

THE EVOLUTION OF NAVAL AVIATION AND NAVAL SPECIAL WARFARE

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Fleet Combat Camera, Atlantic

In the ongoing war against terrorism, the combined abilities of Naval Aviation and Naval Special Warfare (NSW) forces have become increasingly visible. While their origins are separated by nearly half a century, these two seemingly divergent warfare specialties actually followed similar paths and faced similar challenges in their development. Technology and politics have profoundly affected the growth of Naval Aviation and NSW, and the two titans now appear to be ripe for renewed interaction.

Tactical Influence

Naval Aviation: New warfare areas must wage uphill bureaucratic battles to prove their

validity. This is clearly seen in the early stages of Naval Aviation. The Department of the Navy acknowledged aviation in 1914 when the position of Director of Naval Aeronautics was established. Seaplanes emerged from WW I and were recognized as potentially useful machines to naval commanders. Progress in Naval Aviation procurement occurred in 1921 when the Bureau of Aeronautics was created and managed the acquisition and development process. A group of naval officers seized the opportunity and doggedly expanded the aeroplane's practicality by constructing a runway on top of a collier, which was completed in 1922. This experimental vessel, *Langley* (CV 1), proved its tactical validity in 1925, whereupon the Navy accelerated work

Facing page: it's a certain type of individual who welcomes what other people fear. Aviators and special warfare types share the choice to operate in extremely hostile environments. Naval Aviation and Naval Special Warfare enjoy a rich history of combat operations that have forged a close bond, exemplified in the photo above: SEALs from Naval Special Warfare Group 2 and HH-60H Seahawks from Helicopter Combat Support Special Squadron 4 train together to refine the tactics of special operations insertions.

Right, a UDT member recovers into a rubber boat during combat operations in the Pacific during the closing months of WW II. Below, UDT frogmen conduct a mission on the coast of Korea in 1952.



on CV 2 and CV 3.

NSW: If one had to pick the origin of modern Naval Special Warfare it could be said that the landing on Tarawa in November 1943 validated the need for pre-assault reconnaissance and obstacle-removal specialists. The Navy responded to the need by transforming the character of Naval Combat Demolition Units into Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT). Frogmen from UDT-1 and UDT-2 first moved onto the tactical scene in January 1944 at Kwajalein and Roi-Namur, blasting coral and eliminating invasion obstacles. The community

increased to more than 30 teams by the end of WW II and saw action throughout the Pacific and at Normandy. UDTs expanded their mission during the Korean War where their demolition expertise proved invaluable in clearing mines in Wonsan Harbor. In 1954 the UDTs were reorganized into UDTs 11 and 12 at Coronado, Calif., and UDTs 21 and 22 at Little Creek, Va.; however, UDT-22 was subsequently disestablished in 1956. Through the end of the decade, UDTs subsisted within the Navy like other specialty offshoots; they provided a necessary service but had little influence on war planning.

Operational Influence

Naval Aviation: The offensive capabilities of carrier-based aircraft were demonstrated in dramatic fashion in 1929 when aircraft from *Saratoga* (CV 3)

successfully attacked the Panama Canal in Fleet Problem IX. War games in the 1930s continued to suggest to those few not blinded by the luster of battleships that future naval operations would center on air strikes. The Navy took a big step in preparing for a two-ocean war on 14 June 1940 when Congress passed the Naval Expansion Act, then augmented it five days later with funding to build four more





From the early years through the late 1960s, the Navy had aircraft that could operate from the sea. The Curtiss F-boat, left, a seaplane, plows through Pensacola Bay, Fla., before taking off in 1918. Below, *Langley* (CV 1) was the Navy's first aircraft carrier. Her deck was the crucible of learning for fledgling carrier pilots.



Adm. John S. Thach, seen below as a lieutenant commander in WW II, was an innovative Naval Aviator who developed the "Thach Weave" tactic in WW II to increase the combat effectiveness of aircraft. Far right, Thach flies an F4F Wildcat in formation with another illustrious aviator, Lt. Edward H. O'Hare. Bottom, Navy carrier aircraft attack the Japanese carrier *Shokaku* during the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942.



battleships and start the *Essex*-class carriers, and authorized the Navy to possess 10,000 aircraft. The Navy had 1,194 combat aircraft in July 1940, but by July 1945 those figures had risen to 29,125. Vice Admiral Bill Halsey's 1942 raids on the Marshall, Wake and Marcus islands, as well as successes at the Battle of the Coral Sea and Battle of Midway, moved Naval Aviation from the arena of operational influence into the realm of strategic influence.

NSW: Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke recognized that future hostilities would involve guerrilla activities, and in March 1961 recommended forming naval special forces to counter the threat. In an address to Congress on 25 May 1961—shortly after the Bay of Pigs incident—President John F. Kennedy emphasized the need to “expand rapidly and substantially, in cooperation with our allies, the orientation of existing forces for the conduct of non-nuclear war, paramilitary



Left, President John F. Kennedy reviews the men of UDT-21 in April 1962. Below, *Forrestal* (CVA 59) leaves the pier at Newport News, Va., in 1955 as a Navy airship hovers nearby. It's interesting to note that in the jet age the Navy operated airships until 1962.

operations and sub-limited or unconventional war.” This led to the development of National Security Action Memorandum 57, “Responsibility for Paramilitary Operations” on 28 June 1961, which prompted each branch of the armed forces to form its own counter-insurgency force. The Navy utilized UDT personnel to form separated units called Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) teams. SEAL Teams 1 and 2 were commissioned in January 1962.

Throughout 1963 and 1964 SEALs operated in Vietnam as instructors to South Vietnamese frogmen. Their tasking steadily expanded and by 1966 SEALs were stalking Viet Cong in the Rung Sat Special Zone in Operation Game Warden. Integrated with Helicopter Attack Squadron Light (HAL) 3, Attack Squadron Light 4 and Patrol Boat, River forces, SEAL tactics soon gained respect. In support of efforts to disrupt supply lines from Cambodia, HAL-3 transported special warfare personnel on more than 6,000 missions during 1970.

NSW gained momentum after the Vietnam War, when in May 1975 Cambodians seized SS *Mayaguez*. The incident reinforced the need for quick-response maritime special operations forces.

Strategic Influence



Naval Aviation: Naval Aviation persevered after WW II despite attempts by the Air Force to denigrate the mission. Following the Korean War, Naval Aviation gained premier status in the sea service’s strategic planning. As the Cold War heated up, the Navy was forced to concentrate its efforts on building long-range, nuclear-laden bombers, as well as ships big enough to launch and recover them. Soon the massive jet-equipped carriers of the *Midway* (CV 41) and *Forrestal* (CV 59) classes emerged as the Navy’s undisputed mission and expenditure showpieces. In fact, the number of aircraft carriers increased from 17 in 1951 to 24 in 1961. Naval

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During the Vietnam War, VAL-4 flew the OV-10 Bronco, above, and HAL-3 operated the UH-1 "Huey," right, providing close-air support for SEALs. In addition, the *Seawolves* of HAL-3 transported SEALs in the Mekong River area of South Vietnam. Below, SEALs leap from a Navy patrol boat to raid a Viet Cong base in the Kien Hoa province of South Vietnam, 1968.



JO1 Tom Walton



Aviation held its ground during the Cold War, despite encroachments by submarine-launched ballistic missiles, by exercising its conventional capability in the form of thousands of Alpha Strike sorties and maritime reconnaissance flights during the Vietnam War. Following the collapse of the USSR, the focus of naval strategy became power projection, with aviation exemplified by the *Nimitz* (CVN 68)-class carriers, as the means to that end. A quote from the 1992 strategy statement “. . . From the Sea” illustrates the Navy’s general thinking for the past decade, and also hints at a greater interdependence between the Navy’s two primary “feet-dry” forces, aviation and NSW: “This strategic direction, derived from the National Security Strategy, represents a fundamental shift away from open-ocean warfighting on the sea toward joint operations conducted from the sea.”

NSW: Middle-eastern terrorism began to impact the American psyche in the late 1970s and culminated in the Iranian hostage crisis. The calamity of Operation Desert Rescue in 1980 accentuated the need to merge and standardize crisis response forces from the several services into a cohesive organization. In 1983 existing UDTs were reconfigured and redesignated as either SEAL teams or Swimmer Delivery Vehicle Teams. Shortly afterward, President Ronald Reagan decided to unleash Operation Urgent Fury. The preemptive assault on Grenada proved to be a real-life test of the new NSW organization.

The evolution of Naval Special Warfare forces was subject to the military and political forces that were on the move in the mid-1980s within the U.S. government. The Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 sought “to place clear responsibility on the commanders of the unified and specified combatant

Kitty Hawk (CV 63) crew members spell out their support of Operation Enduring Freedom on the flight deck of the forward-deployed carrier in 2001.

commands for the accomplishment of missions.” The approach established combatant commands to ensure unity of effort in using forces from the several services. The United States Special Operations Command

(SOCOM) was assigned the responsibility of “providing trained and combat-ready special operations forces to the combatant commander and when directed by the President or Secretary of Defense for exercising command of selected special operations missions.” Special operations forces were assigned missions of unconventional warfare, direct action, strategic reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, civilian affairs, psychological warfare, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and theater search and rescue.

The Navy was reluctant to relinquish its NSW forces to SOCOM but eventually complied in July 1987 when it established the Navy Special Warfare Command (NSWC) as the naval component commander to SOCOM. By this time there were about 1,300 SEALs among six SEAL teams, a 50-percent increase in personnel since 1983.

In the buildup for Operation Desert Storm, NSWC deployed an NSW group to the theater. Once in place, SEALs conducted strategic reconnaissance, early warning patrols, hydrographic reconnaissance, direct action, mine hunting, and combat search and rescue.

In March 2002 the NSWC added two new SEAL teams, bringing the total to four East Coast teams and four West Coast teams. The new organization is expected to improve training and deployment cycles by rotating teams and support units as integrated squadrons.

Converging Destinies?

In many ways 11 September 2001 has advanced NSW into the realm of strategic influence in the same way

Operation Enduring Freedom has demonstrated the benefits of a close bond between Naval Aviation and special warfare forces. Right, a Navy SEAL observes munitions being destroyed in eastern Afghanistan. Below, an SH-60F Seahawk leaves the motor vessel *Kota Sejarah* after dropping off SEALs and Marines conducting a search for illegal contraband and al Qaeda troops. Special warfare personnel were deployed aboard *Shreveport* (LPD 12). Bottom, SEALs from Naval Special Warfare Group 2 prepare to fast-rope from a Helicopter Combat Support Special Squadron 4 HH-60H Seahawk onto patrol boats from Special Boat Unit 20.



PH1 Tim Turner

Naval Aviation was propelled to the forefront by the events of 7 December 1941. The use of *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) in Operation Enduring Freedom is one example of increased interaction between aviation and special operations forces. While U.S. diplomats sought permission from regional allies to stage forces on foreign soil, *Kitty Hawk* was outfitted as a special operations forces airbase and deployed to the theater of operations.

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As Navy missions move further inland, Naval Aviation and NSW will become even more integrated; Navy helicopters dedicated to supporting quick-reaction SEAL missions is one example. Aviation and NSW were spawned from different eras and

for different purposes, but today stand side by side in the fight against terrorism. A renewed affiliation between NSW and Naval Aviation benefits both communities and revitalizes the Navy to manage asymmetrical threats in future contingencies. ✈

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) are acquiring missions at an astonishing rate. The presence of UAVs in Naval Aviation may be a boon for NSW and serve as a catalyst to merge the communities. To reduce the risk of civilian or friendly casualties, “eyes-on” identification is always prudent. Thus, as armed drones orbit overhead they may be controlled by, or depend on, NSW forces for target validation.

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