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# The British Pacific Fleet Experience and Legacy, 1944–50

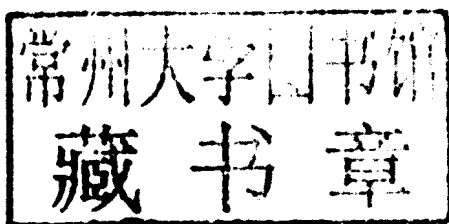


Jon Robb-Webb

# The British Pacific Fleet Experience and Legacy, 1944–50

JON ROBB-WEBB

*Joint Services Command and Staff College  
and King's College London, UK*



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THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET EXPERIENCE  
AND LEGACY, 1944–50

# Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies Series

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Defence Studies Department, Joint Services Command and Staff College, UK

The Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies Series is the publishing platform of the Corbett Centre. Drawing on the expertise and wider networks of the Defence Studies Department of King's College London, and based at the Joint Services Command and Staff College in the UK Defence Academy, the Corbett Centre is already a leading centre for academic expertise and education in maritime and naval studies. It enjoys close links with several other institutions, both academic and governmental, that have an interest in maritime matters, including the Developments, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), the Naval Staff of the Ministry of Defence and the Naval Historical Branch.

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*To my mother and my father who encouraged me in everything*

#### Disclaimer

The opinions and views expressed in this work are those of the author, and do not reflect those of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Issues, King's College London or the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence.

# Glossary and Abbreviations

AA	Anti-Aircraft
ABC	American, British, Canadian staff talks on military co-ordination
ACNS	Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (RN)
ADM	Admiralty Papers
AIO	Action Information Organisation; British precursor to Combat Information Centre
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
BAD	British Admiralty Delegation (Washington)
Banquet	Codename for the bombardment operation on the island of Sabang, Sumatra, August 1944
BPF	British Pacific Fleet
CAB	Cabinet Papers (Britain)
CAP	Combat Air Patrol
Casablanca Conference	Codename Symbol – Grand Strategic meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt, January 1943
CCS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
CinC	Commander-in-Chief
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (USN)
CINCPOA	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Ocean Area (USN)
CinC SWPA	Commander-in-Chief Southwest Pacific Area (USN)
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations (USN)
CO	Commanding Officer
Cockpit	Codename for the naval air operation against oil facilities on Sabang island off the northern tip of Sumatra, April 1944
COMAIRPAC	Commander, Air Force, Pacific Fleet (USN)
Combined Operations	Military operations involving more than one service. In modern military parlance, this concept is referred to as 'joint operations'. 'Combined operations' now refers to operations involving more than one nationality
COMINCH	Commander-in-Chief (USN)



COMNAVFE	Commander Naval Forces, Far East (USN)
Coronet	Codename for the invasion of Honshu
COS	Chief of Staff
CTF	Carrier Task Force, sometimes Fast Carrier Task Force
Culverin	Codename for a planned British amphibious operation on Northern Sumatra and then Malaya
CV	Fleet Carrier
CVL	Light Fleet Carrier
DCNO(A)	Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air) (USN)
DCNS	Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (RN)
DNAOT	Director of Naval Air Organisation and Training
DNOR	Director of Naval Operational Research (RN)
DoP	Director of Plans (RN)
DRC	Defence Requirements Committee (Britain)
DTSD	Director of Tactical and Staff Duties (RN)
FAA	Fleet Air Arm (RN)
Fifth Fleet	USN fleet designation in the Pacific when under the command of Admiral Spruance
Fifth Sea Lord	Member of the Board of Admiralty responsible for naval aviation with the rank of Vice Admiral; in full, Fifth Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Air Services
Fleet Train	Logistical assets which kept the BPF sustained at sea
Grand Strategy	The highest level of strategy, comprising all the levers of state power co-ordinated to achieve national policy objectives
Highball	Codename for a variant of the 'bouncing bomb', designed for use against shipping. No. 618 Squadron RAF, flying Mosquitos, began trials in April 1943, finally reaching the Far East in January 1945. Highball was never employed, and the squadron disbanded in July 1945
Iceberg	Codename for the British naval contribution to the invasion of Okinawa
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff, formed in 1942 as an American equivalent to the British Chiefs of Staff Committee
Joint Staff Mission	British tri-Service body representing the Chiefs of Staff to the CCS in Washington
JPS	Joint Planning Staff (Britain)

Lentil	Codename for naval air strike operation against oil refineries on Sumatra, January 1945
Light	Codename for naval air operations against northern Sumatra and Nicobar Islands, September 1944
Meridian I and II	Codenames for the series of naval air strike operations against Sumatran oil facilities, January 1944
Millet	Codename for the naval air and bombardment operation against Nacowry Islands and Nicobar, October–November 1944
MIR	Monthly Intelligence Report (RN)
NMM	National Maritime Museum (Britain)
NR	<i>Naval Review</i>
Octagon	Codename for the grand strategic conference, September 1944
Olympic	Codename for the proposed operation to invade Japan
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence (USN)
Operational Level of War	The direction of military resources to achieve military strategic objectives; the level at which campaign and major operations are planned, sequenced and directed
OR	Operational Research; application of quantitative mathematical analysis to military activities
Overlord	Codename for the invasion of Normandy June 1944
Pedal	Codename for naval air operations against Port Blair, June 1944
PM	British Prime Minister
Quadrant	Codename for the US–British conference held in Quebec, 14–24 August 1943, sometimes referred to as the Quebec Conference
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RDF	Radio Direction-Finding
RN	Royal Navy
Robson	Codename for first of a series of attacks on oil installations in Sumatra collectively known as Operation Outflank, December 1944
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
Seafire	Naval variant of the Spitfire
Sextant	Conference in November 1943
SLoC	Sea Lines of Communication
SWPA	Southwest Pacific Area

TF	Task Force
Third Fleet	USN Fleet designation in the Pacific when under command of Admiral Halsey
TTPs	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
USN	United States Navy
USAAF	United States Army Air Forces
VCNS	Vice Chief of Naval Staff (RN)
VLR	Very Long Range aircraft
WU	Western Union
XE Craft	A type of midget submarine; 33 tons submerged displacement with an endurance of 80 nautical miles and a crew of five

# Author Biography

Dr Jon Robb-Webb is a lecturer in Defence Studies at King's College London, at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, where he is Academic Director of the Royal Naval Division and Subject Matter Expert for Maritime Strategy on the Advanced Staff Course. He is Deputy Director of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies, and lectures internationally on the subject of maritime strategy and sea power.

## Series Editor's Preface

It is a genuine pleasure to welcome Jon Robb-Webb's monograph into the Corbett Centre series. One of the main objectives of the series is to recruit and publish works which add significantly to the historical knowledge of an area, but, at the same time make it clear that such a study of history is relevant for contemporary practitioners and policy-makers. Robb-Webb's work on the experience of the British Pacific Fleet (BPF) in the Second World War achieves this aim admirably. His study of operational and strategic issues concerning equipment procurement, interoperability, doctrinal interaction, intelligence sharing and an analysis of alliance/coalition warfare through the prism of a wartime defence diplomacy campaign, all provide a number of such useful insights.

Robb-Webb's study highlights the Clausewitzian principal of politics continuing to be pursued through the actions of war. Anglo-American pre-war competition to control how Far Eastern international relations were to develop remained a constant influence on the allies' relationship throughout the war. By the end of the 1943, as the threat from heavy German and Italian naval units in Europe lessened, Britain's ability to use conventional capital ship forces in out-of-Europe operations created the question of how best to utilize those limited resources. While some politicians, senior civil servants and members of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the strategic policy-making elite, wanted to see a return of British naval power in the Far East, others were less convinced. The balance was tipped in favour of the use of significant British naval power, a not inconsiderable cost to incur given the strain already being placed on the British war effort, by three key arguments.

The first argument was one of post-war influence. Robb-Webb's book shows clearly the value of operational activity being used to consolidate higher strategic alliance cohesion. That cohesion was important not just from an operational point of view but most importantly from the strategic perspective of shaping the peace-making processes that would follow the conclusion of the war in the Pacific. Without a major naval contribution, Britain would have no legitimacy or authority with which to influence either the peace terms applied to Japan, or, in how post-war areas of interest would be defined. If Britain had not provided a viable, capable and compatible naval aviation capability to the final stages of the war against Japan it would be seen as not having had a significant role in the defeat of Japan. Niche capabilities, such as battleships for gunfire support, destroyers for task force duties, or the provision of submarines for the campaign against Japanese shipping did not have the same strategic effect as naval aviation. Naval aviation activities were the currency which American senior military officers, politicians and the general public valued most. Therefore, in order to obtain a post-war

strategic “seat at the table” Britain was required to create and utilize naval aviation capabilities which were understandable and acceptable to their American allies.

The second key argument made is that in order to achieve this strategic influence, the BPF was reliant on close alliance relations that allowed the acquisition of the necessary capabilities. Most importantly here was the question of acquiring both the doctrinal knowledge and actual combat capabilities which would allow the BPF to operate as a fully compatible and functional element of the larger American naval aviation fleet. The need for American carrier aircraft, with the necessary firepower, range and endurance, was a key element in that relationship. Robb-Webb demonstrates how the BPF’s acquisition of the necessary American naval aviation technology not only cemented the operational-level relationship, but also opened the door for an even greater level of technical and intelligence sharing. That operational symbiosis made the Anglo-American fleet not just a more effective operational tool for the successful prosecution of combat operations, but created a cohesive and valuable strategic understanding on both sides. The shared combat experiences, and political expedience imposed to make such operational ties spilled over into the strategic level, creating a shared wartime experience that allowed both nations to work more closely on shaping the peace.

Finally, the third important point is one of influence and improvement in the Royal Navy (RN) in the post-war, due to the BPF’s operational experiences of working with the United States Navy (USN) in the Pacific. Through its close operational exposure to American naval aviation methods the RN gained technical, doctrinal, tactical and organisational knowledge that prepared it well for the aftermath of World War Two. With limited naval aviation experience prior to the BPF’s operations, the RN retained a lower level of modern competences in these areas compared to the USN. With the rise of the aircraft carrier to the status of the premier capital ship, required by blue-water navies set on maintaining a global presence and power projection capability, such knowledge and skills were mandatory if the RN was to continue to hold on to its role as such a Britain’s main strategic weapon. The BPF’s operational exposure and lessons learned during its campaign with the USN laid the groundwork for national programs of acquisition and procurement regarding future naval platforms, as well as indicating the way ahead in terms of the skills and training that the post-war navy would have to create and maintain if it was to sustain such competences.

All three of these issues, combined with Robb-Webb’s discussions about internal RN appreciations of the new operational challenges created by creating and maintaining a naval aviation capability in the Pacific, RN-USN command relationships, and the role of naval power in shaping Anglo-American strategic thinking, are points contemporary maritime strategic policy-makers will benefit from. I am sure that readers of this book will appreciate that utility, as well as the extensive research and insights provided as a work of history that make this an exciting new and unique analysis of the war in the Pacific.

# Acknowledgements

A great many people helped sustain and bring to fruition this project, but one person bears more responsibility than all the others – not for any of the errors of fact or interpretation, which are entirely my own, even though he strove hard to keep both of these aspects on the right lines. My first thanks must go to my doctoral supervisor, Professor Geoffrey Till, whose patience I am sure I tried severely at times during the long gestation of this work. Secondly, my thanks must go to my post-graduate department of study, the War Studies Department at King's College London, which not only gave me my first exposure to many of the ideas developed in this thesis, but demonstrated remarkable patience as well, in particular Professor Andrew Lambert, who introduced me to the joys of serious naval history scholarship.

My colleagues in the Defence Studies Department at the Joint Services Command and Staff College are also owed a huge vote of thanks. Working in such a stimulating environment has been, and continues to be, a great pleasure. Likewise, thanks go to the many students from the British military and from militaries around the world whose thoughts and comments on a range of defence subjects have been both challenging and invigorating. Teaching them has been a wonderful experience, and again influenced my thinking greatly. My association with the officer corps of the Royal Navy over the last decade and a half has been a privilege. It has also been a constant reminder that whatever is said or written in official documents or history books, it is upon the skill, professionalism and courage of those that wear dark blue that the peace and prosperity of these islands do mainly depend.

From the wider defence academic world, I must acknowledge my debt to Professor Eric Grove, who has always given so freely of his great knowledge.

I was sustained through the long years of study necessary to complete first the doctoral thesis on which this work is based, and then this book, by the friendship and generosity of some remarkable people: Robert Foley, Patrick Earnshaw, Matt Feeney, Andy Redman and Kerry Oakden, Robbie Davies and Karrin Smyth, my sister Kate and my oldest friend Craig, my brother Unj, and of course, my parents.

Finally, I thank my wife Ali. Without her belief and support, this published version might never have seen the light of day.

# Contents

<i>Glossary and Abbreviations</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Author Biography</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Series Editor's Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Introduction: Experience and Legacy – A Levels of Warfare Analysis	1
<b>PART I            THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET EXPERIENCE</b>	
1        No Sooner Offered: The BPF and the Grand Strategic Level of War	23
2        The British are Coming by Sea: Anglo-American Military Strategic Planning	51
3        The Tip of the Iceberg: New Operational-level Concepts	77
4        Sweepers Man Your Brooms: The Tactical-level Experience	105
<b>PART II           THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET LEGACY</b>	
5        An Uncertain New World: Britain, America and Post-war Defence	133
6        An Alliance Sustained: The Royal Navy, US Navy and Military Strategy for the Cold War	169
7        New Tricks for Old Sea Dogs: Operational Ideas After the War	205
8        Making It All Work: The Post-war Royal Navy and the Tactical Level of War 1945–50	233
Conclusion: The British Pacific Fleet Experience and Legacy	259
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>269</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>283</i>



# Introduction:

## Experience and Legacy – A Levels of Warfare Analysis

No romance should form more attractive reading to young and old than the history of our Navy. The narrative of its rise and progress teems with incident of the most varied and exciting character, which fiction cannot surpass. It comprises biography, travel, and adventure; while the events which gave us our maritime position are so connected with the general history, that no study of the one can be satisfactory which does not show its influence on the other.<sup>1</sup>

This is the story of the greatest fleet the Royal Navy (RN) ever put to sea: the story of its formation, its experience and its impact. The British Pacific Fleet (BPF) has been variously labelled the ‘Forgotten Fleet’, the ‘last Hurrah of a dying Empire’, and it has only recently troubled the bookshelves of naval historians. Yet, as this study will contend, an understanding of the BPF is critical to appreciating the development of the Royal Navy, British defence and naval policy in the second half of the twentieth century.

The passage quoted above, which opens an illustrated school textbook on the Royal Navy, neatly encapsulates some of the problems and one of the promises of naval history. I will deal first with the problems. When Captain Eardley-Wilmot used the term ‘romance’, he was not attempting to create a ‘bodice-ripping pot-boiler’, but at the same time it is doubtful whether he really intended to refer to the literary genre characterised by highly imaginative unrealistic episodes forming the central theme. It does, however, convey a certain taste of things to come. This is not history as rigorous scholarship directed at uncovering the pattern and relationship of past events, rather it is story-telling. The reader is carried along by the ‘action’, paying scant regard to any founding in reality. This may seem rather harsh criticism of a book designed to inspire the youth of late Victorian England, but naval history has toiled away under the consequences of this type of popular history for most of its existence. The thrills and excitement that sea stories can convey have led to naval history being neglected by the wider academic community, its output suitable only for either young boys before they move onto more serious areas of study or the province of quaint amateurs. As a result of this, until recently it has been difficult to establish and maintain a body of professional

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<sup>1</sup> Eardley-Wilmot, Captain S., *Our Navy for a Thousand Years*, London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1900, p. vi.