

# The US Naval War College—The Navy’s “Home of Thought”

by Evan Wilson

**T**he origins of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, can actually be found in Charleston, South Carolina, during the Civil War. The war had begun in Charleston, and the city soon became one of the most active blockade-running ports on the Atlantic seaboard. For both symbolic and practical reasons, it became a priority target for Union naval forces. For three years, the Navy besieged and blockaded the city, involving more than sixty warships and 40,000 men. Yet in January 1865, Charleston still stood defiant, having resisted the Navy’s best efforts. Why had the Navy failed? William T. Sherman thought he knew, and he told anyone who would listen. While occupying Savannah after his famous “March to the Sea,” Sherman met with the young commander of USS *Pontiac*, Stephen B. Luce, to coordinate the coming operations in South Carolina. Sherman told Luce that the Navy had been going about attacking Charleston all wrong. By cutting Charleston off from the interior, he could cause it to fall into Union hands “like a ripe pear,” without a battle.<sup>1</sup> To the amazement of Luce, that was precisely what happened, bringing an anticlimactic end to the longest siege in American military history.



*Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce*

1 Stephen B. Luce, “Naval Administration III,” United States Naval Institute *Proceedings* (December 1903), 820.



*The US Naval War College was established in 1884 on Coasters Harbor Island, a 92-acre site in Newport, Rhode Island.*

Luce later recalled that upon hearing Sherman’s explanation of the military situation, “the scales seemed to fall from my eyes. . . . It dawned upon me that there were certain fundamental principles underlying military operations, which it were well to look into; principles of general application whether the operations were conducted on land or sea.”<sup>2</sup> The search for these principles led Luce to establish the Naval War College in 1884. In the intervening two decades, Luce had traveled around the world, where he learned about other efforts to educate officers and professionalize the study of war. Through correspondence with like-minded officers, he learned about the Prussian staff system and the first attempts to study naval history systematically in London. Sherman had provided the inspiration, but the final product was Luce’s own. The Naval War College was to be, Luce said, “a place of original research on all questions relating to war and to statesmanship connected with war, or the prevention of war.”<sup>3</sup>

Notably, the Naval War College was not designed to train young naval officers in the basics of their profession—that was the job of the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and navies had been educating officer trainees like that for centuries. Before Luce, there did not exist a plan for educating mid-level officers for the challenges of high command as admirals. Luce’s idea was to broaden their minds so that they could tackle the

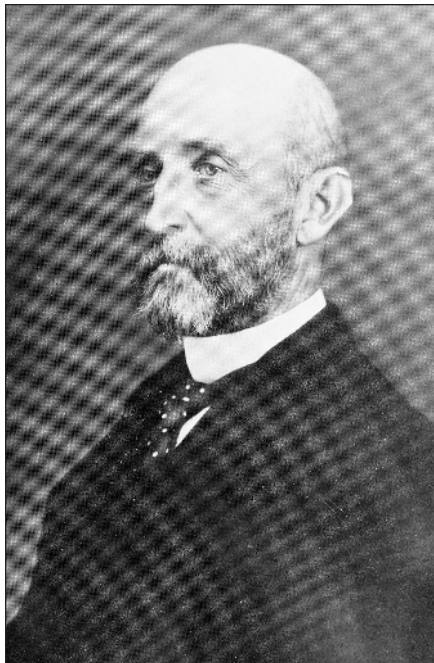
great questions of war and peace. He was one of the founding fathers of what today we call Professional Military Education, often abbreviated PME. What Luce wanted was a place for mid-career officers to uncover the principles of war and strategy; most of all, he wanted a place where officers had an opportunity to think.

Luce’s innovative institution confused many of his colleagues, and the college encountered resistance in its early years. Many naval officers preferred practical training to classroom study. The turn of the twentieth century was an era of rapid technological change at sea, as submarines, mines, torpedoes, aircraft, and radios were all introduced or substantially developed. Some officers argued that they should learn how to handle these new technologies rather than read about battles in the age of sail. Another avenue of attack on the college came from officials in Washington, who disliked having an important hub of naval thinking and strategy so far away.

The Naval War College survived, though, in large part because of one of Luce’s first appointments to the college, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, who took full advantage of the opportunity to think and to write. He compiled the lectures he had written for the students at the college into a book entitled *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*. Published in 1890, it became an immediate best-seller and one of the most influential works of naval history ever written. It also validated Luce’s vision for the Naval War College as a place of serious scholarship of use to the Navy.

2 Ibid.

3 Stephen B. Luce, *The Writings of Stephen B. Luce*, ed. John D. Hayes and John B. Hattendorf (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1975), 39–40.



*Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan*

Luce and Mahan demonstrated that the Naval War College was viable, but it was William S. Sims who led the college into its most famous era. He became the college's president in February 1917, but he was soon dispatched to Europe to command US naval forces operating there. After the war, he resumed his presidency and transformed the college into a research laboratory with a practical focus. Sims's charisma and fame helped encourage officers to attend courses in Newport, with the result that most of the Navy's admirals at the outbreak of the Second World War were graduates of the college.

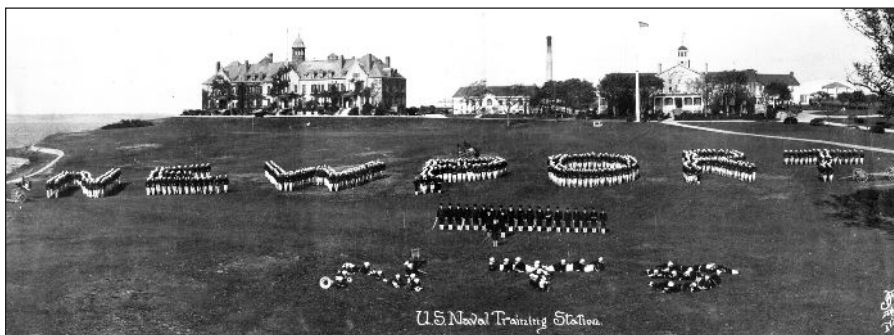
Newport was the home of the Navy's North Atlantic Squadron, and Sims saw an opportunity to connect the college's curriculum more directly to the needs of the fleet. Today, we would call Sims's vision



*Admiral William S. Sims*

*War gaming has been an important component of the Naval War College curriculum since 1887. Its value in maritime leadership development remains strong; the Naval War College conducts more than 50 gaming events per year, ranging in variety from complex, multi-sided computer-assisted games to simple, single-sided seminar games.*

that of a think tank: offering expert advice on matters of real-world concern. As Japan grew ever more menacing in the Pacific, naval planners began to consider how to fight a war thousands of miles from major bases. Students and faculty at the college worked to identify the challenges and think through the possibilities. Faculty members were influential in developing the modern practice of war gaming. Chester Nimitz, who attended the college in 1922–23, later said that because of the work he and his peers had done in Newport, “nothing that happened during the [Pacific] war was a surprise—absolutely nothing except the kamikaze tactics.”<sup>4</sup> While Nimitz was playing to his audience—he said that in an address to the Naval War College in 1960—it nevertheless indicates that the college seemed to have found its *raison d'être* during the interwar years.



*The Naval Training Station and Naval War College, 1923.*

<sup>4</sup> FADM Chester W. Nimitz, USN (Ret.), Address to the Naval War College, October 10, 1960, RG 15, Box 30, Naval War College Archives.



As it matured, the college also settled into a regular rhythm. Officers studied naval tactics, participated in war games, and listened to lectures from distinguished outside speakers. They researched in-depth studies of classic naval battles, like Trafalgar and Jutland, and produced theses on tactics, logistics, and strategy. Faculty and staff worked on broader issues of interest to the Navy, leading to, for example, the publication of the short book *Sound Military Decision*. A planning manual, it helped students prepare for problems they were likely to encounter when they assumed command, and it was widely distributed and read throughout the Navy during and after the Second World War.

Raymond Spruance, the four-star admiral best-known for his role in the Battle of Midway, served as the college's president in the postwar years, giving some indication of the importance the Navy placed on it.



*"The Big Three" (l-r) Admirals Nimitz, Ernest J. King, and Raymond Spruance were all graduates of the NWC.*

But by the end of the 1950s, the Naval War College seemed to have lost its way. Students, most of whom were active-duty naval officers, regarded their time in Newport as an opportunity to play golf and see their families, away from the rigors of deployment. It was not an unreasonable conclusion. Though Newport's Gilded Age heyday was behind it, the area was still rightly known as the playground of the rich and famous. President Eisenhower vacationed in Newport regularly while in office, and Jacqueline Bouvier married John F. Kennedy there in 1953.

A series of reforming admirals in the 1960s sought to transform the Naval War



*Admiral Stansfield Turner*

College into a more academically rigorous institution, culminating in the tenure of Stansfield Turner from 1972 to 1974. Turner, who later became the director of the CIA under President Carter, made extensive revisions to the curriculum, many of which are still in place today. In the Strategy and History Department (now re-named Strategy and Policy), students examined case studies like the Peloponnesian War that deliberately forced them outside the contemporary issues of Vietnam and the Cold War. That case study is still used today. Turner wore academic regalia to convocation, signaling the college's renewed seriousness of academic purpose, and he encouraged students to think critically rather than to regurgitate school answers to set questions.

Turner's "revolution" was one of three major changes to the Naval War College during the Cold War. A second was the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which reorganized the Department of Defense and, importantly for the college, made Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) a requirement for officer promotion. The Naval War College was one of the places officers could go to complete that requirement. The Goldwater-Nichols Act also more fully integrated the Naval War College into the broader network of JPME institutions, which today includes, among others, the National Defense University plus the war colleges of the other services:

the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama.

At the Naval War College today, there are three core departments: Strategy and Policy, Joint Military Operations, and National Security Affairs. The academic year is divided into trimesters; students move from one department to the next to complete their JPME Phase I or Phase II certificates. Phase I students tend to be officers with about ten years' experience, while Phase II students usually are coming off of their first command with fifteen to twenty years of experience. As a result of Goldwater-Nichols, students also increasingly come from services other than the Navy. Only about a third of all students at the Naval War College are US naval officers; there are substantial delegations of Air Force, Army, Marine, and Coast Guard officers, as well as civilians from the State Department, intelligence services, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and other branches of the federal government.

These American students, numbering usually about 500 per year, are joined by international students—a third major innovation of the Cold War years. The first foreign students arrived in 1894, when two officers in the Royal Swedish Navy attended a three-month course. In 1956, under the leadership of Chief of Naval Operations Arleigh Burke, the college dramatically increased its outreach to allied and partner navies. A new international course began with representatives from 23 navies, a number which has now grown to about 100 per year. The 2020 class includes officers from the Royal Bahamas Defence Force and the Gabonese navy alongside representatives from Britain, India, and Japan. The Naval War College's role in international affairs is not limited to education, as every two years it hosts dozens of chiefs of the world's navies at the International Seapower Symposium.

The college is located on Coasters Harbor Island in Narragansett Bay, just north of Newport's harbor. When Luce founded the Naval War College, the only building standing was the former Newport poorhouse, which had no heat or plumbing. Today, that building houses the Naval War

College Museum, which is free and open to visitors and includes exhibits not only on the history of the college but also on the maritime history of Narragansett Bay. As the college outgrew the poorhouse, it colonized the southern half of the island, increased its international role, and broadened Luce's vision. Since 1989, some international students and all American students have been awarded master's degrees upon graduation, and the college is accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education. Fundamentally, though, it



*Swedish officers in the first class to include international students, 1894. The Royal Swedish Navy's Baron Ugglas is third from right and Commander Flach is on the right.*

remains distinct from civilian institutions. Its mission is "to educate and develop future leaders by building strategic and cultural perspective and enhancing the capability to advise senior leaders and policy-makers."<sup>5</sup>

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*The Naval War College's 2019 graduating class included 318 resident students of the Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, federal civilian employees, and 110 international students. Additionally, 1,080 students completed coursework through NWC's College of Distance Education programs.*

*the English Historical Review and the Naval War College Review. Before coming to Newport, he was the Caird Senior Research Fellow at the National Maritime Museum (UK) and the associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University. He holds degrees from Yale, Cambridge, and Oxford. He is grateful to Professors John Hat-*

*tendorf and Craig Symonds for their comments on this article. Hattendorf is the lead author of the authoritative history of the college, Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the US Naval War College (Naval War College Press, 1984) and is in the process of revising and updating it. Interested readers should look for it in bookstores soon.*



*Founders Hall is home to the Naval War College Museum. This building was the original site of the college and is where Alfred Thayer Mahan first delivered his lectures on sea power.*

<sup>5</sup> US Naval War College, "Our Mission," accessed 16 Jan. 2019, at <https://usnwc.edu/About/Mission>.