Inside Reagan’s Navy: The Pentagon Journals

Carnes Lord

Chase Untermeyer

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Bismarck on 27 May after a lucky aerial torpedo hit disabled the ship’s steering mechanism. Not so Robert Winklareth. His focus instead is on Bismarck’s “singular triumph” in destroying the British battle cruiser Hood three days earlier. A 38 cm shell from its fifth salvo sliced through Hood’s armored side below the aft turrets, setting off first the 4 in. secondary armament magazine and then the main 15 in. magazine. Only 3 of its complement of 1,421 survived.

So, what is new? Winklareth, a military weapons systems expert, traces all action at sea in five-second intervals. He primarily uses translated German records of the battle of the Denmark Strait to offer a salvo-by-salvo analysis, to re-create the speed and headings of the major combatants, and to determine the precise firing angles and effects of the heavy guns. Unsurprisingly, the book is highly detailed and a feast mainly for naval engineering and gunnery enthusiasts. It is complemented by countless charts, diagrams, photographs, and pencil drawings (by the author). Winklareth’s own battle is with the (unnamed) historians who claim that just before the engagement with Hood, Bismarck, in a mere six minutes, came up the port side of the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, crossed its wake to its starboard side, and then recrossed the cruiser’s wake to take up position on its port side again (15–16, 258). What he calls a “reversed photo” error resulted in this assumption. Few will cross swords with the author on this matter.

On the other hand, serious historians of the battle will take umbrage at two of Winklareth’s strong statements, both on the first page (11) of the book. His claim that the battle of the Denmark Strait “was undoubtedly one of the most famous and most important naval battles of World War II” will raise the hackles especially of historians of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific 1941–45. And his second claim, that the encounter between Bismarck and Hood “is perhaps the most documented event in naval history,” will come as news to German naval historians who are all too aware of the fact that Bismarck’s war diary (Kriegstagebuch) went down with the ship.

With regard to the broader aspects of the battle of the Denmark Strait, Winklareth spends a great deal of time sketching out the past histories of the German and British navies as well as the major ship designs of the two powers. The actual artillery duel between the German battleship and the British battle cruiser, in fact, consumes but half a dozen pages of chapter 13. Unfortunately, there is no attempt to place “Operation Rheinübung,” the German sortie into the Atlantic, into the wider context of Grand Admiral Erich Raeder’s double-pole strategy of attacking Britain’s maritime commerce with two modern battle fleets in the Atlantic Ocean, while a third fleet of elderly battleships tied the Royal Navy down in the North Sea. The reader deserved this analysis.

HOLGER H. HERWIG


The Washington diary is something of a lost art these days. Instead, we have to be satisfied with books of instant journalism using largely anonymous sources or memoirs too often tendentiously crafted after the fact. Chase Untermeyer is a
wonderful outlier. Apparently, Untermeyer started keeping a diary at age nine, and has already published excerpts covering his initial Washington service as executive assistant to Vice President George Bush (1981–83). This latest volume covers the period of his service in the office of the Secretary of the Navy (1983–88), during the tenures of John F. Lehman and later James Webb as Secretary of the Navy. The result is an engaging portrait of the glories and miseries of life within the Beltway. Though lighthearted and refreshingly modest, Untermeyer’s book also offers up telling anecdotes and keen insights into the practice—or lack thereof—of civilian control of the United States Navy at a critical juncture of the Cold War.

Though he had served briefly in the Navy as a very junior officer, Untermeyer was the classic political appointee. Born in Texas and educated at Harvard, he became involved in Texas politics and was elected to the statehouse in 1976. After his stint working directly under the vice president, Untermeyer was appointed initially as Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Installations and Facilities, and then for some four years served as Assistant Secretary for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. Both jobs are political plums, offering many opportunities for ingratiation of the holder with defense contractors and members of Congress. Untermeyer makes no attempt to hide his own ambitions, or the intoxicating effects of constant mingling with the good and the great not only in Washington but on many tours of inspection or protocol in the provinces. (At one point, he charmingly announces that he has at last become a “toff”). But he also makes clear that he took his responsibilities seriously and was intent on serving the boss well.

And what a boss! To get the flavor of John Lehman, it is hard to improve on this riff of Untermeyer’s at Lehman’s farewell party at the Naval Observatory in April 1987: “People have asked me, what’s the difference between Jim Webb and John Lehman? And I’ve said that the thing to remember is that Jim is a former Marine officer. Tell him to take a hill, and he’ll take the hill. But with John it’s a little different. Tell him to take a hill, and the first thing he’ll do is get together with Mel Paisley [perhaps best described as his consigliere] for a few drinks to concoct the plan. . . . Then John will start a competition among real estate agents over the purchase price of the hill. Next he’ll go to the senator in whose state the hill is located and make a deal: the Navy will build the chrome bumper-guard assembly for the Trident sub in his hometown if the senator will slip an amendment into the Wild and Scenic Areas Act to purchase the hill. Then, with the money saved from the competition, John buys another Aegis cruiser.”

Lehman’s methods did not appeal to everyone, and in fact could be outrageous; but he could claim results. He nearly achieved the “600 ship Navy” for which he lobbied so ferociously. But the Navy leadership was ambivalent toward him. He had a habit of breaking Navy crockery—for example, by forcing the Naval Academy to put more humanities in its curriculum, and by engineering the retirement of Admiral Hyman Rickover (the story of Rickover’s tantrum in his departing courtesy call with Ronald Reagan is told with great relish at the beginning of Lehman’s memoir Command of the Sea). Anyone concerned about the current state of civil-military relations in Washington would do well to read this book.

CARNES LORD