

2002

Fleets of World War II

Frank Uhlig

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Uhlig, Frank (2002) "Fleets of World War II," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 3 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss3/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

representative democracy and Athenian direct democracy are radically different, but their shared political culture, devoted to equality and liberty, has encouraged a degree of dynamic innovation no authoritarian government has been able to match. Nonetheless, it can be dangerously misleading to impose a Cold War framework on the early struggle between Athens, a democracy at home but a tyrant over its allies, and Sparta, tyrannical at home but relatively mild in its treatment of allies. As one contributor, Robert Kagan, suggests, the American-led anticommunist alliance in Europe and Asia was not a Delian League, exacting tribute at sword point and crushing all who resisted it. Athens turned the Delian League into something like the Warsaw Pact, which explains why both Athens and the Soviet Union were hated and could not count on voluntary support from their allies. The willing assistance of allies for the more benevolent hegemony of the United States goes far to explain why the latter succeeded where Athens failed.

Noteworthy too are essays exploring the problem of maintaining civil liberties and civilian control of the military. Ellen Schrecker shows how the Korean War strengthened McCarthyism in 1950, and Stephen J. Whitfield considers how the American populist tradition rendered the United States vulnerable to the worst excesses of the senator from Wisconsin. Jennifer T. Roberts's insightful discussion of the cults of personality attached to Alcibiades and Douglas MacArthur helps us understand why "loose cannons" are less likely to rise to the top in the United States but also less likely to be punished as severely as they might deserve. Oddly, the only discussion of the most infamous demagogue in wartime Athens, Cleon, occurs not in this section

but in another essay, on a fundamentally different topic—an attempt by Josiah Ober to reconcile Thucydides the realist strategic theorist with Thucydides the consummate historian of the Peloponnesian War.

Perhaps the most striking essay is Gregory Crane's, on the problems that small states, like Plataea and Korea, face in preserving their independence and security when caught up in struggles between would-be hegemons. Dae-Sook Suh and Kongdan Oh invite the American reader to explore the internal dynamics of North and South Korean policy and strategy, while Kurt A. Raaflaub and Dong-Wook Shin offer intriguing perspectives on the bellicose character of Athenian political culture and the efforts of Koreans to resurrect a national identity from the ashes of war.

This eclectic mix of essays reminds us that democracy can be both an asset and a liability to its votaries in time of war.

KARL WALLING
Naval War College



Worth, Richard. *Fleets of World War II*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2001. 375pp. \$35

In this handy-sized, reasonably priced book, Richard Worth and his publisher have provided an excellent instrument of discovery for readers whose range of interest in World War II includes the many fleets that fought, and even the few that only looked on nervously.

Worth describes adequately all the combatants, nation by nation (from Albania to Yugoslavia), type by type (aircraft carriers to motor torpedo boats), class by class (oldest to newest), and, for the

larger types down through destroyers and submarines, ship by ship (the Americans in hull-number order, though Worth does not give the individual numbers). Worth omits amphibious ships and auxiliaries, “ships whose primary function was not naval combat,” though he does include the U.S. Navy’s several dozen seaplane tenders, large and small. There are a few other omissions too, some obviously unintended.

Each country’s section begins with a general discussion, “an assessment” of its fleet, geostrategic situation, tasks, relevant history, and resources, including weapons (guns and torpedoes). Then Worth gets to the ships and their aircraft. He covers Albania in just over six lines; the United States requires seventy pages.

One should not expect to find portraits of any particular ship; Worth includes very few. However, other excellent but more expensive books provide satisfactory views, as well as individual ship data, of almost every class of fighting ship of that war.

Altogether, the index includes about 4,600 ships’ names. However, a host of unnamed ships and craft (such as the thousand or so U-boats, the eight hundred American torpedo boats, and the 502 American yard minesweepers, YMS) must content themselves with one general index entry for each class. Nearly all classes are to be found in the book—only nine lines for the 136-foot YMS, with a fine photo. The U-boats, in all their variations, properly get seven pages.

In a book of this sort one will find errors, but this reader found few indeed, compared to the great opportunity to commit errors, and those were small. For example, the German 280 mm gun was much closer to the eleven inches credited to it

in other books than to the 11.1 inches Worth allows. Also, not all American *Clemson*-class destroyers built for World War I “suffered from inferior workmanship.” Only those built by Bethlehem did, and the U.S. Navy discarded most of those before World War II began.

The great pleasure of this book lies in Worth’s clear and succinct commentary. Regarding a pair of British battleships, for example, he writes: “The *Nelsons* were innovative in many ways, but successful in few. The nine 16-inch guns seemed a potent battery, but by the time they worked out all their bugs, they proved no more effective than the old 15-inchers.” The fifteen-inch-gun *Queen Elizabeths* “sometimes achieved brilliant gunnery; as early as Jutland the Germans noted *Valiant’s* consistent fire.” In 1940 “at Calabria, *Warspite* planted a shot on the Italian flagship at a range of 26,400 yards, the longest ship-to-ship hit in history.”

Of the numerous American *Fletcher*-class destroyers, Worth observes that they “had a strong armament, long range, reliability, and irrepressible toughness. Some of their success came by inheritance; most units joined the fleet after the early, unpleasant lessons of night combat against the Japanese. However, the *Fletchers* presented the perfect vehicle for exploiting those lessons, achieving utter triumph at Cape St. George and Surigao Strait.” Also, “most of the losses among the *Fletcher* and *Sumner* classes resulted from kamikaze attacks. In many cases the ships survived, but the navy in that stage in the war didn’t bother to repair them. *Hoel* succumbed to a more traditional fate beneath an avalanche of Japanese gunfire: 40 shells, ranging from 5-inch to 16.1 inch, stopped her dead in the water, and subsequent hits finished her

off. *Johnston* received 4,700 pounds of incoming ordnance within the space of one minute. It wrecked half of her machinery, yet she continued at 17 knots. . . . After accumulating damage for two and a half hours, she wallowed so helplessly that her crew couldn't even properly scuttle her; they simply opened her watertight doors and let her flood."

Worth says of the American diesel-driven *Cannon*-class destroyer escorts that they "rolled as badly as the *Evarts* type," an earlier class of destroyer escort that he reports was prone to "lurid" rolls. The Navy, according to Worth, considered the *Cannons* the least successful of its several destroyer escort classes. I did not know the Navy's official opinion on those ships, but having a little experience in one of them, I found it an easy opinion to share.

Discussing briefly another class in which I sailed, the 173-foot American submarine chasers, Worth reports accurately that they were "wet forward and generally uncomfortable in heavy seas." Indeed, in a head sea of any magnitude, solid water often swept over the pilot-house. With the sea on the beam the ship proved a deep roller. Still, these little ships "proved seaworthy enough," and, Worth adds, "the navy viewed them as a success." This also is an easy opinion to share.

With a substantial library of good books on the fighting ships of the last century and a half, I am glad to add Richard Worth's *Fleets of World War II* to my collection.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College



Robinson, C. Snelling, *200,000 Miles aboard the Destroyer Cotten*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 2000. 320pp. \$35

As a midshipman in the 1960s, I discovered J. Bryan's *Aircraft Carrier*, the classic World War II nonfiction "diary" of life aboard the USS *Yorktown* (CV 10) in 1945. It remains a great source of insight into the everyday lives of the men of Task Force 58 at the height of the Pacific War. As a junior officer in destroyers, I sought out similar nonfiction work describing life aboard "tin cans" during the war, but I found only two books, both novels. Not until Robinson's *200,000 Miles aboard the Destroyer Cotten* have I read anything as good as J. Bryan's book.

This book comprises Robinson's recollections, bolstered by deck logs and his archive of letters to his parents, of his experience as a junior officer in *Cotten* (DD 669). As such, it is an amalgam of specific details, his immediate appreciations, and his present-day reflections on the men he served with, the events of those years, and the ship itself.

Ensign Robinson was commissioned via the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps at Harvard University in late spring 1943. He was assigned to the precommissioning crew of *Cotten*, which was then under construction at the Federal Shipyard in Kearny, New Jersey. *Cotten* was a "war emergency" *Fletcher*-class unit, with built-in modifications based on the wartime experience of earlier sister ships. Laid down on 8 February 1943, the ship was launched and commissioned in just 165 days. Ensign Robinson began his service on *Cotten* as the typical junior officer, with a bewildering series of assignments while the ship was