

Book Review

Fighting the Fleet: Operational Art and Modern Fleet Combat

Jeffery R Cares & Anthony Cowden

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The foreword to *Fighting the fleet* by Adm. Scott Swift (USN retd) dwells very appropriately on the great power and peer-related competitiveness of China and Russia. Very aptly, considering the current Russo–Ukraine war, Adm. Swift describes Russia as less of a competitor and more of a spoiler. This fact is now cast in stone by the actions of Russia in the 2022 war with Ukraine. However, Adm. Swift categorises Russia as being innovative and agile (based on evidence from the Russo–Georgian war, the 2014 conflict with Ukraine, and the Russian adventures in Syria). This characterisation is eroded each day the Russo–Ukraine (2022) war is progressing. Russia currently does not display any ability to execute joint warfare doctrine (e.g. concentration of fire and manoeuvre warfare). Russia also does not seem to understand the criticality of logistics and supply-chain management. Adm. Swift points out that Russia does not have the diplomatic, informational, military and economic power to assert itself internationally. This statement is currently showcased on a grand scale in Ukraine.

Accurately and with great brevity, Adm. Swift describes the contribution of the book as critical to the understanding of operational art that is calibrated by “the science of applying kinetic effects”¹ – the art of warfare. This is combined with more “subjective elements of the art of war, such as variabilities of weather, logistics, system functionality, readiness, training quality and quantity, and human decision making”.² Reading (even studying) this book contributes to an understanding of the art of naval warfare, and will therefore assist in understanding the current demise of Russia in the Ukraine as well as the significance of the Chinese naval expansion and pre-positioning in the Asian Pacific.

In a final comment on context by Adm. Swift, he states that this book is about operational art in the maritime domain, which provides the bridging mechanism between tactical actions and strategic effects in recognising that the “the sum of tactical successes would never result in an equation of strategic success”³ without artful operations and scientific understanding.

¹ JR Cares & A Cowden. *Fighting the fleet*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021, p. xii.

² *Ibid*, p. xii.

³ JR Cares & A Cowden. *Fighting the fleet*, p. xv.

Fighting the fleet is a precise narrative about the art of naval warfare and the science that supports such combat through a US naval warfare dominance lens. The book informs and challenges current perspectives of operational art with the intent to change the strategic outcomes and provide critical links between tactics and operational and strategic effects. More importantly, the authors make a distinction between operational art and naval operational art defining it as “what admirals do”⁴ as opposed to what generals do. With this said, the book positions itself as a thought-provoking narrative about the requirement for joint warfare from two perspectives – the traditional land warfare perspective, and the nuances of such perspectives that makes naval warfare joint and combined by its very nature.

This book might have arrived on our bookshelves just in time. The authors state, “[t]hankfully, it has been many decades since this knowledge [technical and mathematical equations about naval salvos] has been needed”⁵ – referring to the absence of grand-scale kinetic naval engagements at sea for decades. The current international security dynamics driven by the imperialism of Russia and China could very soon break this trend, rendering this book a must-read for naval combat officers.

A fundamental wisdom shared by Adm. Fiske during the early 1900s – which might remain unread by those reading this book, as it is part of the introduction – is that he foresaw that naval warfare was spiralling towards untold levels of complexity, which would insist on “deep intellectual commitment in peacetime because failure to do so would leave us wishing we were smarter when war came again”.⁶ Many nations, including the South African Navy (SAN), should reflect very critically on the implications of these wise words whilst the international maritime security in the Indian Ocean has the potential to be contested kinetically very soon based on current challenges to world order.

Jeffery Cares and Anthony Cowden achieve with relatively simplistic comparative analysis informative perspectives on the immense advantages of having both maritime and naval power. They point out and discuss the advantages of (albeit) developed world naval power as a joint and combined force (carrier battle group configurations) enabling expeditionary force projection over vast distances in a day with the ability to engage kinetically any foe in its way. Neither the army nor the air force contributes this level of force projection, thus informing the concept of ‘admiralship’.

Combining interesting snippets of the historical development of naval power, the authors expertly build the puzzle with pieces that describe the importance and place of buoyancy, throw weight, pulsepower interaction, and how these inform salvo theory. The book is not short on mathematical equations that ground these constructs and theories, making

4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

S Fellman. “Ukraine’s sinking of the Russian flagship Moskva is a ‘wake-up call’ for the world’s top navies”. *Business Insider*. 24 April 2022. < <https://www.businessinsider.com/?ir=t/russia-moskva-sinking-wake-up-call-for-navies-experts-say-2022-4>> [Accessed on 17 May 2022].

this an excellent book to include as compulsory reading for any naval officer. It should also be included in general warfare programmes to ensure that all future generals and admirals have the same understanding of the attributes of naval power and how it could be employed to multiply the delivery of land and air power within a specific theatre or multitude of theatres. The recent sinking of the Russian Black Sea fleet flagship *Moskva* is an excellent (almost real-time) example of how pulse fire impacted the Russian Naval Power in the Black Sea during the 2022 Russo–Ukraine war.⁷

The book is a must-read for naval officers even if his or her specific navy is not even close to the league of those kept buoyant by the Great Powers because the theory can be scaled down to fit size and complexity levels. It also provides an important guide to General Staff that would inform their analysis of the situation before providing decision-making knowledge to those responsible for international relations and at tables of diplomacy. Asymmetric warfare and hybrid applications of available warfare materiel are therefore important spoilers to conventional theories. *Fighting the fleet* is divided into five chapters that address complexities and practical suggestions on naval power, search and surveillance, logistics and manoeuvre, control, with an end perspective of robotics and fighting fleets.

Commander Jeffrey R Cares⁸ and Captain (retd.) Anthony Cowden⁹ drew on rich experiences from extensive careers within the US Navy as Reserve Officers. Jeffrey R Cares specialises in “Information Age Warfare, distribute control in military operation, and Network Centric Warfare, [...] Antiair Warfare Technical and Operational Expert as well as [being] an Antisubmarine Warfare Operational Expert”.¹⁰ Other areas of excellence and leadership include being the co-founder of Newport Center for Information Age Warfare Studies and being recognised by “Cap Gemini Ernst & Young as one of the top ‘Innovators and Thought Leaders’ of the Information Age”.¹¹

Anthony Cowden is a history graduate (University of Michigan) with master’s degrees in science (University of New Haven) and in national security (Naval War College). He is a US Naval Reserve Captain and co-author of the US Navy *Naval Institute Almanac*.¹² He retired from active naval service during 2021 with 37 years of service.

Dries Putter 
Stellenbosch University

7 *Ibid.*

8 New England Complex Systems Institute. “Jeffrey R. Cares”. <<https://necsi.edu/jeffrey-r-cares>> [Accessed on 19 May 2022].

9 US Naval Institute. “Anthony Cowden”. <<https://www.usni.org/people/anthony-cowden>> [Accessed on 19 May 2022].

10 New England Complex Systems Institute *op cit.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 US Naval Institute *op cit.*