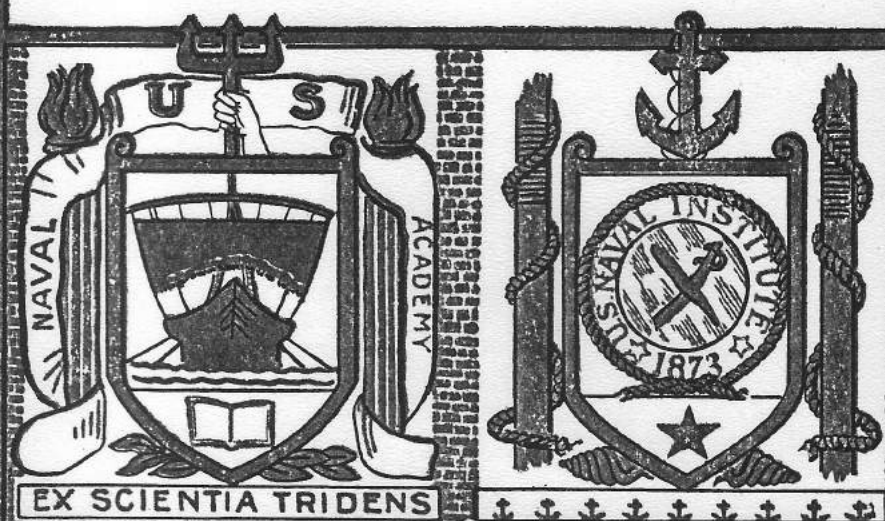


Naval Strength in Naval Bases

By Midshipman EDWARD ELLSBERG, U. S. N. A.



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NAVAL STRENGTH IN NAVAL BASES.¹

By MIDSHIPMAN EDWARD ELLSBERG, CLASS OF 1914, U. S. N. A.

Motto: "War is a business of positions."

Since the conclusion of the war with Spain the navy of the United States has been much in the public eye. That war, which was brought to a quick close by two sweeping victories on the sea, clearly demonstrated to this nation the value of a navy. Since then the navy has received its share of popular attention and support, and it has risen to a higher plane of efficiency. Yet due to popular ignorance of the essentials of a well-balanced navy, this development has been one-sided, for our expenditures have been concentrated on ships alone. To the bulk of our citizens a navy means simply a collection of battleships with perhaps a few destroyers and auxiliaries. But the naval bases, the forces behind the fleet, which render its operations possible and enable it to keep the sea, make no appeal to the public imagination, and they have consequently been neglected.

The fleet's need of shore stations is obvious enough even to the veriest land lubber. He knows, or he has heard, that modern ships are scarcely more than floating machine shops and that all this machinery requires constant overhauling; that ships must be frequently dry-docked and scraped to preserve their speed; and that these ships are dependent upon their bases for supplies of fuel, without which they are absolutely helpless.

"But," says our average citizen, or his Congressman, "what do you want? You have yards enough for these things. Why, there are eleven yards in this country alone. Look at England.

¹ The medal offered by the Admiral Trenchard Section, No. 73, Navy League of the United States, to midshipmen under instruction in English for the best essay on a topic either naval or patriotic in character was awarded for this essay during June week, 1913.

She has a navy twice as large as ours, and yet she has only half as many yards." All of which is true, but what the navy needs is bases, not yards.

It is absolutely necessary to a clear understanding of this question to differentiate between navy yards and naval bases, for of navy yards we have enough, while we are sadly deficient in naval bases. The two have a few things in common. Both contain machine shops and dry docks and both may be made depots of supply, but there the likeness ends. There is one requirement which distinguishes a naval base from a navy yard, and it is their failure to conform to this principle which renders the greater part of our present yards worthless to the fleet in time of war—this is the principle of *position*. A naval base must be so situated that what it has to offer—shops, docks, and fuel—can be utilized by the fleet without the necessity of leaving the theater of war. It must be strategically located with regard to the area of operations; *it must dominate the situation by its location*. This principle of position is best illustrated by Gibraltar, a fortress whose name has become a synonym for strength. Yet how many of our citizens know that what gives Gibraltar its importance is not the fact that its guns control the straits (for a strait 13 miles wide cannot be blocked by guns), but that those guns make impregnable a naval base. Gibraltar exists merely to protect a few dry docks and repair shops. The *fortress* of Gibraltar never has prevented the free passage of ships through those waters; it is the fleet whose base that fortress makes secure that gives England her control of the Mediterranean, and England, realizing this, has spent \$200,000,000 upon the defences.

Such a base also was Port Arthur, which the Japanese were compelled to take before the war could be carried farther; but such bases are just what our navy yards are *not*, for most of them are located in out of the way ports, alike inaccessible to our own fleet and incapable of withstanding an enemy's attack.

From this it is apparent that location is of first importance in the case of a naval base, for, given position, everything may be added unto it. As a supplement to favorable location, the ideal base, like Gibraltar, must be in a position easily capable of defence, and it must be well fortified. It should be remembered that the base exists only for the purpose of supplying the fleet. The strategy of our commanders must never be hampered by the

necessity of protecting their bases, or by the fear that these will fall into the enemy's hands. The fleet must be free; it must be able to look upon its base as a refuge, not as a burden; and to this end the base must be capable of defending itself, leaving the fleet to operate without anxiety against the enemy. A naval base must be well located on the line of communications to supply the fleet operating there; it must be a thorn in the enemy's side, a haven from which swift cruisers may rush out to harry his commerce; and it must be a point beyond which he dare not go, leaving it unreduced in his rear.

The points, then, which distinguish a serviceable naval base from a navy yard useful only in time of peace are location and fortification. If we examine carefully our present yards we will find that almost all of them are lacking in these two fundamentals; that they are so badly located as to be useless or so poorly fortified as to require the constant services of the fleet for their defence alone. We have too long allowed this matter to remain a local question, interesting no one save politicians eager to secure jobs and appropriations for constituents, and the result is that we have yards promiscuously scattered over the country without regard to military value. This is a situation which cannot safely exist, for in these days of war on short notice or on no notice at all it behooves us to be prepared.

There are in this country eleven yards, each one of which, presumably, should be fully capable of serving as a base for the fleet. If they cannot so act they have absolutely no reason for being, for the fleet of this nation is its fighting arm and the navy yard exists only to enable that fleet to keep in fighting trim. Nevertheless, fully half of our naval stations are from one reason or another totally precluded from fulfilling the smallest part of their function. Only four yards on this coast are of any service to the fleet—the others are never used. They are a needless expense, but, what is worse, they prevent the establishment of bases where they are really needed. They have several times been slated for extinction, but on each occasion political expedience has carried the day against military efficiency and these needless yards remain. Before we can put our system on a military basis we must rid ourselves of these. An obsolete ship goes quickly out of commission. What greater claim has an obsolete yard to continued existence? These yards served a purpose once, but that time has passed away. Efficiency demands that they be abandoned.

Into this category of obsolete stations fall the yards at Portsmouth, Port Royal, Pensacola, and New Orleans. Portsmouth is near the Charlestown yard and such unnecessary duplication is a waste of strength. In addition, their proximity enables a hostile fleet to watch both places without a material division of its forces. As for Port Royal, a relic of the blockade in the Civil War, no battleship can approach its dock even at her normal draft, and no ship of the Atlantic Fleet ever tries it. How near, then, could a damaged ship approach, when, several compartments flooded, she is probably drawing four or five feet more and must be docked at once or sink?

The yards at Pensacola and New Orleans fail to measure up to the required standard in defensive power. Pensacola is far too open to bombardment, while a ship which entered the Mississippi to go 100 miles inland to the New Orleans yard would, in all probability, find the narrow passes blocked or blockaded when it sought exit.

These are the home yards which have outlived their usefulness. They fail to measure up to the required standard of naval bases in wartime, and they should go.

But a mere weeding out of useless stations is not all that is required. It is more important that we supplant them with real bases which, by location, fortification, and equipment, are able to serve the fleet under all circumstances. The system of bases which our extended and rather vulnerable coast makes necessary, requires careful consideration. Their location, in each instance, should be governed solely by the probable theater of war. Looking at our eastern coast thus, we find that the various centers of naval operations in all likelihood would be New York, Chesapeake Bay, and the Panama Canal, and our system should contain a sound base controlling each of these points.

For the northern coast, Newport offers the best location. Even so long ago as 1773 its natural advantages were recognized by the British naval officers. Strategically it is of the utmost importance, for it controls the approaches to New York City. Its broad bay and narrow entrance, already fortified, make it an ideal site, and all these advantages should be improved by the construction of the necessary docks and shops.

Farther south is Norfolk, admirably situated and equipped to act as a base for our central coast. We have but to remember

that in 1898, when but one squadron was available for the defence of our entire coast, that that squadron was stationed at Hampton Roads, only a few miles from Norfolk, to appreciate the strategic value of this position. The recent action of Congress in taking steps to fortify the Chesapeake Capes, its only approaches, demonstrates that here, at least, we are to have a base worthy of its importance.

On our Gulf Coast we have Key West and Guantanamo, the logical positions from which to defend the approaches to the Caribbean Sea, and consequently to Panama. It is impossible to conceive of a war in which we are participants where the Panama Canal, the link between our two coasts, will not be the first object of attack. It is from these two positions, guarding as they do the entrances to the Gulf and the Caribbean Sea, that this important waterway may best be defended.

Our haphazard system of providing naval bases is well illustrated by the neglect which Guantanamo has suffered. This bay, without doubt the best location for naval purposes within a thousand miles of Panama, was acquired by treaty for the sole object of establishing a base there. Yet, outside of a Y. M. C. A. building, no improvements have been made, the principal reason being that the New Orleans yard has thus far been able to secure all naval appropriations in that quarter for herself.

Our present yards on the west coast leave something to be desired, but they may yet be converted into reasonably efficient bases by dredging channels and improving interior communications. Mare Island and Bremerton, located in the only real harbors on this coast, are fairly well situated to cover our coast cities, but the addition of a third base at Magdalena Bay would materially increase our ability to defend the western approaches to Panama. This site, of course, would have to be acquired from Mexico, but in the present state of affairs such a proceeding should not be difficult. As the Mexican government was once willing to lease this bay to Japan, it might be induced, if properly approached, to do as much for the United States.

Finally, our chain of bases is rounded out by Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, Guam, and Corregidor in the Philippines, positions which, by fortifications built or projected, are destined to control the Pacific. Pearl Harbor in particular must ever be our advance base in the Pacific. It advances our maritime frontier in that

direction twenty-one hundred miles, and puts us within easy steaming distance of the east. No oriental power can attack us without passing close by Hawaii. Here our fleet, near to a powerful base, can safely handle any opposing force, worn out as that force must be by a long voyage, and further handicapped by the fact that it is four thousand miles from any home port from which to draw its precious coal.

This, then, is the situation in which this country finds itself. We support a large number of yards which are worthless, while we possess sites for a number of bases which remain unimproved. In order to enable our fleet to take the sea and fight in whatever quarter threatened interests may make it necessary we must develop the bases from which that fleet may operate. It is high time that we utilize these sites; that we convert them into real naval bases. Some sites require docks, some need fortification; to all of them is necessary a public realization of their value.

Newport, Norfolk, Key West, Guantanamo, Magdalena Bay, Mare Island, Bremerton, Pearl Harbor, Guam, and Corregidor are the links in the chain of bases that we must forge, if we are to bring that part of our navy on the land up to the standard maintained by our fleet upon the sea. We must recognize our needs, and, disregarding local prejudice, abolish what is useless and devote our energies to equipping and fortifying these sites which nature and our interests have destined for the naval bases of America's sea power. For war is a business of positions, no less upon the sea than on the land, and, having the positions, if we fail to utilize them disaster on the sea will ultimately be our portion.