

“1955 in 1947: Historical Conjecture and Strategic Planning in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations”

Abstract

In late 1947, the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OPNAV) employed historical conjecture to determine U.S. Fleet requirements for the mid-1950s. Needing to be prepared for a war against the U.S.S.R. as well as for competition from its interservice rivals, the Navy's leadership attempted as much as possible to anticipate what a future war against the Soviet Union might be like so that the Naval Operating Forces that would be necessary for the U.S. could be procured. Given the national security problems in our own time period, study of this 1947 historical exercise provides perspective on how naval policy was made and how it might still be made in the present and future.

Introduction

Between 1945 and 1947, the United States set out to create an exclusively strategic and even in many ways imperial sphere of influence in the Pacific Basin. It largely succeeded in this endeavor, especially in the former Japanese Mandated Islands of Micronesia as well as sovereign Japanese territory conquered by the U.S. during the Pacific War. The United States saw its postwar actions as entirely defensive even as foreign nations saw them as aggressive and offensive. Accordingly for the United States Navy, the time period under study here was a greatly tumultuous one. While assisting the United States Army in carrying out postwar occupation duties in both

Europe and Asia, the Navy—like the other American military services—had to carry out these duties at a time of massive personnel demobilization—and therefore loss of most of its experienced personnel—as well as huge budget cuts. At the same time, the nation’s foreign policy was radically reorienting from armed neutrality to the Containment Doctrine. For the Navy, this foreign policy revolution was even more radical as it meant reorienting its strategic focus from the Pacific—where it had been primarily occupied for the last four decades—to the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf while it also applied lessons from the Pacific War to the next possible war with the U.S.S.R.¹

It is precisely because this two-year time period after the end of the war was so rapidly changing and even confusing that I have focused on the Navy in this era and its future strategic planning. I wanted to look closely at how the Navy had to devise war plans under all of these pressures and in an intellectual environment where the primary, assumed enemy had now changed so significantly. Even more so, I wanted to study how the Navy had to once again “do more with less,” a situation it had not had to deal with during the war itself, but which was very familiar during the interwar period.²

Along these lines, readers will find a great deal of attention paid to the Navy’s attempt to historically “predict” what the next major war might be like and what force structure the Navy would need in that conflict.³ Always in a context of cutting the

¹ For this context in regard particularly to the United States in the postwar Pacific, see Hal Friedman, *Creating an American Lake: United States Imperialism and Strategic Security in the Pacific Basin, 1945-1947* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001); idem, *Governing the American Lake: The US Defense and Administration of the Pacific, 1945-1947* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2007); and idem, *Arguing over the American Lake: Bureaucracy and Rivalry in the U.S. Pacific, 1945-1947* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).

² For the parsimony of the interwar period, see Thomas Hone and Trent Hone, *Battleline: The United States Navy, 1919-1939* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2006).

³ For one example of this attempt by one part of the U.S. Navy to perceive the future in the mid-1940s,

number of bases and personnel so as to devote scarce resources to a mobile striking fleet centered around aircraft carriers, these historical studies took place in the context of the Navy's doctrinal transformation from the Pacific War as well as its need to refocus on its new enemy in new areas of the world. In other words, the Navy had to largely disengage from one region of the world and focus its scarce resources on new missions in unfamiliar regions, something that should not be foreign or alien to the United States military of the late 1900s and early 2000s.⁴

Readers will also note a fairly detailed narrative about this historical conjecture. One purpose of this work is to look at how the Navy administratively operated at this time. While tracing the flow of paperwork may seem mundane and myopic, readers should focus on how the historical studies in question and just about everything else had to be completed with paper and typewriters before the entrance of the automatic digital computer.

Figuring Out the Future

In a communication that demonstrated a major theme when it came to conjecture about the future, on 18 November 1947, Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), sent a Top Secret Memorandum about American Naval Operating Forces for Fiscal Year (FY) 1955 to Admiral DeWitt Ramsey, the Vice Chief

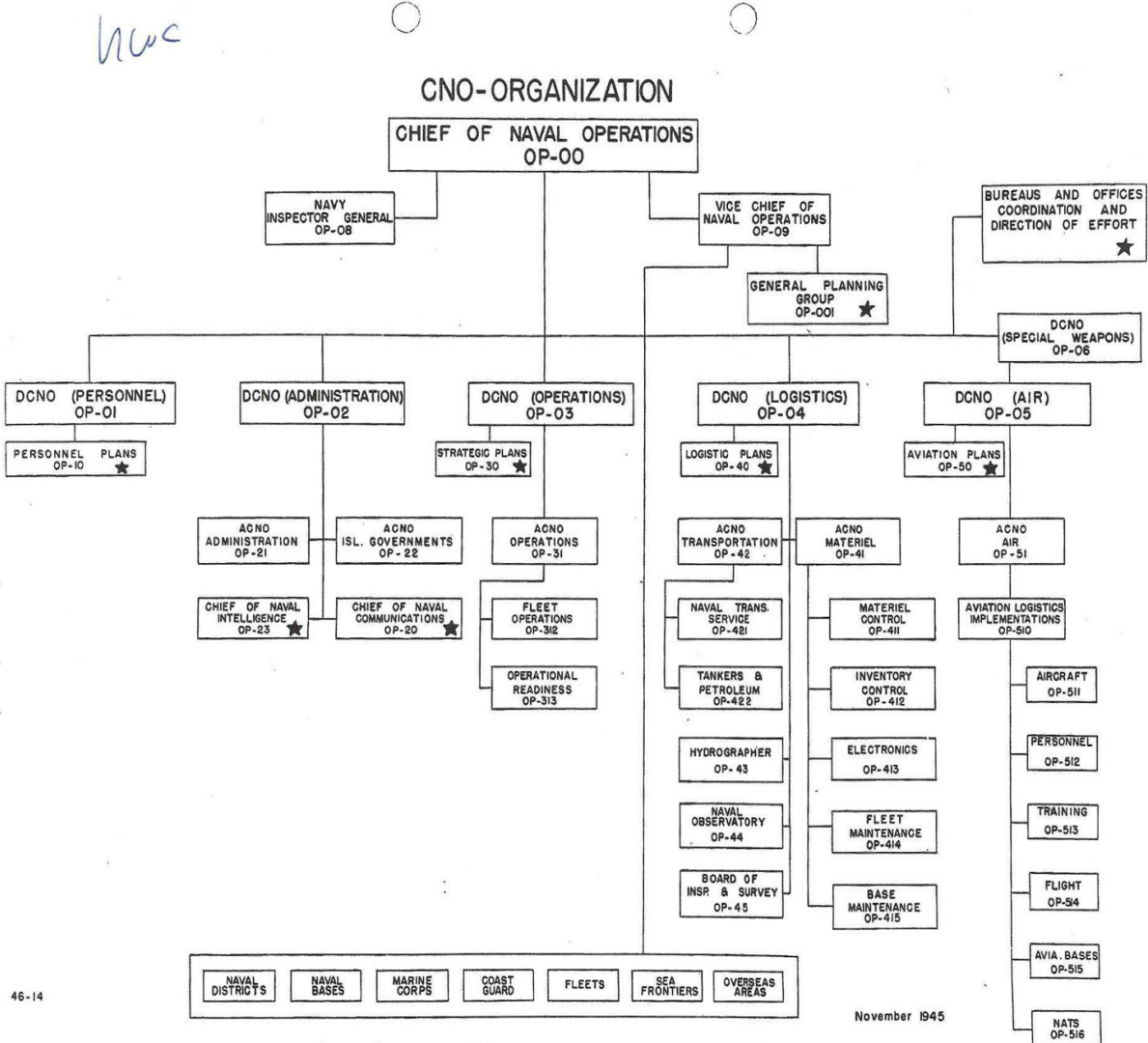
see Hal Friedman, *Digesting History: The U.S. Naval War College, the Lessons of World War Two, and Future Naval Warfare, 1945-1947* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press, 2010); idem, *Blue versus Orange: The U.S. Naval War College, Japan, and the Old Enemy in the Pacific, 1945-1946* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press, 2013); and idem, *Blue versus Purple: The U.S. Naval War College, the Soviet Union, and the New Enemy in the Pacific, 1946* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press, 2017).

⁴ See Corbin Williamson, *The U.S. Navy and Its Cold War Alliances, 1945-1953* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020).

of Naval Operations (VCNO); Vice Admiral John McCrea, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (DCNO) for Administration; Vice Admiral Forrest Sherman, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations; Vice Admiral Robert Carney, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Logistics; Vice Admiral Donald Duncan, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air; the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Special Weapons; Vice Admiral William Fechteler, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Personnel; and Rear Admiral Maurice Curts, the Chief of the Navy's General Planning Group. Nimitz told his subordinates that it was necessary that there be prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) a statement about the Naval Operating Forces that would be required in Fiscal Year 1955. Nimitz wanted the subject treated as a matter of urgency. Nimitz also said that the information as it pertained to naval aviation had to be incorporated into a statement by the Joint Chiefs of Staff with respect to the Navy and the Air Force on or about 1 December for use by the President's Air Policy Commission.⁵

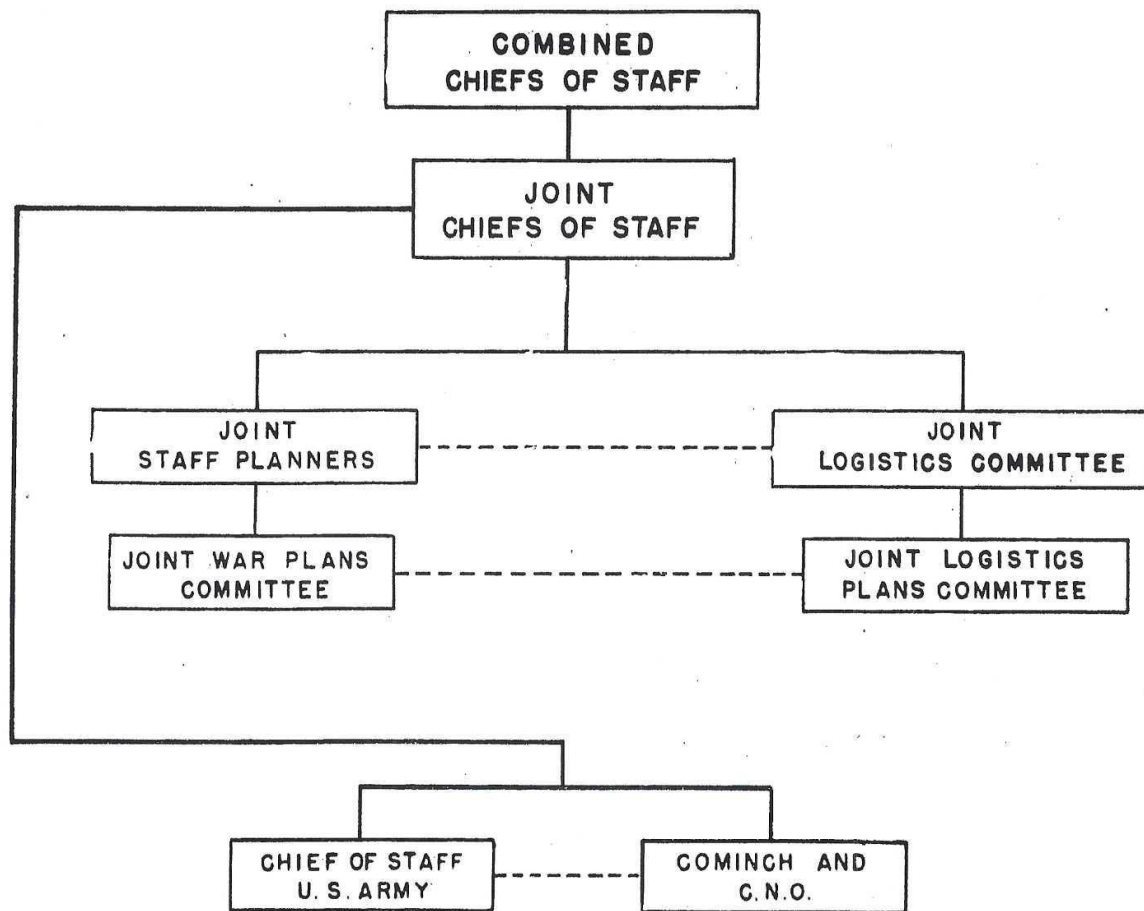
Nimitz additionally said that in considering the background for these studies, reference was to be made to another planning document, Joint Staff Planners (JPS) 814/2, its accompanying intelligence estimate, and the Joint Strategic Survey Committee's (JSSC) Memorandum of 6 November 1946. Nimitz informed his

⁵ Nimitz to Ramsey, Fechteler, McCrea, Sherman, Carney, Duncan, and Curts, "Naval Operating Forces – fiscal year 1955," 18 November 1947, Folder A4-1 Status of Vessels and Aircraft, 1/47-12/47, Box 109, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1. It is unclear why Nimitz addressed the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Special Weapons in this Serial since that billet had been abolished in November 1946. The billet had been replaced by the Director of Atomic Defense and was filled by Rear Admiral William Parsons since that time; see Al Christman, *Target Hiroshima: Deak Parsons and the Creation of the Atomic Bomb* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 232-235 as well as "William Sterling Parsons, 26 November 1901-5 December 1953," Modern Biographical Files, Navy Department Library, Naval History and Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/research-guides/modern-biographical-files-ndl/modern-bios-p/parsons-william-sterling.html>



Courtesy of the Naval War College Historical Collection

subordinates that revisions of these studies were being initiated. Nimitz further wanted the action addressees to furnish Admiral Sherman with their views about the composition of the 1955 Naval Operating Forces as early as “practicable”. He particularly wanted them to note the differences in the composition of the Naval



Courtesy of the National Archives & Records Administration

Operating Forces at the present time and what they thought would be necessary by 1955 since their estimates would form the basis for annual increments in the shipbuilding and aircraft procurement programs. He concluded by telling his subordinates that comments by the information addressees would be welcome.⁶

The analysis ordered by Nimitz was carried out by a committee that was chaired

⁶ Nimitz to Ramsey, Fechteler, McCrea, Sherman, Carney, Duncan, and Curts, "Naval Operating Forces – fiscal year 1955," 18 November 1947, Folder A4-1 Status of Vessels and Aircraft, 1/47-12/47, Box 109, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

by Rear Admiral Charles Styer, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (ACNO) for Operations, the Coordinator of Undersea Warfare, and the Navy Member of the U.S-Canadian Permanent Joint Board on Defense (PJBD). This committee also included key officers from the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, including Rear Admiral Jerauld Wright, the Director of the Operations Divisions' Operational Readiness Section; Captain James Carter, the Deputy Strategic Plans Officer; Captain Donald Osborn, Head of the Fleet Operational Readiness Section's Operational Requirements Sub-Section; and Captain Leo Bachman, the Director of the Operations Division's Fleet Operations Section. The analysis that was sent to Vice Admiral Sherman referenced Nimitz's 18 November 1947 Serial. The analysis began by naming the above members of the committee that had been formed to carry out the analysis. Styer and his committee subsequently told Sherman that the replies to Nimitz's Serial had been analyzed and were appended for Sherman's independent study. In addition, the authors stated that the paper presented a summary of the analysis along with their recommendations concerning the American Naval Operating Forces that were to be attained by July 1955. Styer and his committee additionally told Sherman that they had in mind the total which they thought that the national economy could support prior to hostilities and under peacetime personnel ceilings.⁷

The authors also said that the consensus of opinion "envisaged" early American naval combat operations to require "... the employment of quick offensive power in carrier striking forces, the rapid seizure of certain important bases, and rather extensive

⁷ Styer, Wright, Osborn, Carter, and Bachman to Sherman, "Naval Operating Forces – fiscal year 1955," no date, Folder A4 Operations of Vessels, Aircraft, and Shore Stations, 1/47-12/47, Box 109, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

anti-submarine warfare.” Further, they argued that there would be additional requirements for forces for the protection of occupation forces during the reinforcement or evacuation of those forces from certain areas, the maintenance of sea lines of communication, and the general support of the Naval Establishment. The authors then noted that Vice Admiral Carney, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Logistics, and Rear Admiral Curts, the Chief of the General Planning Group, had “apparently” based their recommendations primarily on “rather optimistic” guidance in the presently approved Basic Mobilization Plan for 24 Months and 9 Months, respectively. By July 1955, the Naval Operating Forces were supposed to equal the totals in the Basic Mobilization Plan. The other authors, however, made recommendations independently of the Basic Mobilization Plan. Of these various analyses, the majority of the authors argued that the Navy General Board’s (GB) estimate was “perhaps” the most realistic and “inclusive” (see below). Accordingly, the majority of the authors asserted that they subscribed to the overall considerations, discussions, and conclusions of the General Board.⁸

The authors also summarized their recommendations for the required Naval Operating Forces by July 1955 by asserting that they had grouped their recommendations by major components of forces. In connection with this, the recommendations of other officers were given for comparison though the details of the composition of forces would be given later. First, Styer and his committee listed four

⁸ Ibid. The Navy General Board was the service’s primary strategic think tank from its inception in 1900 until the 1930s at least. During the war, many of its functions had been taken over by various Offices and Bureaus in the Navy and it would be abolished by the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in 1951; see John Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet that Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2008).

Fast Carrier Task Groups (TG) comprising sixteen fleet carriers (CV) as units that would be necessary. The General Board had recommended a minimum of four Task Groups while Vice Admiral Duncan, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air, had recommended four as well. Vice Admiral Carney recommended six groups while Vice Admiral McCrea, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Administration, recommended that two groups be activated and that at least three new fleet carriers be constructed. Admiral Curts suggested six groups and Rear Admiral Thomas Robbins, Assistant Head of the Secretary of the Navy's Committee on Research and Reorganization (SCORER), suggested three. The authors also recommended that guided missile ships based on either fast battleships (BB (GM)) or battle cruisers (CB (GM)) be incorporated within one or more of these Task Groups given the "overhead" entailed by screening and air cover. For various assigned missions, it was also envisioned that these heavy surface forces would be formed into a separate Task Group that was "suitably" supported by the carrier forces. Carrier Air Groups (CAG) for the Fast Carrier Task Forces (TF) were listed as two air groups per carrier for a total of thirty-two air groups with 2724 planes. Vice Admiral Duncan concurred with this recommendation as did the General Board.⁹

Next, there was the recommendation for three Fast Logistic Support Groups for the Fast Carrier Task Groups. To reach this force level, the authors stated that there was need for an increase in alteration of certain required auxiliaries. These forces

⁹ Styer, Wright, Osborn, Carter, and Bachman to Sherman, "Naval Operating Forces – fiscal year 1955," no date, Folder A4 Operations of Vessels, Aircraft, and Shore Stations, 1/47-12/47, Box 109, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1-2. Heavy surface forces were typically battleships, battle cruisers, and heavy cruisers as opposed to light cruisers, destroyers, and destroyer escorts, the latter of which were classified by the United States Navy as light surface forces.

would include escort carrier air groups (CVEG), cover forces, transit and reserve forces, and 500 planes. The General Board concurred with the recommendation for three of these groups, but Vice Admiral Carney recommended six while others merely gave “general comment” on this matter. Also recommended was “high-speed” lift for two Marine Corps Divisions. This shipping would include fourteen escort carriers (CVE) with 420 aircraft, twenty-four attack transports (APA), ten attack cargo ships (AKA), thirty-four dock landing ships (LSD), and four amphibious force flagships (AGC). This assault shipping would provide gunfire support, screening, and mine clearance. Further, the authors recommended that additional amphibious lift be activated as soon as was allowed by the personnel expansion that would follow an “advanced state” of “strained” relations with the enemy. This additional assault shipping would allow another four divisions to be used either as a follow-up for a fast assault or elsewhere as necessary. The General Board recommended assault shipping for a total of five Marine Corps Divisions while Admiral Duncan recommended allowance for two divisions as did Admirals Curts and Robbins.¹⁰

Next on the list was the recommendation for six Mobile Hunter-Killer Groups that would consist of six light carriers (CVL) with twelve air groups and 360 planes as well as six hunter killer cruisers (CLK) and forty-eight destroyers (DD). The General Board concurred with the six Mobile Hunter-Killer Groups, but Admiral Duncan called for eight, Admiral Carney called for fifteen, and Admiral Curts called for nine. Admiral Carney’s number of fifteen assumed that there would also be six Fixed Area Patrol and Hunter-Killer Groups which were called for by the authors. These units would comprise

¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

six squadrons of naval patrol planes (VP) for a total of 160 aircraft along with another six hunter killer cruisers and another forty-eight destroyers. The General Board concurred with six of these units being deployed while other recommendations were only “generalizations”. The authors then looked at the Submarine Force (SUBFOR), which they thought should be comprised of 285 subs of various types, including 100 anti-submarine type submarines (SS (A/S)). The Submarine Conference that was now regularly being convened by Admiral Styer had determined 547 submarines (SS) while Admiral Duncan determined that only ninety were necessary. The General Board recommended 185 submarines plus the number of anti-submarine submarines determined after the evaluation of a new prototype sub. Admiral Carney recommended 320 submarines, Admiral Robbins recommended 110, Admiral McCrea recommended 189 plus an “adequate” number of anti-submarine submarines, and Admiral Curts recommended 150 submarines.¹¹

The analysts then recommended 200 destroyers and destroyer escorts (DE) as Ocean Escorts whereas the General Board thought that 210 would be needed, Admiral Carney saw the need for 150 ships, and others only gave general comments on this category. Coastal Forces were to be 100 patrol vessels (PC) that were augmented by 150 dirigibles, but only general comments were again given here by the committee. Mine Forces (MINFOR) were to consist of 150 “mine types” which Admiral Duncan concurred with while Admiral Carney saw the need for 487 weapons and Admiral Curts saw the need for 188 weapons. Fleet Air and Marine Air Units that were not included in the various items would comprise 1800 planes for night carriers (CV (N)),

¹¹ Ibid., 2-3.

anti-submarine warfare (ASW), Fleet Air Wings (FAIRWING), Marine Corps Air Wings (MARAIRWING), and utility planes (UT). Here, the authors' numbers were based on Admiral Duncan's recommendations. Related to this, the Naval Transportation Service (NTS) would need to activate 150 auxiliaries according to the authors, approximately 100 of which would be acquired by the Navy. The authors also recommended that at least 1000 merchant vessels be in existence in the U.S. Merchant Marine and that every "inducement" be offered for the building of twenty-knot merchant ships. Admiral Carney called for 100 Navy auxiliaries and 1200 for the U.S. military entirely and he assumed that the latter would come from the Merchant Marine. Admiral Curtis called for 258 Navy auxiliaries and 400 for the military in general, also assuming that these latter ships would come from the U.S. Merchant Marine. Admiral Robbins called for 1000 ships from the Merchant Marine and the committee concluded this section by calling for 1200 planes for the Naval Air Transportation Service (NATS), a figure that came from Admiral Duncan and the General Board.¹²

The authors then listed the Marine Corps in general and noted that the recommendation here was in accordance with statutory allowances that included a Fleet Marine Force (FMF) of four divisions. The General Board argued for five divisions while Admiral Robbins argued for three and the Marine Corps reasserted four divisions plus additional organizational elements. According to the authors, training detachments for carrier air groups, surface ships, amphibious ships, and submarines needed to total seventy combatant ships and 100 planes. This latter recommendation was specifically from the General Board while Admiral Duncan gave general comments on the matter.

¹² Ibid., 3.

Rear Admiral Styer and the others then moved to Experimental and Development Forces for continued research, development, and evaluation in connection with anti-aircraft (AA) weaponry, aircraft, radar, guided missiles, rockets, and countermeasures. No specific recommendation was made at this time concerning the total number of ships involved in these latter activities since it was assumed by the authors that these units would be drawn from the Operating Forces that had been noted above. However, the analysts did estimate 400 aircraft for this category and they were acting on specific recommendations from the General Board and Vice Admiral Duncan. The analysts also listed three Complete Advance Base Outfits which had been recommended by the General Board, but they also recommended material procurement only after personnel expansion took place. For Miscellaneous Support and Training, the authors recommended approximately 3000 administrative and training aircraft as well as icebreakers, task fleet flagships, and ships for local defense forces.¹³

When it came to the detailed composition of Certain Important Groups and Forces, the recommendations mentioned above in the introduction formed the basis of the total inventory of required Naval Operating Forces. The authors first listed a New Carrier Task Group that would consist of a new fleet carrier, a *Midway*-Class battle carrier (CVB), two converted *Essex*-Class fleet carriers, seven heavy support ships, and twenty-four destroyers. The authors also noted that since only three *Midway*-Class battle carriers were available, one modernized *Essex*-class fleet carrier would replace a *Midway* in one of the four Fast Carrier Task Groups noted above. They further asserted that the guided missile fast battleship *Kentucky* and the guided missile battle cruiser

¹³ Ibid., 4.

Hawaii could replace two of the heavy support ships listed in one Fast Carrier Task Group or there could be one heavy support ship in each of the two Fast Carrier Task Groups. Next came a Fast Logistic Support Group that was to consist each of two escort carriers as well as one fleet carrier unless “heavy” new planes were “land-staged.” The authors assumed that the fleet carrier would require alteration to its elevators and catapults because of new aircraft. The Fast Logistic Support Groups would each consist additionally of four fuel oil tankers (AO), an ammunition ship (AE), a provision stores ship (AF), a general stores issue ship (AKS), an aviation supply ship (AVS), and eight destroyers or destroyer escorts.¹⁴

The Two Division Fast Assault Force was to consist of four amphibious force flagships, twenty-four attack transports, ten attack cargo ships, thirty-four dock landing ships, or a combination of six dock landing ships and twenty-eight tank landing ships (LST) if fast tank landing ships could be produced. There would also be thirty-six destroyers or destroyer escorts, fourteen escort carriers, four fast battleships (BB), six heavy (CA) or light cruisers (CL), and ten destroyer-minesweepers (DMS) or light minelayers (DM). A Mobile Hunter-Killer Group would comprise a light carrier, a hunter killer cruiser, and eight destroyers with increased anti-submarine capabilities. Related to this, a Fixed Area Patrol and Hunter-Killer Group was to consist of a squadron of naval patrol planes, a hunter killer cruiser, and another eight destroyers with increased anti-submarine capabilities. The Submarine Force was to consist of thirty-two fast attack submarines, sixty-two greater underwater propulsion power program conversions (GUPPY), 100 small anti-submarine submarines, nineteen guided missile submarines

¹⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

(SS GM)), fourteen radar-picket submarines (SSR), ten troop-carrying submarines (SSP), five cargo-carrying submarines (SSK), nine tanker submarines (SSO), and thirty-four miscellaneous submarines such as unconverted submarines for activities like training.¹⁵

Based on their analyses, Rear Admiral Styer and his committee recommended that American Naval Operating Forces by 1955 consist of additional forces even if all of these units were not manned and even if the force levels were dependent on the “acuteness” of the situation as the years progressed. They first listed 6500 operational aircraft and they asserted that the present inventory was only partially sufficient since a large proportion of the required future aircraft would have to be “new types.” They also recommended 3000 aircraft for overhaul and 2500 planes for basic training. This total of 12,000 aircraft would be supplemented by 150 dirigibles, though the present inventory of the latter they found to be “insignificant”. They next listed the four new carriers, only one of which was currently requested. They also found the need for fourteen *Essex*-Class carriers. Currently, there were twenty-four in the Navy’s inventory and nine needed to be converted as flagships for Task Group Commanders while three more needed to be altered for Fast Logistic Support Groups. There was additionally the need for the three *Midway*-Class battle carriers. All of these ships were in the Navy’s inventory although two of them needed to be altered for future operations. Also listed was the converted guided missile fast battleship and the converted guided missile battle cruiser noted above as well as the eight light carriers with increased anti-submarine capabilities. The authors further noted that while there were no more guided missile

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

battleships or battle cruisers, there were nine light carriers in the Navy's inventory.

There were also sixty-six escort carriers while the study only called for the use of thirty of them.¹⁶

The authors next listed four fast battleships. The Navy had ten in its inventory and the authors specifically noted that prewar modernized battleships (OBB) would probably be required at a later stage for bombardment operations. The Navy also had sixty-eight heavy, light, and anti-aircraft (CLAA) cruisers in its inventory while the recommendations only called for thirty-two. There was also a need for twelve hunter killer cruisers with two requested as well as three command cruisers (CLC) and one building. The Navy had 178 submarines in its inventory, but the analysts again listed 285 subs here and remarked that six attack submarines could be built annually. In addition, twenty-four current submarines could be converted annually to more advanced types. They also asserted that twelve anti-submarine submarines could be built in the first year and increased by annual increments so that the Navy could "approach" 100 of these submarines in numbers by 1955. 252 newer destroyers were also listed as needed. The Navy had 292 newer destroyers in its inventory but not all of them were of the more advanced type so the authors noted that four new destroyers could be built annually and nine could be converted annually to carry more capable anti-submarine equipment. There was also a call for 200 older destroyers (ODD) or destroyer escorts (ODE). There were 318 of these ships in the Navy's inventory, but there was the obvious need to update these ships as well.¹⁷

Next on the list were 100 patrol vessels. The Navy had 126 old and slower

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

vessels so fast patrol vessels needed to be acquired. The authors again called for 150 “mine types,” of which the Navy had 191. According to Styer and the committee, the Navy also needed to acquire twenty-four twenty-knot attack transports, ten attack cargo ships with the same speed, thirty-four dock landing ships, and four amphibious force flagships. The latter two types of ships were also to have twenty-knot speeds but only one attack cargo ship had so far been requested. Accordingly, the authors repeated their statement from above in which they indicated the need for the Navy to reactivate its present inventory of amphibious assault ships. They additionally called for 150 fleet auxiliaries from both the Fleet and the Naval Transportation Service that would include an increase in fuel oil tankers to approximately fifty ships. The authors concluded their report by listing the need for ten heavy icebreakers, all of which needed to be acquired by the Navy.¹⁸

Towers’ Study

A day after Nimitz’s memo to his subordinate commanders, Admiral John Towers, the Chairman of the General Board, sent a Top Secret Serial to the Chief of Naval Operations which was also about the projections for American Naval Operating Forces by 1955. Towers referenced the Top Secret Memorandum from Nimitz on the subject that was dated two days before. Towers told Nimitz that the General Board was in “general agreement” with the concepts and assumptions set forth in JPS 814/2 as well as JSPC 846/5 from the Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC) on 19 November 1947. When it came to the likelihood of war, Towers argued that the only war that was

¹⁸ Ibid., 6-7.

“likely” to occur between 1947 and Fiscal Year 1955 was “. . . a war instigated by the USSR against the United States, either a war planned by Russia or precipitated by a miscalculation on Russia’s part as to the extent to which she can pursue her policy of



Admiral John Towers (Courtesy of the Naval History & Heritage Command)

expansion without causing the United States to fight.” Towers wrote that the U.S.S.R. would not risk such a war until it was fully prepared to fight, though he later added the word “intentionally” to that statement. He additionally told Nimitz that the Soviet Union

would not fight until its land forces, air force, submarine force, and “possibly” a “guided missile force” were all capable of delivering an effective surprise attack on the Continental U.S.’ (CONUS) industrial and military centers as well as the U.S.’ principal advanced bases and lines of communication in an initial, hostile act. He later changed designation of the Soviet Air Force to a “strategic” air force.¹⁹

Towers then looked at the Naval Operating Forces that the U.S. would require to carry out any long-range plan to defend the U.S. against the threat of war beginning at any time after Calendar Year 1952. First, he said that it had to be accepted as a premise that a war “forced” upon the U.S. after that date would start with a “. . . quick, vicious, well planned, well coordinated, broad scale attack on the continental United States, the objective of which will be to cause partial paralysis of our war making potential at the very outset of hostilities.” To Towers, assuming otherwise would invite disaster. He later added to this portion by inserting the phrase “be to.” He also thought that the initial impact as well as the speed and fury of the succeeding early stages of the conflict could “well be” so devastating as to “seriously impair” the U.S.’ capacity to mobilize its armed forces and the necessary supporting industrial capacity “. . . to meet the threat against the United States and western civilization.” Accordingly, Towers said that it was essential that the United States Navy have an Operating Force of sufficient size, mobility, striking power, and “inherent” defensive power that was also fully

¹⁹ Towers to Nimitz, “Naval Operating Forces – Fiscal Year 1955,” 20 November 1947, Folder HDCL/9, General Board Reports 1947, Box 6, Papers of Arleigh Burke, Operational Archives, Naval History & Heritage Command, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as the Burke Papers, OA, NHHC), 1. Towers was one of the pioneers of American naval aviation, the Navy’s third qualified aviator, and the Navy’s senior aviator by this time. Having been both Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas (CINCPAC-CINCPOA) for Admiral Nimitz during the war and then Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas after the war, Towers was now on his final tour of duty before retirement. For an excellent biography on him, see Clark Reynolds, *Admiral John H. Towers: The Struggle for Naval Air Supremacy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1991).

mobilized and ready in the first few weeks of the conflict. To Towers, this force would be necessary to deliver “telling” blows that were designed to neutralize the offensive war-making capacity of the Soviet Union and demoralize its civilian population.²⁰

Having defended against the initial impact of the war or “otherwise” survived, Towers argued that the U.S. then had to be prepared to mobilize the necessary forces to project against the enemy in such a manner as to terminate the will of the enemy to resist. He later changed the word “will” to “capacity”. Accordingly, he “visualized” early U.S. combat operations to be atomic and conventional bombing attacks on vital Soviet installations that were within the range of carrier airpower. Next would be the protection of occupation forces during reinforcement or the evacuation of the U.S.’ and its allies’ forces from their existing positions in Eurasia. Following that would be the destruction of Soviet water transportation and then the protection of the U.S.’ own “essential” lines of communication as well as those of its allies. Towers informed Nimitz that there would then need to be the denial of vital lines of communication to the Soviets as well as the protection of areas that were strategically vital to the U.S. Towers saw the latter including sources of raw materials and advanced base locations that he listed as Japan-Okinawa, the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, Northeastern Africa, the British Isles, and the “Iceland-Greenland-Newfoundland Sector.” Later, he added Alaska to the top of his list. At the end of the list, he noted as an early mission the occupation of these advanced bases and the denial of the bases to the Soviets.²¹

²⁰ Towers to Nimitz, “Naval Operating Forces – Fiscal Year 1955,” 20 November 1947, Folder HDCL/9, General Board Reports 1947, Box 6, Burke Papers, OA, NHHC, 1-2.

²¹ Ibid., 2-3.

Towers then asserted to Nimitz that it was the opinion of the General Board that the principal Operating Forces of the U.S. Navy in Fiscal Year 1955 should consist of a minimum of four Fast Carrier Task Groups. He later added the phrase “in full state of combat readiness.” In turn, each of the four Fast Carrier Task Groups was to consist of one Project 6A “flush deck” carrier, one *Midway*-Class battle carrier, two modernized Project 27A *Essex*-Class fleet carriers, one guided missile ship, eight “major supporting” ships, and eighteen destroyers, which Towers then changed to twenty-four. Similar to Styer’s committee, Towers noted for Nimitz that since only three *Midway*-Class battle carriers would be available by the time that they were necessary, one modernized *Essex*-Class fleet carrier would replace a *Midway* in one of the Fast Carrier Task Groups. He also noted that the distribution of the ships of the three carrier classes would be varied according to their assigned tasks and he penned in the statement “among the task groups” right after the notation of the three carrier classes. Towers likewise informed Nimitz that each carrier would have to have two carrier air groups, one embarked on the ship and the other in reserve but “fully ready” for alternating with the embarked air group. Towers later crossed out the word “necessary” and replaced it with “essential”. He thought that the aircraft complement of the striking forces would be “approximately” 784 planes with the four flush-deck carriers. Each carrier would have two air groups of eighty F2D-1 *Banshee* fighters (VF) and eighteen ADR-42 attack planes (VA). For the modernized *Midway*-Class carriers, there would be a total of 522 planes, each carrier having the two air groups and each air group having sixty F9F *Panther* jet fighters and twenty-seven *Savage* medium bombers. There would be another 1512 aircraft with the nine modernized *Essex*-Class fleet carriers. Each of

these ships would have two air groups as well and each air group would have forty-two *Panther* fighters and forty-two *Skywarrior* attack planes.²²

Towers concluded the study by listing a minimum of six Anti-Submarine Warfare Hunter-Killer Groups, though he also penciled in red the number five in a circle. These units were to be available on Mobilization Day, but Towers later crossed that out. Each Anti-Submarine Hunter-Killer Group was to consist of a light carrier, a “hunter-killer” ship, and eight destroyers. The aircraft complement of the Anti-Submarine Warfare Groups would be nine fighters and fourteen attack aircraft for a total of 276 planes, which was later specified for each light carrier. Towers also saw the need for “at least” sixteen “fixed area” Patrol and Anti-Submarine Warfare Groups. These units were also to be available on Mobilization Day, though Towers later crossed that phrase out as well. Each Patrol and Anti-Submarine Warfare Group was to consist of six hunter-killer ships, thirty squadrons of four-engine land-based naval patrol planes (VP (HL)), ten squadrons of two-engine sea-based naval patrol planes (VP (MS)), forty-eight destroyers, and small surface patrol craft. The total aircraft complement of the Patrol and Anti-Submarine Warfare Groups would be 450 planes. The Submarine Force that was projected to be available would be sixty “new attack” submarines, eighty “converted attack” submarines, fifty guided missile submarines, twenty-four submarine radar pickets, 300 anti-submarine submarines, forty converted submarine troop and cargo carriers, and twelve submarine tankers. The total number of submarines would be 566.²³

²² Ibid., 3-4.

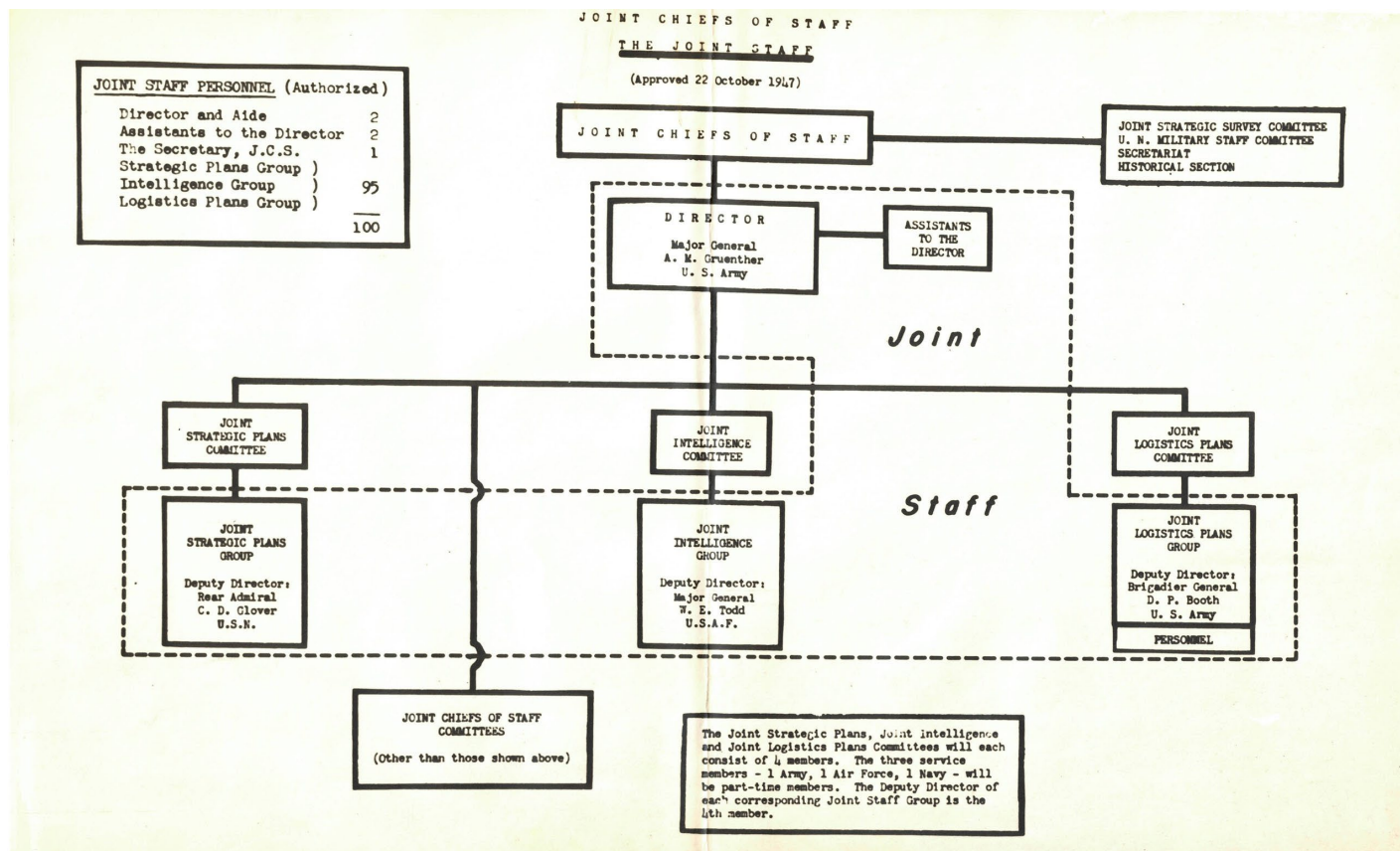
²³ Ibid., 4-5.

English and Others

Following up Towers' study on 24 November, Captain Robert English, the Navy Director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Joint Strategic Plans Group (JSPG), also forwarded a Memorandum on a request for planning studies concerning the employment of American naval forces in 1955. English began by stating that the Navy Members of the Joint Strategic Plans Group "urgently" needed information by 15 December 1947 on the kind, capabilities, and employment of naval forces as well as the weapons that could be expected to be developed and made operational by 1 January 1955. English therefore requested that studies be prepared by "appropriate" personnel of the Navy Department. These studies would include the capabilities of improved vessels, naval aircraft, and weapons as well as all of the new types of vessels, naval aircraft, and weapons that could be expected to be developed and made operational by 1955. Someone penciled in the margins that this study be carried out by the Fleet Operational Readiness Section within the Operations Division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. In addition, English requested a study specifically on the employment of aircraft carriers and carrier aircraft in a war against the Soviet Union in 1955.²⁴

English asserted that this latter study should include a description of new carriers, carrier aircraft, and their weapons along with brief statements on performance. Additionally, there was to be an analysis of the kind of targets against which these forces would be employed. This latter analysis was to include a survey of the number of

²⁴ English, Memorandum, "Employment of Naval Forces 1955, Request for Planning Bodies Studies of," 24 November 1947, Folder A16-3 Warfare Operations, Box 110, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.



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these targets with an estimation of the size of the effort required for their “reduction”.

Further, the analysis was to evaluate the ability and effectiveness of carriers and carrier aircraft against Soviet defenses. The latter study was to analyze the capability of Fast Carrier Task Forces to operate within aircraft range of their targets. In his original version, English called for a plan for the employment of carrier forces based on concepts and assumptions in JSPC 846/6, but he crossed out “plan” and substituted “study” in a later version of his memo. This study on American carrier forces was to include the composition of the Task Forces, where they would operate, the frequency of their operations, and a determination of the forces that would be required to accomplish

the reduction of the targets that English had mentioned above. English further requested that all types of carriers be included in the study. He asserted that it also be recognized that the overall study would probably have to be divided into two or more sections that dealt separately with the various classes of ships.²⁵

Further, English requested that the types and capabilities of anti-submarine warfare vessels, anti-submarine warfare naval aircraft, and anti-submarine warfare weapons which were estimated to be operational in 1955 be studied. This study—which English had originally termed a plan—was to include requirements for the employment of these forces and it was also to be based on the concepts and assumptions set forth in JSPC 846/6. This latter study was to be done by Admiral Styer’s Office of the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Operations as well as by the Coordinator of Undersea Warfare, still also Admiral Styer at this time. English said that there needed to be a further study on the concept of amphibious operations in 1955 that included the types of vessels, their capabilities, and a “typical” amphibious task force composition. Finally, English initially called for a plan—which he then redesignated a study—on the capabilities of submarines in 1955 that was also to include the force requirements for their employment in a war against the Soviet Union. This study was similarly to be based on the concepts and assumptions sent forth in JSPC 846/6 and it was also to be undertaken by the Operations Division’s Fleet Operational Readiness Section. English concluded his memo by asserting that unless these studies were undertaken in the Navy Department immediately and made available to the Navy Members of the Joint Strategic Plans Group, it was “. . . believed that the

²⁵ Ibid.

naval service will be severely handicapped. In the development of Force Requirements for future wars, it is vital to the naval service that the needs of the Navy be properly provided for in all Strategic Plans.” English’s argument was based not so much on strategic calculations but the interservice rivalry between especially the Navy and Air Force over roles and missions at this time. Accordingly, he thought that the particular naval requirements expressed “herein” could then be utilized by Secretary of Defense James Forrestal for budgetary determinations.²⁶

The next day, Vice Admiral Sherman, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations, sent a Top Secret Office Memorandum to Captain Carter, now the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Strategic Plans, about the study on the deployment of American naval forces in 1955. Sherman told Carter that the attached memorandum was from Captain English and was being forwarded for action. Sherman also told Carter that he considered the completion of the studies recommended by English to be a matter which was to be accorded top priority. Sherman further thought that primary “cognizance” should “undoubtedly” be assigned to the War Plans Sub-Section in the Operations Division’s Strategic Plans Section. However, he also asserted that the War Plans Sub-Section would require assistance from the Navy Members of the Joint Army Navy Intelligence Division (JANID), the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations’ Aviation Division, and the Bureau of Aeronautics (BUAER) as well as “probable” advice from the Strategic Plans Section’s Long-Range

²⁶ Ibid., 2. For the extraordinarily bitter and often unprofessional interservice rivalry at this time, see Michael Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-158.

War Plans Sub-Section.²⁷ Penned in at the bottom of the Office Memorandum was a short note from Admiral Sherman that the Operations Division's Fleet Operational Readiness Section had the ship program "in hand."²⁸

On 2 December, Captain Carter sent a Top Secret Office Memorandum to Admiral Sherman on the planning studies that were being done on the employment of American Naval Operating Forces in 1955. Carter referenced the 24 November 1947 memo from the Joint Strategic Plans Group as well as Sherman's memo to Carter on 25 November 1947 on the same matter. Carter included these memos as Enclosures A and B and informed Sherman that assistance from other Divisions and Sections of the Office of Chief of Naval Operations would be required in the preparation of these requested studies. In order to accomplish the "desired" results most effectively and in the available time, Carter recommended that Sherman sign an attached memo dated the next day that Carter had prepared.²⁹

Carter's memo was from Sherman to Vice Admiral Duncan, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Air; Brigadier General Merwin Silverthorn, the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations' Liaison for Marine Corps Matters; Rear Admiral Styer, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Operations and the Coordinator of Undersea Warfare; Rear Admiral Thomas Inglis, the Chief of Naval Intelligence; and Rear Admiral Wright, the Director of the Operations Division's Fleet Operational Readiness Section. As noted, Sherman referenced the 24 November 1947 Top Secret Memorandum from the

²⁷ Sherman to Carter, Office Memorandum, 25 November 1947, Folder A16-3 (5) War Plans, 1/47-12/47, Box 111, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

²⁸ Sherman to Carter, Office Memorandum, 25 November 1947, Folder A16-3 Warfare Operations, Box 110, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

²⁹ Carter to Sherman, "Planning Studies of Employment of Naval Forces in 1955," 2 December 1947, Folder A16-3 (5) War Plans, 1/47-12/47, Box 111, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

Joint Strategic Plans Group and he enclosed that memo as Enclosure A. Sherman's memo began by stating that given the development of force requirements for future wars, it was of primary importance to the naval service that the needs of the Navy be "properly" provided for in joint strategic plans. Sherman then asserted that in order to ensure this situation, naval strategic planners had to have the views of "pertinent" naval agencies on prospective naval developments and the future employment of naval forces and weapons. Sherman therefore requested that the studies that he listed be prepared as a matter of top priority by each of the Divisions and Sections that had been indicated.³⁰

Sherman then noted that the study should provide a description, a brief statement of performance, and the capabilities of "improved" vessels, naval aircraft, and weapons which were expected to be developed and made operational by 1955. He also wanted this discussed and summarized under subheadings that were determined by the functional employment of these forces in a war against the Soviet Union in 1955. The first study that Sherman listed would be one on carrier task force operations by Admiral Duncan and his staff. Admiral Styer and his staff would also prepare a study on anti-submarine warfare and convoy escort while Admiral Wright and his staff would prepare a study on amphibious operations. The latter would include a concept of tactical operations in 1955 that indicated the necessary types of vessels, capabilities, and "typical" amphibious task force composition. Admiral Styer and his staff would then prepare a study on submarine operations other than anti-submarine warfare. This

³⁰ Sherman to Duncan, Silverthorn, Styer, Inglis, and Wright, "Planning Studies of Employment of Naval Forces in 1955," 3 December 1947, Folder A16-3 (5) War Plans, 1/47-12/47, Box 111, Series 5, Strategic Plans, RG 38, MMRB, NA II, 1.

would be followed by a study on airborne early warning (AEW) and guided missiles from Admiral Duncan and his staff. Finally, there would be a study from Admiral Wright and his staff on mine warfare operations and “any other” projects and techniques that were not included in the list above.³¹

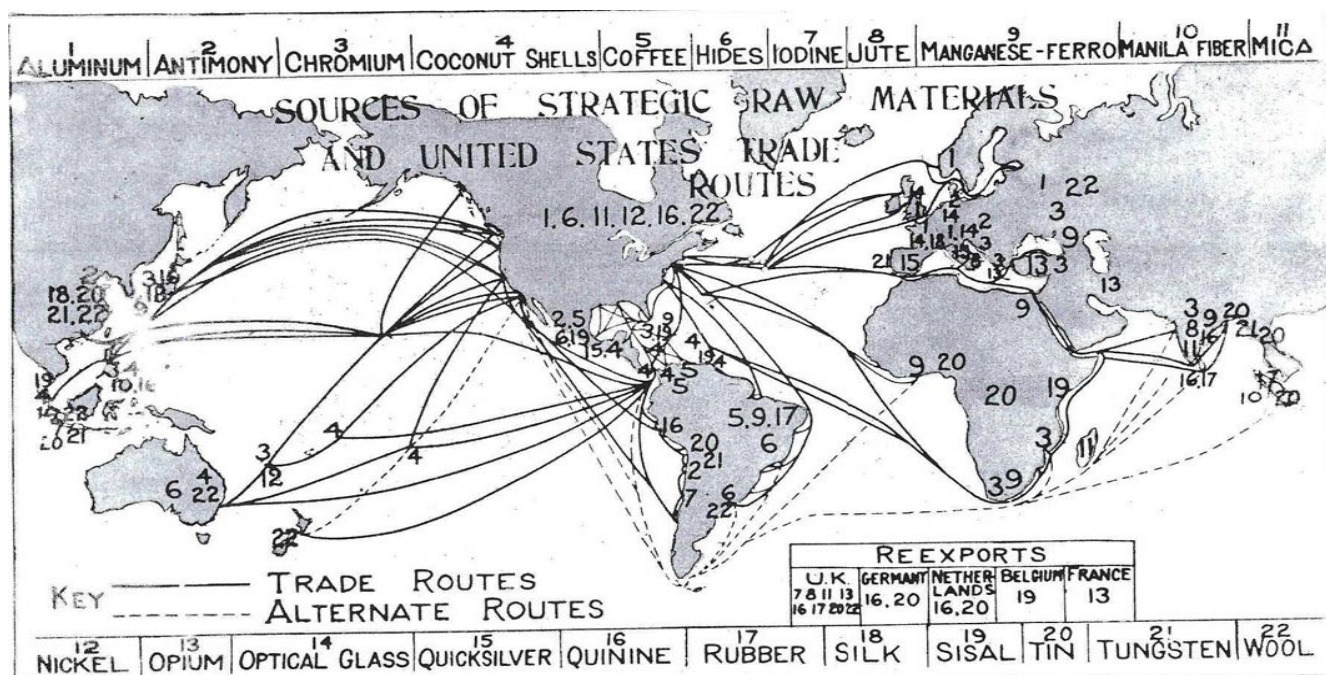
The next major study would be done by Admiral Inglis and the Office of Naval Intelligence on an evaluation of Soviet defenses against carrier task forces and carrier aircraft by 1955. Inglis and his staff would also do an analysis of the kind and location of Soviet targets against which American naval aircraft would be employed by that time. This analysis would include an estimate of the size of the effort required to reduce the Soviet targets. Discussions and conclusions would further embrace the analysis of two types of targets. First would be targets against which atomic bombs would be “appropriate”. This study would be followed by one in which the targets would be assaulted by conventional bombs. Inglis and his staff would further analyze Soviet submarine strength by types and distribution in 1955 as well as a more general analysis of Soviet naval strength and distribution at the same time. This latter analysis would additionally look at Soviet merchant ship distribution and the probable density of shipping over the sea routes in a war with the United States.³²

Sherman went on to assert that the basic assumptions upon which these studies were to be developed included the premise that in the period from 1 January 1955 to 1 January 1956 “. . . war has been forced upon the United States by an act of aggression of the U.S.S.R. and/or her satellites.” Sherman also assumed that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. would use atomic weapons and that biological and chemical warfare “might”

³¹ Ibid., 1-2.

³² Ibid., 2.

be used by either side depending on “considerations” of retaliation. In addition, Vice Admiral Arthur Radford—the Commander of the Second Task Fleet but soon to be the Vice Chief of Naval Operations—was requested to provide the studies on the subjects



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under his cognizance and to furnish assistance to the other Divisions and Sections that might be required in the preparation of the related studies. Sherman further requested that these studies be completed and forwarded to the Strategic Plans Section by 10 December 1947. General Silverthorn was also requested to provide assistance to Admiral Wright that might be required in the preparation of the study on amphibious operations and “typical” amphibious task force composition. Sherman repeated to the various Divisions and Sections that they were to prepare their studies in accordance with the indicated responsibility and forward those studies directly to Sherman by 10

December 1947. Upon receipt of these studies, the Strategic Plans Section would prepare plans and develop force requirements for the employment of American Naval Operating Forces as requested by the Joint Strategic Plans Group on 24 November 1947. Sherman concluded the memo by telling his subordinates that knowledge of the contents of JSPC 846/6 was not required for the preparation of these studies.³³

Conclusion: Back and Forth in Time

Of course, the conjecture about future warfighting requirements did not cease with Sherman's memo but suffice it to say that historical conjecture of the future was a significant part of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations' preparations in the early postwar period. The U.S.' radically new foreign policy interests and responsibilities meant that the Navy's new responsibilities were equally altered. In this context, the Navy took historical context from war into account as it tried to peer into the future. Choosing dates like 1955 for a U.S. war against the Soviet Union was probably arbitrary but trying to see into the future in terms of force structure, organization, and technology was more systematic. Or, at least it was as systematic as it could be. It is, of course, impossible to predict the future. Still, Navy planners had to try in order to carry out their preparatory duties for what they saw as the next most likely conflict. That they got this prediction wrong is less important than the value of studying their attempt. Their generation of defense personnel did not have a monopoly on getting the future wrong. Beyond purely historical arguments about studying the past for the sake of studying the past, looking at the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations' historical conjecture offers

³³ Ibid., 2-3.

us perspective today as we deal with our own national security mistakes as well as our attempts to provide for the Republic's security in our own uncertain future.