Conference Abstracts and Biographies

Dr Samantha Middleton, From Convoys to Crisis: How the WWII Maritime Infrastructure shaped Britain's Strategic Failure in Suez and its Aftermath for Dockyards and Shipyards

The 1956 Suez Crisis has often been portrayed as the symbolic end of Britain's imperial era, yet its roots and repercussions cannot be fully understood without reference to the vast maritime infrastructure constructed during the Second World War. This paper examines how Britain's wartime shipyards, dockyards, and global base network—originally built to sustain Atlantic convoys and far-flung naval operations—shaped both the ambitions that drove the Suez intervention and the strategic failures that followed.

During the Battle of the Atlantic, Britain created an unparalleled logistical system: expanded home dockyards, high-output shipbuilding centres, repair facilities across the empire, and a global chain of fuelling and support bases. This infrastructure underpinned postwar assumptions that Britain could continue to act as a world naval power. By 1956, however, the geopolitical landscape had changed even as Britain attempted to employ an essentially WWII-era maritime model to execute a Cold War operation.

The Suez crisis exposed the obsolescence and vulnerability of this system. Britain's dependence on overseas bases—many located in newly independent or politically unstable regions—was abruptly revealed. The crisis also underscored limits in fleet readiness, supply-line security, and the ability of domestic dockyards to support sustained global operations without American backing. As a result, Suez became a decisive trigger for a far-reaching reassessment of naval infrastructure.

In the aftermath, successive defence reviews accelerated the contraction of wartime shipbuilding capacity, the closure or downgrading of imperial dockyards, and the restructuring of labour forces in historic maritime communities. This paper argues that Suez marked not merely a diplomatic defeat but the moment when Britain's WWII maritime system definitively ceased to be viable. By linking wartime mobilisation to post-imperial retrenchment, the study offers new insight into how the legacies of the Battle of the Atlantic cast a long shadow over Britain's naval policy, industrial landscape, and global identity.

Biography

Dr Middleton is an early career naval historian whose doctoral research examined the professionalisation of the Royal Navy between 1660 and 1688. Her thesis adopted a multidisciplinary approach, integrating naval history with accounting history, and demonstrated that principles of management control were consciously developed and implemented by James, Duke of York, Samuel Pepys and William Coventry. She is currently finalising a co-authored article on this research and has presented her findings at a range of international conferences in both accounting and naval history. Dr Middleton's recent publications focus on the Battle of the Atlantic and the role of intelligence during the Second World War

David F. Winkler, Filling the Void: The Reluctant Superpower East of Suez

During the first decades of the Cold War, the Middle East/Indian Ocean region remained a backwater for the U.S. Navy as a commitment to build NATO in Europe as a counterweight to the Soviet Union and Pacific theater proxy wars – first in Korea and then in Vietnam – took priority. This paper will overview the U.S. Navy's Middle East Force which was based out of HMS *Juffair* in the British protectorate of Bahrain through a transitional period that includes the Suez Crisis, the signing of the Baghdad Pact and the formation of CENTO, the decision of the UK in 1968 to withdraw "East of Suez" in the early 1970s, and the reaction of the Nixon administration.

The paper will detail the American decision to only occupy a portion of the former British naval base as the U.S. – instead of replacing the British as guardians of the Gulf – will resort to a "Twin Pillars" strategy that assigns Saudi Arabia and Iran the role of regional policemen. The strategy will falter in 1979 with the fall of the Shah of Iran and the United States will be forced to increase its regional footprint, establishing a maritime prepositioned force at British-controlled Diego Garcia. Also covered will be the decision by a newly independent Bahrain to "Evict" the Americans in the wake of the October 1973 Middle East War. – but were the Americans shown the door?

Of note the paper will highlight the symbiotic relationship between the ruling Khalifa family in Bahrain with an out of region power – first Great Britain and then the United States – as the emirate faced regional threats with the first and foremost being Iran. It's a dynamic that continues today.

Biography

Dr. David Winkler was the Naval Historical Foundation historian, taught at the US Naval Academy, and is an U.S. Naval War College adjunct professor. A retired U.S. Navy commander, he holds a PhD from American University, an MA from Washington University, and a BA from Penn State. His notable publications include: *Incidents at Sea: American Confrontation and Cooperation with Russia and China*; *Amirs, Admirals, and Desert Sailors: The US Navy, Bahrain, and the Gulf*; *Witness to Neptune's Inferno: The Pacific War Diary of Lloyd M. Mustin, and America's First Aircraft Carrier: USS* Langley *and the Dawn of US Naval Aviation.*

The Suez Canal hit during the initial Anglo-French assault on Port Said, 5 November 1956. Fleet Air Arm official photographer, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

File:Port Said from air.jpg - Wikimedia Commons

Richard Holme, Sheerness Dockyards 1956–2026: Bad and good news.

Sheerness naval dockyard closed in March 1960, just four years after Suez. The announcement of this, made in February 1958, also saw news of other closures and reductions. The Nore command, responsible *inter alia* for the Thames and Medway estuaries as well as the Humber and Harwich, was to be abolished in 1961.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selkirk, 'with great regret', blamed the Sheerness closure and other changes on a reduction in repair work, due to the fleet shrinking in size.

The closure of Sheerness inevitably brought substantial unemployment in the dockyard and the supply chain. Concerns were also expressed in Parliament and in the press about the dockyard's very well-preserved collection of elegant buildings, mainly of great quality, dating from the early 19th century.

Privatisation of the dockyard thereafter brought a certain degree of much needed employment but led to substantial regrettable demolitions of historic dockyard buildings, principally in the 1960s and 1970s.

My presentation will look at the background to the Sheerness closure and the end of the Nore Command and the extent to which each is attributable directly or indirectly to Suez and related factors. It will move on to consider how the privatisation might have been handled better, to allow a commercial port to operate efficiently in a historic dockyard, with better conservation and viable use of buildings, with relevant lessons to be learned. It will conclude by reviewing the state of the former naval dockyard at Sheerness today and the challenges it faces.

Biography

Richard Holme has always been interested in the history of Sheerness and has visited the town and dockyard on many occasions, particularly since the Naval Dockyards Society (NDS) tour of June 2000.

He is currently involved in two book projects concerning Sheerness: the first a chapter in a new book on the Great Quadrangular Storehouse demolished sadly in 1979. He is also working with others in preparing a book on Sheerness by the late David Hughes, a leading Sheppey historian, to be published on the NDS website.

Richard was editor of the NDS newsletter from 2013 to 2023 and wrote many articles for it and generally in the maritime press.

The World Ship Society awarded him best naval essay of 2022 for research into the covert British mission to acquire the Graf Spee wreck in 1940. He has had books published on Cairnryan Military port from U-boats to the Ark Royal (1997), HMS Warspite in Cornwall 1947/56 (2023) and Harry Pounds Shipbreaker Extraordinaire (2026).

He is Treasurer of the Friends of the Falkland Museum in Stanley and completed at Masters in UK shipbreaking 1945–95 at Newcastle University in 2020. He then worked to catalogue part of the Marine Technology Special Collection at the University.

Sheerness Dockyard in the mid-1970s, with permission from the photographer, Martin Verrier.

Chen BI, From Imperial Base to Commercial Lease: The Governance Transformation of Malta Dockyard after the Suez Canal Crisis

In the decade following the end of the Second World War, British policymakers increasingly confronted a practical dilemma: how to sustain overseas defence commitments in a rapidly changing international environment. The combined pressures of fiscal constraint, alliance politics, and decolonisation cast growing doubt on the long-term viability of Britain's overseas naval infrastructure. This paper takes the Malta Dockyard as a case study to examine how the British government managed strategic retrenchment through institutional and legal adjustments, thereby reshaping the governance of a key naval-industrial facility.

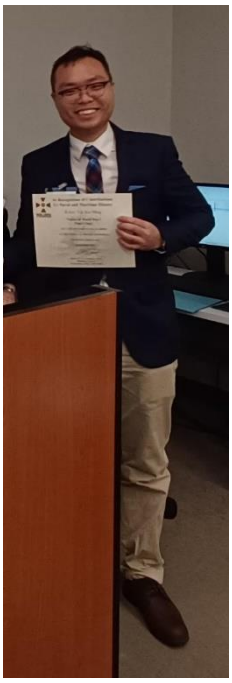
Drawing on British parliamentary debates (Hansard), the Foreign Office archives, and the 1964 Anglo-Maltese Defence Agreement and its annexes, the paper analyses how the British government responded to strategic retrenchment by shifting the dockyard from direct Admiralty management to commercial operation. Central to this transition was the preservation of employment and repair capacity in Malta while reducing Britain's direct administrative and financial responsibilities.

Crucially, Maltese independence did not invalidate the Bailey lease. Instead, the 1964 agreements explicitly transferred sovereignty over land and assets to the Maltese state subject to existing contractual arrangements, introducing specific carve-outs for the civil dockyard. This legal architecture separated political sovereignty from operational control, allowing the dockyard to continue functioning under a commercial intermediary despite the end of colonial rule.
The paper argues that the Malta Dockyard illustrates a broader post-Suez pattern in British overseas dockyards: imperial withdrawal did not entail the dismantling of infrastructure, but rather its reconfiguration through contracts, commercial intermediaries, and international legal guarantees. Bailey (Malta) Ltd thus emerged as a key post-imperial mediator, enabling continuity in naval-industrial capacity while shaping a form of sovereignty constrained by inherited legal and institutional frameworks during the Cold War.

Biography

Chen BI is a PhD student at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, International Christian University (Tokyo). His research focuses on British diplomatic history and the Commonwealth history, with particular attention to the Eden and Macmillan governments. He is a member of the Royal Historical Society, the Political Studies Association, and the Japan Association of International Relations.

Kater Yip PhD, The Connection Between the Suez Crisis and the Closure of Hong Kong's Central Drydock in 1958



This paper explores the causal relationship between the 1956 Suez Crisis and the closure of the Hong Kong Royal Naval Drydock in 1958.

Since the 19th century, Hong Kong served as a paramount strategic stronghold for the British Empire. To meet the Royal Navy's operational requirements in the Far East, Hong Kong's dockyard facilities underwent rapid expansion at the turn of the 20th century. These developments provided Britain with a vital maritime complex capable of both extensive maintenance and shipbuilding. However, the strategic value of the naval yards in Hong Kong declined after the Second World War and diminished drastically following the Suez Crisis. The financial haemorrhage triggered by the crisis forced Britain to acknowledge in 1957 that overseas military expenditures were crippling the national economy. To preserve its residual sea power "East of Suez," Whitehall executed a strategic amputation: downgrading Hong Kong to a mere garrison outpost while retreating the Far East Fleet's operational homeport to Singapore. Under the supreme directive to concentrate base facilities and slash administrative overheads, the Royal Naval Drydock—stripped of its strategic value as a permanent fleet base—ultimately became an inevitable sacrifice to halt the Empire's financial ruin.

Furthermore, while Britain initially resolved to defend Hong Kong against potential Northern threats with a substantial garrison in the late 1940s, Washington's stark strategic calculus forced a re-evaluation. American strategists concluded that Whitehall had severely overestimated its defensive capabilities. Geopolitically, the United States deemed Hong Kong an unsuitable liability: it lay dangerously beyond the First Island Chain, and Washington refused to commit American troops to defend Hong Kong due to foreseeable opposition from the American people. Forced to accept their unilateral vulnerability, the British government discussed garrison reductions as early as 1954. The Anglo-American strategic negotiation served as an overlooked catalyst for the demise of the Naval Dockyard.

Biography

Dr Kater Yip is a Hong Kong-based independent naval historian. His PhD dissertation dissects how the Imperial Japanese Navy identified, disseminated, and institutionalized combat lessons from 1907 to 1940. His broader research encompasses naval innovations, strategies, and tactics from the 1850s through World War II. Dr Yip translated Dr Edward J. Marolda's *Ready Seapower* into Traditional Chinese and authored the bestselling e-book *Navies and Seapower: 1859–1945*. A three-time presenter and panel chair at the McMullen Naval History Symposium, he recently received the Recognition of Contributions in Naval and Maritime History from the Naval Order of the United States.

Hong Kong Dockyard in the centre *c.*November 1936, NH 80422 from the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), in the public domain and free from copyright restrictions,

https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-80000/NH-80422.htm

Andrew Livsey, MA, The British naval requirement for dockyards and support facilities, 1956 to 2026

This presentation would for the first time provide an overview of the effect of British naval policy on the dockyards and facilities used by the Royal Navy between 1956 to 2026. It has value of itself and by taking a broader gaze three gaps in the historiography can be identified and partly filled.

The first is that while the effects of policy on the major facilities have been articulated, such as the rise in use of Singapore after the Suez crisis and then partial abandonment fifteen years later, and the growth of the use of Faslane with the development of the UK's underwater nuclear deterrent, use of other facilities such as the post-Cold War use of NATO ranges in Crete has gone unnoticed. Such omissions are partly due to the second gap, which is that the paucity of considered histories of the Royal Navy after 1990 means that policy effects on the dockyards and facilities beyond the post-Cold War drawdown have been little considered. The third gap is in the determinants of the need for dockyards and facilities. Important issues such as shipyard capacity for building and repair, proximity to likely enemies, the importance of the hinterland, political desiderata

and the lag to change imposed by previous choices and investment have been well articulated both for individual establishments and more generally. But there is another determinant which has been barely touched on, which is the importance of proximity to exercise areas with suitable local topography, water depth and other criteria. This applies to Portsmouth and Plymouth, with the advantages of the later meaning that when Portland was closed in 1995 the decision about where operational sea training had to be moved was obvious. It also applies to Faslane which has had a barely mentioned role in supporting the training of the surface navy, for it is helpfully close to the Minch between the Inner and Outer Hebrides. The Minch is, of course, geographically similar to Vestfjord where the Royal Navy expected to fight in the 1980s if the Cold War went hot.

The resultant article would accordingly both provide an overview narrative and point to further issues to be studied. In 6,000-8,000 words the coverage of some issues would be relatively brief, but I still think it could both be a useful summary and a springboard for further study.

Biography

Andrew Livsey served in the Royal Navy for twenty-five years in many ships and oceans, as well as ashore in Iraq. In 2017 he won the Sir Michael Howard prize for best MA on the British Advanced Command and Staff Course, and in 2021-2 he was the Royal Navy's Hudson Fellow with the Changing Character of War at Oxford. He has been published in *War in History, The Mariner's Mirror, The RUSI Journal, The Naval Review* and elsewhere. He is currently finishing his PhD at Kings College London on the development of UK and US sea power thought 1920-1990.

Faslane JW 2004, Defence Imagery website, image no. 45143831, copyright-free.