

## Twitter Thread by Thomas Shugart



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**A few thoughts about tugs:**

**As I've been reading *Beans, Bullets, and Black Oil*, a 1952 book about logistics in the Pacific in WWII, I've been struck how often the topic of tugs has come up: ships that were saved because of their presence, or perhaps lost due to their absence.**

Some examples that jumped right out: that the carrier USS Yorktown might have been saved at Midway, had the Navy yet appreciated the value of fleet tugs.

Here at Midway we lost the *Yorktown*. We had not yet learned thoroughly the use and value of fleet tugs and salvage action.

That the carrier USS Hornet and destroyer USS Porter might have been saved at the Battle of the Santa Cruz islands if tugs had been available:

we again discouraged the Japanese from following through. We lost the carrier *Hornet* and the destroyer *Porter*, both of which might perhaps have been saved had 2 or more salvage tugs been available, but we had none.

And that tugs were able to help save three heavily damaged cruisers after the Battle of Tassafaronga:

torpedoed and put out of action. All three of the ships were saved, the *Minneapolis* with a temporary bulkhead of coconut logs, and restored to the fleet after a long period out of service. Two additional tugs had been instrumental in saving them, and the patching facilities at Espiritu Santo had been improved a little by the use of Seabees and a PT boat base, with the assistance of the repair ship *Rigel*. Temporary patchwork there enabled them to go to navy yards for real repair. The *New Orleans* had to turn back once for additional patching before she finally made it.

By my count it looks like the USN started WWII with 20 or so ocean-going tugs (ATs) available. And then over the course of the war, as lessons were learned, the USN built 200+ more (ATAs and ATFs), many of which served for decades more. <https://t.co/d58helDqpP>

During the war, the Navy also built or converted 40-odd dedicated rescue and salvage ships (ARSs) that were also crucial to repairing battle damage and rescuing crews. <https://t.co/d58helDqpP>

This all made me wonder - now that we have reason to worry again about USN ships potentially being disabled in combat in the vastness of the Pacific, how are we doing in this area - tug and salvage capability - now?

From what I can tell, here are the numbers: for its worldwide responsibilities, the USN currently has 3 fleet tugs (T-ATFs) - 1 each in the Pacific, Atlantic, and in Bahrain. <https://t.co/Fvao5QIRLU>

MSC also owns 2 Safeguard-class salvage and rescue ships (ARSs) and 1 additional civilian tug (MV Gary Chouest). <https://t.co/UMlxOKabcy>

Since most of MSC's current tugs & salvage ships are ~40 years old, there's a new class of 8 ships in the works - the Navajo-class - intended to replace both the fleet tugs and salvage ships with a single platform, and based on a commercial design. <https://t.co/BX27x39mDM>

An obvious question for me: how does the PLA Navy stack up here?

One sometimes hears the PLAN described as a brittle and inexperienced force, unlikely to be able to succeed in real-world combat. How well have they provided for forces to conduct recovery and salvage?

Here are the numbers, from ONI's latest PLAN identification guide:

- 14 tugs (ATAs)
- 13 PLAN rescue/salvage ships (ARSs), w/ 27 more under Ministry of Transportation

Worth noting IMO is that these are all likely to be located in the western Pacific. <https://t.co/23uccgzcl6>

The PLAN also has a new class of 6000 ton ocean-going tugs under production, with some sources indicating a likely run of 21 hulls. <https://t.co/GTaaMCysSf>

So does the USN have a Tug Gap that needs to be closed?

Not specifically so, but IMO the relative lack of this capability is symptomatic, along with stories of double-pumped deployments and the like, of trying to run a worldwide Navy on the cheap...

...against an authoritarian maritime power of the first order, one who seems to have an iron will to challenge the Western naval superiority that has underwritten the world order as we've known it since WWII.

Fin.