BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.C. Rickover

“Unpleasant Work for a Naval Man”
Mine Countermeasures

Lieutenant Commander Jan van Tol, U.S. Navy


Mine countermeasures (MCM) is a sport that Americans have historically seemed unsuited for by temperament. MCM is slow, uncertain, infinitely tedious—precisely the opposite of the dramatic, definitive nature of other types of operations that more easily engage the professional interests of most U.S. naval officers. What combatant officer (this reviewer included) following a plodding little minesweeper out of harbor at the beginning of a fleet exercise has not fervently wished that the poor old thing would just get out of the way and let the real ships get on with the important evolutions that lay ahead? And yet, failure to recognize the importance of MCM maintaining a modern capability has regularly embarrassed the Navy, most recently in the Persian Gulf between 1987 and 1991.

Damn the Torpedoes is a short, well researched monograph on the U.S. Navy's experience with MCM. Based on scores of interviews with MCM personnel as well as on copious archival material, the book discusses MCM efforts from the Civil War through the recent Persian Gulf operations. The historical record thus revealed shows a dismayingly consistent pattern of early losses, ad hoc adaptation, repentance and good intentions, and finally relapse into complacency at the end of hostilities.
Senior American naval authorities have routinely paid lip service to the importance of MCM, usually after painful reminders. And yet, the author suggests, MCM is not and never was quite important enough to them to get the needed resources, despite the fact that “the recent experiences of the Samuel B. Roberts, Tripoli, and Princeton remind us that even our most valuable and expensive warships can be easily stopped by simple, cheap mines.” Why should this be so? Perhaps the key reason is that the business of countering mines, to use a felicitous phrase, has always been a “danger field,” in that it gets no respect. The widespread view that “minesweeping is tedious, minehunting is more tedious, and countering mines cannot be made easy, cheap, or convenient,” makes MCM organizationally and professionally unattractive. Responsibility for mine warfare has usually been fragmented, with the result that MCM is a low-priority claimant for funding or for high-level interest (though the recent establishment of COMINEWARCOM as a type commander may finally ameliorate this to an extent). Professionally, MCM and mine warfare have been paths to neither glory nor promotion; more typically, they have been considered “unpleasant work for a naval man, an occupation like that of rat-catching.”

Will matters be different in the future? The author pessimistically notes that “due to real competing needs, priorities, and lack of mine warfare knowledge within the Navy, it has been impossible to sustain adequate priority and funding for MCM.” Today’s budgetary constraints may make competing needs and priorities hard to change. However, the professional ignorance of most officers about MCM can certainly be redressed.

A good start would be to make Damn the Torpedoes required reading for naval officers, particularly for surface officers and members of operational staffs. If appreciation for MCM and its difficulty does not become more widespread, the Navy is likely to encounter more embarrassments and losses to mines in future operations. It will never be known what might have happened if an amphibious landing had actually been attempted in Kuwait, but Iraqi mining certainly complicated the planning. Future foes will doubtless take note.

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This is a history centered around personalities. Robert Massie has employed his considerable and tireless narrative skills to give the reader a thousand pages that detail the complex relationships of the political, military, and diplomatic elites of Great Britain and Germany in the decades leading to the Great War. In this, Massie has written in the tradition of such works as Cecil Woodham Smith’s biography of Queen Victoria in creating a compelling picture of life within the ruling classes.