

# Losing the Crown

## Lessons from the Pre-1946 Royal Navy

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In 1890 Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan published his landmark book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*. While surveying that period, Mahan focused clearly on the Royal Navy as an illustrative example of his theories of sea power and the importance of naval strength to a nation's fortunes. "It is then particularly in the field of naval strategy," he wrote, "that the teachings of the past have a value which is no degree lessened."<sup>1</sup>

When Mahan wrote his landmark study, the Royal Navy wore the crown as the largest and greatest navy yet seen on the globe. The US Navy aspired to develop into a global power and looked to its British cousin as an exemplar of how to proceed. Within 60 years of Mahan's book, the US Navy had succeeded in its goal, even exceeding the Royal Navy's size and stature. For the past 75 years the United States Navy has worn the crown as the world's leading naval force. Despite challenges from growing powers, the Navy today still fields the most powerful naval force on the planet and finds itself in a broadly analogous position to the Royal Navy of Mahan's time.

In the 56 years after Mahan's book, the Royal Navy endured a turbulent period. The service reached its zenith by fighting wars large and small around the world, culminating in victory in World War I. Within three decades after 1918, the world's largest and most powerful navy would cede first place to the United States Navy. This time also saw great technological change, including the founding of a new service with a new dimension of warfare. While adjusting to these changes, the Royal Navy also confronted rising powers around the globe that threatened its status as global leader.

As Mahan did in the 1890s, it is time to once again examine Royal Navy history to influence the United States Navy's future and development—in this case to learn the lessons and avoid the pitfalls of the Royal Navy's experience.

### **Wearing the Crown**

The Royal Navy wore the crown of the most powerful and globally influential fleet throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century until shortly after World War I. Four lessons from that period deserve notice by today's US Navy leadership.

#### ***The value of global basing***

Like the US Navy, the Royal Navy was a global force. British ships operated all over the world and could be counted upon to be available to protect British interests when called. Global basing also proved handy in emergencies such as the China Relief Expedition during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 or to counter German Vice Admiral Graf Spee's East Asia Squadron off South America in 1914. In both cases, the Royal Navy surged ships and personnel to respond to a conflict's outbreak.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to warfighting, British sailors often played important roles as diplomats through direct participation in negotiations, goodwill visits, or hosting local dignitaries. British ships also provided an implied sense of force to back up British interests, perhaps most famously and effectively in the 1898 Fashoda incident between Britain and France. Negotiations occurred aboard General Herbert H. Kitchener's flagship, under the implied power of its guns.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Brown-water and joint service can be critical***

The three commanders of Britain's main battle fleet during World War I, Admirals George Callaghan, John Jellicoe, and David Beatty, all contained in their careers significant brown-water service or time in billets involved with other services or nations (*joint* or *combined*, in modern parlance). Jellicoe was chief of staff

of the first expedition to relieve the besieged Legation Quarter at Peking (modern Beijing) in 1900, in the course of which he suffered a wound and carried a Chinese bullet in his lung for the rest of his life. Callaghan commanded an infantry brigade in the second, and successful, relief expedition.



**Figure 1. Raising the American flag over the walls at Peking, 1900.** (US Army)

Beatty, the youngest of the three, received rapid promotion resulting from his exploits in Sudan and China. As part of the flotilla of gunboats on the Nile River accompanying Kitchener's army to Khartoum, Beatty distinguished himself for coolness under fire. His ship was also the scene of the Fashoda meeting. As a result of this performance, in 1898 at age 29 Beatty was promoted to Commander. Two years later he commanded troops in battle in China with success, despite suffering a serious arm wound, winning promotion to Captain.

In all three cases, these men experienced senior-level command in quite complex and demanding environments. In each man's biography, service away from blue water stands out as essential to his development as an officer and leader.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Keep developing technology***

During this period, Britain led the way in several key technological fronts. HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906 revolutionized battleship design and lent her name to an entire style of warship. British sailors also advanced naval gunnery. During World War I, the Royal Navy pioneered naval aviation and developed the first operational seaplane and aircraft carriers. Sonar and radar were also British inventions. Taken together, these developments ensured Britain's place at the forefront of technological advances.

### ***In the end, people are the key factor***

Great sea stories often turn on the human factor. The Royal Navy in World War I emerged victorious in significant part because of the men who were in the service. The war added to its annals stories of courage and accomplishment with Room 40, the Falklands, Jutland, the Dover Patrol, Evans of the *Broke*, Victor Crutchley's Victoria Cross, the Zeebrugge Raid, Q Ships, and many more. Even less happy stories such as the chase of the *Goeben*, Coronel, Gallipoli, and the Battle of the Dogger Bank reinforced the fact that ships are often only as good as the personnel that manage and operate them.<sup>5</sup>

Britain used these assets to win victory in conflicts around the world through 1918. Indeed, at the end of World War I the Royal Navy stood unmatched in size and power. It appeared that Britannia would rule the waves for decades to come. But within 30 years, all that had changed. What happened?

### **Interwar Challenges**

The reasons the Royal Navy lost its preeminent position are many and varied, but four major causes stand out from the period between 1919 and 1945.

#### ***Washington Naval Treaty***

In 1921, Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy met in Washington to conclude an agreement to forestall a naval arms race between the countries. The resulting Washington Naval Treaty fixed capital ship ratios of Britain and the United States at 525,000 tons each, with Japan allowed 60 percent of that total and 35 percent each allocated to France and Italy. The treaty also limited the sizes and types of ships that could be built and placed a moratorium on battleship construction for 10 years.

The treaty's impact was immense, as each nation was forced to cancel numerous ships under construction. Britain alone stopped work on 23 ships and scrapped most of her battle fleet from World War I. Japan felt humiliated, and the British-Japanese alliance ended in 1922. But the biggest implication of the treaty was that the US Navy and Royal Navy were now equal in strength. Britain had signed away sole global naval superiority and would never get it back.<sup>6</sup>

#### ***Peacetime budgeting***

After World War I the British public mood favored austerity. The Royal Navy's Captain Russell Grenfell explained: "The people of Britain set their face against spending money on armaments between the wars. They were prepared to back any

policy, expedient, or nostrum that offered reduction of such expenditure.” Because of this attitude, plus the acceptance of the Washington Naval Treaty, Britain did not have enough modern capital ships to answer all the crises it faced during World War II. Global conflict between 1939 and 1945 thus stretched the Royal Navy to the breaking point.<sup>7</sup>

The post-1918 mood of economy also caused the British government to create the Ten Year Rule in 1919, a rolling mandate that set annual defense budgets upon the assumption that no general war would occur for a decade; it remained in effect through 1933. The Royal Navy thus competed with the Royal Air Force and the British Army for limited resources, which forced painful choices. Sir Eric Geddes, First Lord of Admiralty in the early 1920s, wielded the “Geddes Axe,” which chopped out 2,100 promising officers between 1921 and 1923—men who would be sorely missed at World War II’s outbreak in 1939. A board of officers decided who would stay and who would go. “The only way it is possible for us to work on this committee,” mused Ernle Chatfield, Beatty’s flag captain at Jutland and a future First Sea Lord, “is not consider the individuals, but to think of the good of the Service.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Interservice rivalry*



**Figure 2. Fairey Swordfish British Navy main torpedo bomber in 1939. (US Navy)**

On 1 April 1918, the British Army's Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service merged to form the Royal Air Force (RAF). After the war debate raged over which service should control naval aviation, since 1921 known as the Fleet Air Arm. In 1924 the RAF and Royal Navy created the "Dual Control System" where essentially the RAF provided the planes and the Royal Navy operated them from its carriers. The RAF prioritized development of its land-based air assets, leaving the naval aviators to take second place; as a result, Britain lost its edge in naval aviation to innovators in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere. In 1937 the Fleet Air Arm returned fully to the navy, but its aviators entered World War II flying biplanes while the RAF operated more modern aircraft such as Hurricanes and Spitfires.

### ***Overconfidence***

Britain entered World War II confident in her fleet's ability to protect the Empire. The fleet also had not lost a modern battleship to enemy action in 25 years, since HMS *Audacious* in 1914, which fed a feeling of superiority. Then on 14 October 1939 the German submarine *U-47* sank the battleship *Royal Oak* at her moorings in Scapa Flow, shocking the world. *U-47* escaped while the stunned and unbelieving British tried to figure out what had happened. Worse came on 24 May 1941 when HMS *Hood*, pride of the Royal Navy and symbol of the Empire, tangled with the German battleship *Bismarck* and was sunk in six minutes of battle in the Denmark Strait. "For most Englishmen the news of *Hood's* death was traumatic, as though Buckingham Palace was laid flat or the Prime Minister assassinated, so integral a part was she of the fabric of Britain and her empire," recalled Ludovic Kennedy, an officer aboard destroyer HMS *Tartar*. "Many people simply did not believe it." *Royal Oak* took 800 men with her, while all but three of the 1,418 men aboard *Hood* were lost.<sup>9</sup>

The service had forgotten that large capital ships require considerable protection at all times, and past performance is no guarantee of future results. This record inspired overconfidence; British belief in the Royal Navy's ability to defeat the Axis trickled down to the wardrooms, affecting strategy and tactics. The psychological blow of the loss of *Royal Oak* and *Hood* was therefore immense.<sup>10</sup>

### **Losing the Crown**

These effects of the interwar period all came together most forcibly when Force Z, comprised of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* plus four destroyers under Admiral Sir Tom S. V. Phillips, arrived in Singapore on 2 December 1941. Singapore and Malaya represented the keystone of the British Empire in Asia. British

strategy for Malaya's defense hinged on the entire main fleet arriving from England to assist in the defense of Singapore, and a large naval base had been built on Singapore Island capable of handling the bulk of the Royal Navy. The stated purpose of the 88,000 troops and 141 aircraft in Malaya was to defend the naval base.

By the time a fleet was needed for Malaya, battles in the Atlantic and Mediterranean had stretched available modern ships to the limit, with little to spare for Singapore. After much debate with the Admiralty (who wanted to send four older battleships), Prime Minister Winston Churchill dispatched Force Z to be a "vague menace" to the Japanese while also confidently declaring that *Prince of Wales* could "catch and kill" any comparable Japanese ship.

War reached the Far East on 8 December 1941, with a Japanese bombing raid on Singapore and a landing in northern Malaya and southern Thailand. Phillips sortied Force Z that night to find the Japanese invasion fleet. After a day and two nights of maneuvering without success, he turned for home. At 1100 on 10 December Japanese warplanes found Force Z east of Kuantan and commenced a series of attacks. *Repulse* sank at 1232, *Prince of Wales* at 1320. Admiral Phillips was among the 840 men lost. In less than three hours 85 Japanese planes had eliminated two of Britain's most powerful ships, the first capital ships sunk entirely by air attack while at sea defending themselves.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 3. Loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, 10 December 1941.** Force Z under attack, just after 1100 on 10 December 1941. HMS *Repulse* has just been bombed, while HMS *Prince of Wales* is increasing speed and maneuvering to starboard. Within two hours, both ships would be sunk by Japanese airpower. (US Navy)

The death of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* shocked the world and echoes today. Psychologically, Britain and her regional allies never fully recovered from this blow. Force Z's destruction "marked, in fact, the end of an epoch; that of British pre-eminence as a sea power," according to Captain Grenfell. Militarily, the loss of this fleet knocked out the centerpiece of British defense in the Far East. Australia and New Zealand turned to the United States for defense assistance, planting the seeds of today's alliance. Grenfell explained, "The . . . resultant passing of the command of the south-west Pacific to the Japanese was never redeemed, at least by the British. When redemption came, it was the achievement of the Americans." This fact continues to influence Asian geopolitics.<sup>12</sup>

As World War II progressed, British officers found themselves increasingly dependent on American assistance to carry out plans and operations. By 1945, the British Pacific Fleet was a task force in the US Fifth Fleet, and at war's end the US Navy in the Pacific fielded more World War I-era battleships (so-called old battleships) than the total number of battleships in the entire Royal Navy. The crown of naval dominance had now definitely moved across the Atlantic.

### Storm Warnings

Taken as a whole, this story is a storm warning for the United States and its Navy, which rules the waves but faces growing threats from emerging powers. The Navy also needs to be wary of overconfidence affecting strategy and tactics, as it has not lost an aircraft carrier sunk in 77 years or a ship damaged by enemy action in 22. Today's naval leaders need to look to the past to both inform the present and influence the future. In this case, the story of the Royal Navy before 1946 offers much for today's naval leaders to ponder and learn.

As we conclude, I leave you with this visual. Today the US Seventh Fleet operates ships out of the former Royal Navy base in Singapore, not far from where *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* rest on the floor of the Gulf of Thailand. The base and wrecks are monuments to the passing of the British Empire while also offering warnings to today's Navy leaders. ✪

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## Notes

1. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1890), 9.
2. Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 179–286.
3. For more on Fashoda, see Philip Warner, *Kitchener* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 101–04.
4. Massie, *Castles of Steel*, 56–71; 83–96. Callaghan commanded Britain's battle fleet until the morning of 4 August, when he handed over to Jellicoe approximately nine hours after Britain declared war on Germany.
5. Massie, *Castles of Steel*.
6. S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. I (London: HM Stationery Office, 1957), 3–5.
7. Russell Grenfell, *Main Fleet to Singapore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 221.
8. Philip Zeigler, *Mountbatten* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 73–74.
9. Ludovic Kennedy, *Pursuit* (New York: Viking, 1974); and Massie, *Castles of Steel*, 141–43.
10. Cecil Brown, *Suez to Singapore* (New York: Halcyon, 1942), 306–08 relates a conversation on this subject in the wardroom of *Repulse* on 9 December. Several cruisers and destroyers had been sunk by German aircraft in the Mediterranean. Two battleships and an aircraft carrier had been sunk by German submarines.
11. For more on Force Z, see Christopher Kolakowski, "The Lessons of Force Z," 7 August 2014, available online at: <https://www.linkedin.com/>.
12. Grenfell, *Main Fleet to Singapore*, 209, 210. Good perspective on Force Z's legacy is also found in Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London: Penguin 2004), 115–18.

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