

1989

# The Far Distant Ships: An Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II

Marc Milner

Joseph Schull

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Milner, Marc and Schull, Joseph (1989) "The Far Distant Ships: An Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss2/13>

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](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

If the student of war wishes to pursue an interest in the history of strategic bombing, he probably will not want to take the time to use either of the works under review since both require substantial supplementary reading. A recent book which is superior to both and covers much of the same ground is the biography of General Ira Eaker, *Air Force Spoken Here*, by James Parton. Parton was Eaker's aide during World War II and is a primary source well acquainted with his subject. It is quite clear that he, too, is favorably disposed toward his hero, but he is much more careful in his use of the sources, more thorough in his research, and clearly better balanced in his approach than either of the two authors under review here. Parton is a literate man and his prose is a pleasure to read.

Forrest Pogue and Stephen Ambrose (on Eisenhower) have amply proven that biographies can be useful instruments for the study of war. But the study of air war has not matured to the degree that have military and naval history. *Bomber Harris* and *Iron Eagle* are two examples of that point. There is an inversion in the field of the history of air power. Usually, official history is not deemed to be as valid as unofficial work. But if one wants the best approach to the study of war in the air, he should go through the official works first. For example, on the War against Hitler and the Japanese, the seven-volume *The Army Air Forces in World War II* is

several other official works on other periods that seem destined to gain that status. Raymond Bowers's volume on tactical airlift in Vietnam is one example. But there are inhibitions to the official publication of biographies—and yet, it does not seem likely that support for private work on air figures competitive with that of Pogue and Ambrose will soon be found. That is regrettable, for as Napoleon once said, "he who would be a warrior should above all study the lives of the Great Captains."

DAVID R. METS

Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)  
Niceville, Florida

---

Schull, Joseph. *The Far Distant Ships: An Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press/Toronto: Stoddart, 1988, 528pp. \$21.95

During the Second World War, Canadian warships and sailors were drawn—or managed to insinuate themselves—into virtually every major theater of war. The scope and variety of activities were unprecedented in the annals of Canadian naval history, from escorting the Russian convoys to battling kamikazes off Okinawa. They included landing operations in the Aegean and the Aleutians, MTB and destroyer engagements in the English Channel, escort duties in the Caribbean and the familiar convoy operations of the North Atlantic. By the end of the war was the miniscule small-ship navy of

1939 had given way to the third largest fleet in the world, one that was on its way to becoming a balanced force with cruisers and light fleet carriers.

This remarkable story is the subject of Joseph Schull's *The Far Distant Ships*, originally published in 1950 as part of the official naval history series and as yet the only comprehensive account of the RCN's war. Schull's book is masterfully written, conjuring up both the pace and the flavor of those hectic days. His slick prose and thorough coverage of the highlights has always served as a good introduction into Canada's war at sea. And so it remains.

That being said, a few caveats are in order. *The Far Distant Ships* has drawn criticism for being superficial, uncritical and lacking in analysis. All are valid observations, but those who enjoy and use Schull's book must remember that he produced precisely what was asked for by the Naval Staff. As his subtitle indicates, this is not "the" official history of operations, rather it is "an official account." The difference is subtle and usually missed: the significance is profoundly important to understanding the book. In a nutshell, *The Far Distant Ships* was written to foster public support for postwar naval expansion. Despite the efforts and wishes of the RCN's operational scientists and historians, the postwar navy was confident in its understanding of its wartime difficulties and saw little merit in a thorough, analytical study. Instead,

it gave Schull access to the preliminary narratives and files of the Naval Historical Section and instructed him to produce a "popular history." The result was a good book, well-written and broad in scope, but one written to develop for the RCN the same aura of legend and gallantry that characterized the Canadian Corps of the First World War. Unfortunately for the Navy, its experiences contained nothing on par with Vimy Ridge or the Hundred Days Campaign. But for a service which had nearly disappeared in the 1930s, "being there" on a major scale by 1945 was a heady potion, and *The Far Distant Ships* celebrates that accomplishment. Schull's operational account, then, does not fit well with the rest of the genre. British and American operational histories are about the war and the development of tactics, technology and doctrine, while Schull's concentrates on the RCN itself and the high drama of its exploits. This fundamental dissimilarity in approach to the Canadian operational history has limited its value as a work of history. Whether *The Far Distant Ships* was successful in fostering public support for the peacetime Navy is harder to gauge, although the tremendous size of the RCN by 1960—its largest ever peacetime establishment—suggests there might be a connection. However, there may also be a connection between the lack of a thorough and properly prepared operational history and the precipitous decline of the Navy in the 1970s.

The relationship between a service's view of its past, its access to the past in a useful form, and the fate of that service in contemporary struggles for force structure form the backdrop for the original appearance of *The Far Distant Ships*, giving shape to its content and style. It has value as an essential document in modern naval history and remains the best introduction into exploits of a major Allied navy. It is a good read in its own right. In short, this is an essential part of any naval or Second World War library and, therefore, a most welcome reprint.

MARC MILNER  
University of New Brunswick  
Canada

Whinney, Reginald. *The U-Boat Peril: An Anti-Submarine Commander's Story*. New York: Sterling, 1986. 160pp. \$17.95

After the war, Winston Churchill wrote that the only thing that ever frightened him was the U-boat peril. As commanding officer of a long-range ASW escort—an 1,100-ton converted destroyer from the previous war—Bob Whinney was in the middle of defeating that peril. His account of World War Two ASW is well worth the read for it is full of technical detail as well as a strong sense of what it was like to chase submarines at short ranges from an open bridge in the North Atlantic. Practitioners of modern ASW might well read his account

to see where we began and how far we have come.

Before the war, gunnery and gunners reigned supreme in the Royal Navy. Perhaps they were planning to get Jutland right the next time. Antisubmarine warfare was very far down the totem pole. Officers who had the foresight to get into it before the war, as Whinney did, found that they were not on a fast track to recognition and promotion. Even as the war in the Atlantic became an ASW campaign, many of the older regular officers simply were not interested. Whinney relates the tale of one senior escort commander who, when taken to the remarkable ASW tactical simulator in Scotland, left after a few minutes, saying to Whinney: "if we find a submarine, you take care of it." The vital business of convoy protection and ASW became the province of small ships, a few determined regulars and a large number of wartime Reserve officers. Considering how little initial support they had from the "real" navy, they did quite well.

Whinney joined the Navy at a time when naval training and service were vastly different from what we now know. His account of life at Dartmouth Naval College will seem medieval to the modern reader. His descriptions of life in the prewar navy, where athletics and a good seat on a polo pony were the road to advancement, may leave the reader wondering if that was not a pleasanter and more civilized, if less professional, world than the one we now know.