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## Against the Odds: Battles at Sea, 1591-1949

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have access to the senior officers who would be responsible for its execution. Planning was also centralized for OVERLORD, as opposed to HUSKY, with some half-dozen locations from Washington to Cairo.

Operations HUSKY and OVERLORD have produced a shelf of books over the last half-century. Most are popular histories, which look at strategic issues, tactical anecdotes, or both, but avoid operational details of little interest to the nonprofessional. The British and American official histories do get into the minutiae of planning, but they tend to gloss over the role of dominant personalities, especially when unflattering, and the contributions of the other partner, respectively. D'Este has brought these elements into balance in works that are highly readable, professionally informative. They are strongly recommended for inclusion on one's "purple" bookshelf.

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McKee, Alexander. *Against the Odds: Battles at Sea, 1591-1949*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991. 268pp. (No price given)

Stephen, Martin. *The Fighting Admirals: British Admirals of the Second World War*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991. 209pp. (No price given)

Both these books deal with leadership in war at sea. Both are written by British authors and draw heavily, though not exclusively, on the British experience. The *dramatis personae* are, to a considerable extent, common to both books and

the authors have a shared interest in many of the same historical events. That said, the purposes of the two authors are very different, and their works are aimed at very different readerships.

We have little sympathy these days for the "gallant attempt." Heroic failure somehow seems to have lost its romantic appeal. Therefore, many may find that *Against the Odds* has a strangely Edwardian ring to it. The author gives us an anthology of gallant attempts from the history of naval warfare (twenty-six episodes in all), some familiar (*Revenge*, 1591 and *Bismarck*, 1941) and others too often neglected, like Admiral Cowan's raid on Kronstadt in 1919.

Alexander McKee is a noted marine archeologist, with a score of books to his credit, and a prolific author on maritime subjects. He is a compelling storyteller with an eye for the dramatic and a nose for contemporary scuttlebutt—a trait which, in fact, both authors share. Readers should look on McKee's work as a collection of rattling good yarns. If there is a deeper message, it is a simple one: that individual ingenuity or, failing that, dour intransigence can beat the odds. McKee favours the David-and-Goliath formula, but other conventions of the storyteller's art are in evidence too. His heroes win in spite of (or lose because of) irresolute and ignorant superiors, deskbound admirals, and the arrnchair strategists who jog their elbows. Philip of Spain, Louis XIV, Winston Churchill, Jackie Fisher, and Dudley Pound are, for McKee, all of a piece.

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Little need be said about the author's choice of material. This is a personal anthology, and readers can scarcely complain if some of their own favourite stories are missing. It is clear, however, that the formula works best when applied to simple and clear-cut episodes like the cruise of the raider *Emden* or the chronicle of Italian midget-submarine operations in 1941. Larger themes are less successful; it is hard to do justice to Jutland in a dozen pages.

*Against the Odds* is aimed at the general reader, and the author has made a deliberate attempt to avoid what he calls "any excessively nautical term." Naval professionals will find much to criticise. McKee claims familiarity with naval matters, but his grasp of strategy, tactics, and naval material is unimpressive. His portrayal of British strategy during Hitler's invasion of Norway is misleadingly simplistic, and his excursions into air navigation, direction finding, and radar intercept in the context of the *Bismarck* operation will fail to convince anyone with a general knowledge of these topics.

Historians will find McKee's research unacceptably thin and his writing slipshod. Sir Reginald Hall was hardly "head of Room 40," and Sir Philip L. Vian was a captain at the time of the *Bismarck* episode. The description of Admiral Sir John Tovey as "the commander of the Home Fleet at Scapa during the Second World War" scarcely does justice to the other holders of that appointment. McKee's glib generalisations and unsubstantiated conclusions will rankle. What are we to make of this

olympian judgment on the Zeebrugge raid? "Like Admiral Bacon before him, and Bomber Command at one stage of the Second World War, Keyes refused to face unpalatable facts: that he had matched Nelson only in his bloody failure at Tenerife not his overwhelming victory at Trafalgar." Streams of consciousness like this should make the sleepest editor reach for his pen.

*The Fighting Admirals* is a more serious and a far more ambitious work. Martin Stephen is a historian, an academic, and an established writer on naval matters. In this work he sets out to reevaluate and, perhaps less wisely, to compare the British combat commanders of World War II. His major subjects are Admiral Sir John Cunningham, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, and Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, but he examines certain lesser-known figures too, including Vian, Thomas Phillips, and Burnett.

He has set himself a difficult task. It is easier to define what united these men—a common social background, naval training, and a shared experience of destroyer command during World War I—than to identify the qualities that distinguished one from another. In high command, no one was a free agent. Fate dealt each man a very different hand. Their grip on the hearts and minds of a navy rested on a human chemistry that can hardly be recaptured in the printed word.

Despite these difficulties, Dr. Stephen leaves little doubt where his preferences lie. The raw spirit of aggression is not enough, nor is the gambler's

instinct, no matter how well tuned; nor, apparently, are those extraordinary powers of leadership that could hold a fleet together through thick and thin. The author judges his subjects on their depth of intellect, breadth of vision, administrative skills, technical grasp, and on their ability to cooperate with other services and with allies.

On these criteria, Admiral Cunningham, commander in chief in the Mediterranean during some of the darkest days of the war and long acknowledged as the archetypal British fighting admiral, loses pride of place to Ramsay, who commanded at Dover during the Dunkirk evacuation and who later masterminded the TORCH and OVERLORD landings. In the end, Stephen's judgements are largely subjective. Cunningham's reputation rested (like Halsey's) on an indomitable fighting spirit and on steadfastness in the face of adversity. His approach to war was essentially opportunistic. Forward planning was not his strong suit, and administration bored him. Ramsay, despite his breadth of vision, his foresight, and his grasp of detail, was never tested by fleet command. Comparisons seem inappropriate.

While *Fighting Admirals* is stimulating and introduces new material from the private papers of the admirals concerned, few readers will be persuaded to abandon traditional assessments. The author has an insatiable urge to overturn accepted judgments and often tries to do so without adequate foundation. His grasp of the tactical and operational problems facing admirals of the day is

not as strong as it should be. His comments, for instance, on the stationing of British cruisers during the battle of the River Plate, and on fire distribution during the action between the *Hood* and the *Bismarck*, are unconvincing. Few will agree that in the latter case Admiral Tovey should have gambled all on the Denmark Strait. Hunches are seldom an adequate basis for decision in naval warfare. The author expects admirals to be psychic, when all evidence shows that they are not.

Stephen's revisionist urge is nowhere more evident than in his attempt to restore the reputation of Tom Phillips, scapegoat for the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in December 1941. There is no doubting Phillips' administrative capabilities or his moral courage in standing up to Churchill. There is also no reason to challenge the author's view that he was the victim of strategic misjudgments made at the highest level. To argue, however, that Phillips understood the risks and that he had reached a full, if belated, appreciation of the air threat hardly helps his case. In this light, his decision to investigate the reported landing at Kuantan without assuring himself that air cover would meet him on arrival seems less judicious than ever. There is little here to overturn S.W. Roskill's verdict on the matter; and herein lies the fundamental difficulty. The British official histories are works of impressive scholarship; they remain proof against this scale of attack.

There are many errors in terminology in this book that have raised the

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hackles of British naval readers but need not spoil the enjoyment of an American audience. Many may find it ironical that beside a caption that reads, "Cunningham was a firm traditionalist and a stickler for uniform in particular," stands a photograph of the Admiral with his medal ribbons pinned, apparently, on the right-hand side.

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Kalbfus, Edward C. *Sound Military Decision*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 286pp. \$32.95 (originally published 1936)

The road that leads to the Naval War College gate is called Admiral Kalbfus Road. Edward C. Kalbfus was a fleet commander too old for glory in World War II; the legacy he left is this strange book, *Sound Military Decision*.

Kalbfus was twice president of the College, in the mid-1930s and again from 1939 to 1942. There a process of planning for naval action, called the Estimate of the Situation, had been taught since 1910. However, Kalbfus was not content with lectures and short outlines, so in 1936 he manufactured this lengthy cookbook, which because of its emerald covers the students dubbed "the Green Hornet" after a bizarre radio hero. The Naval Institute Press has reprinted it in its Classics of Sea Power series with an introduction by Captain Frank Snyder—an apologetic introduction, because the book, like a computer manual, is virtually unreadable.

The portly Kalbfus—chairs were known to collapse under him—was a nineteenth-century rationalist living in an uncertain era. He had complete faith that "painstaking mental effort" would always produce sound military decisions, and he scoffed at the notion of genius or intuition. Human thought, he said, was virtually mathematical. He swamped future admirals with hundreds of abstruse rules for writing action plans, with hardly a tangible example to chew on.

Still, what he says is intriguing once you breast the torrent of sermonizing. Kalbfus believed that a single principle governs the attainment of ends in human affairs; in the profession of arms it is called the Fundamental Military Principle. It is the one true process by which commanders, from squad leaders to theater commanders in chief, make decisions. According to Kalbfus, the leader's mind must march through four rigid steps. The first and "paramount matter" is to identify the effect sought—today we call it the mission. A commander coins his mission by pondering the demands of higher authority. Next he weighs its suitability: will it accomplish the goal? The third step, determining feasibility, is the heavy labor of the process. The commander analyzes the physical theater, logistics, and many other matters, but above all, he compares the strengths and frailties of his own and enemy forces, stressing quantifiable units because moral factors are vague. (This typically American approach yielded some bad estimates in Vietnam and the Persian