

1991

U-Boat Command and the Battle of the Atlantic

Peter K.H Mispelkamp

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

Recommended Citation

Mispelkamp, Peter K.H (1991) "U-Boat Command and the Battle of the Atlantic," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 3 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss3/20>

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.

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.

FRANK C. MAHNCKE
Naval Surface Warfare Center

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

coding machine, neither he nor his experts were ever able to confirm this. As a result, the size of his staff was cut to the bone in a vain attempt to eliminate the possibility of intelligence leaks. Consequently, the "Ultra secret" was never really in danger of being uncovered. Also, the British development of centimetric radar and the high-frequency direction finder was never seriously suspected until it was far too late for effective countermeasures to be devised.

Showell also argues that the U-Boats of World War II were only technically improved versions of their First World War predecessors. He maintains that the type XXI U-boat was technologically feasible long before the outbreak of the war. Germany's total failure to invest in long-term U-boat research and development was the prime cause of her defeat in the Battle of the Atlantic.

In addition, the author also gives us several brief insights into Dönitz's character and personality. Perhaps the most important is his argument that Dönitz never believed, even before the outbreak of war, that Germany could defeat England in a major conflict. If his thesis is accepted, then we are indeed in desperate need of an authoritative biography of Dönitz, because those that are currently available are clearly in need of major revisions.

Given its many radical observations and conclusions, it is unfortunate that the book is not footnoted. It is, for the most part, remarkably error-free, con-

vincingly argued, well written and researched. (One rare example of an error which can be found in this book is the author's misidentification of the German heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* as a battle-cruiser on page 123.)

This book is profusely illustrated with both maps and photographs. The latter have been carefully selected, and are well captioned. The former provide information on U-boat operations at various key stages of their attempt to sever England's trans-Atlantic lifeline. For some reason, Showell believed that the majority of his readers would not read the entire book. Consequently, he often repeats the main points of his arguments in different chapters. However, despite this, the book should be read thoroughly. It is an important contribution to our understanding of the Battle of the Atlantic, and is clearly one of the most important works that has been published on the U-boat war in several years. It is wholeheartedly recommended.

PETER K.H. MISPELKAMP
Pointe Claire, Quebec

van Tuyl, Hubert P. *Feeding the Bear: American Aid to the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989. 200pp. \$37.95

Mr. van Tuyl addresses himself to a single issue: how important was the American lend-lease program to Soviet victory in the Second World War? He sensibly recognizes the difficulties