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Commanders Winn and Knowles: Winning the U-boat War with Intelligence, 1939-1943

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fire, no braver than the next man Under fire, the majority of men did only what they had to do.”

Whatever the Marine was when he joined, the Corps molded him and taught him to go forward in the face of enemy fire. He did a lot of that. A Marine sergeant wounded by a sniper on Peleliu remembered, “A million thoughts raced through my mind. Did my archangel save me again in battle? Why was I spared? This was the third time I had been wounded in this war.”

The book bristles with no-holds-barred discussions of the poor conditions on troopships and in the field. As Jones says, official histories duck such crucial matters as field sanitation, but *Gyrene* even explains how a Marine moves his bowels while in combat and how they got drunk or laid in San Diego, Honolulu, or Auckland. Always, in the shadows, there waited the next battle.

What kept them going? Said a company commander who won the Medal of Honor on Peleliu, “There was a certain confidence we were the best.”

By 1944 and the battle for Saipan, a former squad leader said, most of the men thought their chances of making it through the war were next to nothing. Many fighting there had been on the ‘Canal or Tarawa, and for some it was their third campaign. The call to

expose themselves to enemy fire never seemed to end.

Marines prayed, whether they had been devoted to religion all their lives, or, as one said, “I just prayed for my butt.”

Long after the war, Jones asked author Leon Uris what kind of Marine he had been. Uris replied, “I was a good Marine, an ordinary Marine.” That is what this singular book is about.

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author of *The U.S. Marine Corps Story*, and *Mr. Truman's War*

Kohnen, David. *Commanders Winn and Knowles: Winning the U-boat War with Intelligence, 1939–1943*. Krakow, Poland: Enigma Press, 1999 (available in the United States from Classical Crypto Books, Londonderry, N.H.) 168pp. \$20

Since its public revelation twenty-five years ago, the Allied breaking of the German U-boat cipher during World War II has become a historical staple. The British and American navies, armed with the uniquely valuable intelligence dubbed ULTRA, thwarted the German effort to cut the Atlantic supply lines. Specialized histories on the subject have generally focused on the technical ingenuity behind the code breaking. While often fascinating, these works give the impression that once the German codes were

broken, the resulting messages immediately produced usable intelligence. The truth is that any information, whether from communications intelligence or other sources, required analysis and interpretation before it yielded the secrets of the German fleet.

In *Commanders Winn and Knowles*, David Kohnen, naval reservist and curator of the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia, tells the story of the British and American naval intelligence organizations that turned ULTRA into operational intelligence. The book takes its title from the two extraordinary naval officers who served as officers in charge of the British and American submarine intelligence organizations, respectively. Commanders Winn and Knowles were both reservists, medically disqualified from combat service and hand picked for their unusual task. Their close professional association ultimately produced cooperation that one contemporary described as "closer than between any other British and American organization."

In both nations, the prewar naval intelligence groups had concerned themselves with background information (capabilities, port facilities, orders of battle) and were unsuited to providing a "near real time" intelligence picture. The Battle of the Atlantic required an intelligence center that would, in Commander Knowles's

words, use all "available intelligence to reproduce as nearly as possible the operations room of the enemy." In response, both nations developed small organizations, located near the most senior naval decision makers. Despite their influence, their highly classified functions ensured that they remained little known.

The two submarine intelligence centers did not merely repackage ULTRA intelligence. A critical truth Kohnen presents is that intelligence success during the Battle of the Atlantic was not a simple matter of breaking German codes. German U-boat message traffic was unreadable for lengthy periods of time and most notably during the critical spring and summer of 1942. When decoded, a message often could be understood only with the aid of other intelligence sources. As a result, each center became a clearinghouse where all intelligence sources could be fused into a coherent picture. Aerial reconnaissance provided information on U-boat departures and arrivals. High-frequency-direction-finding and radar sites provided some (limited) U-boat locating data. Human intelligence and prisoner of war interrogations provided material on tactics and procedures. Taken together with enemy communications, the fusion of these sources provided the best possible picture of enemy operations and, in time, a

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basis for predicting future U-boat movements.

Kohnen also examines the historical controversy surrounding Admiral Ernest J. King's handling of Operation DRUMBEAT, the 1942 German U-boat offensive along the U.S. East Coast. Here Kohnen takes issue with the prevalent view that King's legendary antipathy for the British led him to disregard warnings of the offensive. Kohnen finds that while intelligence estimates provided by the Admiralty to the U.S. Navy offered some indication of the coming German offensive, the warnings were by no means explicit. Even when German intentions became clear, Kohnen argues, King's lack of immediate action was a considered judgment, based on limited resources. It is a convincing argument.

Kohnen also explores the differences that arose between the British and American organizations. Despite close cooperation, the two organizations disagreed on the best means of exploiting ULTRA information. The British were cautious, mindful that prosecuting a German U-boat on the basis of its communications alone might compromise the intelligence source. Despite these concerns, in 1943 the Americans began using ULTRA to guide escort-carrier groups to concentrations of German submarines. The tactical exploitation of

this intelligence brought these antisubmarine warfare groups great success but produced tension between the two intelligence centers, an insight into the disagreements that can arise when sharing intelligence.

Even readers well versed in the period will find substantial new information in this work. Many American archival sources were declassified through the author's efforts. These include an oral history by Commander Knowles and also the first known photos, reproduced in the book, of the American submarine intelligence center. Kohnen also used archival sources from Britain and Germany, along with a wide range of secondary sources. This is an impressively documented work.

While it is appropriate that this work be published in Poland (site of the first efforts to break the German codes), it deserves a wider audience than such a specialized press usually enjoys. Naval professionals of any era will recognize in its pages the origins of operational intelligence, as well as a strong example of one of the critical truths of naval intelligence—the best new intelligence sources are of no use if the information is not analyzed and sent to the fleet.

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