

1990

Torpedo Junction

J. S. Hurlburt
U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Homer M. Hickam Jr.

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

Recommended Citation

Hurlburt, J. S. and Hickam, Homer M. Jr. (1990) "Torpedo Junction," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 43 : No. 4 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol43/iss4/23>

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.

in 76 days of combat. The dozen plus 3 NCIs, including the author, became fighter Aces (5 or more kills), but 13 pilots didn't come home (MIA/KIA). The impact on the Japanese war plans resulted in the evacuation of all remaining Japanese aircraft from Rabaul, which up till then had been a major threat to U.S. ships and ground forces. The disintegration of an empire had begun.

Aircraft logistics and maintenance, Blackburn's second theme of this shoot'em-up, were, of course, crucial to the Pacific victory. As the author points out, VF-17 and their F4U-1As were flown off the *Bunker Hill* (CV-17) upon arrival at Pearl Harbor in October 1943 because of logistics and provisioning problems, not because of carrier landing problems. *The Bunker Hill* had been the only carrier with F4Us aboard. All other carrier-based fighter squadrons had F6F Hellcats or, in the case of smaller ships, F4F Wildcats. Even so, the Jolly Rogers in November '43 launched from Ondongo, New Georgia, to provide combat air patrol for the carriers *Essex*, *Bunker Hill* and *Independence* while those ships' air groups pounded Rabaul, landed aboard to rearm and refuel, and launched again to provide fighter cover while the air groups returned from the Rabaul strike, scoring 18 kills, blunting the Japanese counterstrike, and recovered back to New Georgia. The lesson is to make the fighters simple, make lots of 'em, and keep the parts coming: a lesson lost in 1990 with \$500M bombers and \$50M fighters.

One of the ironies that Blackburn discovered at the end of his combat tour was that he had occasionally lost fighters in the extreme effort to protect the bombers being escorted, only to discover later that the bombers were primarily bait to draw Japanese fighters, the primary targets. The effects of bombing land targets were minimal in the southwest Pacific in 1943-44 and in southeast Asia in the 1960s-70s. The effects of shooting down Japanese fighters were maximal in 1943-44 and in shooting down U.S. fighters over North Vietnam in the 1960s-70s. An airplane in 1943 was a weapon to protect the ships and divisions of soldiers and marines who won the last one that we won.

Well done to the Jolly Rogers of 1943-44 who did their job. And a Hail Mary for the ships and divisions of soldiers and marines of Korea and Vietnam, and to those of the 1990s.

M.W. ALLINDER, JR.
U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)
Clearwater, Florida

Hickam, Homer M., Jr. *Torpedo Junction*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989. 367pp. \$24.95

This is a great book! Homer Hickam has done a thorough job of researching his subject—reviewing U.S. and German records and logs, reviewing newspapers from the era as well as other books on the subject, interviewing participants and, as a skilled scuba diver, even visiting some of the wrecks.

While the short title *Torpedo Junction* may conjure up visions of a paperback thriller about night actions off Guadalcanal, this book is really a definitive history of the U-Boat campaign against U.S. East Coast shipping from January to August 1942, complete with charts, tables and notes. It is history written with a novelist's style—which makes for great reading.

Hickam covers this campaign from three sides and two levels. At the command level there is Admiral Dönitz, the attacker, arguing for more assets to commit to this profitable killing ground, but being told there are higher priorities in the Mediterranean and Norwegian Sea. And there is Rear Admiral "Dolly" Andrews, Commander Eastern Sea Frontier, the defender, arguing for more assets to stem the tide, but being told of higher priorities in the Pacific. (Hickam seems to share Admiral Andrews' frustration and doesn't even give an "Oh by the way . . ." to the fact that the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo and the battles of the Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal were occurring during this time.) Even so, when America's oil companies told the President they would not be able to provide the fuel to support the American war effort if tanker losses continued, "Dolly" Andrews got his forces.

At the ship level on the defense there is the 350-ton Coast Guard cutter *Dione* (the only large ASW ship committed to the entire campaign), any number of destroyers coming and going, the hapless

merchantmen, and ultimately a plethora of small craft, but most importantly aircraft. On the offense there are *U-66*, *U-123*, *U-103*, *U-108*, *U-504*, *U-124*, etc. Hickam takes us aboard many of those ships and aircraft and allows us to watch the deep frustration and anger of the Americans in January, change to grim satisfaction in August. At the same time the arrogance of the Germans in the late winter and early spring turns to frustration, caution and fear as the hunters become the hunted during the summer. There is even comic, but tragic relief—*U-352* attacking a small freighter three times at point-blank range and missing all three times, giving up the chase as the crew of the freighter abandon ship; then several days later, in frustration, attacking another vessel without identifying it. *U-352* misses again, but the torpedoes detonate on the bottom in the shallow water—alerting the intended victim, an American sub-chaser, which exacts a terrible retribution.

But *Dione*, all 165 feet of her, is the centerpiece around which the story at sea is told. Time and again we return with her to fight the weather, the merchantmen who refuse to take safer transit routes, the citizens who refuse to turn off lights along the coast, thereby providing excellent silhouettes for the U-Boats, and of course the U-Boats themselves.

Beyond being a splendid sea story and history, there are some lessons underscored here that make this a candidate for wardroom libraries

and Pentagon offices as well. Ships, including warships, were lost due to a lack of vigilance or even routine precautions such as zigzagging in known submarine waters. There is a hauntingly familiar ring to Admiral Andrews' initial theory that enough ASW ships patrolling the East Coast shipping lanes (while the merchantmen conducted independent transits) could defeat the submarine threat. Though the requisite number of ASW ships called for in the analysis did show up, the ASW campaign still faltered. Only when convoys were formed and escorted with the ships, while aircraft did the area patrolling, did the tide turn. I do not so much wish to remake the argument for convoys, but to raise caution over the lure of the siren of technology and *a priori* analysis of the next ASW campaign. It's never easy to predict this sort of thing; if it were, many wars probably would not have been fought. (But maybe others would have.) *Torpedo Junction* is a firm reminder that in spite of the best analysis we should be ready for some unpleasant surprises.

In summary, I would recommend this book to a wide audience—from those who simply enjoy a gripping story of life at sea in wartime to the serious student of naval history. This is truly a book to satisfy all interests.

J.S. HURLBURT
 Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
 Newport, Rhode Island

Villa, Brian Loring. *Unauthorized Action: Mountbatten and the Dieppe Raid*. Toronto; Oxford; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989. 314pp. \$27.50

The Dieppe raid took place on 19 August 1942. It involved about 5,000 Canadians, of whom about 1,000 seem never to have landed and of whom 3,367 became casualties. The Canadian army lost more prisoners (1,946) than it did in the eleven-month North-West Europe campaign or the twenty-month Italian campaign. British army and Royal Marine casualties were high as well. There were serious naval losses, especially in landing craft, and the air force (RAF and RCAF units took part) suffered its heaviest one-day loss of the war. It was a humiliating defeat.

Defeats, according to the cliché, are more instructive than victories. The claim has been made for nearly fifty years that Dieppe was an important—some have suggested indispensable—prelude to Normandy. Churchill once wrote in the draft of a letter to Lord Mountbatten: "and I said to Stalin at Moscow, 'It will be like putting one's hand in a bath before getting in to feel how hot the water is,' or words to that effect." Professor Villa argues that Dieppe in fact taught no lessons that had not already been learned in 1942, but that Dieppe tells us a lot about why governments do what they should not do. He even devotes an appendix to the subject.

Nineteen forty-two was a bad year for the Allies. Villa's assertion