

Title: Rowing is War!

\*\*\*Insert Image/Title - "The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up" (1838)  
William Turner\*\*\*



I have often taught my Australian art students about the well-known painting by William Turner "The Fighting Temeraire" (1838), which incidentally was voted as Britain's most favourite painting. It depicts the 98-gun naval warship HMS Temeraire that played a pivotal role in the Battle of Trafalgar and here is being unceremoniously towed up the Thames to be scrapped. What is lost on my students is that this epic painting is a pointed critique of the Industrial Revolution where iron and steam replaced oak and cloth. The iron tug spewing forth plumes of smoke acts as a metaphor for the onslaught of the industrial age and the grotesque modernisation of the world.

If you are still reading this, no doubt you are wondering what this has to do with rowing. Hear me out ... everything.

As good students of rowing history, we can date rowing back into antiquity and its development during the wars of the Mediterranean when the paddle was first levered against the gunnel to become an oar. Our modern-day rowing has a direct line from the Royal Navy as all sailors were trained to row - a fact which has had a lasting effect on rowing and is still being felt to this day. Much of our terminology, iconography, values and attitudes are directly linked to the Navy. We

were recently reminded of the historical legacy of our sport by the Doggett's Coat and Badge sculling race for Thames waterman which has been raced since 1715. The Thames watermen were often called to serve as a naval reserve force and are known to have helped established rowing clubs, coach and coxed crews to victory and instilled militaristic values and discipline within our sporting culture. In the US, many of the first rowing clubs were attached to Naval Academies and the first recorded rowing race in America was in 1824 between a crew of the British frigate "Hussar" and a crew of the New York Whitehall boatmen shortly after the US War of Independence. In many ways, the sport of rowing is a lingering historical microcosm of the Navy and having this understanding helps us to see our sports prevailing attitudes and could provide a key to your clubs and ultimately your own crews success.

We know that in the navy a conscript becomes part of a unit, follows a chain of command and success is achieved by each sailor falling into line and working together as a crew. You may be inclined to believe that enhanced militaristic teamwork might give you an edge but the Navy's pernicious attitude towards innovation may be holding you, your club and our sport back. After the disastrous US and GB Olympic campaigns, there has been much soul searching and reflecting on each of our systems, structures, organisations and cultures and grappling with a larger historical perspective may help.

We must revisit Turner's painting one more time as the brushstrokes tell the tale of the fraught relationship between the Royal Navy and the new technology of steam. Although the industrial age transformed the world through the power of steam the Royal Navy resisted the technology and continued to use traditional *mast and cloth* and relied on sails and wind power well into the 20th Century. The Navy failed to see that steam was an essential maritime technology. There was a full 100 years of the Royal Navy holding onto sail when the world had been opened up by steam power. As early as 1828 the Admiralty assert that it was *"their bounden duty to discourage to the utmost the employment of steam vessels, as they consider that the introduction of steam is calculated to strike a fatal blow at the Naval Supremacy of the Empire."* As late as 1893, Rudyard Kipling wrote the short story 'Judson and the Empire', which was perhaps an antecedent of Joseph Hellers 'Catch-22', where he mockingly describes an iron tub vessel which was made "in the days when men built for sail as well as for steam". Kipling said the British ship looked like a flat-iron with a match stuck up in the middle and maneuvered like a cow stuck in the mud. You can see that in Turner's painting he adds insult to injury as the mighty ship is being towed by a steam-driven paddleboat, something the Navy was loath to adopt. It was not until 1909 that the Navy built the first warship without a wooden mast and sail.

Dare I say, the Navy's resistance to transition from sail resonates in so many areas that I see in rowing today. I wonder if the admiralty had asked themselves ["Will it make the boat go faster?"](#) would it have taken 100 years to fully adopt steam? This simple question was famously asked by the victorious GB Men's VIII before the Sydney Olympics and represents a revolution in thinking about rowing innovation. It is critical to understand why this mindset is so revolutionary in our sport. The question allows every member of the crew to rethink what they are doing and gives each crew member agency, autonomy and freedom to consider alternatives. The revolutionary aspect of this question is in direct contradiction of our core attitudes of following a chain of command, obeying orders and working as a crew. A Navy midshipman telling the captain that they want to use a new oar design would be seen as insubordination. But when

each member has been given the right to challenge authority and to ask the question “Will it make the boat go faster?” then innovation flourishes. Sadly, some of the innovations adopted by the 2000 Olympic GB VIII have been rarely seen since; these include 3M aero-dots and a new hydrodynamic fin/skeg combination.

There is a tension between giving rowers autonomy to use the equipment that makes them go faster and falling into line, using standardised squad equipment as determined by high command. In my own case, an exciting trial of my foil blade design was being conducted by the [GBStart program](#), however, when one athlete was not permitted to use the design after qualifying for the GB Squad the trial was abandoned.



\*\*\*Insert Image/Title: GBStart Program Randall foil trial \*\*\*

Tellingly, at an international level, the foil has only been adopted by rowers who do not belong to centralised National rowing systems. Generally, these are scullers who are coached independently by their fathers, like Martino Goretti (ITA) and Isaiah Harrison (USA). When I look around, I can see glimpses of self-empowered athletes in places, like the Swiss Junior World Champion sculler Aurelia-Maxima Janzen who is using macon blades. When I asked her coach about her choice of oars the reply was simple, “She rows faster with macon blades.” Giving individual rowers agency is a revolutionary mindset and may prove to be the secret of future successes. Last month, the new CEO of USRowing, Amanda Kraus, outlined a new

philosophical approach by moving away from a monolithic centralised national system to empowering individual athletes, in small boats, to determine their own Olympic path. Perhaps it's time to reconsider your own attitude towards the military, innovation and to allow your crew to ask the revolutionary question, "Will it make the boat go faster?" or shall we keep hoisting up the sails.... "All-Hands!"

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