012): 868-870; "The 'Flotte Necessaire,'" *Army and Navy Gazette*, 20 June 1896.

²⁵ F. W. Young, *The Story of the Staff College 1858-1958* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1958), 16-17; Brian Bond, *The Victoria Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 168-170.

²⁶ Ian F.W. Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

²⁷ Howard Bailes, "Patterns of thought in the late Victorian army," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 31-32.

The obvious question is why the Admiralty just did not send naval officers to Camberley and augment the directing staff with navy instructors. As the senior service, the Royal Navy remained standoffish toward the British Army since “the average naval officer if he reads does not give credit to the competence of the soldier to direct naval affairs.”²⁸ Inter-service rivalry between navy and army provided a barrier to greater cooperation, as did the uniquely different operating environments and traditions. Much of the Camberley curriculum was either irrelevant or ill-suited to the education of sea-going naval officers because the British armed services remained compartmentalized. Unlike the French and Germans, the Royal Navy looked to sea battles and campaigns of the past rather than incorporating contemporary army-based tactics and strategy into the movements and dispositions of fleets. It enjoyed the stature of a dominant navy with technical and numerical superiority over its closest rivals. The US Navy, growing in quality, established its own war college separate from the US Army, and British naval officers possessed little desire to be beholden to the smaller army. Perceptions about British performance in South Africa against the Afrikaners also called into question the quality of Camberley-delivered PME and suitability of its staff-educated graduates to meet modern conditions.²⁹ The protracted and costly struggle against Boer farmers under arms underscored the British Army’s ill-preparedness for any conflict against a major European power with the latest armaments and organization. Prevailing perception at the time was that something needed fixing on the army side, and the navy would not be well-served until the deficiencies were resolved.³⁰ Inter-service rivalry therefore remained a significant factor. As pressure from outside the navy mounted to establish a naval staff college, the Admiralty tried a different approach, neither Camberley nor foreign navy.

Calls to improve formalised advanced education for Royal Navy officers progressively grew stronger. In February 1900, the Navy League lobbied for a naval staff college along lines of the French, Germans, and Americans.³¹ The public was kept well-aware of warship additions and capabilities in other navies, compared to the Royal Navy’s own state of preparedness. During the Channel squadron’s April manoeuvres, the senior commanding officer Vice Admiral Harry

²⁸ “A Chair of Naval History and Strategy,” *Shields Daily News*, 9 August 1899; “Strategy and Its Teaching,” *Army and Navy Gazette*, 18 June 1898; “Naval and Military Strategy,” *Morning Post*, 27 July 1899.

²⁹ Edward M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 326-29; Edward Smalley, “Qualified, but unprepared: Training for War at the Staff College in the 1930s,” *British Journal for Military History* 2, no. 1 (2015): 55-57.

³⁰ Lowell J. Satre, “St. John Brodrick and Army Reform, 1901-1903,” *Journal of British Studies* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 121-124; Halik Kochanski, “Planning for War in the Final Years of Pax Britannica, 1889-1903,” *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890-1939*, eds. David French and Brian Holden Reid (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 19-21; Timothy Bowman and Mark L. Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 214-215; Spencer Jones, *Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 35-36.

³¹ *London Evening Standard*, 13 February 1900.

Rawson experimented with a changed tactical system that simulated real combat conditions interrupting command and control. Meanwhile, the Admiralty solicited and received proposals from the Royal Naval College's president, Vice Admiral Richard Tracey, as to viability of delivering a war course in Greenwich and what form that might take. The First Naval Lord, Admiral Walter Kerr, acknowledged that existing study of naval tactics in Portsmouth was rudimentary.³² A naval correspondent linked the two separate developments: "We have no naval staff college, though proposals in this direction are under consideration of the naval authorities, but such training as Sir Harry Rawson has initiated should commend itself to other admirals as meeting an undoubted need."³³

Whether officially-driven or internal to the fleet, serious thinking about changes in tactics and operating required interested and educated officers. In an article serialized in various newspapers, veteran naval journalist and historian William Laird Clowes divided Royal Navy officers into three principal groups: 1) the keen and engaged ones reading widely and working through professional problems; 2) the indifferent majority on the active list; and, 3) the sloven and incompetent who rose in rank regardless. Clowes was really only interested in giving encouragement to the first group, and he advocated "establishment of a naval war college, for the instruction of officers in history, strategy, and tactics, the college not necessarily to be ashore."³⁴ Concurrently, the Navy League passed a list of resolutions at its annual June meeting that included the same recommendation.³⁵ As Tracey's war course proposal made the rounds of the Admiralty, the director of naval intelligence, Rear Admiral Reginald Custance, took special interest and made further recommendations. A final submission received Treasury and Admiralty approval in late Summer 1900.³⁶ A proper staff college like Camberley and the foreign navies was a step too far for the Royal Navy, which chose instead to assign one officer to set-up, administer, and instruct the war course, one of Rawson's smart promising captains from the Channel squadron.

An Officer for the Job

Captain Henry May's appointment to the Royal Naval College Greenwich proved fortuitous since he possessed the requisite mix of experience, knowledge, and personal abilities to see the endeavour to execution. During his career, May received two special promotions, making him younger than others ranking on the *Navy List*. In July 1882, the diligent lieutenant took part in the fleet bombardment of Alexandria, to shore up the khedive and protect British control over the strategic

³² Minute, study of naval tactics, 4 April 1900, ADM 1/7461B, TNA.

³³ *Northern Whig*, 11 April 1900.

³⁴ W. Laird Clowes, "The Navy and the Empire," *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1 June 1900.

³⁵ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 9 June 1900.

³⁶ Harry Dickinson, *Wisdom and War: The Royal Naval College Greenwich 1873-1998* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 70; Shawn T. Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), 15-16.

Suez Canal. His ship, the ironclad HMS *Superb*, was badly holed in exchanges of gunfire between nationalist-held fortified batteries and Royal Navy warships.³⁷ May had first good fortune to survive unscathed, and second been brave enough to keep the crews firing with enough accuracy to suppress and knock out opposing guns. Awards and accolades followed: the Egyptian medal with Alexandria clasp, elevation to commander at age twenty-nine, and third-class Osmanieh from the sultan. In December 1888, May, commanding the sloop HMS *Racer* stationed in the Mediterranean squadron, supported English, Scottish, Welsh, Egyptian, and Sudanese troops under British command at the Red Sea port city of Suakin, surrounded by Mahdist forces.³⁸ Some accounts have him in the thick of battle, though Commander Alfred Paget led the naval contingent of sailors and marines ashore, while May, the senior-ranking naval officer and resident expert in naval gunnery, directed the guns of HMS *Racer* and several ships in the harbour against enemy positions to devastating effect.³⁹ May joined Major General Francis Grenfell in the battle's latter stages to inspect the handiwork done by naval supporting fire and for the general military advance, the British side suffering only minimal casualties. Meanwhile, the gunboat HMS *Starling* dispatched by May along the coast and Grenfell's cavalry together harassed the Madhist retreat and prevented reinforcement from enemy-held Handoub.

Suakin ingrained in May the significance of inter-service cooperation between naval and land forces. The next month, May was promoted to captain, again out of seniority, and sent home to pay off HMS *Racer* into second reserve and assume positions as member on the Royal Navy's ordnance committee and inspector of warlike stores.⁴⁰ In 1892, he received the Companion of Bath (CB) in the Queen's birthday list. As a decorated officer, May's earlier career experience influenced his later teaching and stature within the Royal Navy.

Four subsequent years spent on the Pacific station in command of the older third-class cruiser HMS *Hyacinth* gave him firsthand insights into latest developments in the American, Russian, and Japanese navies and ample opportunity to ponder and test tactical schemes and ordnance effects. During this time, May began his association with naval writer and illustrator Fred Jane, best known for the *All the World's Fighting Ships* annual and accompanying name-branded naval war game that simulated naval movement and battle.⁴¹ The young, decorated naval captain

³⁷ Handwritten notes, 11-13 July 1882, Vice Admiral George Napier Tomlin papers, private collection broken up and sold off; Colin S. White, "The Bombardment of Alexandria 1882," *The Mariner's Mirror* 66, no. 1 (1980), 39-44; Captain N.L. Walford, "The Effects of the Bombardment of the Forts of Alexandria, July 11th, 1882," *RUSI Journal* 27, no. 119 (1883): 145-205.

³⁸ James Andrew Fargher, "Steam, Cannon and Wires: The Royal Navy and British Imperialism in Northeastern Africa, 1799-1899" (PhD diss., King's College University of London, 2018), 222-224; James A. Fargher, "British Interventionism in the Red Sea Eastern Sudan and Britain's Global Defence Strategy," *War in History* 28, no. 2 (2021): 299.

³⁹ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 23 December 1888.

⁴⁰ Service record, Rear Admiral Henry John May, ADM 196/86/78, TNA.

⁴¹ Richard Brooks, *Fred T. Jane: An Eccentric Visionary* (Coulsdon: Jane's Information Group,

combined practical real-world experience with a sound, inquisitive mind open to new ideas.

When May returned from the Pacific to England in 1896, novel thinking about naval tactics and strategy inside the Royal Navy was essentially torpid. Annual manoeuvres substituted hands-on experiential performances for deeper theoretical study. Many British naval officers genuinely believed that sea time was the truest expression of professional knowledge and readiness for advancement, in the best traditions of Nelson. Leading authorities on tactics such as admirals Samuel Long, Geoffrey Hornby, and Edmund Robert Fremantle were dead or progressively out-dated.⁴² Despite introduction of torpedoes and quick firing guns, the ram was still given primacy in the Royal Navy. Advocates were unwilling to admit that technological changes in warships and armaments made following Nelson's dictum of getting close risky.⁴³ Based on his experience and expertise in gunnery, May knew the real odds in combat against ships employing modern weapons.

In the fields of naval tactics and history, Vice Admiral Philip Colomb was perhaps the most recognizable public writer. He had earlier revised the Royal Navy's system of tactical signaling assisted by Harry Brent (later director of the Indian Marine and vice admiral) and his younger brother John served in Parliament as a Conservative and wrote on naval matters as well. His book *Naval Warfare* blended theory and history to show how the Royal Navy achieved and held command of the sea, though according to one review could "not be compared, either in scope or insight, with Sir Edward Hamley's 'Operations'... but the book, though of unequal interest and value, is scientific in method, and bears evidence of wide historical reading, though hardly independent research."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Colomb was distrusted in parts of the navy as too critical, long-winded in presentations, and just a tad academic. For several years, Colomb delivered lectures on naval strategy

1997), 92; Chris Madsen, "Rear Admiral Henry John May and Fred Jane's 1898 Naval War Game." *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 30, no. 3 (2020): 248, <https://doi.org/10.25071/2561-5467.57>.

⁴² Captain Samuel Long, "Study of the Tactics of Naval Blockade as Affected by Modern Weapons," *RUSI Journal* 25, no. 110 (1881): 316-349; "Fatal Accident to Admiral Long," *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 April 1893; Rear Admiral Edmund R. Fremantle, "Naval Tactics," *RUSI Journal* 30, no. 133 (1886): 199-231; Admiral Geoffrey Phipps Hornby, *Squadrons of Exercise in the British Navy* (Portsmouth: Griffin & Co., 1885); "Obituary – Navy – Admiral of the Fleet Sir Geoffrey Hornby," *Army and Navy Gazette*, 9 March 1895; Robin E. Mullins, "New Ways of Thinking: The Intelligence Function and Strategic Calculations in the Admiralty, 1882-1889," *Intelligence and National Security* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 78-79.

⁴³ Admiral George Elliot, "The Ram – The Prominent Feature of Future Naval Victories," *RUSI Journal* 28, no. 124 (1884): 356-378; George Elliot, *Treatise on Future Naval Battles, and How to Fight Them, and other Naval Tactical Subjects* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1885); Matthew Allen, "The Deployment of Untried Technology: British Naval Tactics in the Ironclad Era," *War in History* 15, no. 3 (2008): 282-286; Robert Leroy Johnson, "Rise and Fall of a Tactic: The Ram in Nineteenth Century Naval Doctrine" (MA thesis, Texas A&M University, 1989).

⁴⁴ P.H. Colomb, *Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practice Historically Treated*, 2nd ed. (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1895); *London Evening Standard*, 18 August 1891; Schurman, *The Education of a Navy*, 52-57; Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army*, 246.

and tactics at Greenwich, and he wrote a biography of the Royal Naval College's first admiral president, published in 1898.⁴⁵ Many naval officers found his opinions wanting and lacking present-day application because he lived too much in the past.

Thus, when May presented and published his own paper on naval tactics and the effect of modern weaponry at the Royal United Service Institution in 1897 based on his reflections and experimentation in the Pacific, the field was wide open. The two-part work was scientifically-based, analytical, highly technical, and focused squarely on how best to move and fight tactically a ship or groupings of ships under modern conditions.⁴⁶ He ended the paper by recommending establishment of a tactics school for officers in Portsmouth.

The Admiralty looked upon May's understanding of naval tactics favourably as an original thinker within the Royal Navy, without necessarily Colomb's baggage and bite. Command of the newer battleship HMS *Mars* in the Channel squadron soon allowed May to refine his concepts and win over converts amongst serving naval officers, aided by Jane's commercially marketed boxed naval war game bearing endorsement from May, Prince Louis of Battenberg, and Grand Duke Alexander of Russia.⁴⁷ Prior to Colomb's death in October 1899, May took over the naval tactics lectures part-time while employed with the fleet. The lectures proved popular and credible amongst attending students.⁴⁸ Here was a knowledgeable younger senior captain commanding one of the Royal Navy's mightiest warships protecting the home country against all potential threats, sharing the latest ideas in tactics, formations, and relative merits of armaments, using real-world examples, and answering questions in straightforward language common to the profession. With his value to naval education initiatives clearly demonstrated, May traded ship command for a shore billet.

Sending May to Greenwich to direct the war course was calculated. Emotions were no doubt mixed about leaving HMS *Mars* and the Channel squadron after

⁴⁵ Christopher Lloyd, "The Royal Naval Colleges at Portsmouth and Greenwich," *The Mariner's Mirror* 52, no. 2 (1966): 153; P.H. Colomb, *Lecture on The command of the sea and its effect upon military operations* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1893); P.H. Colomb, *Memoirs of Sir Astley Cooper Key* (London: Methuen & Co., 1898).

⁴⁶ Captain H.J. May, C.B., "Notes on Tactics for Ships and Weapons of the Present Day," *RUSI Journal* 41, no. 227 (1897): 48-82; 41, no. 228 (1897): 201-23; Stephen McLaughlin, "Battlelines and Fast Wings: Battlefleet Tactics in the Royal Navy, 1900-1914," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 7 (2015): 987-988, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1005444>; a correspondent later wrote: "There have always been thinkers who sought to lead us back to the experience of the sea and to the necessity of basing ship design on tactical and strategical principles alone. The late Admiral Colomb plainly showed the only scientific method of approaching problems, and in the remarkable papers of the late Rear-Admiral H.J. May closer reasoning was brought to bear upon these problems, with results which might well have served to steady unbalanced judgments." "Warship Design," *Evening Mail* (London), 8 October 1913.

⁴⁷ Fred T. Jane, *Rules for the Jane Naval War Game* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1898); "Naval Kriegspiel," *The Graphic* (London), 29 January 1898.

⁴⁸ Barry D. Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar: Admiral Herbert Richmond 1871-1946* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1982), 17; "Navy Notes," *Army and Navy Gazette*, 29 July 1899.

fewer than nineteen months in command. The fleet assembled in Portland during summer 1900 for annual naval manoeuvres, with an emphasis on the tactics of scouting and destroyer operations employing torpedoes. At the conclusion, a resounding victory was declared over Rawson's A squadron representing France (the opposing forces never actually met due to fog).⁴⁹ Still, the vice admiral held a high opinion of May's tactical insights and gunnery expertise. In early September, Admiral Robert Henry More Molyneux was formally announced to replace Tracey as president of the Royal Naval College effective 1 October, and May "of the *Mars*, goes to the Royal Navy College Greenwich, as captain of that establishment, where his large abilities will be taken advantage of in lecturing."⁵⁰ Harry Dickinson and Andrew Lambert have stressed the administrative and disciplinary



Admiral Sir Robert Henry More Molyneux. ("A New Naval G.C.B.: Admiral Sir Robert Henry More Molyneux," *Navy and Army Illustrated*, 22 November 1902, 227)

duties associated with this position, but the timing and nature of the appointment leave little doubt that May was expected to take on active teaching roles.

Pairing May with Molyneux created an effective team. Second Naval Lord, Vice Admiral Archibald Douglas, chose Molyneux for the sedate Greenwich position because he had a reputation for efficiency and getting things done. Individual presidents of war colleges each have their own approaches and styles that directing staffs and faculty constantly guess at. As superintendent of the Devonport naval dockyard, Molyneux had been promoted to admiral in July 1899, and like May, had taken part in the Alexandria bombardment and defended Suakin in previous years.⁵¹ They shared much in common in terms of life experience. Molyneux was serious about the assigned function and as the person in charge – in today's language of strategic business planning – addressed concerns about resources, institutional

⁴⁹ "The Naval 'War' – A British Success," *Evening News* (London), 4 August 1899; "The Naval Manoeuvres – Victory of the British Fleet," *Western Gazette*, 11 August 1899.

⁵⁰ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 8 September 1900.

⁵¹ Service record, Admiral Robert Henry More Molyneux, ADM 196/14/265, TNA.

branding, and meeting end-user service needs in curriculum and instruction. At a farewell dinner aboard the flagship HMS *Majestic*, Vice Admiral Rawson regaled May, who was off to Greenwich, and Captain Randolph Foote from HMS *Repulse*, taking charge of the ordnance department at the Admiralty, with tall stories of past deeds, good fellowship, customary naval toasts, and offers of bright prospects for the future.⁵² May clearly had a network of friends and acquaintances in the fleet and at Whitehall. In turn, the Royal Naval College gained one of the best tacticians in the Royal Navy to set up the new war course.

The time given May to settle in and get that course up and running was astonishingly short. Besides personal distractions of moving the possessions of a large family and establishing new lives in a strange city, May was thrust into the day-to-day administration of a historic service establishment that hosted numerous tenants connected either directly or tangentially to the college's educational mission.⁵³ The divisions of a battleship seemed straightforward by comparison. Sleepy Greenwich with its green parks and riverside walks possessed its own charms, while the amusements and hustle of metropolitan London were only a short ride away. May made the trip to London frequently, particularly in early days, to consult with interested authorities about organization, approach, and content. May was also elected member of the Royal United Service Institution in place of Captain Walter Stopford, that officer leaving to command the second-class cruiser HMS *Pallas*.⁵⁴ The first students, senior and mid-rank officers of captain and commander ranks, joined the Royal Naval College in November 1900 little more than a month after May's own arrival.

Subjects of Higher Learning

Only barest details are known about the first war course serials offered at Greenwich. May left no known private papers, though some limited correspondence exists with persons such as Julian Corbett, whom May hired, and in official Admiralty records. Building upon a list of students compiled by Simon Harley and taking inspiration from social historians for earlier periods of the Royal Navy such as Nicholas Rodger and Evan Wilson, this section presents a reasonable interpretation of the curriculum on the war course during May's tenure, how it was taught, and who as a group attended.⁵⁵ Because the documentary record is fragmentary, some reconstruction becomes necessary.

Broadly, the war course for the first three years was eight months in duration, before being split into two four-month serials starting in 1903-04. Core subjects

⁵² *Army and Navy Gazette*, 22 September 1900.

⁵³ Dickinson, *Wisdom and War*, 63-65.

⁵⁴ *St. James's Gazette* (London), 26 October 1900.

⁵⁵ Simon Harley, "War Course Attendance at Greenwich from 1900 to 1904," *The Mariner's Mirror* 103, no. 4 (2017): 471-474; Nicholas Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1987); Evan Wilson, "Social Background and Promotion Prospects in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815," *English Historical Review* 131, no. 550 (June 2016): 570-595.

included naval tactics, strategy, international law, and history. Related technical topics on steam propulsion, navigation, naval architecture and construction, and languages rounded off the last months. These latter courses were meant to fill gaps in knowledge, reflected the infatuation with science and engineering so evident in late Victorian culture, or had been provided by interested departments for advocacy reasons.⁵⁶

May most likely believed, like the original proposers, that the longer eight months instilled sounder understanding on the part of attendees and allowed time for reflection and self-study. After all, the navy's war course was still only a third the length of Camberley's course of studies. The larger institution, and even some students, always pressed for shorter courses or cramming more into existing allotted hours, so naval officers could return to duty and responsible positions. Quite often, someone else back home performed their job while absent, or sending organizations simply went short on the personnel side. The war course was still a relatively unknown quantity and indeed regarded with some suspicion inside the navy.⁵⁷ Compared to the formalities and ever-present branch identifications of Camberley, teaching on the early Royal Navy war course was somewhat looser and far more intimate in the spirit of Nelson's band of brothers.

Methods of instruction used on the war course involved both traditional and innovative approaches. The weekly set schedule consisted of lectures and small tabletop exercises styled as war games, limited in duration.⁵⁸ Students heard from speakers, either May or others, for about an hour on a topic and then broke into smaller groups for discussion and playing out set problems. The natural inclination was to fill the day as full as possible, though absorption of information noticeably falls off after a few hours. Some students were known to fall asleep and snore through lectures, particularly after lunch, when a gentle nudge from the fellow beside or the instructor might be necessary. The amateur cartoonists and sketch artists, another pastime employed during lectures, were notable for documenting these acts of indiscretion. Passive learning of lectures balanced out by the active learning of one-on-one exercises provided breaks in attention and catered to individual learning. Some of the tactical war games involved rolling of dice to replicate the element of chance that raised the general volume in the room and at times evoked occasional cheers more reminiscent of the casino. Instruction that incorporated some fun or interesting content customarily was more engaging.⁵⁹

May quickly realized that some repetition and summation were necessary in lecturing because student attention was limited. For topics beyond his immediate

⁵⁶ Don Leggett, "Naval architecture, expertise and navigating authority in the British Admiralty, c.1885-1906," *Journal of Maritime Research* 16, no. 1 (2014): 79-80.

⁵⁷ Dickinson, *Wisdom and War*, 91.

⁵⁸ War course timetable, October 1902, Captain Tristan Dannreuther papers, DAN/220, NMM; These were distinct from the elaborate strategic games played: Précis of strategical war game carried out at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, in early part of 1903, no. 706, ADM 231/38, TNA; Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning*, 34.

⁵⁹ War course timetable, October 1902, Dannreuther papers, DAN/220, NMM.

expertise, May relied on outside speakers from various backgrounds. The going rate for delivery of a lecture was £5. May inherited Reverend Thomas Lawrence, author of several law books and professor of history and international law at Cambridge University and the University of Chicago, who had lectured on international law at the Royal Naval College since returning from the United States in 1896.⁶⁰ Diligent students took notes from the lectures, which proved useful for review and writing of papers. Several typed student essays held at the National Maritime Museum from Lieutenant Tristan Dannreuther indicates a written component to the war course.⁶¹ In preparation of papers, students synthesized reading and lectures on topics of interest.

May was in almost daily contact with students throughout the week. Course reports and annotations for professional standing and individual academic performance were based on his personal observation. As with many higher PME courses or programmes, the latter counted for the vast majority of weighting, while the former constituted a smaller percentage. Students attended the Royal Naval College with the intent to be better and more knowledgeable senior naval officers.

In the early years, tactics and some strategy dictated interest and content. May encouraged students to read widely in newspapers and illustrated magazines on current events and matters affecting the Royal Navy and foreign navies.⁶² British progress in the South African War was much in the news and attracted lively discussion because bashing the army, whether deserved or not, was always popular amongst naval officers. Inter-service rivalry was alive and well even at these rank levels. Several students had been mentioned in despatches for their service in South Africa and imparted firsthand experience. In that conflict, the Royal Navy played a smaller, but important supporting role in conduct of operations and strategy. The 1898 Spanish-American War, as the last with significant naval action, was also a favourite topic, especially in regard to the published writings of Captain William Bainbridge-Hoff, USN that had been sold in Great Britain for some years.⁶³ Such books were much in demand at the Royal Naval College's small library. Thomas Brassey's *Naval Annual* also added to debates over the piercing effects of shell against ship armour. Technical topics predominated.

Naval officers individually or together generally liked to talk about ships: ships they had served on or commanded, ships they had seen in person, places ships took them to meet with more ships, ships built, and shipbuilding. May opened up the latest edition of *All the World's Fighting Ships*, or clipped photographs from

⁶⁰ T.J. Lawrence, *The Principles of International Law* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1895); T.J. Lawrence, *A Handbook of Public International Law*, 5th ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901); *Cambridge Daily News*, 19 August 1919; Dickinson, *Wisdom and War*, 108.

⁶¹ Essays, 1903, Dannreuther papers, DAN/225, NMM; Service record, Captain Tristan Dannreuther, ADM 196/46/29, TNA.

⁶² H.J. May to J.S. Corbett, 30 October 1902, Julian Corbett papers, CB/13/3 pt. 3, NMM.

⁶³ William Bainbridge-Hoff, *Elementary Naval Tactics* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1894); Commander William Bainbridge-Hoff, *Examples, conclusions and maxims of Modern Naval Tactics* (Portsmouth: Griffin & Co., 1885), Admiral Archibald Berkeley Milne papers, MLN/217/1, NMM.

illustrated magazines, as visual aids during his lectures.⁶⁴ The library included English translations of foreign books on naval tactics, which received higher priority for limited purchases. May picked which publications and subscriptions were useful, and made recommendations for reading and research to students. Given his background and rise to rank, he encouraged thinking about combined operations and working collaboratively with the army that required broader consideration of policy and strategy.

Strategy received greater attention once May secured the services of civilian historian Julian Corbett first as a casual lecturer and then full-time staff member. The hiring, for a relatively modest number of lectures to begin with, was primarily from acquaintance through the Navy Records Society and to relieve some of May's own heavy teaching load rather than any advocacy on Corbett's part for improvements to naval education or connections inside the Admiralty.⁶⁵ Knowledge of strategy and history, Corbett was told, was uneven amongst the students and he was given specific suggestions about where to begin. David Hannay, also known through the Navy Records Society, delivered lectures to a certain level on the 1901-02 course. In a letter to Corbett, May emphasized practical application to present circumstances:

As Mahan has so well shewn politics will greatly affect any future struggle for Sea Power & it is distinctly necessary to remind naval officers that expediency & strategy are not always in accord. An Admiral may have the force on the spot but may be restrained by political considerations from striking at the right time & place. Generally-speaking the faults, failures & decadence of matters & their Commanders are insufficiently considered so that the difficulties likely to beset one in the present day are minimised.⁶⁶

A first observation is that May subscribed to at least some of Mahan's arguments and conclusions and second, that Corbett was given latitude to choose and interpret examples that best illustrated the British way of warfare. Out of these modest beginnings, Corbett advanced those concepts and themes into his lectures and later book *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.⁶⁷ May saw strategy differently than

⁶⁴ Fred T. Jane, *All the World's Fighting Ships* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1902).

⁶⁵ Andrew Lambert, "Sir Julian Corbett and the Naval War Course," in *Dreadnought to Daring: 100 Years of Comment, Controversy and Debate in The Naval Review*, ed. Peter Hore (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2012), 41; Donald M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), 32-33; Donald M. Schurman, "Julian Corbett's Influence on the Royal Navy's Perception of Its Maritime Function," in *Mahan Is Not Enough: The Proceedings of a Conference on the Works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond*, eds. James Goldrick and John B. Hattendorf (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1993), 55-56.

⁶⁶ H.J. May to J.S. Corbett, 22 August 1902, Corbett papers, CBT/13/3 pt. 3, NMM; H.G. Archer, "Naval Officers as Diplomats," *Navy and Army Illustrated* 12, 29 June 1901, 360.

⁶⁷ Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1911); J.J. Widen, *Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his Contribution to Military and Naval Thought* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Andrew Lambert, "'Doctrine, the Soul of Warfare': Sir Julian Corbett and the Teaching of Strategy in the Royal Navy before 1914," in *Military Education and the British Empire, 1815-1949*, eds. Douglas E. Delaney, Robert C. Engen, and Meghan

Corbett because, for naval officers, study of history simply provided illustration for theory and practice that required constant experimentation and reconsideration. Strategy competed for balance with other subjects on the war course, which still corresponded to what May considered important and relevant to the Royal Navy's present-day needs.

Notwithstanding many limitations, May managed to keep students happy and engaged, the Admiralty pleased with a signature product, and not wear himself out as an instructor and administrator in the process. This achievement of PME bliss is difficult for bigger directing staffs and faculty at the best of times, never mind alone. May ran the first war course serials with some voluntary help from his eldest daughter Constance until a Royal Marine lieutenant was appointed to assist. From March 1901, May received a good service pension of £150 per year, vacated by Commodore Edward Davis upon promotion, in addition to his regular salary.⁶⁸ The relief and extra financial security allowed more time devoted to teaching and improving the student experience.

Much informal learning took place outside the classroom in conversations at the mess or in other social contexts. May belonged to the temperance society, so was sworn off alcohol.⁶⁹ Unlike most army officers, naval officers mastered the skill of effortlessly balancing a plate and drink with steady hand while engaging in business-casual conversation, thanks to years spent on heaving ships at sea and travelling the world. Admiral Molyneux, like most commandants and presidents of PME colleges, liked to meet personally with students and hear firsthand experiences and complaints of "being on course." Dress was relaxed, and students were allowed to wear civilian clothes instead of uniform in and out of class.⁷⁰ Greenwich and surrounding areas offered ample opportunities for exercise, sailing, organized sports, recreation, and sightseeing outside study hours. Photographs from May 1901 show participants and spectators for high jump and hundred-yard, three-legged, sack, and dummy rescue bicycle races, one caption cheekily declaring: "The Nimble Naval Officer Displays His Usual Dash."⁷¹ Team-building is important in PME and creates collective experiences long remembered after leaving course. A mania for bicycle clubs and similar organized physical pursuits was strong at the turn of the century. May, an avid cyclist, represented the navy at a dinner held by the Amateur Athletics Association.⁷² The most successful students, like May, concurrently enjoyed themselves while handling the workload of studies and intellectual pursuits. They might have cursed all the reading and maybe even

Fitzpatrick (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018), 50-51; Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning for Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

⁶⁸ Service record, Rear Admiral Henry John May, ADM 196/39/131, TNA.

⁶⁹ "Rear-Admiral May of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich," *Kentish Mercury*, 29 April 1904.

⁷⁰ "Naval Officers at Greenwich College," *Navy and Army Illustrated* 15, 20 December 1902, 344.

⁷¹ "The Sports of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich," *Navy and Army Illustrated* 12, 18 May 1901, 213.

⁷² "The Amateur Athletic Association," *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 14 June 1901.



War course group photograph from late 1902. Students are dressed in casual civilian attire, now common in higher PME, to lessen rank distinctions, create a more comfortable learning environment, and save the expense of dry cleaning and pressing. (“Group of Captains and Commanders,” *Navy and Army Illustrated*, 20 December 1902, 344)

Front row sitting: Captain Thomas Young Greet; Captain Ernest Alfred Simons; Captain Charles William Winnington-Ingram; Rear Admiral Henry John May (centre in uniform); Captain Alban Giffard Tate; Captain Edmund Moore Cooper Cooper-Key; Commander Algernon John Hotham

Back rows standing: Commander Herbert Charles Campbell Da Costa; Commander Charles Richard Newdigate Burne; Commander Charles William Stares Leggatt; Lieutenant Tristan Dannreuther; Captain Arthur Archibald Campbell Galloway; Commander Charles Frederick Corbett; Captain William Oswald Story; Captain William Osbert Boothby; Commander Clement Cooper Horne; Captain John Gorham Hewitt; Commander Frederick Kenrick Colquhoun Gibbons; Commander George Ellis Cave

stopped at some point, but recognized that the education provided by the navy was a privilege and ultimately prepared them for higher responsibilities of rank. Whether the war course deserved the descriptor of “gentlemen’s course” can really only be assessed in terms of expectations and results.

The war course attracted attention at the Admiralty’s higher levels. The energetic First Lord of Admiralty, the Earl of Selborne, most known for his critics and controversial change agenda, praised May’s good work at the Royal Naval College in presentation of the Admiralty’s annual estimates.⁷³ Selborne also pushed

⁷³ Elinor Frances Romans, “Selection and Early Career Education of Executive Officers in the Royal Navy c1902-1939” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2012), 22-24; Oliver Johnson, “Class Warfare and the Selborne Scheme: The Royal Navy’s battle over technology and social hierarchy,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 100, no. 4 (2014): 427-428; Keith Wilson, “Directions of Travel: The Earl of Selborne, the Cabinet, and the Threat from Germany, 1900-1904,” *International History Review* 30,

against the navy establishment for promotion of suitably qualified younger officers into flag rank. May moved to top of the captain's seniority list consequent upon Vice Admiral Rodney Lloyd's retirement in May 1902, and received promotion to rear admiral the following 22 September as "an officer of great distinction and high scientific attainments, whose service at Greenwich has had great influence in stimulating the work at the Naval College."⁷⁴ For the time being, he stayed war course director because his teaching was superior and the Admiralty could not think of anyone else qualified enough to replace him. Most important, the students and administration liked and respected May.

In terms of cohort, students attending the earlier serials of the war course represented a relatively small, self-selecting group. Understanding who these officers were and their motivations remains an interesting piece of the puzzle. The Admiralty advertised for naval officers to submit names for selection. Individuals were then vetted and screened by naval authorities and May for suitability. Since numbers were limited, some competitiveness entered into selection. Basically, senior and mid-rank naval officers willing to subject themselves to months of studies away from homes and the active navy for sake of promotion and improved professional competencies chose to put themselves forward, while those sceptical about worth of such education stayed away, as Laird Clowes predicted.

The voluntary nature meant that most, if not all, students wanted to be in Greenwich and believed to some degree that naval tactics and strategy could be taught and learned. Robert Davison's sometimes uncharitable characterizations about the war course need revisiting in light of May's time as director.⁷⁵ The students attending were professionals near the top of their profession, attuned to latest developments in naval warfare, and current with contemporary events. They learned naval doctrine and international law and edged tentatively into some strategy and history.

Statistics compiled from service records for twenty-nine students attending the third serial and last long course ending 30 May 1903 (see group photograph) are illustrative. This sample taken from the larger four-year population is chosen because the war course at this point was most developed and mature in keeping with May's concept of instruction and the available information is most complete; some gaps exist for the other war course serials. By rank, there were thirteen captains, fifteen commanders, and one lieutenant, the last specially put on the course for his cleverness and language abilities.⁷⁶ The average age was 39 years; the oldest was

no. 2 (2008): 259-261; Iain O'Shea, "Selling 'The Scheme': The British Periodical Press and the Discourse on Naval Reform, 1900-1910" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2010).

⁷⁴ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 13 May 1902; *London Gazette*, 10 October 1902; "Rear-Admiral H.J. May," *Hampshire Telegram*, 11 October 1902; Paul Haggie, "The Royal Navy and War Planning in the Fisher Era," *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 3 (1973): 115.

⁷⁵ Robert L. Davison, *The Challenges of Command: The Royal Navy's Executive Branch Officers, 1880-1919* (London and NY: Routledge, 2016); Mike Farquharson-Roberts, *Royal Naval Officers from War to War 1918-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.

⁷⁶ Harley, "War Course Attendance at Greenwich", 473. Further data is extracted from the original

born in 1850 and the youngest in 1874. Several officers joined and left part-way through the eight months depending upon assignments; one officer did not complete the course; while another officer started a previous serial, withdrew, and came back to finish. Captain Henry Fleet, the oldest officer, applied several times and only joined the course in March for the last three months.⁷⁷ Two officers captained the same ship in recent years, the floating battery HMS *Magdala*, late of the Indian defence squadron.⁷⁸ Proficiency in French and German was demonstrable within the group, one student having spent four months in France immediately before joining the course late. Eleven achieved first class standing, ten second class, six third class, and one compassionate pass.⁷⁹ Captain Arthur Galloway and two other students received distinction in legal work: “The Professor of International Law mentioned this officer as having shown special aptitude in dealing with problems put to the class.”⁸⁰ These annotations show that May consulted Reverend Lawrence in student assessment, but no specific references are made to Corbett and strategy subjects. Strategy and international law were both classes delivered by academic instructors, but the latter received greater attention than the former because of its practical application and the popularity of Lawrence as a lecturer. Corbett never achieved the same distinction. Many students came off or went on other courses afterwards or exercised command in responsible positions at home and abroad.

In respect to subsequent careers, twenty-five officers from the original twenty-nine on the third war course serial advanced in rank and fifteen of those became flag officers up to and including admiral. In 1905, Captain Charles Winnington-Ingram recorded “Good services in connection with establishment & working of [the] Australian Naval Agreement scheme.”⁸¹ Several officers attended later serials of the shortened war course in Portsmouth again over the next decade. Five officers died prior to 1914, while others went on to serve in First World War duties. Rear Admiral Robert Arbuthnot was killed in action on 31 May 1916 during the Battle of Jutland/Skagerrak when his flagship, the armoured cruiser HMS *Defence*, fell victim to the battlecruisers of Franz von Hipper’s division (the German admiral lost his own flagship SMS *Lützow* but lived).⁸² William Story served as superintendent of both the Esquimalt and Halifax dockyards and was promoted to full admiral in 1918, and Admiral Percy Grant, who had served as a lieutenant under May on HMS *Mars* in the Channel squadron, headed the post-war Royal Australian Navy as “First Naval Member of the Commonwealth Naval Board & also C[ommander-]

individual personal service records held at Kew.

⁷⁷ Service record, Vice Admiral Henry Louis Fleet, ADM 196/38/455, TNA.

⁷⁸ Service record, Admiral Thomas Young Greet, ADM 196/19/158, TNA.

⁷⁹ These figures are verified from original recorded notations for each individual officer and differ slightly from Vary’s reconstructed course serial information.

⁸⁰ Service record, Admiral Arthur Archibald Campbell Galloway, ADM 196/38/600, TNA.

⁸¹ Service record, Rear Admiral Charles William Winnington-Ingram, ADM 196/87/111, TNA.

⁸² Service record, Rear Admiral Robert Keith Arbuthnot, ADM 196/42/277, TNA; Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London: John Murray, 1996), 443-446.

in[-]C[hief] of [the] Australian Naval Station.”⁸³ Two officers committed suicide, the first just three months after the course while commanding a flotilla of destroyers on manoeuvres and the second in 1918 by gunshot under wartime strains.

As this brief snapshot shows, the war course represented a finishing school before naval officers assumed higher command and responsible positions in the Royal Navy and navies of the British Empire. May knew that, and serious students did as well. The importance of higher naval education within the Royal Navy was realized to a suitable standard. And May delivered to the expectations of the higher leadership.

Task Undone

The Royal Navy’s war course was on a sound footing passing through the third academic year. In March 1903, Selborne again reiterated “in the strongest way the value of the war course at Greenwich for the senior officers of the Navy as conducted by the Captain of the College.”⁸⁴ Rear Admiral May was a shining example of the First Lord of the Admiralty’s continuing fight to move more younger officers into flag rank. Reports about the war course were positive, both from graduating students and those who employed them afterwards. On 21 May 1903, the Prince of Wales, nicknamed the sailor prince for his enthusiastic support of the Royal Navy, dined with May and the war course officers at Greenwich.⁸⁵ The thirty-eight year old George wore the uniform of a rear admiral on public occasions, the same rank as May, which no doubt entered into the banter. The Edwardian royals were popular and May, like Selborne and Molyneux, knew the value of public trust and support from persons in high places in changing the Royal Navy into an effective modern fighting force schooled in the higher arts of strategy and tactics.

The Prince of Wales, eventually to succeed Edward VII as king in May 1910, wisely left teaching to expert professionals like May and shunned his German cousin Wilhelm’s example at the *Marineakademie*. As a previously serving naval officer, he quietly pushed naval reform and education behind the scenes. A short course was delivered to flag officers at the Royal Naval College between 2 and 18 June after conclusion of the last eight-month war course.⁸⁶ May, at top of his game, lectured on naval tactics and latest trends in ship design and armaments across navies. In August 1903, he joined naval manoeuvres of the British fleet

⁸³ Service record, Admiral William Oswald Story, ADM 196/41/0/139, TNA; Marc Milner, *Canada’s Navy: The First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 42; Service record, Admiral Edmund Percy Fenwick George Grant, ADM 196/42/497, TNA.

⁸⁴ “The Naval Estimates – Lord Selborne’s Statement,” *Globe* (London), 10 March 1903.

⁸⁵ *Globe* (London), 22 May 1903; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 14 July 1903.

⁸⁶ *Hampshire Telegram*, 23 May 1903; Andrew Lambert, “The Naval War Course, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and the Origins of ‘The British Way of Warfare’,” in *The British Way of Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856-1956*, eds. Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy (London and NY: Routledge, 2010), 227-228; Dickinson, *Wisdom and War*, 92.

taking place in Portuguese waters alongside three retired flag officers serving as umpires.⁸⁷ For the first time, a newly allied Japanese naval officer was allowed to observe secret tactical evolutions during the exercise. By this date, the navy's annual training manoeuvres in home waters were turning into grand spectacles and social events, typically associated with naval reviews and jubilee celebrations. Vice Admiral Robert Harris succeeded Molyneux as Royal Naval College president on 6 August 1903.⁸⁸

Later that month, announcement came of the change from long course to two four-month courses in the coming year. The first ran from October to January and second from February to June.⁸⁹ The Admiralty advertised for suitable candidates to put names forward. The shortened courses necessitated dropping some technical subjects, but increased throughput and overall numbers benefiting from advanced professional education. Practically, more naval officers received exposure to naval tactics, international law, strategy, and history, a positive move in Selborne's opinion: "It is not all officers who have turned their minds to the consideration of the many problems which will confront them in war, and the more we stimulate the



Rear Admiral Henry John May, C.B.,
a year before his death in April 1904.
("Rear-Admiral H.J. May, C.B.," *Navy and
Army Illustrated*, 28 March 1903, 703)

⁸⁷ "The Assembly at Lagos," *Hampshire Telegram*, 8 August 1903; Matthew S. Seligmann, "A prelude to the reforms of Admiral Sir John Fisher: the creation of the Home Fleet, 1902-03," *Historical Journal* 83, no. 221 (August 2010): 508-509.

⁸⁸ "New President of the Royal Naval College," *Evening Mail*, 27 July 1903; "The Royal Naval College," *London Evening Standard*, 25 July 1903; Robert Harris, *From Naval Cadet to Admiral: Half-a-century of naval service and sport in many parts of the world* (London: Cassell, 1913), 408.

⁸⁹ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 29 August 1903.

study of naval problems by officers of every rank the better it will be for Navy.”⁹⁰ But, the change was significant in more ways than one. What had been a relatively leisurely and intimate war course spread over time sufficient for study and reflection turned into a rushed and high-volume enterprise that tried to maintain same quality with same resources, while expectations stayed high. Something inevitably had to give, as May extended himself to the point of affecting his health.

Loss of Rear Admiral May midpoint through the shortened war course that started 2 February 1904 delayed, at least temporarily, teaching of naval tactics and strategy in the Royal Navy. Tentatively, he was to leave Greenwich sometime in the summer for a new post. Andrew Lambert posits that was to be director of naval intelligence, but in fact, May was earmarked to replace Rear Admiral Hedworth Lambton as the Channel fleet’s second-in-command.⁹¹ In other words, he was returning to sea in a leadership position over an operational formation of warships, where his ideas on naval tactics could be further tested, refined, and practiced. In late March, May attended the funeral in Guildford of Admiral Molyneux, who had died earlier in Cairo.⁹² The apparently fit and vigorous May, in his prime, possessed absolutely no foreshadowing of his own death within the next month. After returning to Greenwich from a two-day cycling tour, May came down with stomach flu which persisted for a few days, and then he died in his official residence on 26 April 1904.⁹³ War course classes were suspended for the week following.

The Greenwich funeral for May turned into a big show, which reflected the esteem and high regard for his teaching on the war course within the Royal Navy. First Naval Lord, Admiral Walter Kerr, numerous admirals and generals, a thousand ratings sent from Chatham, his family, and a long list of friends and acquaintances attended.⁹⁴ A gun carriage carried his body in a procession accompanied by the Royal Marine artillery band from the Royal Naval College’s chapel along streets lined with sailors to the Royal Naval Hospital cemetery on Woolich Road. The pallbearers were Rear Admiral Alvin Corry, Vice Admiral Swinton Holland, Captain Edward Inglefield, Captain W. Vernon Anson (superintendent Royal Hospital Schools), Colonel Charles Gordon, Rear Admiral Charles Arbuthnot, Major General William Wright (commandant Royal Marines), Rear Admiral Charles Drury, and Vice Admiral Lewis Beaumont. Graveside, two-hundred fifty

⁹⁰ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 26 December 1903; Andrew Lambert, “History as Process and Record: The Royal Navy and Officer Education,” in *Military Education: Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Gregory C. Kennedy and Keith Neilson (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 96-97.

⁹¹ Andrew Lambert, “The development of education in the Royal Navy: 1854-1914,” in *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan McLaren Ranft*, ed. Geoffrey Till (London and NY: Routledge, 2006), 51; “Naval Notes,” *Globe* (London), 26 April 1904; *St James’s Gazette* (London) 3 May 1904.

⁹² *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, 28 March 1904; *Berks and Oxon Advertiser*, 31 March 1904.

⁹³ “Rear-Admiral H.J. May, C.B.,” *Evening Mail* (London), 27 April 1904; “Death of Rear Admiral May,” *Woolich Gazette*, 29 April 1904.

⁹⁴ *Kentish Mercury*, 6 May 1904.

rifles fired a three-volley salute and a bugler played the Last Post.⁹⁵ The grandness of the affair indicates in some measure May's popularity and stature as a respected teacher and professional naval officer. Once the overdone ceremonies ended, his widow Constance moved to Hampshire, where she lived with her five daughters on a modest survivor's pension and private income. A hurriedly appointed new director, Captain Edmond Slade, assumed lecturing and administration for the interrupted war course.

Aspiration for a Royal Naval War College built upon the original war courses. In March 1905, Selborne reported satisfactory progress under Slade after "the great loss in the death of Rear-Admiral H.J. May, who had inaugurated the war course at Greenwich with such singular success," and he announced the war course would move, likely to Portsmouth.⁹⁶ When pressed later about creating a naval staff college in the House of Commons, the Admiralty's financial secretary, Ernest Pretyman, replied that "the sea was the Staff College of the Navy."⁹⁷ Subsequently, the four-month war courses for selected captains and commanders rotated between Devonport, Portsmouth, and Chatham meant to attract reserve division and half-pay officers. Like the earlier version, instruction consisted of lectures and tabletop war games delivered in a morning-only format.⁹⁸ In 1905, the first army officers joined on a reciprocal basis with Camberley along with bigger war games and exercises comprising two staff tours.⁹⁹ Inter-service familiarity and cooperation benefited. Lectures included strategy, tactics, naval history, international law, trade, marine engineering, coast defence, combined operations, the Russo-Japanese war, stability of ships, explosives, armour, destroyers, submarines, and other subjects of naval and military interest. Civilians like Lawrence and Corbett continued lecturing. On 1 November 1907, Rear Admiral Robert Lowry, a war course graduate earlier that year, took command of the new Royal Naval War College at Portsmouth after Captain Slade went to the Admiralty to become director of naval intelligence.¹⁰⁰ Lowry lasted a year before taking command of the fifth cruiser squadron and handing over to Commodore Lewis Bayly in the acting rank of rear admiral. Advanced professional education for senior and mid-rank officers now had a home under some serious leadership and faculty for teaching of tactics and strategy.

⁹⁵ *Army and Navy Gazette*, 7 May 1904; *London Evening Standard*, 30 April 1904.

⁹⁶ *Morning Post* (London), 3 March 1905. Canada's own then-Captain Charles Kingsmill attended the war course over the winter of 1904-05. William Johnston, William Rawling, Richard Gimblett, and John MacFarlane, *The Seabound Coast: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, 1867-1939*, Volume I (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), 125 and n.113.

⁹⁷ *Scotsman* (Glasgow), 7 March 1905; *Evening Mail* (London), 8 March 1905.

⁹⁸ "The Naval War Course at Devonport," *Western Morning News*, 4 December 1905.

⁹⁹ *Civil and Military Gazette*, 20 December 1905; Jim Beach, "The British Army, the Royal Navy, and the 'big work' of Sir George Aston, 1904-1914," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 1 (2006): 150-152.

¹⁰⁰ "Admiralty Appointments – New Royal Naval War College Commander," *London Evening Standard*, 30 October 1907; Service record, Admiral Robert Swinburne Lowry, ADM 196/39/71, TNA.

Conclusion

The war course at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich represented a reluctant concession, a good idea based on a definite need, and finally what Henry May fashioned over those early years into PME that satisfied multiple stakeholders. There is no doubt that learning took place, students were engaged, and the Royal Navy so benefited. Often military institutions do not know exactly what is wanted, but understand implicitly when curriculum and instruction fall short of requirements. May skilfully avoided that conundrum entirely. In fact, he was so successful by the fourth year that more courses and more students were added for advanced officer education, thereby creating an oversubscribed and under-resourced situation. Such decisions are fairly typical in PME programming and delivery that try to go too far too quickly, invoking the refrain “too much of a good thing.” The Royal Navy war course may not have been the length or quality of studies at the Camberley staff college or equivalents in foreign navies, but it provided a creative space for consideration of subjects relevant to naval professionals under May’s mentorship.

That tactics, naval technical subjects, and international law held sway over strategy and history should not be surprising considering the immaturity of advanced PME in the Royal Navy, where May came from, and the practical-orientation of the students. Captain Slade leaned more on Julian Corbett for delivery than May who reserved control over curriculum and instruction to himself. Corbett’s advocacy for the later naval war course and teaching of strategy when the Royal Naval War College was established diminishes in no way the accomplishments achieved earlier on the war course. Historians such as Harry Dickinson and Andrew Lambert understandably give some prominence to Julian Corbett and Jackie Fisher in the development and delivery of early PME in the Royal Navy. Other individuals associated with the war course like May, Molyneux, Lord Selborne, and Reverend Lawrence also contributed in meaningful ways and should be recognized. This collective effort provided conditions for advanced instruction to take root and flourish. From the start, the war course utilized civilian lecturers alongside military directing staff, a hallmark of the current academic-military model at Shrivenham and other staff and war colleges delivering advanced PME in operations and strategy. May set-up and ran a serious course from scratch that satisfied students, the military institution, and an active political minister holding a change agenda. Those engaged in PME are well familiar with the dynamics and interplay involved. Delivery on the war course was a delicate balancing act.

What then was May’s enduring legacy to advanced education for officers in the Royal Navy? His contemporaries certainly held his teaching and instruction on the war course in high regard, as evidenced by the esteem of students, the regret over his untimely death, and funeral attendance. Yet, his name and achievements quickly passed into obscurity prior to the First World War with reorganization into shorter courses, the move from Greenwich, and establishment of the Royal Naval War College in Portsmouth. May was not Mahan, and never attained the same stature for his early contributions to PME in the Royal Navy. In fact, May remains

a largely forgotten figure in an institution that struggled to embrace advanced education for officers, for various reasons. May allowed the Royal Navy to catch up to other foreign navies who started much earlier and put greater premium on affording selected officers such opportunities. The solid foundation provided a transition to more focused attention to the content and scope of delivered instruction suited to ensuring the Royal Navy remained a modern and operationally relevant naval force compared to its competitors and peers. In so doing, May combined professional expertise with intellectual rigour that addressed contemporary needs. Successful PME for higher rank and responsibilities relies on good quality teachers and intellectually-inclined officers. As far as serving officers put into those roles, May joins the ranks of other better known innovators and thinkers within the Royal Navy. His early work on the war course, while continuing to be underappreciated, was significant for the advancement of higher education given to naval officers and adds to comparative studies across navies and militaries in staff and war colleges.

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