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## The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle

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As an example of Heinrichs' analytic method, refer to the month of July 1941. The government related the German invasion of Russia directly to the future of the Atlantic and a new deterrence policy towards Japan. American security depended on control of the Atlantic. For this the defeat of Germany was essential, for which in turn the survival and continued resistance of the Soviet Union was necessary. To help, the United States could supply the Russians and prevent the Japanese from opening a second front against them in Siberia. Events on the Russian western front were thus behind sending marines to Iceland (army troops being unready for so sudden a move) and the decision to escort the convoys. At the same time, and by the same token, the government sought to contain Japan's careening expansion in the Far East.

The Japanese had the choice of moving north to take advantage of the wounded Russians, or, with fewer worries now on the Manchurian border, to turn south toward a maritime empire. Deterrence was meant to prevent action in either direction. The elements of diplomatic and economic pressure are well known. Less so are its military dimensions. Roosevelt's quid pro quo for help to the British in the Atlantic was their dispatch of the *Prince of Wales* to join the *Repulse* in the Indian Ocean. The Philippines became part of an offensive strategy, based in part on a buildup of submarines but mainly on long-range B-17s, whose deterrent value the

army air force touted (as it turned out, entirely unrealistically). This Asian strategy, a Far Eastern second front from Manila, was meant to enhance security in the Atlantic. This is truly global thinking. However wrongheaded were some of the assumptions about strategic bombing and containing Japan, Heinrichs' point is that the administration was consciously thinking in terms of a worldwide balance of power, and action in the Pacific was meant to add to the security of the Atlantic.

For an understanding of U.S. foreign policy in 1941, for clues to appraise the elusive Roosevelt, this is now the book with which to begin.

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van der Vat, Dan. *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. 424 pp. \$25

World War II's Battle of the Atlantic, the Allies' triumphant effort to use the Atlantic sea lines and Germany's nearly successful attempt to deny, was the longest and bloodiest campaign in naval history. Dan van der Vat's *The Atlantic Campaign* is a one volume history of this epic struggle, intended for the general reader. Surprisingly, there have been few English language attempts prior to this. Most related works tend to concentrate upon one specific aspect, such as the crucial convoy battles of early 1943, the sinking of the *Bismark*, or intelligence. Author of previous

naval narratives, *The Grand Scuttle* and *Gentlemen of War*, van der Vat brings to his work the dual vocation of historian and journalist and a healthy skepticism toward accepted historical wisdom. He also brings fluent German and archival research accomplished in Germany. The result is a straightforward chronological narrative that begins with World War I's aftermath, travels through Britain's rearmament mistakes (particularly the forsaking of the fleet air arm), and then relates the tale of lost blood and treasure. No World War II historian or naval planner should bypass *The Atlantic Campaign*.

Any weak points in this comprehensive work are in emphasis or interpretation. With respect to emphasis, the author rightly portrays the long neglected Canadian contribution to convoy escort on the North Atlantic run; but, there is nary a word about the Allied merchant marine, whose losses of personnel and ships dwarfed even those of the U-boats. This silence is a bit incongruous in view of the fact that merchant shipping was the reason for the Atlantic battle. Moreover, van der Vat seems to have recognized this implicitly in his compliments to the little known but immensely successful efforts of Captain Eric Band, RN and Captain Frederick B. Watt, RCNR to maintain the morale of merchant mariners via Canada's Naval Boarding Service.

The Kriegsmarine staff for U-boats is given due applause for being small, efficient and the servant of the

operating forces. Doenitz' Chief of Staff, Captain Eberhard Godt, is given full credit for his contribution. However, the Western Approaches Command in Liverpool is given short shrift. While Admiral Sir Max Horton was every bit the dynamo portrayed, he was not the whole command. DCOS (Operations) Captain Stephen Ravenhill and Staff Officer A/S Commander C.D.H. Howard-Johnston were a match for Godt. Individually and collectively, the Western Approaches staff was that rarest of miracles, a shore establishment highly esteemed by sailors.

With respect to interpretation, two subjects deserve readdressal: Convoy HG-76 and intelligence. In December 1941, passed-over Commander Johnny Walker, officially "lacking qualities of leadership," took a thirty-two ship Gibraltar-to-Plymouth convoy, HG-76, through an eight-day running battle. Walker safely delivered thirty ships and left in his wake four or five sunken U-boats, an incredible victory when victories were few. Walker would eventually become Captain Frederick John Walker, CB, DSO\*\*\*, RN, whose escorts sank some thirty U-boats. However, HG-76 was more than just a dramatic victory which introduced a fighting hero of the Atlantic. The operations of HG-76 were scrutinized by Commander Gilbert Roberts of the Western Approaches Tactical Unit. From his study came the tactics which transformed Commonwealth escorts from individual lookouts into teams

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of U-boat killers. Van der Vat misses this link.

Regrettably, there is no separate chapter on intelligence. However, woven through *The Atlantic Campaign* is the theme that Anglo-American intelligence, important though it was, has been overrated. When the Ultra secret was declassified in 1974, it caused a rethinking of Allied World War II successes. Van der Vat questions this wholesale historical revision. He correctly states that Ultra was only one means of intelligence. (Donald McLachlan in his classic *Room 39* outlines no fewer than seventeen naval intelligence sources, of which wireless intercepts were most valued but by no means stood alone.) Van der Vat also reminds us that Allied communications themselves were by no means secure. Foremost in van der Vat's challenge is the occasionally forgotten truth that intelligence alone does not win battles. Assuming that the raw information from many sources is correctly evaluated, three things can happen, and two of them are bad. The intelligence may not be disseminated to the right command, as at Pearl Harbor. Or the intelligence may not be correctly acted upon, as in the case of convoy PQ 17. Or, lastly, as at Midway, correct intelligence may be rightly received and ably employed. But even then success is only made possible, not guaranteed. Perhaps in his quest to put the still rather new Ultra revelations in perspective, van der Vat mildly underrates the total effect of intelligence. This is particularly

true for the latter stages of the war when Ultra decrypts, handled in Washington by Captain Kenneth Knowles of OP-20-G, were instrumental in the destruction of fifty-one U-boats by U.S. hunter-killer groups. Still, the challenge to the Ultra revisionists merits consideration.

Van der Vat is no admirer of Admiral Ernest J. King, but the allusion to near "psychotic Anglophobia" goes too far. The King intellect surpassed that of any English-speaking colleague. Cominch *was* prejudiced against anyone and anything not stamped "USN" (perhaps the English foremost); but he was no psycho. Still, while an American might wish the tone were less harsh and more credit given to King's late but effective Tenth Fleet organization (listed beneath his portrait in the Pentagon as one of his great achievements), van der Vat does debunk the long-standing myth that King's early attitude about convoy was a triumph of mindset over evidence. King actually believed in convoy from the outset, but he also believed that limited escort along the U.S. coastline was useless. King was proven wrong. Limited escort *was* better than none. Van der Vat here discerns a subtle mistake in King's thinking rather than the blunder many have ascribed.

These oversights are minor in what is an impressive achievement. In John Waters' *Bloody Winter* and Martin Middlebrook's *Convoy*, one may perhaps more easily grab the essence of this one campaign *which*

had to be won. But for completeness, *The Atlantic Campaign* is the single best English language reference and a book which should become a standard text.

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Breuer, William B. *Operation Torch: The Gamble to Invade North Africa*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 272 pp. \$18.95

This is a popular account of the Allied invasion of French Northwest Africa in November 1942. William Breuer is a combat veteran who has produced several World War II histories for the general reader. Operation Torch, the first blooding of American ground troops in the Mediterranean theater, has been often bypassed by authors with more spectacular tales to tell. However, many of the military and naval leaders who were prominent in landings on the beaches of Sicily, Italy, and France made their appearance first in North Africa. Through Breuer's lively prose the reader will sense the trepidation, confusion, and courage of American troops and their leaders as they staged their first major amphibious assault.

Allied leaders contemplated various ways to enter the war. One early option was an invasion of western France in 1942 or 1943. That this was seriously considered provides a sense

of how troubled those times were. The Allies were concerned that without a show of force in the West, the Soviet Union might be forced into a separate peace. Stalin was urging the establishment of a second front to divert German pressure on his beleaguered troops. Breuer boldly states that the British staged the suicidal Dieppe raid (Operation Jubilee) in August 1942 in order to convince Washington (Roosevelt, Stimson, and Marshall) what a mistake a larger invasion would be at that early date. In other words, they intentionally staged an attack they knew would fail in order to win an argument at the conference table.

Breuer emphasizes the tortuous nature of military politics in Vichy France and how difficult it was to determine whether the French in North Africa would oppose an Allied landing. The Allies went to great lengths to prevent French opposition. The book contains extensive coverage of General Mark Clark's ill-advised (by Robert Murphy), clandestine voyage in a British submarine to have a meeting with a sympathetic French general on the North African coast. The very real possibility of Clark's capture, with its propaganda and intelligence value, overrode the practical result. The romantic, daring quality of the mission was undeniable, but it did not prevent hostilities with the French.

Finally, Breuer vividly portrays what went wrong in the various landing zones when local French commanders opposed the Allies with