ADMIRAL ISOROKU YAMAMOTO

A CASE FOR THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL READING

Official portrait by Shugaki Honma

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Introduction

Reading is a wonderful past-time which opens the mind to exploration and relaxation. Disciplined reading, which is reading with a purpose, is a chore. Finding the time to fit it into the complex mosaic of our lives is often difficult. However, disciplined reading is the lifeblood of professional development and military competence.

What role does professional reading play in a military officer's development? Some have argued that history has little to offer because technology is maturing too quickly and events are superseding lessons learned for them to be of any immediate value. This begs the value of a systemic approach to the application of "historical" knowledge to the military professional.[1] One may argue that "reading" is a redundant skill, yet reading with a purpose is a necessary tool that develops "the forward thinkers" of the future.

Many professionals today rely heavily on fast paced and technically based media for much of their information needs. Many of us have little time for the printed word. The multi-media have come to be the sole source of information to quickly justify our precepts and conclusions. However progress in any field of human endeavour must come with some deep thought, reflection, analysis and conceptualization to avoid superficiality. Analysis and conceptualization cannot be a process of simply ticking the box, to say "been there, done that, got the T-shirt!" The lack of time cannot always be the excuse as the limiting factor in decision making. Experience may offer the counter balance but many leaders do not necessarily have experience of a given situation. When time is of the essence then, where lives may be at stake, or where a nation's resolve matters, reading history may offer some insight. In order to use history and professional reading to its fullest potential, the professional must be able to juxtapose the present to the past, analyse the consequences and then conceptualize the way ahead.


Shokaku

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The Case of Isoroku Yamamoto

Military officers in particular need to reflect upon the value of disciplined reading. We cannot view it a lost cause. We need examples where disciplined reading and experience made a great contribution to strategic action. One such example may have been Isoruku Yamamoto; the Admiral of the Japanese Imperial Navy who orchestrated the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Though there is little clear direct evidence suggesting that Yamamoto was widely read, his career does offer insight that suggests he had a unique opportunity for development, synthesis, and evolution of a novel strategic concept for his time—the employment of aircraft carriers in a theatre of war. Yamamoto may have been simply an objective observer of his day who was open to the potential of synergies offered by new technologies because of time, place, and most importantly, professional reading.

The period following the Great War may provide some insight to Yamamoto's opportunity. The inter-war period was an era of prolific strategic thinking and writing. Many writers wrested lessons learned from the First World War in the hopes of defining breakthrough ideas that would lead to creating force structures of the future. Many also argued a dominant service view as the fighting services were bidding against one another for a limited share of dwindling budgetary resources in the inter-war years. This produced a running debate that was often fought in the popular and technical press. Yamamoto was exposed to this debate.

An ambitious naval officer; Yamamoto was brought up in the great tradition of the supremacy of the battleship. He was a world traveler and spoke fluent English.[2] As an up-and-coming naval officer, he was sent to the United States to study economics at Harvard University between 1919-1921.[3] While there he took a keen interest in aviation and, in particular, military aviation. Yamamoto was noted for being well-versed in matters of naval aviation.[4] Upon his return to Japan in 1923 and until 1925, he was director of a new naval air training unit. He was subsequently appointed Naval Attaché in Washington (1925-27). One of his duties in this position was to report on military advancements.

Most information of the day was gleaned from technical journals, magazines, and newspapers. Some have argued that this information was of little intrinsic value as it was played in the court of public opinion. Debating in the court of public opinion is a different character to that of debate within professional service. The court of public opinion appeals to the heart strings of a popular cause to swing the public's mood toward that cause. A professional service debate, however, must ensure that its arguments are based on fact—not fancy—as lives and national treasure are at stake, scarce commodities that are highly valued. Most military officers were likely biased and championed concepts and specific causes that supported their own particular service or strategic interests.[5] Yamamoto was different. He appeared to be more open and objective; and came to believe in the value of the aircraft carrier.[6]

In 1931, Yamamoto was promoted to rear admiral, became responsible for his navy's technical service, and learned to fly. As vice minister of the Japanese Navy he oversaw the building of two modern aircraft carriers, *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*.[7] He became increasingly convinced that future wars would be decided by air power. Yamamoto envisaged the necessity for immediate surprise for the neutralization of the enemy in future conflict and saw the aircraft carrier as the means to do so. Exceptionally well-versed in matters of naval aviation,[8] he argued for the cause of the aircraft carrier, which must have been exceedingly difficult given the cult of the supremacy of the battleship as the capital ship of the line. Yamamoto's argument was accepted by the Japanese Naval staff at the time.[9]


Zuikaku

Courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center

The Stage

Yamamoto had many sources for his development. The inter-war period following the Great War was a point of departure for strategic thinking about future war. There were many prolific and passionate writers who advanced significant study of military strategy on land, sea and air that was often conducted in the popular press. Some examples include Liddell Hart, J.C. Fuller, Guilio Douhet,

Guilio Douhet

William Mitchell, Heinz Guderian, Charles deGaulle and Hector Bywater. Their works often provoked heated discussion, debate and controversy for the study of military affairs during the inter-war period. Their works stimulated progressive thinking but despite new concepts, technologies or capabilities, many felt that the fundamental nature and reality of war had not changed. There would always be the factors of friction, fog, ambiguity, chance, and uncertainty. It was assumed that these factors would continue to dominate the future.[10] This was the crux of the issue for many correspondents. Many argued a "favoured" service view that offered what they felt was the best solution that mitigated these future factors, and uncertainty, at a lower cost.

This debate posed great problems for the readers of the day, including Yamamoto, who were left to sift through the details to sort the wheat from the chaff. The resolution is essentially a matter of the reader's objectivity and openness. A military professional must be a competent observer, but not necessarily an expert one. Although Yamamoto was well-versed in matters of naval aviation, he still mistrusted his grasp of naval air – sea operations.[11] Yamamoto knew, however, that the aircraft carrier was an untried and immature asset.[12]

Yamamoto was a gambler at heart, but he was not reckless. His affirmation of naval air power must have been premised on considerable reflection and analysis that was surely based on professional reading. The key to understanding Yamamoto is the consideration that his reading was not simply a matter of a service-centric interest, but that it was also broadly based in

Billy Mitchell

Ostfriesland

other areas beyond his specific technical and professional interests. Yamamoto would not have been entrusted great power if he did not have the professional trust of his peers and government. Significantly, he not only challenged conventional wisdom but had the daring and audacity to propose significant change.

Why was Yamamoto so sure of himself? It may be that he based his concept on his synthesis of readings from many intellectual influences including Generals Guilio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and Billy Mitchell. This idea is not without merit. All were widely written about and quoted in the popular press. Yamamoto had the opportunity as a keen observer both as a student and as a professional officer to garner this knowledge. Guilio Douhet was one of the first to express a number of ideas in his work, *The Command of the Air*. Mitchell, a contemporary of Douhet, was as passionate in his advocacy for the championing of air power. Both Douhet and Mitchell debated in the court of popular opinion. Like Douhet, Mitchell's passion tended to grate on his peers and others within their defence community.[13] However, their view of the air force's role differed considerably. Douhet preferred a balanced development of capabilities in air power with offensive and defensive capabilities in a balanced approach to ensure mastery of the air that exploited air power in a quest for victory. On the other hand, Mitchell believed in the value of strategic bombing and supremacy of the air and sought opportunities to demonstrate that power.

Mitchell's first opportunity came on July 21, 1921 when he demonstrated the value of air power by the sinking of the ex-German battleship, Ostfriesland with six 2000 pound bombs. Mitchell had hoped that this demonstration would clearly illustrate the value of air power as he was seeking a mission for his fledging air force. He was attempting to carve out a niche in the costal defence mission; which was the navy's domain. He hoped that the efficacy of his demonstration (arguably the first demonstration of an initial application of a precision engagement) would stir the nation and its leaders to his cause.[14]

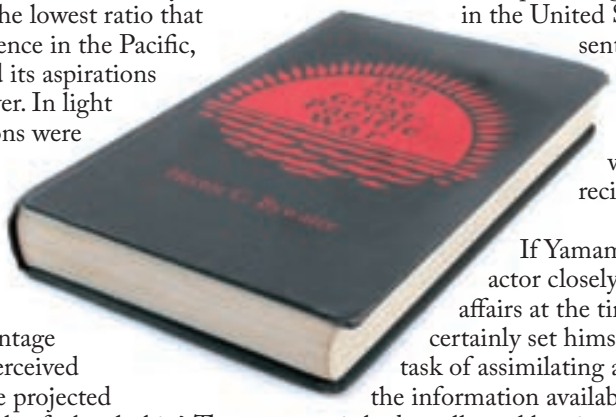
Why would a professional naval officer such as Yamamoto lend any credence or interest to this incident? The strategic debate was not just a purely academic exercise. It was being fought for public opinion. Air power caught the public's imagination as it offered the promise of an expedient and ready solution to the way for quick strategic victory in future wars. This must have played heavily to the sentiments of service personnel of all stripes, reformers and politicians of the day and to anyone whose primary duty was to comment on the service implications and national interest. Air power seemingly offered the promise of the "right solution," at an appropriate moment in time, with promises of resolving problems of manoeuvre, movement, and stalemate of trench warfare. More importantly, air power's solution seemed to be at a lower cost than other arms. A glowing economic argument was being made for defence at a lower price. The surgical precision of the air strike also appealed to the public who were enamoured by a scientific approach that promised minimized impacts and expeditious wars. More importantly, it was Yamamoto's duty as Naval Attaché to report, analyse and comment on the events of the day.

The public sentiment at the time was open to an advancement of revolutionary concepts. It was an era of a rapid change, new technology, and more importantly the public was looking for a panacea to stem prolonged warfare with a demand for reduced defence spending. Historically, however, there was little experience or precedent for the employment of air power as it was a new and open field. The airplane was being cast as the latest challenge to the supremacy of the great surface ships. Mitchell's demonstration was certainly setting the stage for controversy. Air power enthusiasts argued that the battleship was a thing of the past. But the "big ship" proponents countered by claiming that Mitchell's demonstrations were unrealistic because he staged his demonstrations on stationary targets that were undefended. This prompted a furious debate and the resulting furor accomplished two things; it helped promote the aircraft industry and may have initiated the development of the aircraft carrier.[15]

As mentioned previously, at this time Admiral I. Yamamoto, then a Captain, was the Japanese Naval Attaché in Washington. The controversy around this issue must have been noticed, at least as a matter of a national interest, by this ambitious naval attaché. Coincidentally it may have situated his thoughts to the need for

mitigating the naval arms reduction treaties of his day. Japan had agreed to a naval arm's limitation of 5:5:3 ratios with the United States and Great Britain in the Washington Naval Treaty (Five Power Naval Treaty) of 1922. Japan enjoyed the lowest ratio that limited its naval influence in the Pacific, which greatly reduced its aspirations for dominant sea power. In light of this treaty, conditions were ripe for Yamamoto's considerations for alternative solutions to Japan's naval deficiency. What would possibly give Japan a strategic advantage in a world that still perceived true naval power to be projected through the gun barrels of a battleship? The answer may have been the aircraft carrier, which promised potential for naval aviation in particular.

There are few sources suggesting this synthesis but William H. Honan *Visions of Infamy* offers some insight. He reported that Yamamoto read Hector C. Bywater's work, *The Great Pacific War*, while in Washington. Bywater was a naval correspondent and author who was considered by many to be the pre-eminent naval correspondent of his time. Some have argued that Bywater's *The Great Pacific War* became the template for Yamamoto's future battle in the Pacific.[16] Upon his return to Japan two years later, Yamamoto presented a lecture that virtually adopted Bywater's ideas/concepts from *The Great Pacific War* as his own; thus he must have taken Bywater's work very seriously. Honan cites that Japanese agents stationed in the United States discreetly sent reports about Bywater's latest book to Tokyo. Yamamoto was one of the recipients.[17]



If Yamamoto was a key actor closely following military affairs at the time, he must have certainly set himself down to the task of assimilating and synthesizing the information available especially if it had a collateral bearing on naval affairs. A considerable amount of research, reading and synthesis of information must have been required on subjects beyond his professional expertise and interests.

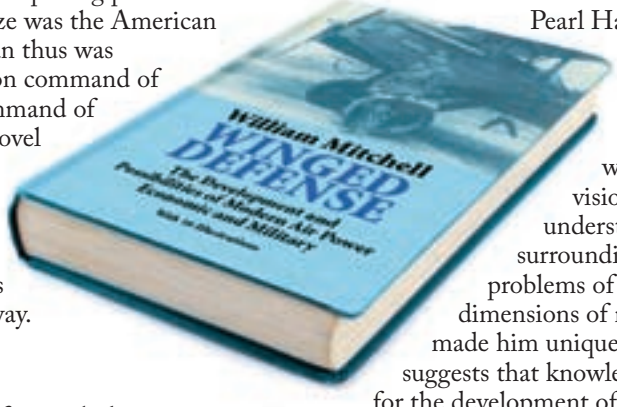
To Yamamoto, a scholar, actor and observer of these events, the solution may have been self-evident. Mitchell's demonstration in the public press may have been the key to Yamamoto's thinking. Bomber aircraft sank something that was considered by many as invulnerable. But air power was land-based and, based on the technology of the day, had a limited range. This limitation had to be resolved. It is possible that Yamamoto saw the aircraft carrier as the resolution of that limitation.

Nations experimented with marrying these two technologies. The results in the beginning were very desultory. The aircraft carrier was limited in power projection by the state of emerging aircraft technologies, the weight or arms that could be borne, limited doctrine, and the platform itself. Moreover there was the problem that current service doctrine that was based on the primacy of the battleship, which was considered to be the principle unit of naval power projection. But Yamamoto had a reason to see that these weapons systems, along with tactics and doctrine, evolved. It is also possible that the Naval Treaty of 1925 forced Japan to consider the aircraft carrier.

Yamamoto may have perceived an opportunity but there is no direct evidence to suggest that he considered the issue of air power in a naval

context. There is, however, anecdotal evidence that was found post World War II that suggests that Yamamoto's thinking was influenced by events that he observed while Naval Attaché. When his closest friends and members of his naval staff were interviewed many cited the Japanese translation of Bywater's work as a prominent document that was circulated amongst Japanese naval staff. All but one recognized Bywater's name and the work entitled the *Great Pacific War*.[18] Further Takagi, a confidante, said Yamamoto took a number of hints from American strategic thinking from his time in the United States. In Takagi's opinion, the work that had the most profound inspiration on Yamamoto was not Bywater's *The Great Pacific War* but rather William "Billy" Mitchell's book *Winged Defense* which was published in 1924 while Yamamoto was Naval Attaché in Washington.

It becomes clear then that Yamamoto was greatly influenced by the works of at least two strategic writers. Consequently, we may deduce that Yamamoto read very broadly both in areas of professional arms and ancillary interests. The ultimate proof surely lies in the initial success of his planning and consequent results of the Pearl Harbor attack. Significantly, he employed the aircraft carrier in the opening phase of battle whose, ultimate prize was the American carrier fleet. His plan thus was premised not only on command of the sea but also command of the air. This was a novel approach and could not have developed if he was not broadly read man who synthesized his plan in a systemic way.



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Clearly there are definitive linkages to air power by career, education and events that suggest Yamamoto may have considered the problem in the context of both naval and air power. By inference Yamamoto may have been able to synthesize a variety of ideas into a unique amalgam that led to a new revolutionary stratagem for Japan using ideas from stock military concepts, history, reading and prevailing technology. These were blended to achieve air and naval strategic thinking which provided a novel solution for the Japanese Pacific naval strategy in 1941. He merged both air power and naval power in an attempt to develop a strategy that would achieve decisive victory at the outset with the intent of convincing the United States and others of the futility of further hostilities. Once the American fleet was annihilated, it would be pointless. He would not only have command of the sea but also command of the air. These events were crucial for the eventual conquest of land and march across the Pacific.

Yamamoto's plan was a calculated risk premised on the hope that the entire American fleet would be tied up in Pearl Harbor on one particular day. His tactics were the product of a synergy that merged the elements of three services in his planning. It was certainly novel for its time as the resultant power projection was certainly greater than the sum of the individual parts. Unfortunately for Yamamoto, a significant portion of the American fleet, the aircraft carriers, were at sea that day (December 7, 1941). This fleet posed a counter-threat to his whole operation and served to upset his strategy.

Yamamoto's initial victory at Pearl Harbor was neither total nor decisive. However, it could have just as easily gone the other way had the entire American fleet been tied up in Pearl Harbor on that fateful day. Such is luck or the fog of war.

Still, Yamamoto was a man of great vision. His fundamental understanding of the issues surrounding the very real problems of managing the three dimensions of modern warfare made him unique. Yamamoto's career suggests that knowledge was a key factor for the development of his strategic plan. This implies the power of the thinking man and the power of professional reading.

Yamamoto was quite likely a man before his time. He was pointing toward the future of jointness and combined arms. It is certainly an interesting speculation that a man with an open mind, not bound by rules of the conventions of his service, yielded results beyond measure. This certainly places Yamamoto in a class of his own and may be a lesson for military professionals who follow. ■

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Notes

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7. Spartacus Educational, "Biography Isoroku Yamamoto," http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWyamamoto.htm (accessed May 1, 2008).
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16. Ibid., 179.
17. Ibid., 177-8.
18. Ibid., 272.