

1995

## The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic

Douglas McLean

David Syrett

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

---

### Recommended Citation

McLean, Douglas and Syrett, David (1995) "The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 4 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss4/16>

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](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## 120 Naval War College Review

unique topics as the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps, the history of the Port of New York during World War II, and Coast Guard Captains of the Port—an important job that is hardly ever noted.

*To Die Gallantly* is an excellent collection of top-notch essays that deal with subjects often ignored. It would be a welcome addition to anyone's maritime library.

WILLIAM T. Y'BLOOD  
Air Force History Support Office  
Bolling Air Force Base  
Washington, D.C.

---

Syrett, David. *The Defeat of the German U-Boats: The Battle of the Atlantic*. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994. 344pp. \$35.95

Despite its subtitle, this work is limited to the critical months of the Battle of the Atlantic—April to December 1943. They mark the point when the most successful German operational and tactical strategy—the “wolfpack”—became untenable in the face of Allied countermeasures. In this book, David Syrett focuses on the factors that contributed directly to defeating wolfpacks. He covers the first years of the battle in a succinct chapter of twenty-four pages, while the last part of the war is barely mentioned.

Syrett argues that it was no single thing that defeated the U-boats but the combination of the increasing superiority of Allied intelligence, sensors, tactics, and weapons, the expanding role of air power, and of course the crippling penetration into German

radio codes, that diminished the effectiveness of the U-boats.

The increasing advance of Allied technology was apparent to U-boat headquarters (BdU) by May 1943. Losses in the costly convoy battles of that month reached such levels that U-boats were redeployed away from the critical North Atlantic routes. German efforts at technical improvements were slow and usually quickly countered. However, because of BdU's failure to understand the magnitude of the problem, it attempted to maintain the attack on Allied shipping with its usual response to increased Allied pressure—a shift of operating area, this time to the central Atlantic. But when U-boats again suffered serious losses at the end of June, BdU called off all wolfpack attacks until new weapons could be introduced. However, in the face of dwindling intelligence and continuous new Allied technology, the only new schemes pushed by BdU were for new torpedoes and antiaircraft weapons, which amounted to an attempt to patch a gaping wound with a Band-Aid.

The result could have been predicted, and the narrative of the renewed convoy battles reveals few surprises. When the U-boats attempted to attack shipping once more in the central North Atlantic in the autumn of 1943, they suffered heavily while inflicting only modest losses. Most of the Allied sinkings occurred in the very first convoy battle; within days, new measures had been developed to deal with the new German weapons. The final effort to employ wolfpack tactics came later that year when the Germans attempted to attack the Gibraltar—Great

Britain routes. This effort only emphasized that the Germans had no fundamentally new ideas but could only move their old ideas from place to place, hoping to find a location where they could work. Syrett ably covers these engagements that marked the renewed German campaign and provides useful comments on the Allied success and German failure. The author points out that the continuous upgrading of Allied technology and tactics simply overwhelmed the U-boat force.

Syrett skillfully develops a coherent narrative, describing various measures used by the Allies to search and destroy U-boats. One such example is the difference between ULTRA and high-frequency direction-finding (HF/DF). ULTRA refers to the decryption of actual German radio messages, which often pinpointed the location of submarines. HF/DF allowed the source of a radio transmission from a submarine to be estimated by specially equipped ships and shore stations, but not always with enough precision to allow local naval forces to find U-boats without additional information, either from onboard sensors or other intelligence. ULTRA could be invaluable, but its worth varied upon the delay required for decryption. On the other hand, HF/DF information, though less accurate, was often sufficient to lead Allied antisubmarine forces to the general area of a U-boat. By scrupulously detailing delays in decryption and comparing all available sources of possible intelligence on a specific U-boat's location, the author provides excellent insight into how Allied navies were able to find and destroy their undersea opponents.

Closely integrated with this analysis is Syrett's careful study of the expanding role of Allied air power—both land-based and from carriers—which greatly increased the flexibility of antisubmarine forces.

Syrett argues that the German navy had no significant alternatives to its wolfpack system for attacking Allied shipping. German U-boats remained at sea, sinking ships and causing problems for Allied naval authorities, until the end of the war, but after the middle of 1943 U-boats never again sank large numbers of ships.

The author's failure to provide any significant comment on the U-boat war after that point is disappointing. Syrett himself has shown in a number of articles that the latter part of the shipping war proved to be an interesting period, marked by measure and countermeasure. Also, there is no discussion of Allied training, scientific cooperation, or research methods, and only the briefest sketch of German efforts. As a result, Syrett's comments on these subjects are deductions based on observation of engagements rather than a result of close study of actual practice. This is not to say that Syrett makes invalid points but only to suggest that this book is not a comprehensive study integrating operations with training, tactical formulation, and scientific and operational research.

Although limited in its focus, this is a very good book, having as its overall verdict that the German U-boat arm was "out thought as well as out fought by the Allies."

DOUGLAS MCLEAN  
Lieutenant Commander,  
Canadian Forces Maritime Command

---

Kelly, Mary Pat. *Proudly We Served: The Men of the USS Mason*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 198pp. (No price given)

Mary Pat Kelly's book offers another correction to the historic record of African-American service in the armed forces of the United States. In presenting the documented and vivid recollections of African-American participants, *Proudly We Served* ranks with Paul Stillwell's *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers*, Charles E. Francis's *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation*, and Eric Furdon's *Black Company: The Story of Subchaser 1264* in telling the truth about African-American service during the Second World War.

The author, an accomplished writer and documentary film producer, provides a clear record of the patriotic contributions of African-Americans who served in the destroyer escort USS *Mason* (DE 529) during World War II. She skillfully combines recollections and narratives into the story of how the U.S. Navy was forced to accept citizens of African descent into the general ranks, how African-American men stood ready to serve as patriots in a navy that embraced popular racist views on integration, how African-American bluejackets were treated as heroes in Ireland but were refused a meal in New Jersey, and how African-American men contributed to the war effort at sea

during dangerous convoy duty in the Atlantic.

In the initial chapter we meet the surviving crew members of the USS *Mason* who convey their wartime service experiences throughout the book. The reader is introduced to James W. Graham, who said, "No, I'm not going to cook for anybody or clean up behind anybody," and then went on to become a radioman in the *Mason*. Gordon "Skinny" Buchanan, who was originally from Harlem and attended a predominantly white school in Long Island, was later separated from whites during his swearing-in ceremony. Lorenzo DuFaz, from New Orleans, said, "A man will go forth and defend his home. You defend your family—you defend your country—because there's no other place that's home but here in America." There was also Arnold Gordon from Michigan, who listed his ancestry as German, Irish, Indian, and Negro in percentage order. He was rudely surprised to find that his service jacket stamped with the word "Negro" in letters that were over an inch high.

Ultimately Kelly takes the reader to sea aboard the *Mason*. It is through her compelling blending of firsthand encounters with historical events that the outstanding technical abilities, patriotism, and service of the crew are fully documented. For example, the subject of chapter six is the participation of USS *Mason* in Convoy 119 in August and September 1944. During its voyage, the convoy encountered extraordinarily heavy seas from a violent storm. The *Mason* was chosen to shepherd a detachment of small craft