

1996

Stealth at Sea: The History of the Submarine

David Hildebrandt

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

Recommended Citation

Hildebrandt, David (1996) "Stealth at Sea: The History of the Submarine," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 3 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss3/15>

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.

ings, the design of the *Sumner-Gearing* class, and its numerous conversions and modernizations. The chapters dealing with armament, fire control, radar, electronics, sonar, engineering, and damage control provide technical details that illustrate the multimission capability of the ship's basic design and the specific improvements subsequently implemented. As threat perceptions changed, so did missions, which, along with weapon improvements, resulted in conversions from the basic DD hull. *Sumner-Gearing* units became destroyer minelayers (DM) and minesweepers (DMS), as well as the better-known radar picket (DDR) and escort (DDE) variants.

The book's illustrations, tables, and drawings depicting the various stages of equipment and hull modifications are first-rate. They not only reflect the author's extensive knowledge of naval architecture and marine engineering but guide the reader through the intricate and diverse modifications. The generous use of graphics helps the reader visualize the way it was and how it was changed.

While this book offers a comprehensive and technically accurate review of the *Sumner-Gearing* class destroyer, it does not address the issue of the human element, life at sea of the 274 crew members. This class of ship was built to fight. Its service in three major wars was marked by a pragmatic, functional approach, both in the initial design and the changes that followed—little in the Fleet Rehabilitation and Maintenance Program was associated with habitability.

For those who think they knew these ships, this book will demonstrate just how much we took for granted. For the thousands who served in these ships for over forty years, this work will provide a cruise to days gone by. A technical, professional library is incomplete without it.

W.V. GARCIA
Captain, U.S. Navy, Ret.
Escondido, California

Van der Vat, Dan. *Stealth at Sea: The History of the Submarine*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 374pp. \$30
This book provides an overview of the history of the submarine, from the first "inventions and devices" of the fifteenth century through the nuclear-powered, technological marvels of today. Van der Vat devotes the bulk of his attention to the period 1900–1945, thoroughly describing submarine developments preceding both world wars and submarine operations during them. The years before 1900 and after 1945 are covered in a brief prologue and a short epilogue, respectively. The book's title is somewhat misleading, however, for there is little analysis of the inherent stealth of the submarine or of the struggle waged over the years between submarines and the antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces intent on overcoming their stealth.

Dan van der Vat is a former correspondent with the London papers *The Times* and *The Guardian*. He has published several books on naval history, including excellent works on the Atlantic and Pacific submarine campaigns of

the Second World War. It follows that the strongest aspect of this work is his grasp of details for submarine and ASW operations during the two great wars of the first half of the century. Although he adds little to his previous work, this presentation is thorough, readable, and almost always on the mark.

The author's expertise in other areas is less evident, however, and the absence of detailed analysis and footnotes detracts from the credibility of his more controversial conclusions. For example, he asserts that the main British and German battle fleets spent most of World War I in port due to "the unexpected deterrent effect of the submarine." A few pages later, he claims that the main Austrian fleet remained in port to serve as "a 'fleet in being,' to offset which the enemy would always have to keep on hand superior forces that would therefore be unable to operate elsewhere." He examines no other plausible explanations, nor does he offer any references for these two seemingly inconsistent positions.

Other such unsupported conclusions are presented as fact throughout the book. For example, the reader is instructed (without evidence) that "after the Cold War the main preoccupation of American submariners . . . was to justify the retention of such a stupendously expensive fleet." The author simplistically claims that since the 1960s the two principal tactical targets of the Soviet-Russian submarine force have been American aircraft carriers and SSBNs, not mentioning at all the bastion defense-in-depth for Soviet-Russian SSBNs. Also, van der Vat entirely dismisses the nuclear deterrence theory in a single paragraph, denying that

nuclear deterrence contributed to peace between the two superpowers. He cites as evidence the limited wars against proxies in which both superpowers found themselves embroiled. He also argues that the submarine, a weapons delivery platform that "has matched or overtaken . . . the battleship and battlecruiser, the aircraft-carrier and cruiser, the strategic bomber and even the land-based missile," has become "a white elephant, if not a strategic dinosaur."

The absence of rigorous analysis is a serious flaw of this work. *Stealth at Sea* may have a place on the bookshelf of the general reader interested in World War I and World War II submarine history, but there is little here for the serious military analyst or the professional naval officer. The definitive history of the submarine has yet to be written.

DAVID HILDEBRANDT

Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

Beach, Edward L. *Scapegoats: A Defense of Kimmel and Short at Pearl Harbor.*

Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 212pp. \$24.95

On 7 December 1941, the devastating success of the Japanese naval air attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, as well as on nearby air and military installations, resulted in the relief from command of both Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, and Lieutenant General Walter C. Short, commander of the U.S. Army's Hawaiian Department. In light of the many subsequent investigations