

Uncommon Knowledge

Naval Intelligence Doesn't Know Its Own Navy—Here's How to Fix It

“We don't do Blue.”

It's a well-known phrase in naval intelligence. It means, simply, that intelligence professionals don't report on U.S. naval units' operations, combat capabilities, or doctrine—our “Blue” forces. That's not our job, as the thinking goes. Naval intelligence is supposed to focus on the adversary—on “Red” forces.

Unfortunately, however, this phrase has mutated into a larger problem. “We don't do Blue” has turned into “We don't *really know* Blue.” Today, indeed, navy intelligence officers lack a basic understanding of U.S. naval combat power.

There are a few reasons for the erosion of knowledge: Naval intelligence officers primarily focus on adversary capabilities; the creation of the Information Warfare Community has levied additional qualification requirements; the naval intelligence career path lacks consistent, broad exposure to U.S. naval combat capabilities; and most important, the lack of a peer naval power over the past thirty years have all contributed to this decline.

Yet operational commanders deserve intelligence professionals that can clearly say what an adversary is doing, what the adversary is capable of doing, and what they might do in the future. This has never changed. It's the intelligence profession's charter—our purpose. Thus, any conversation about adversary intentions and behavior must consider how our adversaries view U.S. naval power and operations. Absent this insight, intelligence professionals stand up and spit out enemy weapon ranges and basic “Red” tactics and doctrine. Intelligence officers, then, are only describing, in many cases, one part of the story.

Naval intelligence must develop a better understanding of our own naval forces if the community wants to provide sound assessments to the commanders they serve. It will require going back to the basics. It will require senior naval intelligence professionals to consider significant and costly changes to the community if we want to prepare the Fleet for the future.

Back to Basics

A basic understanding of U.S. naval combat power is essential to the intelligence profession. Anecdotal evidence shows, however, that junior and senior officers lack key knowledge of U.S. naval combat capabilities, platforms, weapons, and sensors.

For example, we recently conducted an informal survey with twenty junior intelligence officers (ensign to lieutenant). We asked four questions about U.S. naval weapons. First, what is an SM-2? Second, what is its range? Third, what is a MK-48? And finally, what is its range?

The results were not surprising—disheartening, yes—but not surprising. Only half of the officers could identify an SM-2. Only three officers could identify a MK-48. And of the twenty, only two came even close to the range of each weapon. Incidentally, those two officers were former surface warfare officers.

These are not niche weapons. The SM-2 (Standard Missile-2) is the navy's primary anti-air missile. Almost all U.S. destroyers and cruisers carry it in the Fleet.¹ Moreover, the MK-48 is the navy's only heavyweight torpedo in the U.S. inventory. Indeed, it's the submarine force's primary weapon for both antisubmarine warfare and antisurface warfare.

And it's not only junior intelligence officers that lack basic knowledge about U.S. naval combat power. Mid-grade and senior naval intelligence professionals lack sufficient knowledge as well.

Just look at some of the anecdotal data from the U.S. Naval War College's Halsey Alfa group.

Halsey Alfa is a “collaborative student-faculty research effort at the Naval War College that employs military operations research and free-play war gaming to examine in detail high intensity conventional warfare.”² Each year, the group is composed of about fifteen officers, O-4 to O-5, predominantly joint warfighters and intelligence officers, to “analyze and war-game theater level contingencies.”³

For two years, Halsey Alfa gave the incoming students a 60-question test. The test was intended to establish a baseline of their professional knowledge. Questions covered modern warfighting systems, relevant geography, and basic scientific principles relating to weapons and sensors. The questions on the test included such things as “the range of common weapons like the Harpoon or DF-21D missiles, the conversion factor for kilometers to nautical miles, the location of Kadena Air Base, the relative frequency of S-Band versus

L-Band on the [Radio Frequency] spectrum, and the difference between a [low earth orbit] and a [geo-synchronous] satellite orbit.”⁴

The test results revealed that intelligence officers, on average, scored 65. Hardly a passing grade.⁵

Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy does not have any empirical data regarding what officers know beyond basic knowledge derived from limited testing in their own tactical-technical specialties. There are no tests of joint warfighting knowledge at any level in the Navy. We are thus dealing with anecdotal evidence and some limited test data—none of which is encouraging.⁶ The data, however, from the Halsey Alfa test does mirror some of our anecdotal observations over the years, most recently reflected in our informal survey.

The irony of course, is that while intelligence professionals struggle to learn about threat capabilities, many U.S. naval platforms will remain in service during an officer’s entire career. It strikes us as reasonable then, that intelligence professionals should learn a basic blue combat capabilities early in their careers, retain that knowledge, and not allow Red knowledge to rule the roost.

It’s Not All About Red

Just trying to memorize and understand the complexities of a foreign navy is a daunting task. Today’s naval intelligence officers must keep up with a massive array of sophisticated threats from Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, while also understanding different threats confronting U.S. Navy sailors engaged in the Global War on Terrorism.

Still, basic knowledge of these threats is not enough.

Today, the U.S. Navy must be ready to execute a wide range of missions anywhere in the world on a moment's notice. Operating in such a complex environment underscores the critical role that naval intelligence plays. Navy leaders must decide what capabilities to buy, and where and how to operate with limited resources. They deserve the very best information to inform those critical decisions, and it falls largely on naval intelligence to provide it.

Providing that information means both understanding the mindset of one’s competitors in order to anticipate their actions, as well as one’s customers and the difficulties they face in order to anticipate their needs.

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The former is a fundamental competency of intelligence. It is impossible to anticipate the moves of an adversary without understanding what they are trying to accomplish and why. In many cases, the U.S. military and the U.S. Navy in particular have been a fundamental driver behind the development of adversary doctrine, capabilities, and tactics. Our existence prompts scrutiny, close study, and a response. When we field a weapon, they field a counter; and when they field a weapon, we field a counter, and so on. But attempting to predict adversary actions without understanding their own threat perceptions is a losing proposition.

The latter, the anticipation of our customer's needs, requires a longer explanation. Intelligence professionals often deliver the bad news—we describe adversary threats and how they could challenge our capabilities or oppose our objectives. Good intelligence officers focus on both an adversary's weaknesses and strengths. The highest application of intelligence, however, requires something more.

A deep understanding of one's own capabilities and limitations raises the intelligence officer's game to a new level. This allows us to do three things. First, officers with this knowledge can quickly and effectively prioritize threats. Second, knowledge of our own forces' strengths allows us to identify adversary weaknesses most vulnerable to exploitation. Third, the perspective of both Blue and Red operations allows us to discover adversary intelligence successes. During the Cold War, intelligence officers' deep knowledge of Blue and Red forces led them to suspect Soviet penetration into navy operations. They were later proven correct.⁷

Overworked staffs and senior decision makers, then, are no longer left to sort through everything on their own. Instead, they gain a valuable partner in arriving at the solution. The deliverer of "bad news" becomes a crucial asset in assuring the Navy's success.

The CNO's Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority 2.0 highlights that China and Russia "have been studying our methods over the past 20 years," and "are gaining a competitive advantage and exploiting our vulnerabilities." It is not difficult to imagine a Chinese or Russian naval officer scoring better than 65 on the Halsey Alfa test. Thus, we must build our Blue knowledge today to ensure the community retains a competitive advantage.

Build Blue Knowledge

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There are a number of things naval intelligence seniors can do to improve the community's knowledge of U.S. combat power. None of them are easy. Nevertheless, any of these recommendations could build a basic working knowledge of U.S. naval weapons and capabilities.

First, include a robust section on U.S. naval combat platforms and weapons in the Information Warfare Officer's Personnel Qualification Standard. A primer on U.S. platforms at an early stage in an officer's career will set a baseline on U.S. capabilities that one can build on over time. Intelligence officers do not broadly cover this material in their career because there is simply too little time. It is on the officer to study on their own to learn Blue capabilities of the squadron or ship they serve, often cramming the material as quickly as possible.

Second, rotate more intelligence officers to independent deployments of destroyers and cruisers. Today's navy is often operating disaggregated and distributed across the globe. The surface navy could consider buying more operational intelligence billets and investing them on their ships. This would provide intelligence officers with more time at sea, exposure to a larger portion of the surface navy, and in turn assist independent deployers and their intelligence specialists with a better understanding of regional threats and adversary naval capabilities. It would also align with the CNO's Design 2.0 and Distributed Maritime Operations strategy. In a communication-degraded environment, it is time to consider pushing more folks out to the waterfront and not sitting in intelligence centers.

Third, create a mid-career intelligence milestone course that is long (weeks if not months), upholds a testable standard, ranks and rewards students, and includes a robust discussion on Chinese, Russian, North Korean, and Iranian threats, and finally, invites tactics instructors to discuss U.S. Naval combat capabilities. The current method of training is to treat everything a la carte. It is a course here and a course there in preparation of whatever job comes next. This does not provide the community with a method to determine if a standard of knowledge is maintained. If aviators and surface warfare officers require mid-level operators to demonstrate their knowledge in a classroom, simulator, or when they return to the cockpit, then the intelligence community should look in the mirror and consider the same.

Fourth, final, and surely contentious, is regularly rotating intelligence officers from ship's company (aircraft carriers, amphibious ships) during long maintenance periods to other underway units or an established intelligence career course. Currently, naval leadership tries to have it both ways. They maintain intelligence officers onboard ships during maintenance availabilities and then expect them to quickly develop deep knowledge of regional threats in a matter of months, prior to deployment.

During maintenance periods, the officers and enlisted supervise intelligence spaces, process clearances, support maintenance, stand watch, and attend schools and conferences, often in the local area of the ship's home port—indeed, all important work. However, there is a significant degradation in intelligence knowledge during maintenance periods. Workups are intended to get the intelligence department back up to speed and ready for deployment. But soon, naval intelligence will find that as adversaries quickly modernize and field new weapons, workups will not be enough time to absorb the amount of information necessary to keep the commanders informed when deployment begins.

Conclusion

Now is the opportunity to assess the community's shortfalls and debate solutions on how to educate intelligence officers on blue forces. Top down solutions, and even the adoption of any of the recommendations included in this essay will not, in themselves, solve the community's knowledge gap.

The best intelligence officers will do what they have always done: they will educate themselves and find a way to broaden and deepen their knowledge on both Blue and Red capabilities, often on their own time. Or as one retired intelligence officer and a current instructor in joint warfighting put it: "Do not rely on the institution of the military to meet your educational needs, or even inform you of what those are. Failure of the institution to educate you in the critical elements of your profession is no excuse for your failure to educate yourself."⁸

¹Zumwalt Class destroyers do not currently carry the SM-2. See “Navy’s Futuristic Mega-Destroyer Tests New Weapons.” Hope Hodge Seck, *military.com*. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/05/07/first-live-missile-firing-conducted-navys-stealthy-mega-destroyer.html>

²<https://usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Advanced-Research-Programs/Halsey-Alfa-ARP>

³ Jim Fitzsimonds, (2019). *Professional Illiteracy*. Unpublished manuscript.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Fitzsimonds (Personal communication, 09 July 2019); Intel officer average was 65 (albeit a limited data set). The high score over two years was 76 by a Hornet pilot with intense interest in a broad range of military subjects. Even more disconcerting is the overall class average of 19 out of 100.

⁶ J. Fitzsimonds (personal communication, 09 July 2019).

⁷ Christopher Ford and David Rosenberg, *The Admirals’ Advantage*. (USNI Press, Annapolis, MD). 2005. p192. Former Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence, Richard Haver, then an OPINTEL analyst, was concerned that the Soviets has penetrated U.S. Navy codes. The arrest of John Walker Lindh spy ring confirmed his suspicions.

⁸ Fitzsimonds, *Professional Illiteracy*.