U.S. Navy, Brest, France, 1917: The Search for an Optimum Command Structure

Manley R. Irwin
Professor Emeritus
Peter T. Paul College of Business & Economics
University of New Hampshire

McMullen Naval History Symposium
U.S. Naval Academy
Annapolis, Maryland
September 15, 2017
I. Introduction

On October 15, 1917, an army transport departed from Brest, France. The vessel was on a return trip to New York. Two days later, a German U-Boat sent the S.S. Antilles to the bottom of the Atlantic. 170 personnel survived the sinking, 67 went down with the ship.¹

At the time, Rear Admiral William B. Fletcher, Commander of U.S. naval forces in France, operated from his headquarters at Brest. The Antilles sinking occurred under Fletcher’s watch and Admiral William Sims removed him from his French command and sent Fletcher back to the U.S. Fletcher requested a Board to investigate the rationale of his detachment. Immersed in the war at sea, Sims turned down Fletcher’s request. Two years later, Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, approved a formal Board of Inquiry.²

This paper examines the Board’s investigation into Fletcher’s fate. The hearing’s transcript covered over 1,500 pages. A dozen witnesses submitted testimony and endured cross-examination. The proceedings revealed one issue; namely, what was the optimum balance between a commander and his assigned staff? In responding to that question, Fletcher and Sims stood in apposition.

Admiral William Sims (Vice Admiral)

In April 1917, William Sims, President of the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, received a call from Josephus Daniels. Daniels regarded Sims as one of the outstanding service officers of the navy ordered Sims to London. He was assigned to cooperate with the British Admiralty. Dressed as a
certain, Sims boarded a transport destined for Liverpool, accompanied by his aide, Lieutenant Commander John Babcock. 

Sims had the reputation as an unorthodox officer. He first gained attention following the navy’s engagement in the Spanish-American War. The U.S. Navy handily defeated Spain’s antiquated fleet at Manila Bay. Sims later took the occasion to review the Navy’s gunnery record. Some 3% found their target. Concerned by a less than stellar performance, Sims looked for a remedy within the navy department. In seeking a meaningful reform, Sims was less than successful.

Sims’s frustration led him to take an audacious step. He sent a letter to the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. The letter triggered a response. The navy brought in civilian consultants dedicated to an administrative practice known as scientific management, a program developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor, a former machinist. The consultants reviewed gunner’s in action, broke down their actions into individual steps, eliminated redundant movements and reassemble the task into a new choreography. In a subsequent target practice, gunnery hits rose to 33%. Frederick Winslow Taylor, later witnessing naval gun fire, celebrated the application of his doctrine of management doctrine efficiency.

Sims did more than improve naval gunnery. He extended scientific management practices to the fleet. Frederick Taylor had long insisted that any organization, public or private, had become so complex that the management burden exceeded the capability of a single chief executive officer – however,
gifted or talented. By necessity, he argued, a commander had to rely upon a selected staff system. In a sense, Taylor applied Adam Smith’s division of labor concept to organizational management. As a naval officer, Sims accepted the validity of that conceptual application.6

Sims introduced management principles during his staff meetings. For one thing, officer rank was left at the door. Once inside, Sims encouraged staff argument, disagreement, no holds bar, freewheeling discussion. The validity of ideas stood paramount and Sims expected controversy. At one time, he criticized a hardworking staff officer. The young officer, he said, never disagreed with Sims.7

Once his staff reached a general consensus, Sims relied upon execution via his chain of command. Delegation emerged as an essential management tool. Sims, nevertheless, resisted the urge to micromanage. He decided the “what” to be done, permitting subordinate officers to decide the “how.” Sims was convinced the latter encouraged officer initiative and creativity. Delegation carried still another benefit. It gave Sims time to coordinate navy plans and tactics with U.S. associates and allies.8

Sims reported to the British Admiralty in April 1917. At the time, British newspapers were virtually optimistic. Germany was on the run, the ground battle was making progress, Germany’s High Sea Fleet reluctant to venture from their protected continental bases. In a post Jutland era, Sims was taken by surprised from by the Admiralty’s briefings. Merchant losses due to German U-Boats had reduced the British islands’ food supply to six weeks. More ominously, the
nation’s oil supply was down to eight weeks. The British Admiralty had exhausted all antisubmarine options and appeared loss for an effective anti-submarines remedy. 9

Sims suggest a proposal. Arrange merchant ships into a convoy protected by a ring of destroyers. Veteran British officers countered that Sims’s proposal was not only passive but simply presented an enlarged attractive target to German U-Boats. Sims responded on the contrary, that German submarines would meet a concentrated destroyer defense. Skeptical, the Admiralty agreed to try an experimental convoy run from Gibraltar to England. The ships arrived unscathed. As an antisubmarine tactic, convoying began to gain acceptance. 10

Admiral William B. Fletcher

An experienced Naval Officer, Rear Admiral William Fletcher had, during his career, commanded several warships types. He also served on the navy’s General Board and attended the U.S. Navy War College. In the spring of 1917, Secretary Daniels designated Fletcher as the U.S. Commander of Naval Forces in France,

As squadron commander of converted private yachts, Fletcher arrived at Brest in early July 1917. The ancient French base included a few scattered buildings and an old armory, the latter converted into a factory producing 50mm shells for the French army. At first glance, Fletcher’s assignment appeared straightforward; convert Brest into a U.S. operating base, cooperate with the
French Department of Marine. Fletcher’s mission, however, was beset by several issues; his concept of base management, the assignment of staff officers, and the fuel requirements of U.S. ships based in France.11

Fletcher adopted a habit of management self-sufficiency. He typed his own radiograms, wrote his own communications, immersed himself in administrative details, and kept information and radio telegrams to himself. His work habits tied him to his office. He put in an 18-hour day and had little time to visit other French bases under his authority, St. Nazaire and Bordeaux. Fletcher’s routine was not cost free. Officers visiting Brest noted that Fletcher appeared visibly tired.12

Two developments occurred during Fletcher’s Brest tenure. First, Sims sent Captain Thomas P. Magruder to Brest in September, 1917 and designated him as Fletcher’s chief of staff. Observing Fletcher laboring alone, Magruder sought to relieve the commander’s administrative burden. Magruder proceeded to draw up a plan modelled after a naval base in the U.S. The plan, invoking the principle of staff delegation, was geared to eliminate bottlenecks and expedite the base’s decision-making process.13

Fletcher was not receptive to Magruder’s base proposal. In fact, he charged Magruder with “disloyalty” and downgraded the chief of staff’s fitness report. A 25-year veteran of the service, Magruder sent a letter to protest to the Secretary of the Navy. In the end, Magruder found he had little to do. He asked for an assignment afloat.14
About the same time, the navy assigned Commander David Baldwin to serve as Brest’s material and industrial supply officer. Baldwin was familiar with navy operations, having served five years as engineering officer at the New York Navy Yard. Baldwin also managed a government picric acid plant in the U.S. Baldwin also brought another bonus. He was conversant in the French language. Fletcher, nevertheless, informed Baldwin that Brest, was hardly a base worthy of its name, and did not require a base commander. Baldwin found he was less than fully employed.¹⁵

Chain of Command

Fletcher’s treatment of his chief of staff and base commander filtered into Brest’s chain of command. Although Fletcher resisted sharing his workload with assigned officer, he did not abandoned the principle of delegation entirely. He relied, in fact, upon paymaster Lieutenant Commander Emmet C. Gudger. A graduate of the University of North Carolina, Gudger was a member of the navy’s Supply Corps. He accompanied Fletcher’s yacht squadron from New York, to Brest, with intermediate coaling stops at Bermuda and the Azores. While refueling at the Azores, Fletcher’s flag officer turned coal supply over to Gudger.¹⁶

Once ashore, Gudger began to take on the activities of paymaster and base supply officer. He purchased navy stores and materials from French contractors. Normally, a paymaster filled out requisition forms before spending base funds. Gudger preferred to go it alone. Magruder asked Gudger to file requisitions forms,
Gudger, reluctant to do so, insisted that Fletcher had sanctioned his procurement practices. 17

Similarly, Commander Baldwin requested Gudger to file requisition approval before making material purchases. Gudger insisted that his competence in supply exceeded the expertise of Baldwin. The result turned into standoff. The two parties took their case to Fletcher. Fletcher backed Gudger. Undercut, Baldwin asked to be transferred to Guantanamo, Cuba. Fletcher denied the request and accused Baldwin of “disloyalty.” He then downgraded Baldwin’s fitness report. 18

By now, Fletcher seemed to regard Gudger as indispensable. Not only did Gudger take on two base functions, he began to broaden his authority over fellow staff members. And staff members became unsettled. They viewed Gudger’s method as preempting their work specialty. In the process, clean demarcations between payroll, supply, materials, engineering, ship repair, and fleet maintenance began to overlap. 19

Under Brest’s command arrangement, Fletcher and Gudger’s workload rose while staff work narrowed – a distribution that began to effect base efficiency. Yacht commanders, for example, began to complain that the establishment was slow in responding to ship repair, maintenance and fuel needs. 20

Magruder, Baldwin and Dinger endeavored to respond to assigned and visiting shops. Lieutenant Commander Henry Dinger, Engineer, wanted to expand the base arsenal, put in a dry-dock, increase storage facilities and enlarge machine
shop operations. Dinger asked to set up a repair unit ready to board vessels after they returned from three days at sea. Dinger also requested small motor craft to permit him to visit and identify ship repair needs on sight. Dinger submitted his request to base commander, David Baldwin. Baldwin informed Dinger that Fletcher was not receptive. Later Fletcher informed Dinger that as a staff officer, he was uncooperative.\textsuperscript{21}

By September 1917, word of Brest staff dissatisfaction began to filter back to Sims’s London headquarters. Sims asked Lieutenant Commander, Joseph F. Daniels, destroyer commander at Queenstown, Ireland, to visit Brest and report back to London. Daniels spent a week interviewing several staff officers as well as Fletcher. Daniels noted that Gudger worked hard and was impressed with his coal bunker storage. Nevertheless, upon returning to London, Daniels expressed reservations over Fletcher’s administrative capability. He recommended that Fletcher be reassigned to Gibraltar. Here Fletcher could serve as U.S. naval coordinator with the British fleet.\textsuperscript{22}

Looking for a second opinion, Sims asked Captain Nathan Twining, his chief of staff, to visit Brest. Twining originally thought that Fletcher’s workload was the result of inadequate trained staff officers. Under war conditions, qualified officers were obviously in short supply. Twining later changed his mind. He concluded that Fletcher was not taking advantage of his existing staff.\textsuperscript{23}

Twining also discovered that two U.S. naval officers exercised overlapping French authority; Rear Admiral William Fletcher in Brest, Captain Richard H. Jackson in Paris. Returning to London, Twining advised Sims to
assign Fletcher total command authority over France. Accordingly, Sims downgraded Jackson’s administrative standing. Fletcher now enjoyed French command unity.²⁴

Twining was also struck by Brest’s unconventional chain of command. He suggested that Lieutenant Commander Gudger, as payroll officer, should report to Baldwin, base Commander. Twining added that “Gudger’s methods” constituted one source of staff dissatisfaction at the base. Sims accepted Twining’s recommendations.²⁵

Convoying

During the war, Naval Operations in Washington established several U.S. naval bases throughout Europe. Sims chose Queenstown, Ireland as a destroyer base. Here oil-burning destroyers escorted merchant ships bearing supplies and materials from the U.S. to Britain. To meet destroyer fuel requirements, the U.S. navy constructed fuel oil tanks storage at Queenstown.²⁶

As paymaster, Gudger had long been identified with coal-fired yachts. When stationed in the U.S. he served on a committee that recommended buying and converting private pleasure boats into navy escorts. Coal fired, the yachts required bunker storage facilities at Brest. Gudger supervised base coal-unloading operations, adding a rail line adjacent the base harbor. He also set up coal bunkers at St. Nazaire, France.²⁷

Gudger also assumed responsibility over Brest’s fuel oil facilities. The navy’s fuel oil distribution reflected base specialization. Large tankers (7,000 ton)
delivered oil to storage facilities at Queenstown; smaller tankers (2,000 ton) transshipped oil from Queenstown to Brest. To accommodate fuel oil, Gudger to set up two oil barges at Brest. If a visiting oil-fired destroyer required replenishment, a refueling hose connected a stationary oil tanker to a receiving destroyer. No oil tank storage resided at the base pier.28

In August of 1917, Captain Jackson, Paris Commander, asked if Brest could provide 100,000 gallons of fuel oil. Gudger through Fletcher responded that Brest base oil capacity, stood 7,000 tons. The base, he said, could provide little fuel for visiting Queenstown destroyers.29

In testifying at the navy’s Court of Inquiry, Fletcher’s counsel asked Gudger whether Queenstown destroyers could obtain oil from Brest tanks. Gudger answered in the negative. He later edited his remarks. He crossed off his original answer and in red ink wrote “yes, with tanks and barges.” That clearly was the Brest situation in July, 1918. The questioner, however, was referring to the bases’s oil status in the summer of 1917.30

Meanwhile, by August-September 1917, London headquarters began issuing guidelines for deep sea convoying. Transports conveying army troops to France were to be met and escorted by Queenstown destroyers. In particular, Secretary of the navy Daniels was insistent that U.S. transports be accompanied by navy escorts.31

The navy adopted an east-west convoy pattern. Queenstown destroyers escorted merchant convoys east bound; converted yachts escorted transports west bound. It was at this juncture that fuel oil logistics came into play. Absent fuel
capacity at Brest, oil-burning destroyer arriving at Brest had to return 250 miles back to Queenstown for oil replenishment. Destroyer commanders began complaining that the 500 mile round trip resulted in an inefficient use of fleet destroyers.32

Fletcher soon found himself in a dilemma. With sixteen yachts under his control, the French Marine asked to borrow 12 yachts for shore convoys. Fletcher complied with the request. He concluded that his remaining five yachts could not handle deep ocean convoy work. Fletcher thus asked Sims for five destroyers. Concluding that Brest possessed inadequate oil storage, Sims and his staff transferred five coal burning destroyers from the Azores to Brest.33

Sims had sent a letter to Fletcher detailing deep ocean convoy instructions. In September, he asked Commander Daniels to visit and brief Brest officers on recent convoy methods, instructions and practices. By October 1917, Sims’s London staff picked up indications that Fletcher’s administrative burden exceeded his ability to manage the base. Sims’s convoy staff officer, Captain Byron A. Long, was especially concerned. Fletcher apparently failed to respond to Long’s inquiries regarding the status and progress of Sims’s convoy instructions. Accordingly, Long recommended that Sims transfer Fletcher to Gibraltar.34

By October 1917, Sims’s London staff learned that a transport convoy, rendezvousing at Quiberon Bay, was bound for the U.S.. In short order, Sims asked Rear Admiral Henry Wilson, Gibraltar commander, if he would be willing to take over the Brest command. The next day Wilson agreed to do so. Sims then detached Fletcher from his Brest post.35
Escorted by converted yachts the transport convoy headed west. As noted, on October 17, 1917 a German torpedo penetrated the S.S. Antilles and the transport sank quickly. The loss of Antilles undercut Sims’s plan to permit Fletcher to retain his command status at Gibraltar. Sims concluded the British would be insulted in accepting a relieved U.S. naval officer. Instead, Sims sent Fletcher back to the U.S. Ironically, Fletcher was assigned Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, later deemed to required oil storage tank facilities.

II. Conclusion

The navy’s court of inquiry lasted a full month. In May, 1917, the Board issued its findings. In the Board’s words;

“…Rear Admiral Fletcher did not display the foresight, imagination and characteristics required for building up of the coast of France as suitable organization, though he was conscientious, diligent, faithful and unsparing of himself.” The court added “…Sims was justified in his loss of confidence in Admiral Fletcher as commander of the U.S. forces operating in European water…”36

The court did not neglect to comment on Sims’s actions. Here the Board observed that Sims over relied on his headquarters’ officers, concluding that Sims should have dealt with Fletcher directly rather than depending upon junior staff officers.37
The Board sent its findings to the desk of Josephus Daniels. Daniels overruled the findings on grounds the Board had invoked an overly broad standard of personal conduct.\textsuperscript{38}

In sum, how can one evaluate the findings of the Board of Inquiry and of the navy secretary’s ruling? Consider the board’s view of Sims, Fletcher and Gudger.

The Board’s assessment

What is striking about the Board’s review of Sims administrative model is what the Board did not say. The Board made no mention of Sims reliance upon staff consultation. The Board made no comment on Sims’s role as command coordinator. The Board said nothing as to the effectiveness of Sims’s chain of command. Indeed, the Board implied that Sims was over reliant on his headquarters staff in addressing Brest’s administrative issues.

As to Fletcher, the Board concluded that his management practices had forfeited the confidence of his superior commander. Still the Board made no specific reference to Fletcher’s tendency to distrust his staff, to equate staff suggestions as tantamount to disloyalty, to employ fitness reports as a form of personal retribution.

The Board was equally silent with Fletcher base command duplication—move that ultimately compromised Brest’s efficiency. Nor did the comment on Brest’s response to the repair needs of yachts, destroyers or transports. The Board
remained notably silent on Brest’s failure to anticipate the fuel oil needs of the fleet.

Finally, the Board remained noncommittal on Gudger’s staff practices. Not unlike Fletcher, Gudger preferred to work alone to the exclusion of fellow staff officers. Gudger transformed himself from paymaster into a virtual base commander. In clearing his coal storage program with London Headquarters, Gudger circumvented Rear Admiral Fletcher. Finally, with Fletcher’s tacit approval, Gudger miscalculated Brest’s destroyer fuel oil requirements.39

Daniels’ Ruling

Daniels generally ignored Sims’s administrative practices and made no reference to staff specialization as a management tool. Daniels made no reference to staff coordination as a management imperative.

Daniels remained silent regarding Fletcher’s lack of staff consultation, staff support, or command follow up. He said nothing about Fletcher’s clogged chain of command. Not only did Daniels ignore Brest’s staff dissatisfaction, he disregarded ship captain’s complaints regarding the repair, maintenance, and oil requirements of Brest. Indeed, destroyer officers employed the efficiency of Queenstown in criticizing Brest operations.

Finally, Daniels overlooked Gudger’s self-management tendencies, his transformation from staff to a commander, his alienation of Brest officers; his over-emphasis of Brest as a coaling station.40
In sum and in short, both the Board of Inquiry and Daniels missed the chance to evaluate modern naval management practices. Daniels position was easily understandably. He had long apposed the principles and application of scientific management. In so doing, Daniels and the Board incurred a cost of no mean consequence. It would take the next administration, however, discredited by historians, to begin a process of rectifying that opportunity foregone.\textsuperscript{41}
Notes


3 Keble Chatterton, *Danger Zone: The Store of the Queenstown Command*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1934), 238.


7 Morison, 1942, 424. “In all the time you have been here you have never once disagreed with me.”


11 William Sowden Sims, The Victory at Sea, (Garden City: Doubleday Page, 1920), 349. “…This French harbor possessed most inadequate tankage facilities put it out of the question, and it was deficient in docks, repair facilities and other indispensable features of a naval base;” Joseph Husband, On the Coast of France: The Story of the United States Naval Policies in French Waters, (Chicago: A.C. McClur G, 1919) 4.

12 Board of Inquiry, 353, 1258, 1608.


14 Board of Inquiry, 87; also Army Navy Journal, 57, (April 24, 1920): 1030.

15 Board of Inquiry, 467, 473, 477.


17 Court of Inquiry, 1002-1007.

18 Army Navy Journal, 57, 4 (April 24, 1920). Fletcher on Baldwin Fitness Report, Court of Inquiry, 1266 (June 16 to Sept. 30, 1917). 1011, Gudger, when asked if he cleared spending with the base commander replied, “Those I thought were necessary.”

19 Board of Inquiry, 1298, 1601-1612. Magruder, Baldwin, Dinger, Anderson, Freeman, Williams.

Queenstown Forces was so complete and perfect in detail that everything proceeded like clock work.”

21 Board of Inquiry, 1299, 1258. Dinger’s rapid shore force was designed to expedite ship repair, bypassing the need to negotiate with outside French contractors – a form of insourcing. Baldwin, in charge of repair, depended upon material acquisition, controlled by Gudger.

22 Board of Inquiry, 1300, 1306.

23 Board of Inquiry, 1599-1608.

24 Board of Inquiry, 1834. (Baldwin was later transferred to St. Nazaire as naval port officer.)


26 Board of Inquiry, 331, Gudger testimony on converted yachts “I assumed, given the limitations of the yachts, they would be employed on patrol duty or coastal duty.”

27 Army Navy Journal, 997-999, 1312.

28 Board of Inquiry, 1030-1031. Gudger testimony:

Question: Did you plan for oil-burning vessels became there would be no oil based vessels at Brest?

Answer: No, I made my plans on yachts….”

29 Board of Inquiry, 1061-1017.

30 Board of Inquiry, 1031. Gudger testimony:

Question: Were the Queenstown destroyers all there before the tanks were built?

Answer: No sir, they were not.

Revised answer: Yes sir, both from the tanks and the barges.” The Brest tanks, ordered by Sims in December, 1917 were completed by June, 1918.


33 Board of Inquiry, 1040-1041 On September 7, 1917, Fletcher asked Sims for five oil-burning destroyers.

34 Board of Inquiry, 1593-1594, 1604-1605. Captain Long issued a bill of particulars: Fletcher failed to exercise command, ignored staff coordination, lagged on ship repair work, provided inadequate fuel oil at Brest, issued no convoy instructions, appointed no naval port officer at St. Nazaire, resulting in the U.S. army taking over port management.

35 Board of Inquiry, 1834.

36 Board of Inquiry, Conclusion, May 5, 1920.

37 Board of Inquiry, Conclusion, May 5, 1920.

38 Board of Inquiry, Daniels, May 1920.

39 Board of Inquiry, 1000; When Gudger submitted his Brest coal storage plan to London Headquarters, he testified he did not obtain approval from Admiral Fletcher.

40 Edwin Denby papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Box 2, March 5, 1921; letter from Senator Thomas Walsh to Senator C.B. Henderson regarding Emmett C. Gudger’s appointment as Rear Admiral, Chief of the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts.