

1989

## The Odds Against Us

Frank C. Mahncke

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Mahncke, Frank C. (1989) "The Odds Against Us," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol42/iss1/22>

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).

geography. Hence, the famous Navy-Marine Corps Fleet Landing Exercises of the 1930s are called "Fleet Handling Exercises," reference is made to "aircraft of Destroyer Squadron" and "one ordinance of enlisted men." Similarly, U.S. geography is butchered. There are references to "Mobile, Florida" and "West Palm Beach, Miami." Does anyone at Greenwood proof-read? Such egregious errors weaken the author's general credibility.

But the fundamental problem with *War, Cooperation, and Conflict* is that the author has written the wrong book. We do not need another book about U.S. policy toward the European colonial possessions in the Caribbean in World War II, even one that is diligently researched and sound in its judgments; we do need a book about the impact of that policy upon nationalism and anticolonialism in the Caribbean. This is not it.

PATRICK ABBAZIA  
Kingsborough Community College and  
The Graduate Center of The City  
University of New York

---

Townsend, Peter. *The Odds Against Us*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987. 240pp. \$16.95

On a tropical evening in the Singapore of 1936, a young RAF pilot made his first solo night flight in a Vildebeest—a great ark of a biplane fighter now mercifully forgotten. This was Peter Townsend's introduction to night flying and the

beginning of a path that led him to command night fighting squadrons against the Germans during the London blitz.

In *The Odds Against Us*, Townsend tells us of his own action in the night skies above Britain and the experiences of those who had to fight what Churchill called "this hellish invention" (bombing) on the ground. His new book is a sequel to his earlier work on the Battle of Britain, *Duel of Eagles*, and has much the same scope.

After losing the Battle of Britain the Germans turned to night bombing raids on London, but night fighting was a new and untried business for the RAF. Prior to that time, fighter pilots just did not fly at night. The development of a night interception began with "cat's-eye" fighters vectored by ground radar but dependent on the pilots eyes to find and kill the bomber. At first Hurricanes were used, and later Defiants. Their four-gun turrets improved the lethality once the target had been seen. Finally, Douglas Havocs with airborne radar were brought into service, which greatly improved the chances of the vectored pilot finding the target. The quad guns in the nose of the Havoc finished the job.

The story of night interception is intimately connected to what Townsend calls the "Wizard War," the development of radar, aircraft radio, and the first of what we now call electronic countermeasures warfare. In this war, scientists—"boffins" as the British called them—played a

role as important as, though less glamorous than, the pilots. Townsend skillfully weaves in the parallel story of the discovery of the German Knickebein navigational and blind bombing system (a precursor to today's VOR system) with the development, by British scientists, of countermeasures such as Headache and Aspirin which, with the development of radar, was so critical to the outcome of this first "Wizard War." These were so successful in some cases that German aircraft landed at British airfields thinking that they were in France.

Townsend also tells the story of the people on the ground, the citizens of London who bore the worst of the casualties with nothing but their indomitable spirit to sustain them. London families such as the Cal-lows—father, mother, four daughters, and two sons—worked through the blitz in the Woolwich arsenal and served as auxiliary firefighters. In Townsend's words, "They were the mainstay of Britain's night defenses."

As the Second World War recedes in memory and the last of the distinguished veterans, such as Peter Townsend, write their memoirs, the tone of these memoirs changes. There is little enthusiasm for the glamour of war in this book. Townsend's work reflects the destructive futility of the bombing campaigns of which so much had been expected by their proponents, Douhet, Mitchell, and Trenchard, during the decades before the war. He does have some professional regard for the skill and

courage of the German airmen and notes the cruel anomaly that led sober young men of courage to rain bombs upon innocents on the ground.

FRANK C. MAHNCKE  
The Naval Surface Weapons Center  
Silver Spring, Maryland

Y'Blood, William T. *The Little Giants*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987. 468pp. \$28.95

This book is an excellent follow-on to the author's fine work, *Hunter-Killer*. One may well ask what William T. Y'Blood, a post-World War II Air Force B-47 flier and later a commercial 727 pilot, is doing writing about a segment of naval aviation as highly specialized as the CVEs. Currently a military historian for the U.S. Air Force, Dr. Y'Blood's book reveals his intense interest in, and deep understanding of, carrier warfare.

The saga of the Navy's escort carrier operations in the Pacific is narrated in a chronological fashion that some readers without aircraft carrier experience may find a bit laborious. Those who do have such a background probably will find *Little Giants* revealing and exciting. No attempt was made by the author to discuss in detail such points as the standards of construction used in the building of the CVEs, or the merits of the manner in which these little giants were employed in combat. Such judgments are left to the reader who, if so inclined, must be careful to stay in the context of the period