

1991

HMS Sheffield: The Life and Times of Old Shiny

R. A. Komorowski

Ronald Bassett

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

Recommended Citation

Komorowski, R. A. and Bassett, Ronald (1991) "HMS Sheffield: The Life and Times of Old Shiny," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss2/17>

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.

Bassett, Ronald. *HMS Sheffield: The Life and Times of Old Shiny*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 288pp. \$21.95

Every sailor who did wartime service at sea would like to have such a book as this written about his ship by such an author as Ronald Bassett.

In some respects the success of the book is almost preordained for it follows from launching to wrecker's yard, in the wake of Great Britain's illustrious cruiser HMS *Sheffield*; a ship and crew that together won 12 battle honors in World War II. However, the author's task was not an easy one. He had to work against the reality that the outcome, and those many actions described (from the unsuccessful defense of Norway, the sinking of the battleship *Bismarck*, or the invasion of North Africa), certainly lack surprise.

HMS Sheffield is more than the chronicle of the life and times of a busy ship in a long war. Bassett evokes, as well, the full atmosphere of a Royal Navy ship in wartime and in peacetime. Seeping from the pages, from the hull of *Sheffield*, as it were, come the sounds and smells, the heat and cold of a man-of-war run hard; the steady predictable rhythm of wartime life at sea, within the uncertainty of geographic destination and the unpredictability of violent action. We come to know the summons to sail north to Murmansk when the reasoning below decks seems to foretell a voyage south to Gibraltar. We soon feel the dark, lung searing, oppressive cold of the winter-runs to Murmansk and the

heat and sweat of the Mediterranean runs to Malta, amid sudden storms, heavy weather, and damage at sea. There is the foreshadowing shudder of the hull as *Sheffield's* speed is dramatically increased and the sudden call to battle stations. There is a distinct atmosphere: that is recognizable to any sailor or any Navy even today.

"The First Sea Lord . . . assessed ASDIC (SONAR) as being 80 percent successful! Our methods are so efficient that we shall need fewer destroyers in the North Sea and Mediterranean . . . even one AA gun in a merchant ship would compel an aircraft to fly so high that the chances of destroying a ship were very small!"

But as 1940 came to a close, the author wrote: "The year had revealed many myths, such as, in the Navy, the exaggerated effectiveness of ASDIC (SONAR) and warship AA gunfire, and, ashore, the belief that ill-equipped British troops with upraised thumbs and comic songs were a match for ruthlessly handled massed tanks and dive-bombers. Still, Britain was fighting, new leaders and new philosophies were emerging; there had been much brilliant improvisation. The British people had closed ranks more firmly than ever before. They could not see how they could possibly win this war, but, by God, they were not going to lose it."

Students of command will find little to chew on in *HMS Sheffield*. The book, after all, was written in part from notes accumulated from

140 Naval War College Review

many sources by a Royal Navy officer, Lieutenant Commander Hubert Treseder, who had long service in *Sheffield*. So it bears at least the basic characteristics of a tribute to the ship and to all who sailed in her.

What is clear, is that those who commanded the Royal Navy understood that the stress of war on a senior service, largely manned by reserves and conscripts, demanded of its leaders the traditional Western military virtues, but also changes in the pre-war style of command. Thus, *Sheffield* served under a vice admiral who, author Bassett records, "never minced words but recognized effort and ability; his congratulations were delivered *personally even to junior ratings*;" and a new *Sheffield* commanding officer who, upon his first inspection savagely rebuked all hands and subsequently recanted thus; "A few weeks ago . . . I said several things . . . I have since regretted and for which I now apologize. *I was wrong*. I had no conception of the circumstances under which you had been serving—and are still serving—on Northern Patrol, and every criticism I made of this ships' condition I withdraw unreservedly." He had learned Squadron Commander Arleigh Burke's wartime dictum that if it doesn't contribute to winning the war, don't do it.

This splendid book is a truly worthy addition to the U.S. Naval Institute's bookshelf of offerings. Peacetime sailors should read it, whatever their station or responsi-

bility. It will add to their life of service today. All other students of war should read it for the experience of how it was at sea in wartime in a vast oceanic war.

R. A. KOMOROWSKI
Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Alexandria, Virginia

Kilpatrick, C. W. *The Naval Night Battles in the Solomons*. Pompano Beach, Florida: Exposition Press of Florida, Inc., 1987. 335pp. \$30

This book describes the fourteen nighttime naval battles of the Solomons campaign that occurred between August 1942 and November 1943. A full chapter is devoted to each of the fourteen battles which are presented in chronological order beginning with the Battle of Savo Island, 9 August 1942. Six nighttime battles in the vicinity of Guadalcanal are described, as well as two near Bougainville and six more in the New Georgia-Kolombangara-Vella Lavella area.

Each chapter follows this general format: preliminary comments; a short introduction to events leading to the battle; the main body; a series of short paragraphs that relate events in a ship's log format; and a summary and critique. The log format was intended as a minute-by-minute review of each battle and covers the preparations for battle, approach phase, discovery of the enemy, commence fire, highlights on the action and retirement to base. Official navy archival sources were