

**TO THE NADIR AND BACK: THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF THE  
ROYAL NAVY 1918-1939.**

**Volume 1 of 2.**

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**Signed:**

**This thesis is dedicated to Miss Macaulay, an inspirational teacher and head of history at Dorking County Grammar School. When I gave up the study of history to pursue a medical career, she told me that she ‘could have made a historian’ of me.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Royal Navy, and especially its leadership, is perceived to have performed poorly in the First World War and its officers have been described as being automatons who only came alive when directed by superiors. By contrast in the Second World War the Royal Navy and its officers are seen as having ‘done well,’ displaying both flair and initiative. There does not appear to have been any attempts made to look in any detail at what, if anything, changed in the twenty years between the wars to explain the perceived improvement. This thesis critically examines the executive branch of the Royal Navy, and contends that the navy continually adapted and modified the training of its officers to meet whatever was required of them; when they were required to passively obey orders as in the Grand Fleet of the First World War, they had been trained for that eventuality, when to show initiative likewise.

During the 1920s the officer corps was mismanaged and morale and motivation suffered badly. The influence of the Admiralty civil service, the repository of institutional memory, which managed junior officers’ careers, was conservative and resistant to change. Changes in training both before and after the mutiny at Invergordon (September 1931) brought the officer corps up to date and set it on track for its outstanding performance in the next war, in particular recognising that leadership was not an innate class based ability, but had to be taught and developed. However, the navy had since the latter part of the nineteenth century changed the emphasis of officer’s career paths; specialist training was seen as the ‘route to the top’ and command was downgraded as a necessary part of an officer’s career development. It was only during the latter part of Second World War that having exercised command at sea was recognised as being an important part of an officer’s experience.

The thesis also addresses the ‘RNVR myth’. that the Royal Navy was only able to prosecute the Second World War successfully because of an influx of well educated temporary officers and that they were the major driving force.

This thesis has been largely based on primary sources, including personnel records which have not been studied before and have been examined in such a way as to allow statistical analysis.

## LIST OF CONTENTS

Volume 1	
Submission	1
Index	2
Abstract	3
Dedication	4
List of illustrations	5
Introduction	7
PART ONE: The Royal Naval Executive Officer 12 November 1918	37
Chapter 1: The Executive Branch Officer	39
Chapter 2: Entry, Education and Training	57
Chapter 3: Personnel management	91
PART TWO: To the Nadir and Back	103
Chapter 1: Declining to the Nadir: Admirals Wemyss, Beatty and Madden and their policies regarding the officer corps.	105
Chapter 2: Declining to the Nadir: Admirals Wemyss, Beatty and Madden and the morale of the officer corps.	137
Chapter 3: The Nadir and the Inflection: Admiral Field	169
Chapter 4: The Ascension: Admiral Chatfield and the improvement of the officers' lot.	217
Chapter 5: The Ascension: Admiral Chatfield and the coming war.	235
PART THREE: The Apogee	257
Chapter 1: Admirals Backhouse and Pound.	259
Chapter 2: Conclusion: The Naval Officer on 2nd September 1939	297
Volume 2	
Submission	315
Appendix A: Royal Naval officer's rank insignia etc	319
Appendix B: Cohort Study, Ethical Approvals etc and methodology	325
Appendix C: The Branches of the Executive Branch	335
Appendix D: Illustrative Officer's training Record and Certificates	343
Appendix E: Admiralty Fleet Order 2315/32 Confidential Admiralty Fleet Order 2023/32	365
Glossary	373
Bibliography	381
Annexes (on CD in rear pocket)	
List of abbreviations used in the Annexes	
Annex A: Spreadsheet of Midshipmen of 1920 seniority	
Annex B: Spreadsheet of Midshipmen of 1925 seniority	
Annex C: Spreadsheet of Midshipmen of 1930 seniority	
Annex D: Spreadsheet of Midshipmen of 1935 seniority	