

What the Professional Naval Conversation is Missing - Tactics

by Lt. Rob McFall from U.S. Naval Institute, May 30

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The conversation on professional naval issues is alive and well. It happens in many forums and at many levels. From seamen on the mess decks to admirals in the Pentagon, wardrooms to Proceedings, the conversation is happening, but what are we talking about? My feeling is that the conversation is weighted entirely on the strategic level. Heated discussions occur on how many ships should be in the Navy? How many carriers should we have? Is China the next Russia? These are all important conversations that should continue but we are missing something important. Where are the conversations about how best to tactically incorporate new systems like the LCS and the predator drone? Where were the tactical lessons learned from Operation New Dawn? What is the best way to find and approach pirates off Somalia? In the last year there has been a call out to Junior Officers to join the professional discussion. However, the discussion that was happening was at the strategic level. Junior Officers have something to add in that arena as well, but the strategic level issues are not the ones that most JOs handle every day. As a Junior Officer we should be reading, writing, and studying to perfect our knowledge of the tactical employment of whatever platform we are on. That is what the JO discussion should focus on and we as a community are not fostering that discussion.

Naval Officers join the navy to lead Sailors and be officers in the profession of maritime war. We did not join Maersk or MSC. Those Sailors are excellent at their craft but that is not us. I joined to be a Surface Warfare Officer but I have to seek out the conversation that supports the warfare side of my community. In the CNOs "Sailing Directions" he says that we need "warfighting first, be ready to fight and win today, while building the ability to win tomorrow." But could we do it if we were called on? We have the platforms but do we know how best to employ them in combat? Instead of talking tactics we have been preparing for the next certification or inspection. While the country has been heavily involved in two land wars, the navy has been largely at peace, and we have gotten complacent in our thoughts.

Twenty-six years ago, Captain Wayne Hughes wrote Fleet Tactics: Theory and Practice, which is still regarded as one of the preeminent works on Naval Tactics. In it he stated "Good tactics in wartime derive from good tactical study in peacetime" and then went on to state:

Articles on tactics should dominate the Naval Institute Proceedings, as they did in the period from 1900 to 1910. The hard core of the Naval War College curriculum should be naval operations, as it was in the 1930s. War games should stress not merely training and experience but the lessons learned from each game's outcome, as in the 1920s and 1930s.

I don't know that tactics need to dominate the entire naval discussion, as with most things in the Navy, it is important to have a "hi low mix." The discussion also no longer has to be limited to Proceedings. USNI would like to have more discussion on tactics there, but so would the USNI blog, Information Dissemination, CIMSEC, Sailorbob, Small Wars Journal, Alidade and a host of other online forums. This is a huge topic and there is enough to go around for all.

In many of these forums innovation has been a buzzword recently. LT Benjamin Kohlman started a wonderful conversation about Disruptive Thinking and innovation on the Small Wars Journal Blog that has gone viral. I have thoroughly enjoyed the conversation. I agree with many of his points and I do believe that innovation at all levels is important; however, as Wayne Hughes would say, technical innovation without tactical innovation that will incorporate new technologies is useless in naval battle.

One thing that is hindering the open discussion of tactics is the concern that it will endanger classified information. Many believe that it is impossible to have a true discussion of tactics in an unclass forum. This is not true. Those that are in the conversation need to be very careful to know what is and what is not classified but there are plenty of important conversations that can be debated and learned from in an open forum. The use of historical examples, hypothetical environments, and general tactical principles all provide ways to have that open discussion without crossing the boundary into the classified realm.

The conversation on tactical innovation is especially important for the Junior Officers but it should not be limited to them. Senior officers and those that have gone before us have a wealth of knowledge on tactics. They have been there and know where the sinkholes are. Only by learning what has been done before can we keep from making the same mistakes over again. We have the forums. Once again it is time for us to read, think, speak and write about tactics.