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Jeffrey R Cares and Anthony Cowden | reviewed by Allan du Toit

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## Fighting the fleet: operational art and modern fleet combat

*Jeffrey R Cares and Anthony  
Cowden with a foreword by  
ADM Scott Swift, USN (Rtd)*

Naval Institute Press, Annapolis MD, 2021

Reviewed by Allan du Toit



The reader might be excused for thinking that *Fighting the Fleet* is a naval history book, describing how fleets fought and won in past naval actions. Far from it. Captains Cares and Cowden have produced a practical guide, underpinned by historical example, that empowers naval commanders to wield naval power appropriately and effectively in meeting both today's and future operational challenges in the maritime domain.

Woven into the fabric of this accessible book, which fuses operational art in the maritime domain, are the fundamental principles of three of the most important US naval theorists of the twentieth century: Rear Admiral

Bradley Fiske, Rear Admiral JC Wylie and Captain Wayne Hughes.

While the authors advocate the reinvigoration of combat theory, the so-called 'theory of the fight', and the appropriate use of operations research, they avoid over-theorising. They provide invaluable insights for fleet or naval commanders and their staffs at the operational level of war on the fundamentals of modern naval warfare that are necessary to survive and win in the fast-evolving domain of naval combat. Indeed, this book should also be compulsory reading for all joint commanders and their staffs.

There are two main ideas in this timely book, which reminds us that while platforms have changed, combat theory endures. The first is that fleets have four distinct but interlocking functions at the operational level of war – striking, screening, scouting and basing. The second is that successful naval operational art – admiralty as distinct from generalship – is achieved when these functions are brought to bear in a cohesive, competitive scheme for victory in battle. In explaining these elements and how they are conjoined for advantage, a central theme emerges: despite the utility and importance of jointness, the effective employment of naval power requires a specialised language and understanding of naval concepts that is often diluted or completely

lost when too much jointness is introduced.

*Fighting the Fleet*, which focuses on the intellectual space of the operational art of war, provides a framework for debate and professional discussion. It begins – in the salient words of my good friend and colleague, Rear Admiral James Goldrick – the intellectual process necessary to evolve the limited, hitherto land-centric, mid-twentieth-century warfighting construct that underlies so much current joint thinking.

Cares and Cowden pose the question: if ideas are the mechanisms of advantage for a navy, why then should naval thought be diluted into a generic joint concept? While some contend that this is the joint mandate, the authors argue that a service's ability to work well with other services does not necessarily compel all Services to think alike. They argue that fleet and naval commanders can win by ideas, but only if they and their staffs understand the high-level principles and processes of naval warfare and can translate that context into the kind of continuity and direction that prevails in a contest of ideas. This book drives home the enduring truth that, even with tremendous technological advances, navies still fight like navies.

In the words of another good friend – Admiral Scott Swift, who penned the foreword to this book – it 'is at times not an easy read', as it is a textbook

that needs to be read and absorbed in detail. It will, however, challenge the reader to think and it will undoubtedly lead to broad ranging discussion.

*Fighting the Fleet* describes, analyses and weaves together naval (or more appropriately maritime) power, surveillance and search, movement and logistics and cognitive control into the higher theory of the fight. This is comprised of three fights that happen at the same time at all levels: the physical fight; the sensor fight and the cognitive fight. The authors argue these three fights can become mismatched and disconnected in time and space, something that could be effectively exploited by well-informed commanders and their staffs.

The penultimate chapter in this book is a study of how the concepts from this work might inform operations with future platforms in the coming age of robotics. The authors argue that the key to developing the proper perspective on robotics age naval operational art is to understand these technological developments as being a step further along a continuum in the evolution of naval combat theory.

Looking to the future, as the US Navy returns to great power competition amid rapid changes in maritime technology, *Captains Cares and Cowden* contend beyond the pages of this book that the modern US Navy is making too many capability decisions based on technological advances as the only advantage that matters.

They argue that the navy is bound in technical process rather than the theory of the fight, which properly informs investment. They attribute this to the shift to capability-based acquisition after the end of the Cold War, rather than the previous threat-based model. They argue that the US Navy has a long way to go before it has a theory of the fight for distributed maritime operations. In their view, the service needs to better understand how networks fight networks and how distributed forces fight distributed forces across all domains.

Turning to doctrine, the authors argue that naval doctrine is not about checklists and things to do but rather about concrete guidance on how to win at the competitive process of naval combat. They argue that more warfighters need to develop their own theory of the fight, which will in turn allow naval commanders and planners to make better plans, reach better decisions, and ultimately prevail in combat at sea and in the littoral when next called upon.

In their conclusion, the authors offer three salient recommendations to advance the operational art applicable to modern naval combat. Firstly, they recommend inaugurating a new golden age through investing directly in elevating modern naval thought.

Ultimately, the management of power and the fighting of wars are contests of ideas and to stay ahead you need the best ideas. Secondly, they propose learning how to win by playing, subjecting new ideas to vigorous wargaming efforts through competitive, stressful play. Test, test and retest to determine which ideas work best. And finally, they advocate taking the new golden age to sea. Even detailed plans fall apart once you make contact with the enemy. Practice how you expect to fight at sea.

Additional materials include four appendices expounding on salvo theory in some detail and deconstructing the oft-used and misused acronym C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance).

As a naval officer with well over 40-years of experience at sea and ashore, who has commanded naval and joint forces at both the tactical and operational level of war, I commend this timely, compelling and highly relevant new work to you. I venture that you will be professionally and intellectually challenged, enriched and empowered by this insightful and practical guide for naval commanders and their staffs.