

DOCTORAL THESIS

Evaluations of Combat Experiences in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1908-1940

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Abstract

The research aims to study the war experiences obtained after the end of Russo-Japanese War until the early stage of the Second Sino-Japanese War, investigate the relationship and interaction between the war experience and lesson learning throughout the period.

The dissertation argues that, after the Russo-Japanese War, Satō Tetsutarō integrated the Japanese war experiences, historical examples and naval strategical discussions from the west, and the oriental military thoughts to forge his ideal naval strategy.

Although strategically aimed to protect the Empire's maritime economy and national security, operationally it emphasized to secure the strategical objective by close blockade, and an attrition campaign on hostile fleet if the blockade was impossible.

Tactically, being inferior in number, it also suggested avoiding a concentration of fleet, but to separate the fleet to outplay the hostile fleet for tactical advantage, and a final destruction of hostile fleet. His naval strategy became an orthodox doctrine for the navy, marked the beginning for the navy to prepare for a multi-layered attrition naval campaign against the approaching European navies.

During the Great War, the Japanese navy obtained war experiences from the naval attachés deployed to the Royal navy, and the Second Special Squadron in the Mediterranean Theatre. Influenced by the victorious experience of the Russo-Japanese war, the preference on fleet battle and techniques related was notable. During the Interwar period, the fleet manoeuvres and training revealed a continued focus on decisive battle, reinforced by the latest technological innovation such as naval aviation, treaty cruisers and axillary vessels to overcome the numerical disadvantage

restricted by the naval treaties. The Grand exercises showed an interest in developing the attrition warfare towards the approaching American Fleet. However, these exercises also revealed an ignorance on trade protection and the potential of submarine's commercial raiding, which the Japanese navy only began to investigate shortly before the Pacific War.

While preparing the war with the US during the interwar period, the conflict and war with Republic of China provided precious war experience for the Japanese Navy since the Great War. The aerial operations in Shanghai incident and the early stage of Second Sino-Japanese War revealed the incapability of the Japanese navy's logistical system. The flaws in design of aircraft and equipment, and the inadequate logistical personnel on the aircraft carrier also discovered by the officers. The conflicts also provided experiences on the usage of seaplane and cooperation with the carrier-based aviation. The aerial reconnaissance experiences obtained was vital for the navy to polish its aerial doctrine. However, the overwhelming advantage enjoyed by the Japanese navy had made them unaware of the logistical and tactical problem revealed in actions. Thus, the improvements adopted by the navy was limited.

The understanding of war defined their adoption on lesson learnt, and the lesson learnt continued to refine their understanding of war. The dissertation provides another perspective to understand Japanese navy's decision during the interwar period and the Pacific War. Lessons obtained from the study also provide an insight on military learning.