



*Home Squadron: The U.S. Navy on the North Atlantic Station* by James C. Rentfrow.

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In his first historical monograph, *Home Squadron*,<sup>1</sup> James Rentfrow explores the modernization of the US Navy in the period leading up to Spanish-American War (1898). He concentrates on changes in doctrine, strategy, tactics, and ship inventory that helped the Navy transition from a fleet of loosely governed wooden ships of sail operating independently and randomly, to a fleet of steam-powered steel warships working coherently as a singular fighting unit. Using the operational records of the North Atlantic Squadron (NAS) between the US Civil War and the Spanish-American War, the author attempts to clarify how the American Navy secured commercial interests abroad and took significant steps toward supremacy on the sea.

Studies of naval hegemony inevitably refer to Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Rentfrow adopts the master's view that sea power is indispensable to maintaining a geopolitical position of preeminence and authority. But he presents Mahan's ideas about naval modernization with a twist, writing that the NAS's "identity was becoming more that of a fighting unit and training organization and less that of an administrative body that facilitated assignment of ships to individual missions by the Navy Department. Years before Mahan popularized the theory of sea power, NAS operational patterns were laying the foundations for the development of a national battle fleet" (63). The "navalist" movement in the United States—"Manifest Destiny at Sea"—depended on the development of doctrine, tactics, and command hierarchy at the squadron level vis-à-vis sailor identity rather than at the administrative level. The author believes the origins of the US Navy's ability to "govern and execute multi-ship fighting capability [are] not covered in the historiography" (1). He disregards the likelihood that this lacuna in the literature actually reflects a dearth of pertinent source material.

The book begins with the birth of the modern Navy in the squadron exercises in 1874–81 that propelled the wooden navy into a steel, blue-water navy. By the Spanish-American War, the author explains, the Navy had metamorphosed from a means of commerce raiding to a battle fleet capable of taking on rival navies. This coincided with the orchestration of the tactical exercises of the Navy's three squadrons—European, South Atlantic, and North Atlantic.

Rentfrow notes that the "Virginius Incident" made abundantly clear the inferiority of the American fleet to the Spanish Navy. Consequently, Navy policymakers began to consider ways to modernize the US fleet. After failed experiments with weapons systems like ramrods and torpedoes, Navy officials resorted to the obsolete use of battle lines as their chief strategy. Fleet exercises off the Florida coast in February 1874 featured loose formations moving more by whim than any set policy suggestions. Thereafter, a change from column to line formations signified "the move from protecting commerce to military force" (62). The stress on rapid response and fighting with speed in precisely organized fleet

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1. Based on his 2012 Univ. of Maryland PhD dissertation: "The Squadron under Your Command: Change and Construction of Identity in the U.S. Navy's North Atlantic Squadron, 1874–1897."

2. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1683* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1891).

formations marked a watershed moment of “organizational awareness” as the US Navy broke from the antiquated propensities of the past.

Although tactical changes certainly helped usher in the change from independent commerce raiding to engaging enemy ships in consistent, unified movements, it remains unclear whether the move to coordinated fleet maneuvers was more a tactical than a practical matter. Working as a cohesive unit depended on modern strategies that presupposed what Rentfrow calls “organizational identification.”

The author portrays achieving organizational awareness as a tediously slow, seemingly unstructured process of material changes in the Navy. The tactical unit exercises pioneered in the later 1870s raised many doctrinal questions about the manner of waging modern naval warfare. While Rentfrow cites cases of rear admirals and other naval officers facilitating progressive changes in the American Navy, there seems to have been no consistent underlying plan. Either that or a lack of available sources prevents Rentfrow from identifying just who was behind the change from wooden to steel navy strategy.

Navy officials in the last quarter of the nineteenth century recognized that the wooden warship was obsolescent and that a changeover to steam-powered ironclads was a given. In light of the perceived geopolitical threats radiating from Haiti, Mexico, and Central America, the US Navy was authorized to add four new steel warships to its arsenal in 1885. This “naval renaissance,” as the author calls it, was the principal change in American naval command and strategy between 1875 and 1885. For Rentfrow, the creation of a quick-response navy required coordinated tactical exercises and training in emergency maneuvers and fighting as a fleet (68). The North Atlantic “Squadron of Evolution” was the first squadron able to “move outside of the usual boundaries and geographical restrictions to cruise and train together” (82).

While Rentfrow establishes the need for a new, more modern navy in an era of imperialistic globalization, distinguishing practical from tactical decisions made to streamline the Navy is another matter. Since the extant sources do not specify any deliberate tactical decisions made within the Navy Department, Rentfrow argues that the evolution of naval organization reflected not “structural or material changes” (38) made by ranking naval officials, but a bottom-up emergence of organizational awareness from below decks. He does not make a compelling case for this position.

Rentfrow credits Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce with having “a direct effect on strategy change” (50), but tactical fleet exercises occurred even as Luce and, later, Rear Adm. James Jouett were still focusing naval diplomacy on commercial interests (39). The author draws on Luce’s personal papers to show that fleet exercises were a vital element of professionalizing the Navy in the late 1870s and early 1880s. These exercises, developed during Luce’s time at the Naval Academy, were the centerpiece of the Navy’s strategic shift from commerce protection to constituting a national military force (62). But, by the late 1880s, students at the Naval War College were devising the tactics governing fleet exercises. As late as 1890, the rare coordination of fleet movements was in response to operational necessity rather than the result of preconceived strategic changes. Rentfrow finds evidence of a change in naval ideology in competitions, mostly intra-squadron races between 1895 and 1897 (112).

The book’s last chapter clarifies the responsibility of officers and sailors for organizational evolution in the Navy. A balanced budget, new ships coming on line, and the absence of geopolitical threats outside the Caribbean allowed the ships of the NAS to travel and train together in 1896–97. Rentfrow believes the “tactical squadron” was born from the maneuvers executed during sailing from port to port—maintaining speed, keeping distance, and turning in unison. In these limited exercises and off-hours socialization between crew members the author identifies the engines of modernization in the US Navy.

By its focus on the operational changes that marked the transition from defense-oriented ships of sail to a steel navy capable of executing offensive strategies on multiple fronts, *Home Squadron* points the way for further historical inquiry into the US Navy's contributions to what James Rentfrow labels "imperialistic endeavors" (2).