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Hunters in the Shallows: A History of the PT Boat; PT Boats at War: World War to Vietnam; The Sea Hawks with the PT Boats at War: A Memoir

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flown in combat—Rendall does not address the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. Navy's experience in Lebanon (a watershed event for the service), or the U.S. Air Force and Navy joint strikes into Libya.

Rendall does touch on several important issues and trends in modern air combat, including the critical importance of weapons schools; comparisons of gun and missile kills in various conflicts; how older aircraft, such as the F-4 and F-14, often migrate to air-to-ground roles; the importance of rules of engagement, stealth, and electronic warfare; and how aviators have been required to cope with increasingly complex aircraft systems.

Despite *Rolling Thunder's* shortcomings, its overall message is sound. Rendall concludes with a brief soliloquy on where the jet age is headed, with reference to the debate over whether manned aircraft are destined for extinction in favor of unmanned aerial vehicles. He leaves the reader with the thought that though the "edge of the envelope" is now set by cost and human limitations, humans will remain a key ingredient in air combat success for the foreseeable future. Although it is a bit airpower-centric, *Rolling Thunder* is an outstanding primer for those who want a solid overview of how modern air combat evolved, and a good springboard

for examining the subject in greater detail.

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Nelson, Curtis L. *Hunters in the Shallows: A History of the PT Boat*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1998. 242pp. \$28.95

Polmar, Norman, and Samuel Loring Morison. *PT Boats at War: World War II to Vietnam*. Osceola, Wis.: MBI Publishing, 1999. 160pp. \$19.95

Hoagland, Edgar D. *The Sea Hawks with the PT Boats at War: A Memoir*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1999. 234pp. \$24.95

For many readers, PT boats stir up images that are based on a pair of black-and-white movies and a corny television series, in which the PT crews are portrayed as non-conformist, courageous, and usually successful in near-suicidal torpedo attacks on swift and deadly enemy cruisers and destroyers. While these stories are entertaining, the reality of PT operations and the true effectiveness of the dreaded "mosquito boats" can be found in the three books discussed in this review.

The two books by Curtis Nelson, Norman Polmar, and Samuel Morison are excellent overviews. They give detailed descriptions of the programmatic background and

design of the classic World War II Higgins and Elco boats. Both books begin with the U.S. Civil War, when Lieutenant William Cushing, USN, attacked the Confederate ironclad CSS *Albatross* with a spar-torpedo rigged on a small picket boat on the night of 27 October 1864. Nelson points out that Cushing's attack was prototypical of the standard World War II PT attack, in that it occurred at night against an assumed superior, but unalerted, opponent, prompting vigorous counterfire.

Cushing's success notwithstanding, the use of smaller craft against larger craft was not seen as feasible, as survivable by the attacking crew, until the invention and marketing of the autonomous torpedo by Robert Whitehead. Whitehead's early torpedoes were lacking in range and reliability, but he and his team had shown the world's navies a revolutionary weapons system. Still, while some European navies adopted and refined the torpedo and created launching craft, the U.S. Navy was focusing on building the Mahanian blue-water fleet. Coastal warfare seemed to be irrelevant to this massive and costly effort.

Nelson does a creditable job in his description of the employment of motor torpedo boats, MTBs, in World War I. There were some spectacular successes. For example, many readers may be unaware

that one of the standard "stock footage" films of the demise of a dreadnought battleship (along with that of the catastrophic explosion of HMS *Barham* in World War II) shows the Austro-Hungarian battleship *Szent Istvan* rolling over in the Adriatic after suffering torpedo damage inflicted by Italian MTBs in 1918.

The postwar period is well described, but the real story begins during the U.S. naval buildup in the late 1930s. The pivotal role played by Secretary of the Navy Charles Edison (son of the inventor) in carrying out President Franklin Roosevelt's explicit orders to build warships of all types as quickly as possible is described in detail. While Nelson does a particularly good job of relating the "scandal" of Edison's purchase of a proven and excellent British MTB design while competition between U.S. builders was still going on, Polmar and Morison are more technically oriented and show in detail the design elements of the U.S. prototypes and the British import.

In the first months of the Pacific War, the only U.S. assets acting offensively were the six PTs of MTB Squadron 3 in the Philippines, under Lieutenant Commander John Bulkeley. While the actual tactical impact of these craft was slight, the crews demonstrated the hallmark attributes of all PT sailors—

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courage, innovation, and persistence. They also found that the boats' gunnery was at least as important a tactical asset as their unreliable torpedoes. This was a fact borne out later in the Solomons and the Mediterranean, where U.S. PT boats acted more like small, fast gunboats and interdicted coast-wise enemy barge traffic.

It is in this area that Nelson's work is slowed by a protracted analysis of the rationale of Douglas MacArthur's decision to use Bulkeley's PT boat instead of an already scheduled submarine for his escape from Corregidor. An earlier discussion of MacArthur's attempt to build a PT-focused Philippine navy in the late 1930s is germane, but his possible claustrophobia is not.

While the two works described above are overviews of PT design and tactics, Edgar Hoagland's book offers a rare, personal memoir of PT combat from the perspective of a young officer who transferred to the boats from engineering duty aboard an Atlantic Fleet destroyer. He provides the human side of PT-boat warfare. Nonetheless, it is really just a transcribed oral history, and as such it has much emotional immediacy but more than a few minor technical errors. His memory seems fresh after fifty plus years, however, and he does not shy away from describing his adventures both afloat and ashore.

Perhaps the best part is Hoagland's retelling of the PT operations in the Philippines in 1945, when the boats acted as light littoral warships, scouting pockets of Japanese resistance and engaging shore batteries with their ever-increasing gun armament. This book does an excellent job of describing what life was really like on PT boats in the Pacific. It was indeed a very different navy.

The post-World War II use of PT boats was brief, since the Navy discarded virtually all of them by 1946. However, several prototypes were built, and they are well described by Polmar and Morison. The use of South Vietnamese PTFs in 1964 is also recounted, with note of their missions in the Gulf of Tonkin on the nights before the USS *Maddox* was attacked. The weaknesses of Nelson's and Hoagland's books have been cited above; the Polmar and Morison work has several editing gaffes, in both text and photo captions, that are truly surprising given these authors' previous work. However, all three books are enjoyable. Nelson and Hoagland should probably be read together, to appreciate what PTs did and did not accomplish in World War II.

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