



# “LIKE A FISH OUT OF WATER: A SAILOR AT THE ARMY WAR COLLEGE”

By Henry Wicks and Ron Granieri July 28, 2020

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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to A BETTER PEACE the WAR ROOM podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri** Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the WAR ROOM. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Although its name may suggest otherwise to the uninitiated, the U.S. Army War College is not just for army officers. Each year dozens of representatives of the other armed services join the resident and distance classes of the War College encouraging dialogue between the services and representing the ideal of “jointness” at the strategic level that we expect students to uphold when they leave Carlisle to take up their future command responsibilities. Athletic and budgetary rivalries notwithstanding, that commitment to “jointness” even includes naval officers. So, what's it like to be a representative of the Navy at the Army War College? How, if at all, do the approaches of the services interact and contrast with each other? Our guest today is **Commander Henry Wicks** of the War College Class of 2020. Commander Wicks is a U.S. Navy Submarine Officer with operational experience on both fast-attack and ballistic missile submarines. He has deployed to the CENTCOM, EUCOM and SOUTHCOM AORs to include a support tour to the U.S. Army in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2009. Following the Army War College, he will be commencing the Perspective Commanding Officer Pipeline to be Commanding Officer of Fighting Mary, the USS Maryland SSBN 738 as Commander of the Gold Crew. We're interested in our conversation today about naval strategy and the strategies of naval officers at the U.S. Army War College. Welcome to A BETTER PEACE, Commander Wicks.

**Henry Wicks:** Thank you, Sir. It's good to be here.

**RG:** So, I want to ask you just generally, what are your impressions of being a student at the War College?

**HW:** Actually, it's been a very rewarding experience. I know when I first came here, when I was coming here from the previous Navy tour I was at, they were saying I'd get a lot of grief and that

things will be very different, and we do get a little bit of grief whenever Army, Navy are playing anybody, any kind of sports event, and some good-natured...

**RG:** It's a good thing they didn't play this past year, right?

**HW:** Exactly. [laughter] And some good-natured ribbing. But actually, it's been interesting because I've actually seen less differences than maybe some of the other naval officers had said I would see and part of that was maybe just having worked with the Army previously, but in a lot of respects, the way the U.S. military approaches things kind of cuts across services. Now we do have some of our own service specific impressions, but a lot of it I found, actually, it seemed very similar to what I had worked with in the Navy—the ideas about taking care of your soldiers, or my case, sailors, and working on the mission seem to cut across service lines.

**RG:** For those who are not themselves former students at PME, how much input did you have in selecting the Army War College as your Senior Service College?

**HW:** So, I was actually able to have, it sounds like a little more input than some of the other services do. The Navy's approach to Professional Military Education is a little bit different. For the Army and the Air Force, this is kind of a required stepping stone, you must hit this at a certain point in your career in order to a move on to the next specific milestone. For the Navy it's a little different. We still require it before you go on to the O-6 commands, but we try to fit in at about this time in our career but as it kind of works with just our sea and shore rotation. Because sometimes you'll get extended on the ship or in the aircraft squadron that you're in. And so, you may not hit a specific year milestone, but you'll like get it somewhere in this time before you move on to the more senior levels.

**RG:** Right. And so, when you arrived this past summer, did you already have an idea what your next command was going to be or did you just discover your assignment to the Maryland over the course of this year?

**HW:** I actually discovered my assignment to the Maryland over the course of this year but I was pretty sure that I was either going to be pretty quickly put into the Prospective Command Officer Pipeline following the War College, or depending on the needs of the Navy, they might move me to a staff job that they needed my War College basically credentials and the PME experience I got here to be able to fill that job before I moved on to prospective commanding officer.

**RG:** But you came out of the water to come to Carlisle and you're going back in the water after you leave?

**HW:** Yes, Sir. So, it's actually been kind of nice to be at Carlisle because for the first time in many years I actually have a chance to see mountains, don't tend to be a lot of mountains right next to the ocean where the Navy has submarine bases.

**RG:** Truth. Okay well, to think about this, the War College talks about the purpose of professional military education at this level is to encourage tactically successful officers to develop the strategic perspective, become strategic leaders. How do you see or do you see differences in strategic outlook between say the naval ideas that you've brought with you to the War College and what you've been able to discover about other services' approaches to strategy?

**HW:** I do see some differences. The naval approach to it, and it's actually mostly contrasted between the Army approach. For the Navy we never really hold a piece of the ocean, it's not something that we are brought up as, you will you know, take this portion of the ocean and hold it and defend it, any of those kind of things. So, our perspective is it's always a matter of what level of sea control can you kind of have. Do you have very transitory sea control or do you have sea control that's sufficient that you can really do whatever you want right there or is it just enough so that you can move through quickly on your way to somewhere else? Looking at the Army and how they discussed different problems and discussed kind of their strategies, they definitely have to think about the okay, you have taken some ground, now what are you doing with that ground? What are you doing with the people who live there? How are you helping them? Is that the ground you wanted to take, those kinds of things. So, that was a different perspective for sure and it's interesting to think as well, talking with the Army about that, you can't just sail away when you're done doing whatever you're doing, you've taken something and now you have to try to make it better than when you started, so it makes you have to think about what are the second and the third and the fourth order effects of what you just did. In the Navy, for example, if I drop a depth charge in the water, there may be some fish and hopefully if they're trying to get a submarine, a submarine. There's not a whole lot of other consequences. I keep moving on, but for the Army, you have to think about what did you do with that ground now that you took it. I thought that was an interesting change in perspective.

**RG:** That is interesting. We talked about this a little bit before the program and I'm curious about this. You mentioned that you see that there are similarities, more similarities between dealing with sea power and dealing with air power in the same way that we are talking about, spaces that you can't grab and hold but you could try to control access to.

**HW:** Yes, Sir. For air power it's the same thing. It's a transitory level of control so what I tried to kind of bring my perspective when I was talking with my seminar and then in taking the Army's perspective as well so we could kind of share some knowledge there was, for both air power and for sea power, you basically need a certain level of control of that domain long enough to do some given thing, whatever that given thing is you're trying to do. It may not be very long term,

it may be pretty short-term, but then if you are taking ground, you have that ground, you now are thinking about how to hold that long-term. Moving forward I'd talk to a lot of the army officers about a new concept they had been developing over the last few years—multi-domain operations—and thinking about large-scale ground combat now is kind of the thing they're refocusing on after about two decades of counterinsurgency. And one of the things they were thinking about is a multi-domain operation, how to synchronize across all the domain and that's something that is a very interesting concept to me because it requires you to really think about, okay, some of these domains such as land, I'm going to be there persistently for an extended period of time. Other domains such as air or the sea, I'm only going to be there and I only need to be there in sufficient strength to do whatever it is I want to do right now and then I need to recover my forces from that because they can't stay in that domain indefinitely. I need them to move to a different place. So, I see a lot of similarities there and I tried whenever we were discussing inside of our seminar with the various Army officers kind of give some of that perspective about it's a transitory level of control you have. At some point you have to go back to base to refuel or resupply, you're not going to just hold that piece of water forever or piece of air forever. So, make sure that you time it and synchronize it so that when everything shows up, it's when you want it to show up and it's for the right effect.

**RG:** Thinking about the comparative element, the issue of keeping and holding is one thing. I'm also thinking about the realities of command. If you command a ship, you might have a similar number of men under your command, a number of sailors under your command that a comparable army officer would have, but the difference is, when you're on the ship, you are cut off from everybody else. If you're commanding a battalion, that battalion might actually have some kind of contact with other battalions. But if your commanding a good-size ship with a similar number of sailors, you're a little more cutoff. Do you think that makes the command responsibilities of a naval officer on a ship fundamentally different from the command experiences and command responsibilities of an army unit?

**HW:** I think it does make some differences. One of the biggest ones I can think of is you have to first take care of the ship before you can do any other mission. The ship is not just there to provide an effect for The Joint Force or the Navy, it's also the home and the kitchen and the repair and resupply. It's pretty much everything right there so you have to make sure that the ship is okay before you can move on to higher level missions and things like that. I know talking with some of my Army officer colleagues, they have other units that are kind of integrated to support them and those units are very directly tied in in terms of, hey, the resupply is coming at this time or this is who's in charge of protecting the base while you go out and do this. When you're on a ship, all that's kind of self-contained. Now, for a surface ship that's conventionally powered, you do still have to get resupplied with oil and things like that to keep steaming out at sea but the first thing you have to do in terms of command responsibilities is make sure, hey, have I taken care of all the things I need to do just to get the ship to the right place and make sure the people are fed,

watered, that we've actually had a chance to get sleep, all that ahead of time. And then once you finally get there, then you can finally start to do things to affect the area outside of your own small little ship. So, I think that's a big difference in that command responsibility is, you got to kind of take care of the ship first before you can move on to executing any mission for anybody else.

**RG:** Have all of your experiences been with submarines since you've been in the Navy?

**HW:** They've not actually. I did a tour, we call it a disassociated tour. I did a tour with COMPHIBRON 4, so I was on some amphibious assault ships. We deployed with a Marine expeditionary unit, so I got to see kind of the resupply side of that being tasked with doing operations for somebody else in that deployment was to both EUCOM and then CENTCOM and then was in the opening days of Operation Odyssey Dawn. So, saw a lot there about interacting and again, kind of that delivering effects at a certain time and place and then how that worked with the higher headquarters and then at the lower level for us, individually, going okay, we have to make sure we get resupplied at this time so we can support the mission that we're doing later on tonight for a higher headquarters like AFRICOM or somebody like that. And then separate from that as you mentioned in the introduction, I also did a tour as part of an embedded training team in Afghanistan in 2009 which was a very interesting experience because I'm a submarine officer so what do I know about teaching the Afghan Army? But it turned out that a lot of things, in this instance, I was kind of tasked with teaching them kind of base maintenance and things of that nature so a lot of it came down to just basic things that we and U.S. military almost take for granted in terms of sustaining your base functions, in terms of, make sure the lights stay on from electrical standpoint, you have clean water, you have sanitation set up, those kinds of things. That's the kind of stuff that I was able to kind of help train the Afghan Army on. That was just kind of common across the services like all the services in the U.S. military think about, hey, you got to make sure the bases are supportable, those kinds of things. Those have been some interesting and varied experiences and then obviously there's the submarine side of it.

**RG:** And so, when you had the position in Afghanistan, I'm guessing you were far from the water in Afghanistan. How long were you there?

**HW:** I was there for about nine months total and it was in Jalalabad, Afghanistan just outside there at a small forward operating base called FOB Huey and it was supposed to be a much longer tour, it was supposed to go about 12 to 13 months, but this was in 2009 and right towards the end of that time, what had been happening was the Air Force and the Navy had been sending people who weren't necessarily normally involved in kind of ground combat type operations, so not CDs or not combat controllers or people like that. And we'd been sending them as part of a support to the Army because the Army was obviously very busy in Iraq and Afghanistan, so things where we could provide assistance like, hey, we can teach them how to maintain bases

and things like that. We'd been tasked with those missions but right towards the end of 2009, the Army had started to kind of regress a little bit out of Iraq. They had more forces available to move into Afghanistan and so they were able to take over some of those missions that would have normally been more of a traditional Army mission and they were able to retrograde the Navy and Air Force officers back. So, at that point, the Navy was like, okay, well you are actually a submariner, so we're sure you like the mountains in Afghanistan, but we actually need you to get back onto the water so we can get our money's worth from you.

**RG:** That's very good. It's good when they make you do the things they trained you to do.

**HW:** Yes.

**RG:** One of the things, and I guess full disclosure, I should have mentioned that you are a student this year in seminar 20 which is the seminar at the War College where I am the National Security and Strategy faculty member, so I was there for this discussion when we talked about nuclear strategy in the seminar. One of the interesting, it's not attention, but one of the interesting, let's say, differences between the services is that while the Army has relatively little to do with nuclear strategy compared to the Air Force and the Navy. And so, I am curious, when you bring in discussions of nuclear strategy, especially as someone who is going to go and potentially command a ballistic missile submarine, is, how does the Navy integrate the study of nuclear weapons, nuclear strategy into its larger training for officers?

**HW:** So, for the Navy one of the big things we talk about is we hold about 70% of the accountable nuclear warheads, so that's under the new START Treaty, about 70% of those warheads that are deployable end up on Navy vessels and it just happens to be, which are all the ballistic missile submarines. And it just happens to be, that's just the way the U.S. nuclear triad is structured. There's the ballistic missile submarines. There's the ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles and then the ground-based bombers. Those two are held by the Air Force and then we have the submarines. So, it's interesting, the Navy, we spend a lot of time thinking about that because those ballistic missile submarines are one part of the nation's number one, for the Department of Defense, one of the number one missions of protecting the nation and that strategic nuclear deterrence. So, we spend a lot of time in the Navy in general just talking about, we have to make sure that stays funded. We have to make sure that we understand why that is important, we don't forget that. And that includes even the surface warfare officers in the Navy, that they understand, it's not as maybe glamorous as flying off an aircraft carrier or driving destroyers or cruisers, but that's an important mission that we have to make sure we fund. So, right off the bat that happens. And then I know, having talked to some other officers who are in the Pentagon, that also comes up for the Navy especially in its attention that we always are kind of dealing with as a service is, when you're doing any kind of recapitalization of that nuclear triad. So, right now there's been some discussion. I know in the news, there's been lots of

discussion up on Capitol Hill over the last couple years about, we're having to recapitalize a lot of the assets that are associated with our nuclear triad and it's very expensive. And in the Navy's case, the oncoming new ballistic missile submarine will be the Columbia Class and we need it because the Ohio Class, like the USS Maryland that I'm going towards, they're getting pretty old and so we need to make sure they can still do the mission, but we just need to make sure, you can't run them forever, so you have to buy that follow-on class. And it's pretty expensive because if you're assuming that the life of that ship is going to be 50-plus years potentially, you don't want to buy something that works out perfect for you today but is not really able to meet that number one mission 15 or 20 years from now. So, we're running into that tension just from a budgeting perspective and from thinking about how to pay for different things which it's interesting. So, we talk a lot at the higher levels, strategic, of that tension between acquisition and what do you want to buy versus what do you need to do today. In the Navy we've been having to really try to figure out how we're going to buy the balanced fleet that we need to execute that sea control overseas but also still be able to pay for this ballistic missile submarine that we have to buy, it's the number one mission but it's pretty expensive if we expect it to have to last for 50 years. So, that's kind of the long answer to your question of how it kind of always just shows up in the Navy.

**RG:** Right, well it's a good question. Of course, for the Navy, two of the Navy's most visible platforms, one is the ballistic missile submarine and the other is the aircraft carrier. They are expensive, big-ticket items. The aircraft carriers come in for a lot of, let's say, reconsideration lately as people think about what does it mean when one aircraft carrier is vulnerable to anti-access and area-denial strategies like cruise missiles and other surface-to-surface missiles that can neutralize the power of an aircraft carrier that is otherwise very expensive. Does the Navy have a sense of how they imagined the role of an aircraft carrier in force projection in the years to come, especially when I think about regions like the South China Sea which people talk about, where it's important to be there but it's going to be increasingly difficult to get there.

**HW:** So, I know there's been lots of discussion and open press about that. I'm sure we've run many classified war games on what we're going to do with it.

**RG:** Which we'll discuss here on A BETTER PEACE.

**HW:** Yeah. Just talking to what I've seen in the media, what I've seen in opinion editorials, what I've seen in various RAND studies or other think tank studies, the aircraft carrier still can fill a role for the U.S. Navy in the years ahead. It may not look exactly like it did now or it did in the late twentieth century, but it still gives you a pretty vital capability because it gives you flexibility of basing, especially with aircraft. So just the ability to reconfigure the armament on the aircraft and the ability to... so what that means is you can shift from doing some kind of a mission where you're doing air defense with the aircraft on the aircraft carrier, you can shift them

to a strike mission which you can use to do close air support or you can do potentially strategic strike types things to you can use them to help you with sea control in terms of escorting ships or enforcing a blockade or something like that. So, that flexibility of having an airfield basically that you can move anywhere in the world and you don't necessarily have to ask permission or spend years building up a diplomatic credentials with a host nation to be able to get your forces there has a pretty powerful effect for the U.S. military and the U.S. in general for our national security strategy. Where I've seen a lot of the discussion in that open source has been more in terms of what is the carrier air wing of the 21st century going to look like? I'm not a naval aviator but I know they have started moving forward with unmanned aircraft for the refueling mission which is pretty important because you don't want to run out of gas in the middle of the ocean because bailing out doesn't work out so well there. And they've started to move ahead with that, and I've seen a lot of interesting discussion about potentially using more unmanned aircraft to extend the range of the air wing and those kinds of things that kind of... There's always in naval warfare in really all warfare, kind of a balance between the offense and defense. Right now maybe looks like the defense from the land has a little bit of an advantage against the offense from the aircraft carrier but potentially shifting to some unmanned aircraft to kind of extend your range and get you a little bit further out so the defense can't hit you and you can still project power in looks like a way that we might be going with aircraft carriers into the 21<sup>st</sup> and maybe beyond centuries. But I think there's definitely a recognition in the Navy, overall, that some changes have to be made in terms of just how we—because aircraft carriers are expensive—how we think about how their composited on that air wing and what the aircraft carrier will be used for so that we don't get too reliant on one particular path that can then be negated with something much cheaper.

**RG:** Right. And that is always, as you say, when defense gets the upper hand over force projection, defense can be cheaper at least until a better form of offense comes up. One of the other issues that I wanted to talk to you about. Thinking about strategy, thinking about weaponry, is also thinking about the nature of command in the Navy and in the Army. We talk a lot at the War College, we talk about mission command, we talk about the initiative of the commander and the need for creativity and even we think at the higher levels of strategy, in what ways does the Navy approach the question of mission command and the role of the commander in reaching the larger strategic goals of the enterprise?

**HW:** So, it's very interesting to me the concept of mission command because, to myself, as a Navy officer or if you talk to a Marine Corps officer, another one kind of the naval services, if you talk to us, a lot of the things that have been recently published for the Army especially because they've kind of made a pivot back to what they say is mission command. To us, we would look at that and say, isn't that just kind of always how you're supposed to lead? Isn't that good leadership? But I think it's because of just our historical background at sea service is, we're used to once you go over the horizon, you can't really talk to anybody back home for help. So, 1)

who ever sent you over the horizon has to trust that you are trained, you're proficient, and that you have their intent for what you want to do or for what they want you to do. And then conversely with the people going over the horizon, you have to be very clear before you leave, hey, what is the commander's intent or at the strategic level, what is it that the civilian leadership wants me to do? What are they trying to get at? And they may not tell me a specific about how they want that solved, but they trust that I am understanding of their intent, that I know where they want me to go, what they want me to do and that I'll go out and do it. And so, it's interesting to me that the Army has been having this kind of discussion in their doctrine really over the last about three or... well more than that.... but what I've seen, especially coming up in discussions in class was over the last three or four years, kind of having that discussion about mission command. They've talked about it a lot and I think part of it has been interesting in terms of that discussion is also that, at one point in the doctrine, I was reading an interesting article by General Townsend about this, it was a military review. At one point in their doctrine, they got rid of the term commander control completely. They just use mission command and so that caused some confusion because that meant that both the philosophy, the doctrine, and then everything you did to actually execute command and control over your soldiers is all lumped up underneath mission command when mission command is really more of a command philosophy. There're different ways you can do it. You can do very centralized command. You can do a mission command type template, or you can do something kind of a mix in between. So, it's been interesting to see that. But the other interesting part of that that I'll say is for the Army officers, they've had a lot of discussion about the doctrine, what does mission command mean and those kinds of things. But with their experiences and doing counterinsurgency over the last two decades, every Army officer I talked to inherently knows what they would like to do and what they would like to do is that mission command of, I can't get a guidance from the Four Star General that told me exactly what I needed to do when I was a captain deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan but I knew, in general, what they wanted, overall, the country to look like. They wanted it to be safer. They wanted it to be better for the people living there those kinds of things and so they kind of just took up that, okay, well that's the overall intent so let me do what I can to get it. I think it's something that services all understand. It's just sometimes, when we put it into doctrine, when we try to codify it, it gets a little more tricky because then we start kind of arguing over wording as opposed to thinking about, well, isn't that already how we kind of operate?

**RG:** Right. And the idea is that you should be trained well enough in your mission so that you know what is expected of you when it's all over. And I guess that's, for somebody who's going to take command of a ballistic missile submarine, that is designed to be out of contact but to know exactly what its mission is supposed to be, that's a particularly important aspect of command. It's that sense of, it's not independence because you know what your mission is, but it is you're going to be expected to operate according to what you've been trained to do without somebody there to hold your hand.

**HW:** Yes, Sir. That's very correct. They talk a lot for that, for us especially in the Navy is, hey, you need to know what it is that the commander maybe one, two, three, potentially four levels up wants to know or wants you to be doing and then just use your best judgment to do that, and then with that, make sure you instill that into your subordinates as well because eventually you should be training your relief. So, give them the leeway, give them the overall guidance but don't tell them exactly how to do it. For that command and control side of the strategic deterrence where I'm getting ready to go, it's very much the commander's intent is very much, you have to see the specifics telling you, yep, it's time to go. Otherwise your job is just to be out there and maintain the deterrence and don't let anybody know you're there unless the boss wants you to know that for a specific reason.

**RG:** Right. Well and if it's about communication and it's about preparing people for strategy, we're delighted that you came to the U.S. Army War College to communicate to the rest of us about the experiences of being a Naval officer and how to be a part of the strategic force going forward. Henry Wicks, I'm afraid we are just about out of time for today, but I really do appreciate you joining us on A BETTER PEACE. Thanks for being here.

**HW:** Thank you, Sir.