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# The Round Tablette

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## Welcome to the first March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is Craig Symonds, naval historian and former faculty member at both the U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Naval War College. He will be speaking on the vast global naval war waged by the United States Navy and its allies during World War II.

The massive scope of wartime naval combat created what was, in effect, an interconnected “super battlefield” dwarfing anything on land. For example, the entire Eastern Front stretched perhaps 1,600 miles from Murmansk to Rostov-on-Don. That same distance would reach from Tokyo to Saipan, but was not even halfway to Singapore or Rabaul. San Francisco to Guadalcanal was 6,000 miles. No wonder the carrier *Enterprise* steamed 275,000 miles during WWII—the naval war was that large.

In every theater, naval combat was also vital in shaping events ashore. The Battle of the Atlantic—the war’s longest-fought campaign—was also Britain’s most important struggle, in that Germany’s U-boats were the most deadly threat to the British Empire’s core industrial strength. Securing the stormy waters of the Atlantic was crucial if Britain was not to be starved into submission. It was also crucial to America, which had both the good fortune of being safe from physical invasion, but also the curse of being obliged to ship overseas every bean, bullet, and barrel of oil needed by its enormous war machine. Without victory in the Atlantic, there could be no strategic bombing campaign against the Reich. There could likewise be no D-Day.

The Mediterranean naval war was similarly vital to both Western allies. The British island of Malta sat like a dagger at the throat of Axis logistics to North Africa—and keeping Malta in supply during the early part of the war required a truly Herculean effort. North Africa also recommended itself in 1942 as the most logical initial theater of ground combat for U.S. forces, not only because landings in Morocco and Algeria would seal the fate of Rommel’s *Afrika Korps*, but because clearing the Middle Sea for Allied shipping would save millions of ton miles of cargo capacity that was currently being sent around Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. Finally, controlling the Mediterranean exposed the

southern flank of Axis Europe—from France all the way to Greece—to the threat of invasion. Once naval superiority was achieved in mid-1943, the Allies were not slow in launching a series of amphibious operations against first Sicily and then Salerno that drove Mussolini’s Italy out of the war. A year later, the invasion of southern France, coming hard on the heels of D-Day, destroyed the Wehrmacht’s overall position in France, obliging its retreat to the Rhine.

The war at sea also directly impacted the enormous ground campaign on the Eastern Front. Even in 1942, Lend-Lease aid not only accounted for around 5% of the USSR’s GDP, but was weighted disproportionately towards vital items like armored vehicles, trucks, refined steel and aluminum, and, critically, food. The disaster of Convoy PQ-17 in July 1942 sent the better part of half a billion dollars of aid—including 400 tanks, 200 aircraft, and thousands of trucks—to the bottom of the Barents Sea. This equipment would have been enough to equip two Soviet tank corps and a trio of aviation regiments at a time when the Red Army was in desperate shape. Stalin bitterly regretted its loss.

Alternatively, sending Lend-Lease via the Persian Gulf required a six-week, 14,000 mile journey from New York to Basra. Safeguarding the supply lines running through the Indian Ocean from the depredations of both German and Japanese submarines was particularly difficult in the early part of the war. Yet these sea lanes, too, were vital to the Soviet Union. Without aluminum, not a single T-34 engine block could be manufactured. Likewise, without Packard trucks and two billion cans of Spam, the Red Army could not possibly have made it to Berlin as quickly as it ultimately did. Those same sea lanes also supported Montgomery’s 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Egypt, the Indian Army facing the Japanese in Burma, and aircraft flying supplies across the Himalayas to Nationalist China. Controlling the Indian Ocean thus influenced campaigns being waged by all four of the major Allies, against all three Axis powers.

Finally, there was the largest naval theater of them all: the Pacific Ocean. Here, on a vast sea encompassing a third of the world’s surface, the United States Navy waged a battle to the death with its most powerful, capable opponent—the Imperial Japanese Navy. While victory in the Pacific was not an existential challenge to the U.S. in the same way the Battle of the Atlantic was to the British, there was no other theater in which naval power was so directly linked to

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If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)

victory. Japan simply could not be defeated until its naval power was destroyed. This proved extraordinarily difficult, because the Imperial Navy possessed not only a very formidable carrier force, but also excellent surface night-fighting skills. These turned the struggle for the Solomon Islands in 1942-43 into a brutal contest that cost both sides dearly. The U.S. Navy slowly gained the ascendancy not through weight of numbers—that would come later—but through a superior capacity for learning, organizing, and adapting to the war it faced.

The theater's logistical challenges were also on an entirely different level. Keeping one soldier fighting there took 45 pounds of supplies a day—most of it fuel and building supplies—all of which often had to travel for months across as much as 8,000 miles of open water. Supporting 40,000 troops in the Pacific required the same shipping tonnage that would have kept 100,000 men fighting in Europe. Along the way, America had to build almost every dock and warehouse for handling these huge mountains of cargo.

By 1944, the U.S. Navy had mastered these challenges and transformed itself into an awe-inspiring war machine, capable of fielding enormous fleets of warships, and keeping them in motion and in supply across vast distances. In the end, the Imperial Navy was not just beaten, it was annihilated. The same was true of Japan's seaborne trade, as the home islands were cut off from the raw materials of the larger empire. When the U.S. Navy initiated the massive invasion of the Marianas—at the very same time D-Day was taking place half a world away—it confirmed the emergence of America as a military superpower. The USN's overwhelming victory in the subsequent Battle of the Philippine Sea likewise signaled the culmination of the largest naval struggle in history. By now, the Allies were in firm control of all the world's oceans, and ultimate victory in World War II was clearly in sight.

#### FURTHER READINGS:

Craig Symonds, *Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Craig Symonds, *World War II at Sea: a Global History* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Vincent O'Hara, *Struggle for the Middle Sea: The Great Navies at War in the Mediterranean, 1940-1945* (Pavilion Books, 2009).

Philipps Payson O'Brien, *How The War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

#### Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 21 ME. 2023, *Clara Barton; Civil War Nurse* – [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)

Civil War Symposium – 1 April 2023 — [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 -

[www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org)

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall  
Bloomington, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays at 1130 -

<https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 -

<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN -  
Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 -

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie – 22-23

July 2023 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 -

[www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org)

Alliance Française 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org)

Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST,

<https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/>

Western Naval Historical Association

[info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net)

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

[crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com)

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -

[www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org)

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

#### Round Table Schedule 2023

28 Mar Patton & Victory in North Africa

11 Apr New Guinea – Air War

9 May 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Europe

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Operation Pedestal to Malta, 1942



Battle of the Atlantic, 1943



Ulithi Atoll, 1944