



Fleet Naval Reviews: A Short History

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Warships are symbols of national power and pride. Naval reviews are occasions where navies display their fleets in the presence of heads of state, dignitaries and foreign guests. Naval reviews have a long, well-documented history stretching back to the medieval era in Europe. The British Royal Navy has often conducted naval reviews, originally as part of mobilisation for war, later in observance of royal anniversaries and significant occasions. Many navies, influenced by British traditions, have adopted the custom. International naval reviews provide opportunities for officials and military mariners to meet their counterparts, learn about the capabilities of friends and potential adversaries, share experiences and develop relationships that will prove valuable both in times of conflict and in peace.

Whether they are built of wood or steel, powered by wind, steam or nuclear energy, warships are mighty symbols of national power and pride. Such symbols are most effective when they are displayed, both to reassure friends and to deter potential adversaries. Naval reviews are formal occasions where fleets can display their ships to best advantage, typically in the presence of the public, heads of state, local dignitaries and

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foreign guests. Sailors may see their political leaders, and those leaders have an opportunity to see what they are getting for their naval budgets.

There are different ways to conduct a fleet review. One method is to have a line of ships pass in review before a stationary reviewing party afloat or ashore. Alternatively, the fleet can remain at anchor, arranged in one line or many, while the reviewing party passes in review aboard a flagship or official yacht. Customarily, sailors uniformed in white “man the rails” (stand at attention along the deck edges) while passing in review, and, depending on the occasion, saluting guns may be fired. In recent years, it has become more common for naval reviews to include pier-side ship visits for selected vessels open to the public. In the past, fleet reviews were often recorded in paintings, engravings or colored prints, which are prized today by collectors. In modern times, fleet reviews are glorious photo opportunities, especially for photographers aboard helicopters flying overhead.

The best location for a fleet review is a large, sheltered and deep anchorage, with good visibility from the surrounding shorelines. Proximity to a national capital or major city is an advantage. For Great Britain, the Solent (105 km southwest of London) has historically been the main location for royal fleet reviews. The Solent is a strait off Portsmouth that separates the Isle of Wight from England. It is connected to the English Channel by a body of water called Spithead. In Scotland, the Firth of Clyde near the port of Glasgow has also hosted fleet reviews.

In the United States, the historic venue for naval reviews has been Hampton Roads in the state of Virginia, a sheltered body of water where the James River empties into Chesapeake Bay. The adjacent city of Norfolk is the home of the US Atlantic Fleet, and the national capital, Washington, lies some 220 km to the north. The great port of New York City has hosted many fleet reviews. On the Pacific coast, fleet reviews have often been held at the ports of San Francisco and San Diego. Canadian fleet reviews alternate between Halifax on the Atlantic and Victoria on the Pacific. Royal Australian Navy fleet reviews are generally held in Sydney Harbour.¹ The French Navy usually holds fleet reviews in the Mediterranean between the resort of Cannes and its major naval base at Toulon, most recently in August 2014 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Allied landings in southern France.² China held its first international fleet review at Qingdao in 2009, marking the 60th anniversary of its navy. Warships from 14 nations participated, including INS *Delhi* (D52), the destroyer USS *Fitzgerald* (DDG 62), and the cruiser *Varyag*, flagship of the Russian Pacific fleet.

India's presidential fleet reviews have alternated between Mumbai on the west coast and Visakhapatnam on the east.³ The first was held in October 1953, for Dr. Rajendra Prasad. The next one is scheduled for February 2016 at Visakhapatnam, with over 100 ships from 60 navies expected to participate.

Great Britain

The British are masters of pomp and ceremony (perhaps only the Indians do it better), and the naval review seems to be a British invention. As early as June 1346, before sailing across the Channel to war in France, King Edward III may have briefly reviewed his ships. The earliest formal fleet review, however, seems to have been conducted in May 1415, at Southampton, when King Henry V mobilised for the campaign that led to the historic battle of Agincourt (October 25, 1415). Subsequent British monarchs have reviewed fleets in this location or other harbours on many occasions.

In March 1700, King William III entertained visiting Russian Tsar Peter the Great (who was fascinated with the practical details of shipbuilding) with a naval review at the Royal Navy's dockyard at Deptford. In June 1773 at Spithead, King George III reviewed many of the ships that would eventually fight the French in the War of the American Revolution. In June 1814, as the Napoleonic wars drew to a close, the Prince Regent (the future king George IV) was joined by the Tsar of Russia and the King of Prussia to review 15 ships of the line and 31 frigates. This was probably the last royal naval review of a fleet consisting entirely of wooden sailing vessels.

During the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) there were no less than 17 fleet reviews, the grandest, perhaps, being the 165 ships assembled for the Diamond Jubilee Review of June 1897:

There were 21 battleships and 44 cruisers, their names conveying the confidence of a world-spanning Empire: Victorious, Renown, Powerful, Terrible, Majestic and Mars. A vast, intimidating presence intended to impress on friend and foe alike the continuing potency of the British behemoth. And what was more, the assembly of this great fleet had required the recall of not a single ship from the Mediterranean or the far-flung squadrons guarding the imperial sea lanes.⁴

Queen Victoria observed the review by telescope from Osborne House, her residence on the Isle of Wight. Her grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, was present on this occasion and some historians believe that his eagerness to emulate the Royal Navy, by constructing a powerful German fleet during the following decades, sparked the costly naval arms race that was a contributing cause of the First World War.

In July 1914, in anticipation of the outbreak of the First World War, King George V reviewed his Grand Fleet:

The assembly at Spithead was the largest and most powerful ever seen: twenty four dreadnought battle-ships and battle cruisers, thirty five pre-dreadnoughts and 123 smaller ships lay together under the White Ensign. . . . Overflowed by seaplanes and aircraft from the naval air station at Eastchurch, the fleets sailed on 20 July, passing the royal yacht, Victoria and Albert. Other dignitaries watched from the second royal yacht, Alexandra and the Admiralty yacht Enchantress.⁵

A few weeks earlier, Kaiser Wilhelm II of the German Empire, embarked aboard the imperial yacht, *Hohenzollern II*, reviewed the High Sea Fleet at Kiel on the Baltic Sea, in celebration of the re-opening of the Kiel Canal, which was deepened and widened to allow the passage of the largest warships between the North Sea and the Baltic. Four British battleships and three cruisers were present for this celebration:

Paintwork gleamed and brass shone. Southampton's carpenter's crew had even planed her teak decks to remove any spots. . . . While sporting activities and visits were organized for the sailors, life for their officers was a constant dash between duty, official functions and private fun.⁶

On May 20, 1937, for the coronation of King George VI, a fleet review at Spithead gathered many warships that would go on to play a brilliant or tragic role in the Second World War, including the battle cruiser HMS *Hood*, and the visiting German cruiser *Admiral Graf Spee*. The battleship USS *New York* (BB 34) represented the American navy.

A major naval review for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at Spithead in June 1953 gathered over 300 ships (including no less than nine aircraft carriers!) from all the nations of the British Commonwealth, along with an overflight by 300 aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm.

For the 200th anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar on June 28, 2005, a naval review assembled over a hundred warships manned by some 25,000 sailors from 35 navies. Vessels present included the nuclear-powered French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and the Spanish carrier *Principe de Asturias*. Many civilian vessels, including the passenger liner *QE2*, and numerous tall sailing ships (including INS *Tarangini*) were present. Queen Elizabeth II, embarked aboard the Antarctic patrol vessel HMS *Endurance* and escorted by frigate HMS *Chatham* (F87), reviewed the fleet.

United States of America

The customs and traditions of the Royal Navy have influenced many of the world's navies for centuries, and the fleet review has proven to be a popular export. The US

Navy got off to an inauspicious start in February 1844 when President John Tyler and a large party of officials went onboard the new steam corvette USS *Princeton* at Alexandria, Virginia, near the capital. During a demonstration, one of the ship's 12-inch (305-mm) smoothbore cannon exploded, killing the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of State and four others. President Tyler only survived because he was below decks.

In September 1863 during the American Civil War, the Russian Baltic squadron (three steam frigates, two corvettes and a clipper) commanded by Rear Admiral Stepan Lisovsky paid an extended visit to New York City. Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of the president, accompanied by Rear Admiral David Farragut, visited the squadron. Although this was not a formal fleet review, a double-page engraving in the popular journal *Harper's Weekly* recorded the event.⁷ At the same time, the Russian Pacific squadron (three corvettes and two clippers) visited San Francisco, earning the thanks of the residents by helping to fight a devastating fire in the city in which six Russian sailors lost their lives. The reason for the deployment was Russian concern over the possible outbreak of a European war, which might have trapped the fleets in their home ports, but the appearance of political and military support to the United States in the midst of the Civil War created a legacy of good will between the two nations.

The first international naval review conducted by the US Navy was in April 1893 at Hampton Roads, Virginia, as part of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the voyage of Christopher Columbus. President Grover Cleveland reviewed 13 ships of the North Atlantic Squadron, along with more than 20 other warships from Britain, Russia, Spain, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Brazil. Many of the participating ships then sailed to New York City to continue the celebration.

President Theodore Roosevelt was a great naval enthusiast. In 1882, at the age of 24, he authored *The Naval War of 1812*⁸ and was a strong supporter of Captain (later Rear Admiral) Alfred Thayer Mahan, the author of *The Influence of Seapower Upon History: 1660–1783* (1890).⁹ Roosevelt reviewed the North Atlantic Fleet near his summer home at Oyster Bay, New York, on Long Island Sound in 1903 and 1906. During those years the fleet was based nearby at Newport, Rhode Island.

One of the most significant American naval gatherings of the early 20th century was the international fleet review in Hampton Roads, off Norfolk, Virginia, in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the first English settlement at Jamestown in 1607. Ships from Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Italy and Japan attended the Norfolk review. Out of 21 foreign warships present, seven would be lost during the First

World War. This was also the public debut of the “Great White Fleet”: 16 pre-Dreadnought battleships manned by 14,000 sailors. These warships completed a voyage around the globe between December 1907 and February 1909.

Fifty years later, an International Naval Review at Hampton Roads in June 1957 commemorated the 350th anniversary of the Jamestown settlement. One of the largest naval gatherings of the Cold War era, the review included 113 ships from 17 nations. Anchored in two 200 Navy and Marine Corps aircraft. A US postage stamp issued for the occasion depicted the newly commissioned aircraft carrier *Saratoga* (CV 60), which was the largest vessel present.

A uniquely American naval custom is Fleet Week, usually coordinated with the Memorial Day weekend at the end of May. Fleet Weeks welcome Navy, Marine and Coast Guard units, often joined by visiting foreign ships, to major ports such as New York and San Diego. New York’s 2012 Fleet Week marked the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. Twenty-one vessels were present for a parade of ships in the Hudson River, including USS *Wasp* (LHD 1), USS *Roosevelt* (DDG 80), USCGC *Eagle* and naval vessels from Brazil, France, Mexico, Colombia, Indonesia, Spain, Ecuador, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan and Finland. In 2013, New York’s Fleet Week was unfortunately cancelled due to government budget cuts (“sequestration”) but the celebration resumed in 2014.

The Future

The sea is a very unforgiving environment and naval officers have traditionally been trained to strictly observe and criticise the cleanliness, good order and professionalism of every vessel and sailor they encounter. International fleet reviews are occasions where navies can show off their very best to one another, to their political leaders and to the public. Fleet reviews are public events, unlike multinational exercises, which have a strong operational component, and are often conducted outside the spotlight of media attention. Some might object that the competitive nationalistic display of war machines builds public support for naval arms races, but it should be noted that the great era of international fleet reviews between 1815 and 1914 was essentially a time of peace. Navies in that era of rapid technological change competed far more with paint and polish than with weaponry.

For modern navies, international fleet reviews are valued because of the opportunities they provide for sailors to meet and take the measure of their counterparts

from other nations, to share experiences and form friendships that will prove valuable in peacetime and priceless in times of conflict. For naval intelligence officers, of course, fleet reviews may also provide opportunities to collect both technical and human information.

In coming decades, the inexorable advance of technology will raise new challenges. Minimally manned warships will have fewer and fewer sailors to “man the rails” while passing in review. Future autonomous robotic warships may have no sailors onboard at all. The sleek design of “stealth” warships limits the possibilities for streaming decorative lines of colorful flags from rigging and signal halyards.

Submarines are likely to become an increasingly important component of many fleets, but vessels designed to operate beneath the sea do not make for an impressive show on the surface or pier-side. Submarines are particularly unsuited to host the visiting public, being cramped, difficult to access through narrow hatches, and tightly packed with sensitive equipment.

In our era of austerity and constrained resources, many fleets are shrinking and most struggle to meet rising costs of construction, training, operations and maintenance. It may be increasingly challenging for naval leaders to justify the expenditure of fuel and other costs to deploy warships to distant international naval reviews in order to “show the flag”.

Far from becoming obsolete rituals, international fleet reviews are likely to remain for many years as vibrant and popular gatherings for the seafaring military forces of the global maritime community.

Notes

1. “International Fleet Review 2013”, (n.d.): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Fleet_Review_2013 (accessed August 22, 2015).
2. For photographs of this event and a list of ships in attendance, see Navy Recognition, “French Navy International Fleet Review 70th anniversary of the Landing in Provence” (2014): <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/focus-analysis/naval-exercises/1938-french-navy-international-fleet-review-70th-anniversary-of-the-landing-in-provence.html> (accessed August 22, 2015).
3. Indian Navy, “Presidential Reviews of the Fleet” (n.d.): <http://indiannavy.nic.in/book/presidential-reviews-fleet> (accessed August 23, 2015).

4. Neil Tweedie and Thomas Harding, "Diamond Jubilee: The Queen No Longer Rules the Waves," *The Telegraph*, June 1, 2012. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/the_queens_diamond_jubilee/9305678/Diamond-Jubilee-The-Queen-no-longer-rules-the-waves.html (accessed August 22, 2015).
5. James Goldrick, *Before Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press (2015), pp. 8–9.
6. Goldrick, pp. 5–6.
7. Blue Gray Review, "The Russian Fleet, Commanded by Admiral Lisovski, Now in the Harbor of New York" (n.d.): <http://www.bluegrayreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/russian-fleet-1500.jpg> (accessed August 22, 2015).
8. In print: Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).
9. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History: 1660–1783* (Dover Publications, 1987).