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Clash of Titans: World War II at Sea

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150 Naval War College Review

lessons—and that British statesmen and political parties should clearly comprehend that the continued prosperity and security of the United Kingdom is dependent on the sea. Then as now, the author argues, the seas were and are realms of opportunity and the means to wealth and defence.

In many ways this book is a cry from the heart. Jean Cantlie Stewart, a biographer and lawyer, is aware of history's lessons and how England's wooden walls provided protection and influence in foreign policy. But she is less well attuned to the importance of colonial commodities and trades as ingredients in the larger story of success. Her discussion of how Britain adopted the policy of free trade is admirable. Britain's move to free trade had political costs because such a shift did not maintain its seaborne leadership. This completes the first third of the book. The remainder is devoted to commentary on twentieth-century politics of maritime primacy—in other words, to the means and methods of Britain's maritime greatness and decline. Here the tone becomes more strident and the message more certain. Flags of convenience carry British cargoes, and the British merchant marine is now a shadow of its former self. The value of British cargoes may be larger than heretofore, but the regret that the Red Ensign does not wave from the sterns of merchantmen like the windjammers and steamers of yesteryear drives the author to her conclusions.

This book says little about air power, intelligence warfare, alliance politics of our times, or other themes that would have obliged Stewart to look at her thesis in another light. Like many

another country concerned with its maritime strength, Britain knows that it is not by ships alone that the defence of the realm is achieved.

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Boyne, Walter J. *Clash of Titans: World War II at Sea*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 381pp. \$27.50

Miller, Nathan. *War at Sea: A Naval History of World War II*. New York: Scribner's, 1995. 592pp. \$32.50

Both books, published at the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, are single-volume, comprehensive histories of the great naval battles of that war. Even though each discusses the overall political and military background of combined operations, their consistent focus is upon navies and naval operations. You must go elsewhere to find general histories of World War II land and air campaigns. Each book covers the major naval campaigns in the Atlantic and the Pacific of the British, American, German, and Japanese navies, plus the contributions of the French, Italian, and Soviet fleets. Both works describe the personalities of individual commanders and technological advancements, and each analyzes the naval tactics and strategy of the forces involved. They offer interesting insights into motivations of the battle force commanders and observations as to why things may have happened as they did. Each contains helpful maps and pictures of key ships and players. Written for the general public, both

books use narrative and personal anecdotes to explain and illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of each navy. Since each book covers essentially the same events, there is a similarity of content. However, each author has his own definite opinion as to the personalities and reasons for the success and failure of the navies involved.

As is necessary in single-volume histories, there is a relative lack of detailed, in-depth analysis of each battle. The need for brevity mandated that the authors touch only lightly on the many highly complex actions, mistakes, and successes of opposing commanders. Such attempts to cover enormously complex subjects sometimes frustrate knowledgeable readers; in this instance, however, brevity helps rather than hinders. Both books are informative and successful, and they are of interest to today's military professionals. Their conciseness allows one to stand back from the events and gain new perspectives, illumination, and instruction as to the sweep of the vast events of World War II.

For example, each book examines the differences in leadership and character of the admirals and commanders of each navy, how the officers' attitudes, outlook, and style were shaped both by their navies' history of glory or defeat, and by the strong personalities of political leaders, such as Churchill, Roosevelt, or Hitler. It is interesting for a naval officer to realize again what the corrosive fear of making a mistake, losing or damaging ships, can do to the effectiveness of a navy. In essence, it stops aggressiveness; it hands the initiative to the opponent. As has been suggested, this

factor became so important as the war progressed that it often crippled the decision making of on-scene German commanders.

Equally important, both authors outline the significant differences between the strategies used by the various naval forces in the Atlantic campaigns and those in the Pacific campaigns. These differences in offensive and defensive strategy, particularly submarine targeting, led to a German focus upon what was essentially a logistics war against supply lines in the Atlantic. But in the Pacific, the Japanese strategy consistently sought, in the Mahanian sense, a great meeting of vast fleets in a single decisive battle, like the Japanese victory against the Russians at Tsushima in 1904.

Flexible, aggressive, and dynamic leadership, plus the innate qualities of the men and women who constitute navies, are often not reflected in dry calculations of orders of battle. However, as both authors state, they are crucial to the moral force that binds a navy and often can make the difference between success and failure in battle. This quality one sees early on as distinguishing the British Royal Navy as it went through the battles of 1939 and 1940. One also sees the U.S. Navy making the transition from peacetime to wartime in 1942 and 1943, growing in stature and aggressive leadership after the mistakes in the Pacific of 1941 and early 1942.

Both books examine the use of technology: the British and American success in radar, the early U.S. failure in torpedoes, the advent in the United States of more capable naval aircraft, and

the use of carrier battle groups. These all contributed greatly to the success and eventual dominance of the allied navies. The books describe how each navy, to a greater or lesser extent, was or was not able to learn and to implement quickly in the fleet the technological changes that leveraged success. Of particular interest to an intelligence officer is the recognition by both authors of the major contributions toward eventual victory of U.S. and British signals intelligence groups and antisubmarine warfare operational intelligence centers.

Walter J. Boyne, author of *Clash of Titans*, is a retired U.S. Air Force colonel and formerly the director of the National Air and Space Museum. The author of twenty-six previous fiction and nonfiction books on aviation, including *Clash of Wings*, about the air campaigns of World War II, Boyne brings the perspective of an experienced military officer. As such, he points out time and again the importance of Allied leadership and command aggressiveness as major elements of success. Due to his aviation background and evident interest in things technological, Boyne is particularly insightful and authoritative in his descriptions of the evolution of naval aircraft and the constantly improving technology that became so much a part of Allied operations.

One finds sprinkled throughout his book interesting viewpoints and statistics. For example, during the battle of Midway, Army Air Force B-17s dropped 322 bombs upon Japanese ships, none of which hit the target. Boyne also observes that Japanese naval commanders did not learn the importance of antisubmarine warfare, and therefore failed to build necessary escort ships;

directly to this point, he cites the statistic that U.S. submarines sank 59.7 percent of the Japanese merchant marine. Still another example is his view of the vital importance of the U.S. fleet train and underway logistic support in the successful operations of the forward-deployed U.S. Seventh, Fifth, and Third fleets during the later Pacific campaigns.

I was especially struck by his discussion of the initial Axis invasions and Allied evacuations as early indicators of the abilities, and more importantly the psychological makeups, of the various naval forces. He points out that only two and one-half years separated the Japanese use of wooden boats in the invasion of Malaya from the myriad specialized amphibious craft and ships of D-Day. Lastly, and as very few authors of general histories do, he includes a brief review of Soviet World War II naval service, particularly in riverine warfare.

Nathan Miller, author of *War at Sea*, is a journalist, historian, and the author of twelve books of history and biography, including *The U.S. Navy: A History*, which is used as a textbook at the U.S. Naval Academy. Miller makes many of the same points as Boyne regarding leadership: the need for unified command, and the relationships between serving naval commanders and their political superiors. Interestingly enough, he flatly asserts that the underlying reason for the Allied victory "was superior leadership in adversity."

The author has definite opinions about personalities and effectiveness of political and naval leadership. For example, he likes Rear Admiral Frank

Jack Fletcher, USN, but he does not like Winston Churchill. I thought his discussion of the successes and failures of the various navies relating to the Battle of the Atlantic was especially instructive. His point about the crucial importance of logistic supply in a prolonged war, as represented by the British and American merchant fleets, is compelling. It certainly resonates today for those interested in maritime affairs, as one views the precipitous decline in tonnage, numbers, and market share of both nations' contemporary merchant fleets. I also liked Miller's use of footnotes, which added such touches of interest as the story of the Polish submarine *Orzel*.

I do have a point of disagreement, however, with one of Miller's conclusions. Over the last few years several contemporary historians have argued that dropping the atomic bombs was not needed, that the Japanese would have sought peace. Miller shares this view; however, the evidence on page 449 cited by him in support, is, in my opinion, very weak.

In summary, both are good reads, thoughtful, interesting, and concise. Of the two, I preferred Nathan Miller's *War at Sea*.

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Lorelli, John A. *To Foreign Shores: U.S. Amphibious Operations in World War II*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 362pp. \$38.95

For nearly a half century Jeter Iseley's and Philip Crowl's *The U.S. Marines and*

Amphibious War has been the landmark work on assaults from the sea during World War II. Since it did not address the many campaigns conducted mainly by the U.S. Army, students of amphibious operations have had to go to numerous other books to round out their knowledge of the subject. However, the Naval Institute Press has published *To Foreign Shores*, a one-volume history that addresses all the major American amphibious actions of that epic war.

The project was inspired and backed by Rolf L. Illsley, who served during World War II as a young naval officer training the crews of landing craft. Much of the research was done by Samuel Loring Morison, grandson of the eminent historian of the U.S. Navy in the Second World War. The author, John A. Lorelli, is a professor of history at a California community college and a former Navy officer with a tour on the gun-line off Vietnam. Given the background of this trio, it is no surprise (as the author freely admits) that "the book is written mainly from the naval viewpoint." The volume provides a superb account of operations from a "blue" perspective.

However, any reader interested in the landing-force side of the story will be sorely disappointed. Operations on and beyond the beach are not ignored, but they are glossed over in most instances. As an example, the combined assaults on 7 August 1942 on the islands of Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Gavutu, Tanambogo, and Florida are described in two paragraphs. The reader receives none of the detail needed to understand, much less analyze, Marine Corps tactics and capability at that point in the