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THE UNITED STATES NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

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OPENING ADDRESS

Library
Naval war college -
addresses.

delivered by

Rear Admiral Harris Laning, U.S.N.

President

to the

Staff and Classes of 1933

Naval War College .
Newport, R.I.
1 July, 1932.

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by

Rear Admiral Harris Laning, U.S.N.

President, Naval War College.

July 1, 1932.

It is a pleasure to welcome to the War College its Classes of 1933. The entire Staff joins me in the hope that you will have an enjoyable and interesting year,- one that will be of great profit to each individual as well as to our services as a whole.

It is well, at the opening of the College year, to give to students a few pointers concerning the course, for we find many officers coming to the College do so with some misunderstandings of it, which misunderstandings not only handicap them in their work but at times during the year even tend to discourage them. Such feelings can be avoided and we hope they will be.

Perhaps the most common misunderstanding of new students comes from the fact that although students learn much about naval warfare at the College, the College does very little teaching. This is because there are few things in warfare sufficiently fixed to be taught by rote. There are a few basic principles that must be learned and followed if we are to have success in war. We can learn with considerable definiteness the capabilities and limitations of our ships and the various weapons used in sea warfare. Also there are laid down for us in manuals certain formations, maneuvers, and processes to be followed by us in our use of the ships and material that make up the various subdivisions of the fleet. Such things of course must be known and fully

understood by all officers who handle naval forces in war, but they are about the only things that actually can be taught, and they represent merely the tools of our profession. The utilization of those tools in the operations connected with war lies entirely in the hands of the officers responsible for such operations, and what students get at the Naval War College is preparation for such work.

The preparation you will get at the College consists in general of two parts. First you will by reading and study become familiar with the few general principles that lead to success in war, with the capabilities and limitations of the ships and weapons with which war is waged, and with such standardized formations, maneuvers, and processes as have been adopted for our service and published in various manuals issued to it. Second you will get practice in thinking out solutions for the kinds of problems you will face in connection with war operations and will get training for carrying out such operations.

While you will learn much at the College from your reading of books and your study of manuals issued for the guidance of the Naval Service in its fighting, such learning alone will not take you very far as actual leaders. Although that learning is something you must have in order to lead, nevertheless, the success you have in leading will depend on the soundness of your thinking and the excellence of your self training. These two things we try to develop in the War College course and for each one of you they are the most vital features of it.

For some reason many students coming to the College do not realize that one of the great objectives of the College is to develop in them sound and able thinking on matters pertaining to naval warfare. On the contrary, they come with the idea that practically all matters pertaining to such warfare have already been thought out here and that they are to receive the net results on a platter. Instead of realizing that they must think out things for themselves as they will always have to do as operating officers, they often search long, hard and futilely in our books and publications hoping to find written out in them the answers to problems presented for solution or discussion. When they find that answers are not already in existence they become discouraged for a time and find fault with the College in spite of the fact that every question they are called on to meet differs in some way from those that have come up before, just as each situation that arises in war invariably differs in some way from any that has preceded it.

Such a discouragement has been especially noted in connection with theses. The very definition of the word thesis indicates that the proposition advanced is one to be reasoned and argued out. Yet instead of getting fundamental knowledge by reading and then proceeding to think and reason out the proposition presented to them, students often do not write a thesis at all but submit merely an essay on the fundamentals

on which the proposition is based. For instance, in the past two years students of the Senior Class have been asked to write theses to show the "Inter-relationship between national Policy, Strategy, Tactics and Command". To prepare themselves to reason out that inter-relationship, which, though an understanding of it is vital in connection with modern wars has not been much discussed in any books available to us, students were directed to read certain books, some dealing with Policy, some with Strategy, some with Tactics and some with Command. It was expected that having read those books each student would reason out how the policy over which there can be war will naturally dominate the strategy used in that war, how in turn the strategy of the war will indicate the tactical situations to be brought about, and how command in the war must so weld together the strategy and the tactical situations that through them will be insured the enforcement of the policy being fought for.

Very few of the two preceding classes did any such reasoning in their theses on this proposition. In fact, almost all of them avoided reasoning at all on the proposition assigned and wrote merely what were re-hash essays on Policy, Strategy, Tactics and Command. Of course there is benefit to students in writing such essays but nothing to compare with the benefit to be derived from fixing in their minds the why and how of a great war, which why and how they as the leaders

will have to think out for themselves.

It is hoped that the Classes of 1935 will realize that it is not mere reading but sound thinking after reading that will get results for them. There is no substitute for that thinking and no way to dodge it if you expect to get results. Neither books nor the College can do that thinking for you, and if you bear that fact in mind I believe it will help you throughout your course.

So much for the thinking! Let us now turn to the training side,- the training of yourselves for the exercise of command.

As regards such training, many officers who have not taken the College course have the idea that it is possible to obtain proper training through our peace time operations at sea and that such operations represent the only practical way of getting it. As a result of that idea they come to the College with the feeling that the course is merely theoretical, that it is of a "high brow" nature, and that it needs to be taken not because it will especially help them in their work but because having taken it is a good thing to have on their records.

The idea that the War College course is theoretical and high brow, and is opposed to the more practical method of training as provided by sea maneuvers, is perhaps the worst handicap a student can start with because it is so utterly

erroneous. As a matter of fact the War College works with exactly the same tools and uses them under the same conditions as are met at sea. By means of maneuver rules based solely on sea experience not only are we able at the College to carry out, in miniature, operations that closely simulate actual sea operations but also we are able to do what cannot be done in peace time sea maneuvers,- i.e., actually measure the results of our operations.

If we had to depend entirely on peace time sea maneuvers to train ourselves for the exercise of high command in war we would indeed be in a bad way. In the first place, operations at sea cover such enormous areas that no one person can possibly see all that is going on, thus making it utterly impracticable for any one to know and understand the events that are taking place. Even in the very small area one's eyes can cover in sea operations, the movements of the forces are so rapid and complicated that one finds it difficult if not impossible to appraise things. And then besides these handicaps never in peace time sea maneuvers can we know what our weapons are doing. Who is firing, and at what, is rarely known except by the one ship that is doing the firing, and even were it always known what ships are firing, and with what, and at what, there is no way of measuring the results of such firings. For these reasons we never know what the actual results of peace time sea maneuvers are and it is probable that many if not most of our deductions from them

are utterly wrong.

The only way to draw correct deductions from training operations is to measure the actual fire effect of the weapons used in them, and it is because the College does that, and at the same time enables its students to see the whole operation rather than only tiny parts of it, that the War College offers a more thorough method of training for high command than can be had in sea maneuvers. And not only is the method more thorough but it doesn't take hundreds of real ships and tens of thousands of men to carry out the maneuvers. The College gets its better results in basic training without any cost in money and without effort on the part of others than those actually being trained.

I hope you will not from this get the idea that the War College thinks for a moment its work in any way replaces sea maneuvers, for it certainly does not. Sea maneuvers are essential and must never be curtailed. But let us recognize that their primary purpose is not to train high commanders but to train and prepare the fleet for carrying out the ideas of high commanders, which ideas are largely the result of previous training obtained through the Naval War College.

It may seem strange to some, but nevertheless it is a fact, that about the only broad basic preparation for high command naval officers get is at this institution. Until they come here, officers are usually so busy in their every day jobs that they have no time to think much about how they

will do the jobs that lie ahead of them. But even if an officer does think about his jobs of the future and attempts by individual study to prepare for them, he can't go very far by himself, except in theories, in preparing to exercise high command. His efforts will usually lack direction, and of practice he can get scarcely anything. Certainly he has no opportunity to pit his wit in warfare against the wits of others, nor can he see what his theories may lead to or have a measure of their effectiveness.

But an officer can get all of those things at the War College. As a student he has eleven months with no other work than to prepare himself to successfully exercise high command in war. Probably for the first time in his life he can devote all of his time to fitting himself for the duty that is the goal of every ambitious officer. There is nothing high brow about it but just the plain straight job of preparing one's self to do well the things our country expects of its officers. If you will but keep that idea in your minds at all times you will have the proper point of view for your course at the Naval War College.

We have many officers in our service who feel they are completely successful as officers if they attain certain ranks and are assigned to certain important duties, but often they do not weigh in their own minds their actual fitness for the ranks and jobs they aspire to. While most officers get along seemingly well in almost any job during peace time even without the

special training that can be had at the College, it is almost certain that in war those who have not had that training will find themselves less well prepared to carry through successfully the tasks that are theirs. Fortunately no right-minded officer wishes to go to a job that he may be inadequately prepared to carry through successfully in war, and for that reason each member of the Classes of 1933 should be glad of this opportunity to improve his own preparation for war duty.

While we all believe that a proper Navy will tend to prevent war, we must not overlook the fact that such a proper Navy is more than mere material. It also must be thoroughly skilled in the conduct of war operations. Too often in our service we think and talk more about the material that is supplied to us by Acts of Congress than we do about skill in utilizing that material, for which skill we officers alone are responsible, But no matter how good our material may be, unless we handle it with skill it will get us nowhere. On the other hand, even poor material can be partly compensated for by skillful use. And in connection with this thought your attention is especially called to the fact that with naval armaments limited and equalized by treaty, skill -- and skill alone -- will be the decisive factor in our naval campaigns of the future.

You who are coming to the classes at this time, when naval teams have apparently become standardized as regards material strength, are very fortunate. At no other place can

you learn as you can here what the team play of our now standardized Navy should be to assure its success in war. Hence, if at the College we can carry through what we hope to do, those of us here should, at the end of the year, have better ideas than anyone else as how best to use our standardized naval team should war come. Thus the members of these Classes should have at the end of the year a considerable advantage over most of their brothers in service.

That skill in war is the great essential must be evident to everyone, but to make a navy skillful in war much must be done during peace. During peace too many officers are prone to take things as they find them. They do not devote the thought and energy they should to developing either their service or themselves for that perfection in team play so essential in war. They accept whatever is found in our War, Tactical and Fleet Instructions as final, whether or not what is there is good or bad, or whether or not new material or new conditions call for changes. That is not a correct attitude to take, since the responsibility for the efficiency of our fighting services rests not on a certain few officers but on each and every one of us. It is the duty of every officer to bear his share of that responsibility and not leave it for someone else. First each must know thoroughly the Navy as it is provided for us and understand how that Navy should play its game to succeed. And then each must do what he can to point out any defects the Navy may have in organization or operation, suggest ways

to correct those defects, and try in every way to turn what is supplied us into the most perfect and highly skilled naval team in the world.

It isn't so much what an officer gets in the War College course that counts as what he does afterward with what he gets. If he keeps what he gets here under his hat and does nothing with it to improve and perfect the work of our armed forces, his taking the course will lose most of its value. He will probably perform better the work assigned him, but that is not enough. Unless he also endeavors to use his knowledge for the improvement of his service as a whole, he will be failing in his full duty, - and certainly not one of us here will willingly do that.

I therefore hope that students, in taking this course, will keep in mind two of the great benefits that can come from it, - first, the benefit that will accrue to each one personally from the knowledge and training for war that he will get and, second, the benefits that he can give to his service as a whole by using his knowledge and training to make that service better. The good you get from the course will be measured by these two things and especially by the latter, and this applies to all students, whether from the line of the Navy, the Staff Corps, the Army, or the Marine Corps.

As must be expected, the course here has generally to do with war operations on the sea, and on its face would seem

to be of more moment to student officers belonging to the Navy line than it is to other members of the class. However, a little thought will show there is great benefit for all in the course, for not until each student knows how the Navy will operate and fight in war can that student be in a position to determine how his particular department or branch of the service can best cooperate and coordinate in the work for which the Navy exists. The background for everything connected with the Navy is the fighting the Navy may be called on to do, and not until there is an understanding of that fighting can members of the Navy Staff Corps properly coordinate the work of their Corps to meet the fundamental needs of the Navy, or can members of other services cause those services to cooperate efficiently with the Navy.

That the course will be a bit difficult for students not of the Navy line is probable, and to the end of simplifying matters for such students we place each of them in a room with an experienced Navy line officer, who can advise and help them with the technicalities with which they are not familiar. In addition to the help they get from their roommates we want such students, and in fact all students, to feel free at all times to ask help and advice from the staff. The staff wants each one of you to get every possible advantage from the course, and we will consider it a privilege to be of assistance to you and to make the taking of the course a pleasure.

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Although the course as laid out will require much work from every student, the College uses no coercion on students to drive them to it. What the student does and what he gets out of the course is up to his own conscience and himself. There is no grading of students and no comparison of individual ability other than must go in on the regular reports of fitness. That you will find the work intensely interesting we have no doubt, but always bear in mind that what you get out of the College and what you do with what you get we must leave to you.