

1991

The U-Boat Wars: 1916-1945

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Recommended Citation

Mahncke, Frank C. (1991) "The U-Boat Wars: 1916-1945," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 3 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss3/19>

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It is difficult not to indulge superlatives when assessing the importance of Hessler's work and its publication for wide distribution. Nothing like it has ever been available; *The U-Boat War* is without a doubt the most important book ever published on the Battle of the Atlantic.

Amid the welter of books which clutter the field of twentieth century naval history, Hessler's and Tarrant's stand out as essential additions to modern naval libraries. They also demonstrate that naval historians have been neither crushed or blinded by the challenges of their field.

MARC MILNER
University of New Brunswick

Terraine, John. *The U-Boat Wars: 1916-1945*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989. 841pp. \$42.95

The U-boat campaigns of the First and Second World Wars were as crucial to the Allied victories as any campaign or battle in either war. The battles were fought by young men new to the sea. They fought in small, harsh vessels—corvettes, frigates, and destroyers. Battles were frequent and ugly. Most happened far from the land. Neither panache nor dash prevailed. Tenacity and technology, subtlety, and elemental heroism carried the day. Victory was perceived sooner by the statistician than by the commander.

John Terraine, a noted British military historian, has given us a long

and complex history of the U-boat wars. He has conveyed, with a historian's eye for insightful detail and quotation, all the interlocking threads of the campaigns. His special ability is to help the reader appreciate the subtle integrations of tactics, operations, and technologies in those brutal but historic campaigns.

Terraine's coverage of the U-boat actions of the First World War and of developments in the interwar period is important: he shows that the roots of the tactics and weapons of the Second World War were established in those years. Nevertheless, Terraine's descriptive and analytical writing rivets the reader's attention most firmly to the grueling Battle of the North Atlantic from 1939 to 1945.

The convoy arguments—to sail in escorted convoy or to sail alone, hoping to avoid detection—have been discussed by other writers. But Terraine masters this question and its tactical complexities by making the mathematics and its implications obvious. (Readers who want more development of the mathematics are advised to consult P.M.S. Blackett's work in operational analysis.) Terraine observes that the size of a convoy upon the vastness of the sea was so slight that it was not any more likely to suffer detection than was a single ship. Churchill put it: "There was in fact very nearly as good a chance of a convoy of forty ships in close order slipping unperceived between the patrolling U-boats as there was for a single ship; and each time this happened, forty ships escaped instead of

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one." Indeed, ninety percent of the convoys sailed unmolested.

Even so, as Nelson never had enough frigates, so the Allies never had enough escort vessels. The ones they did have were nobly sailed and valiantly fought; Flower-class corvettes wrote a large chapter in British and Canadian naval history. They were what Kipling called that "packet of assorted miseries which we call a Ship."

Terraine presents a good account of the development of antisubmarine and escort tactics. Early in the war, the Royal Navy wished to focus its efforts on hunting submarines—forming "cavalry divisions on the approaches," as Churchill said. This didn't work. The solitary submarine was an elusive thing. Hunting for such ships missed the point. "Sinking submarines (was) a bonus not a necessity;" the strategic objective was the safe delivery of war material to Britain, and the escort was best employed to that end. Later in the war as escorts were available, a two-tier system was set up. The primary escort stayed with the convoy while the newly formed support group could be detached to pursue any unfortunate submarine to the death. Both safe cargo arrivals and submarine casualties increased accordingly.

Technology—weapons and counter-weapons—played a major and continuous role throughout the U-boat wars. Sonar, radar, HF/DF, Ultra, MAD, depth charges, torpedoes, hedgehogs, and mines are well-known weapons to students of naval affairs. None is neglected in

Terraine's work. His contribution shows not only why the weapons were developed but also how they were used and what were their effects on tactics. While each weapon was vital in its own right, the aggregate did the job.

Aircraft were crucial and their value was not fully recognized early in the war. The Royal Air Force's Coastal Command suffered for want of aircraft and crews in competition with Bomber Command. Yet, when the war ended, aircraft had accounted for as many submarine kills as had surface vessels. As aircraft came to dominate the Bay of Biscay, that stretch became as dangerous a place for submarines as the North Atlantic.

The struggle for the Atlantic was, as Churchill said, a war of "measureless peril expressed in charts, curves, and statistics." It was a race to build merchant ships and escorts faster than they were lost and faster than the Germans could build submarines. Victory became apparent only indirectly, and gradually as the curve of submarine losses rose above that of the merchant ships. The crucial crossover came in May of 1943, the first month in which the number of submarines lost exceeded the number of merchant ships lost. Thereafter, the curves never favored Dönitz's forces. Each month following, more submarines were lost than ships. The decline was inexorable, though even in the last months of the war the Kriegsmarine mustered enough submarines to penetrate the Irish Sea and keep the convoys alert.

One might, as this reviewer did, cap Terraine's scholarship by reading again Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*, wherein he says at the end, "The beaten foe emerged. . . . They rose, dripping and silent, . . . above their handiwork, in hatred or in fear: sometimes snarling their continued rage, sometimes accepting thankfully a truce they had never offered to other ships, other sailors."

It was a hard campaign and Terraine's history is not without point for today. It is a very good book both for its historical analysis and for its value should maintenance of freedom of navigation become again a major task for the navy. As we have seen recently, many nations have the capability to disrupt the world's sea lanes.

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Showell, Jak P. Mallmann. *U-Boat Command and the Battle of the Atlantic*. Ontario, Canada: Vanwell Pub. Ltd., 1989. 224pp. \$34.95

In this volume, Showell attempts to view the Battle of the Atlantic through the eyes of the German Submarine Command. Fortunately, he is more than qualified to do so, having penned several studies on the Kriegsmarine in the Second World War. In particular, this work is greatly enhanced by the fact that Karl Dönitz gave the author access to his voluminous wartime files. Despite this rare gesture, Showell came close to

never completing the project. Fortunately, the counsel of wise friends prevailed, and this book was finally completed almost thirteen years after it had originally been abandoned.

As a consequence of his decision to portray the Battle of the Atlantic through German eyes, Showell has concentrated on German primary sources. These give the book a unique and extremely valuable historical perspective. However, these factors have not restrained him from making some rather striking observations about the nature and course of this very crucial campaign. He maintains that the U-boats were plagued with torpedo failures throughout the war, and not just in the early part of 1940. Furthermore, he states that the shortcomings of German torpedoes were only fully recognized and resolved after the end of the war. He also claims that the true turning point of the Battle of the Atlantic occurred during the first half of 1941, not 1943. Showell attributes a large proportion of U-boat successes in the early stages of the campaign to the Royal Navy's inadequate preparations. This is all the more surprising in that Britain should have been aware of Dönitz's potential strategy long before the outbreak of the war.

Other examples include the fruitless search within the U-boat command for leaks that were the suspected cause of the growing success of the Allied antisubmarine countermeasures. While Dönitz often suspected that the core of the problem might be with the German radio