

Introduction

On 5 August 1914 *The Times* published a message from His Majesty King George V to Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet. It read:

At this grave moment in our national history I send to you, and through you to the officers and men of the Fleets of which you have assumed command, the assurance of my confidence that under your direction they will revive and renew the old glories of the Royal Navy, and prove once again the sure shield of Britain and of the Empire in her hour of trial.¹

A few days before the massed ships and vessels of His Majesty's Royal Navy (RN) were assembled. As this armada left for its wartime anchorages in Scotland it stretched over four miles. The sure shield of Empire continued in its role for the next four, arduous years. The Great War could not have been won by naval action alone, but it certainly could not have been won without it. The primary purpose of the RN was to deny the freedom of the sea to her enemies and preserve her own freedom – an essential element if the full capacity of the empire was to be brought to bear. It supported British and allied armies in the field, enforced a rigid blockade of the Central Powers whilst steering a delicate diplomatic course with neutral countries whose own freedoms this activity affected, ensured the secure transportation of troops from Britain and her Empire, controlled communications, intercepted German commerce raiders and secured Britain's imports in the face of unrestricted submarine warfare.

This book seeks to provide a new model for exploring issues of morale and discipline. At present the cannon of literature exploring the issue of morale focuses almost exclusively on land forces. However, the nature of the Royal Navy as an institution and the nature of the war it fought means that these studies cannot be directly transferred to the sea service. Whilst utilising some of the qualitative and quantitative methods already used to explore morale in other contexts, this book will argue that in

¹ *The Times*, 'The King to his Fleet', 5 August 1914.

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order to consider the question of morale and discipline in the Royal Navy a new model needs to be developed which considers the question in terms of a dialogue between competing discourses, utilising the contemporary language of discipline in order to shed light on key questions of how it was that the service was able to absorb indiscipline with marked success, rather than trying to mould it to fit the language of morale. In so doing it will not only provide a new methodological framework for understanding of morale, but also of military discipline and leadership.

The 'experience' of trench warfare has entered British national memory and culture in all its manifestations. From *Journey's End* to *Blackadder*, the First World War on land has ceased, since the end of the Great War itself, to be the preserve of historians alone.² Its significance and place in the collective memory has become such a fundamental part of the British consciousness that it has become not simply part of British literature, but of British comic entertainment. Yet the war at sea has faded from public imagination since the end of the Second World War. Indeed it is rather telling that the current coverage of the centenary by even such stalwarts as the BBC is still being largely presented in terms of the 'pity of war' trope which has prevailed since the 1960s, and which has largely ignored the Senior Service and its role. Given the nature and scale of trench warfare it is little wonder that such an imbalance developed, but when we consider the predominance of the navy and its place in the pre-war national consciousness this difference becomes more striking. The Royal Navy had been inextricably linked, in people's minds, with the British Empire and was a fundamental part of British national identity; as shrouded in myth by civilian admirers as by the navy itself.

Given the importance of the RN in pre-war British society and politics, the relative paucity of studies on the institution's cultural or social experience of war is particularly surprising. The RN was the Senior Service; it was fundamental to British national identity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, this position was challenged by the conditions of total war. This challenge took the form of a dialogue, both internal and external. It was not exclusively a war-time phenomenon; there had been calls to reform lower-deck conditions in the decades leading up to war. However, the particular exigencies of war such as dramatic changes to civilian working conditions, the onset of war weariness and the influx, albeit relatively small, of men into the service for the duration, put an increased strain on the debate and helped to refocus it.

² Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

The dialogue evolved between competing positions: ‘paternalism’ from above, and ‘democratism’ from below. These contrasting interpretations can best be thought of in terms of ‘discourse’.³ Whilst this study has identified numerous individual positions on lower-deck grievances, it has identified only two discourses. The first, which this study will term ‘paternalism’, was used by the service authorities whose interests lay in the preservation of the existing hierarchical structure. This was a coherent structure which governed the way in which officers conceived of leadership and welfare issues, and which was underpinned by the functional flexibility of a nominally rigid set of disciplinary systems. The second can be called ‘democratism’ and was used by sections of the organised lower decks. Like paternalism, democratism was a coherent structure, though it was less fully developed. Democratism encompassed elements of self-determination, egalitarianism, and liberalism. It called for gradual political and social reform which tended towards individual freedom and democracy. In essence democratism was a response to the infantilisation which was the product of paternalism. It was also part of the clash between the ‘service’ and ‘professional’ aspects of the navy, and the institution’s attempts to reconcile the two. This conflict between profession and service was not exclusive to the Royal Navy, but it was one which affected the RN acutely, and had from the moment the navy rejected the press gang. ‘Service’, like fellowship, was an alternative to a fully professional, contractual system or to one where collective bargaining was recognised as a necessary part of the system. The navy was a career choice, a skilled organisation which a man could enter for up to twenty-four years, learn

³ In his 1987 work on the 1806 Parliamentary Committee’s Enquiry into the ‘state of the woollen manufacture of England’, John Smail provided a definition of ‘discourse’ which this study uses. Smail tightened the notation of ‘language’, which he believed was not precise enough and open to too many interpretations, in favour of the concept of discourse (as originally expounded by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) but with slight modifications. Smail used the term to refer to a set of concepts, values and practices that define, inform and justify a set of social relationships. Discourse is not determined by objective reality, but in fact discourse makes its objects. ‘Thus, discourse is not descriptive, as language is, but prescriptive ... When a clothier describes the woollen industry, his discourse shaped each other, each making a different economic world. John Smail, ‘New Languages for Labour and Capital: The Transformation of Discourse in the Early Years of the Industrial Revolution’, *Social History*, 12:1 (1987), 49–71 (pp. 51–54).

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a trade, gain respect, and which, in the pre-war period, offered a comparatively generous pension. However, it was still run on the premise of duty and service, and servicemen had few ‘rights’ as they are now recognised. There was no representation, and strikes were prohibited. Whilst conditions in civilian life were worse than those in the RN, this tension was academic; however, once civilian conditions improved and some of these ‘rights’ were recognised by employers and the government, the conflict in the RN raised its head.

The underlying discourses framed the way in which each group understood its own position. By exploring these two we can see the way in which they ‘talked through’ each other. Each side could look at exactly the same issue and see essentially the same problem, but their understanding of the underlying cause of that problem and how best to address it was inherently different because of these two prevailing discourses which shaped their perceptions. This failure to fully understand or empathise with the position of the other is fundamental to thinking about discipline because it is this that brought about indiscipline and the feelings of discontent and unrest which were present in the fleet in this period with varying degrees of severity. By looking at discourse we are looking at more than just language, we are looking at effectively two ‘world views’ and we can begin to get a sense of both the gulfs and the similarities between the two.

Bound up with the clash of discourses was the notion of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The RN had managed to construct for itself an illusory sense of autonomy and isolation from civil society which was still evident on the eve of the Great War. Bred by the physical isolation of the fleet and consciously perpetuated by the cult of the navy, it was more constructed than real. The Admiralty sought to perpetuate the idea of the navy as somehow separate, and in so doing it endeavoured to strengthen the Admiralty’s own authority over the service. Throughout official publications, Admiralty records and private records continual reference is made to the ‘traditions and customs’ of the Senior Service. The Royal Navy was an institution with a strong but nevertheless nebulous sense of self-identity focused around the myth of autonomy and its ‘traditions and customs’. These ‘traditions and customs’ clearly had a tangible element: the daily grog ration, dunking when crossing the equator, or the youngest member of the crew becoming captain for a few hours on Christmas day, to name but a handful, and such practices went a long way to forging group identity through the sharing of group rituals which marked them out from civil society. However, the oft-cited phrase ‘traditions and customs’ was far more deeply ingrained and is difficult to analyse. It was a concept which was offered by commanders as a caveat to reform, and was the phrasal epitome of the notion of ‘insiders’.

Outside influences were seen as injurious to ‘traditions and customs’. These had no clear definition, but it did not need one, it was simply another self-defining mechanism which embodied notions of isolation and autonomy.

The notion that the navy was apart from civil society was, however, illusory. Strategic changes in the decade preceding war had brought the bulk of the fleet into home waters. Culturally, the RN had been adopted as a key part of the public sphere. Mary Conley has argued that the professionalisation of the service from the mid-nineteenth century accompanied a change in public perception of sailors from wayward drunkards to respectable family men and defenders of nation and empire, and that naval men became an integral part of British national and imperial identity.⁴ In *The Great Naval Game*, Jan Rüger has argued that the North Sea was a stage on which British and German ships, military or otherwise, could perform for domestic and foreign audiences.⁵ The celebration of the navy, in both countries, became a new form of public theatre with profound consequences for domestic and international politics. He outlines the changes that had taken place in the ceremonial aspects of naval theatre, the primary purpose of which was no longer the disciplining of crews, but rather the public acclamation of the monarch.⁶ What is more, this transformation was welcomed by naval authorities in both Britain and Germany.⁷ The mass media transformed navies into a commodity which could be bought, and ensured that naval spectacle was no longer the preserve of a limited few – new technology meant that geography and social status no longer dictated the audience. Naval theatre was the means by which the relationship between the military and civil worlds could be played out for public consumption; it was the means whereby divergent ideas of nationhood could be reconciled.⁸ This cultural construct was important in the context of pre-war Europe because it was an age in which navalism and Social Darwinism became conflated, and in which the construction of an image of power, the cult of the navy, was arguably more important than actual fighting capabilities.⁹ The Admiralty were capable of manipulating the relationship between the

⁴ Mary Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack. Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), particularly chapter 4.

⁵ Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72–82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 165–175.

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masses and the institution of the navy, whilst at the same time continuing to see the inner workings of the service as separate.

The navy's role had shifted with changes in the European political situation, and the main body of the fleet became increasingly confined to the North Sea and other home waters.¹⁰ With sailing ships men could be away on six-month tours without ever touching land. In contrast, steam needed coaling stations which necessitated regular visits to anchorages. With this increased time spent in port and the concomitant amount of time spent in direct interaction with civilians and dockworkers, especially when combined with the receipt of daily newspapers and frequent letters from home, sailors could no longer be separated from trends in society at large, or from politics. Just as with the army, the act of combat, or association with its immediate aftermath, distinguishes the fighter from the civilian; however, in the case of the Royal Navy and the war it fought, this gap began to be closed at a time when civilian society was also undergoing immense change.

Whilst this book argues that the First World War was the culmination of the destruction of the myth of naval isolation, and whilst this is certainly objectively true, there was a sense in which the service at all levels continued to feel a sense of separateness from wider British society – and indeed strove to maintain the separation. Some of the veterans interviewed in the 1970s went so far as to claim they were unaware of what was happening in civilian life. Men like Arthur Ford felt that 'politics, religion, anything what happens in civilian life didn't appertain to us at all. Our life was totally different.'¹¹ However, this sense of separation can also be found in the dialogue between the discourses of paternalism and democratism. Crucially, previous academics working on lower-deck unrest, like Anthony Carew, have failed to recognise both that the process was a dialogue, rather than simply a lower-deck assertion of rights, and that this was an internal dialogue with both paternalism and democratism looking for an internal service solution to the areas of contention. Whilst both were undoubtedly influenced by external events, both sought to construct the debate within a strict service framework, professing to reject non-service methods. Each 'side' feared the influences being exerted by 'outsiders' on the other because it risked upsetting this delicate service dialogue.

Despite acute wartime pressures the Royal Navy was able to contain its wartime manifestations of indiscipline. The service mutinied,

¹⁰ Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–1919*, Vol. 1: *The Road to War, 1904–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

¹¹ IWM Sound Archives, Accession No. 719 – Ford, Arthur William.

but indiscipline never went so far as to threaten the fighting capacity of the RN during the war. Questions about how that was sustained are no less interesting because of the absence of a fleet-wide mutiny. This book will argue that the service was able to hold back indiscipline and fight on because of a subtle web of loyalties, history, ethos, traditions and customs, rooted in older notions of service. These were able to absorb emergent lower-deck discourse, seemingly influenced by home front debates, because these lower-deck concerns were more significant to naval leadership and command issues than historians have previously given credit. Most of the existing literature about military morale and discipline concerns the army, but that model cannot be read across services because of the inherently different nature of the service ethos and its experience of combat.

No study comparable with those of J.D. Fuller, Gary Sheffield or Alexander Watson has yet been undertaken for the Royal Navy.¹² For Sheffield, the crucial element in the maintenance of discipline and morale was the strength of officer–man relations in the British army. This reciprocal relationship was based on the exchange of deference and paternalism – an ethos which was passed on to temporary wartime officers. Whilst this relationship created a culture of dependency, Sheffield argues that this should not be overestimated.¹³ It is, for Sheffield, a relationship which paralleled British society.¹⁴ Whilst the paternalism identified by Sheffield is also found in the navy, his model is not directly transferable because of the structural difference between the two services. The British army of the Great War was a temporary one – the navy, by contrast, was structurally unchanged by the war. In addition, the structure of the officer corps and distribution of responsibility was fundamentally different. As Michael Farquharson-Roberts, has argued in a recent PhD thesis:

Naval leadership at the lower level is fundamentally different from that on land. Firstly and most obviously, at sea a sailor cannot run away ... and, leaders and led, [are] exposed to similar if not identical risks. More importantly is the qualitative difference ... A junior officer in the army had to involve himself with and manage his men in a way unthought-of in the navy; he had even to regularly

¹² J.D. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); G.D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer–Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000); Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹³ Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, p. 179.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 68–72.

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inspect their feet and oversee their rations. In a ship such was unnecessary; a naval officer was not required to man manage in the same way or to the same degree. Indeed, in a Royal Naval context ‘leadership’ is rarely used as a term in the primary sources until about 1931 and thereafter infrequently; the term used is ‘Officer Like Qualities’ often abbreviated to ‘OLQs’, which is nowhere formally defined.¹⁵

The exchange of paternalism and deference must also be reconsidered in the naval context of the early twentieth century as an active dialogue between discourses. Fuller, like Sheffield, also identified the relationship between soldier and civilian as critical to the maintenance of army morale. He used trench publications, in conjunction with more familiar sources, to form conclusions about how morale was maintained whilst being careful to assess the importance of the time spent behind the lines as well as at the front. Entertainments in the rear paralleled those found at home and helped to humanise the soldiers’ new environment, ensuring that ties with the civilian world were not severed.¹⁶ In so doing, Sheffield and Fuller have shed valuable light on our understanding of the essential strengths of the British army and of how the First World War was won. The importance of these issues in a naval context has already been recognised by writers such as Daniel Horn who analysed unrest in the German Imperial navy;¹⁷ however, the Royal Navy is no less interesting and important for the fact that it did not mutiny on such a scale.

The RN of the Great War was a largely professional force and the professional nature of the service meant that sailors had a different relationship with the navy to that which soldiers had with the army. Men enlisted for a minimum of twelve years with the option of a further ten. In peacetime it operated a nucleus crew system whereby the minimum number of men crewed a ship. In wartime the reservists were called up to provide a full complement.¹⁸ This meant that comparatively few men

¹⁵ Michael Farquharson-Roberts, ‘To the Nadir and Back: The Executive Branch of the Royal Navy 1918–1939’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter, 2012), pp. 8–9.

¹⁶ Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, pp. 175–180.

¹⁷ Daniel Horn, *Mutiny on the High Seas: The Imperial German Naval Mutinies of World War One* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1973).

¹⁸ Leaving aside for a moment any pernicious effects these men may have had on the discipline and morale of the fleet, their very presence had an impact upon the conditions of the regulars by making living conditions very cramped, and very cramped for four years! Generally the men lived on ship even when in port, except when their ship was in dry dock or when they were awaiting another commission, in which case they slept in barracks. Submarine crews slept outside the boat when in port, either on their depot ship or in barracks. With an allowance of only a few inches between hammocks, and absolutely no privacy, conditions on the lower deck of a wartime Royal Naval vessel were tough. The men lived, ate, relaxed and slept on their mess decks. Hammocks were slung wherever space could be found, and because of the watch system it was usual for men

were enlisted as hostilities only men (HOs); and many of them had particular specialism, such as radio operators.¹⁹ Compared to the army the RN had a long period of training and therefore a longer period of service socialisation.

The experience of life on board ship varied depending on the type of vessel – a submarine was a world away from a battleship – and the same applied in wartime, not simply because of the type of vessel, but also because of the type of operations on which it was deployed. Battleships spent considerable periods at anchor (especially from late 1916 onwards);²⁰ cruisers made frequent sweeps enforcing the blockade; destroyers, amongst other things, were engaged on convoy protection; monitors fought river wars in the Middle East and Africa as well as aiding amphibious landing and withdrawals; submarines worked to intercept enemy shipping; minelayers and minesweepers made frequent and highly dangerous sorties. Indeed the ex-trawler men who were engaged on this work had one of the highest mortality rates of any group in the British services during the war.²¹

Nor can the nature of naval battle be compared to those on land. Even when at anchor, ships were at constant threat of unexpected and unseen attack from new underwater weaponry or from accident. Crews operated under what would be unsustainable levels of stress had they not normalised the level of danger. Taken as a whole, ‘battle’ was a relatively uncommon experience for a sailor during the Great War. Battle when it came was sudden and comparatively swift. On larger vessels few members of the crew would even have seen the action; the physically compartmentalised surrounding of the ship reflecting the compartmentalised nature of the experience. When a ship sank it could do so within a matter of minutes. Magazines and cordite posed significant risks of explosion which could rip the ship in two. No one knew when battle might come; however, they knew what it might bring.

to have to attempt to sleep whilst another group perhaps played a game of cards on the table directly underneath them.

¹⁹ On the outbreak of war many men did volunteer for the navy, but not all were needed to man the fleet so the remainder were formed into an infantry division (the Royal Navy Division) and served on land alongside the army (although with a nod to naval tradition they were permitted to grow beards). See Douglas Jerrold, *The Royal Naval Division* (London: Hutchinson 1923).

²⁰ The main fleet base was at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, and was not the most inspiring of places unless one liked ornithology or Neolithic history. The inventive naval mind composed several ditties about the ‘delights’ of life in Scapa which frequently ended with the refrain ‘that Scapa hymn of hate’ (see Malcolm Brown and Patricia Meehan, *Scapa Flow: The Story of Britain’s Greatest Naval Anchorage in Two World Wars* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1968), p. 50 – poem entitled ‘Scapa Flow (A Hymn of Hate)’).

²¹ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War. British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 116.



Figure 0.1 Hospital admission photograph of Able Seaman W. Vicarage. Image from the Gillie British Patient File W. Vicarage – archive reference MS0513/1/1/ID2123

Figure 0.1 shows the hospital admission photograph of twenty-year-old Able Seaman W. Vicarage. He was wounded on HMS *Malaya* during the Battle of Jutland.²² His is the ‘face’ of naval battle. He had suffered cordite burns resulting in ectropion of both eyelids and the lower lip.²³ The whole of the nose and both alae were burnt away,²⁴ and his right hand was immobilised by the extent of the burns he suffered. In her article ‘Casualty Care during the First World War: The Experience of the Royal Navy’, Claire Herrick argued that major battle wounds were rare in the RN. Those that did occur tended to be laceration wounds, though burns and scalds were also common. According to Herrick burns were often fatal and almost always septic. When men survived severe burns the scarring was often painful and inflexible. Infection of wounds was as prevalent onboard as it was on the Western Front. Shock was also a feature of naval injuries. It was very common and most usually triggered

²² Harold Gillies, *Plastic Surgery of the Face* (London: Henry Frowde, Hodder & Stoughton, 1920), p. 357.

²³ Ectropion is the inversion of the eyelid. In the case of severe burns this can also happen to the lips.

²⁴ An ala is either of the lateral cartilages of the nose enclosing the nostrils.