

1986

The Great War at Sea, 1914-1918

Frank Jordan
U.S. Marine Corps

Richard Hough

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

Recommended Citation

Jordan, Frank and Hough, Richard (1986) "The Great War at Sea, 1914-1918," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 2 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss2/23>

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.

Europe, the book begins with the origins of the RAF toward the end of World War I, its struggle for survival against the disarmers, the other Services, and the budget cutters in Whitehall; and, its appearance at the beginning of World War II as a modern air force which, in the opinion of its author, was to hold "... for much of the time the place of honor on the right of the line, as the Black Prince and his men did at Crecy." This volume is hard to put down despite its weight and length as Terraine assesses and analyzes the role of the RAF, its missions, organization, equipment, aircraft, its leaders and their personalities and its enemies. It is a critical analysis of the RAF's leadership, policies, plans and organization for war, and its conduct of the war in relation to its prewar preparations and the harsh realities of battle. Meticulously researched, brilliantly written with lucid detail, the author discusses the period of preparation for war; the development of new systems, weapons and organizations; strategic, tactical and doctrinal development and change; the predominant role of the bomber and Bomber Command in RAF thinking; an analysis of the "knock-out blow" thesis; the strengths and weaknesses of its leaders; and how the test of battle showed so much was wanting.

The main themes examined in detail in *A Time of Courage* include the expansion of the RAF for war; the decisive victory of Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain, including a sharp rebuke of Leigh Mallory and a

strong criticism of his own countrymen for not recognizing even posthumously the great deed of Air Marshal Dowding, the leader of the Few, who saved England in the summer of 1940; the RAF's role in the Battle of the Atlantic; the victories in the Desert and Mediterranean where the methods of Army cooperation and air support were forged and prepared the way for Overlord; and, the pyrrhic victory and glory of Bomber Command though the author admits to being displeased with the morality of the methods adopted by Bomber Command. But indicative of both the objectivity of the author and his willingness to draw conclusions, he points out that possibly the greater immorality was to lose the war to Nazi Germany.

This is must reading not just for students of airpower and World War II, but strategists, historians and even our present-day military reformers. This is military history the way it should be written.

BENSON D. ADAMS
Bethesda, Maryland

Hough, Richard. *The Great War at Sea, 1914-1918*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1983. 353pp. £14.50

Richard Hough has provided a highly readable and powerful appreciation of the global dimensions and revolutionary character of the Great War at sea, which proved in many respects the decisive strategic arena. Moreover, it was a conflict which, at least in prefatory competition,

mirrors all too sharply the conventional confrontation between the United States and Soviet Union; i.e., a beleaguered global maritime power challenged by the naval expansion of the predominant continental power.

The undiminished controversy engulfing both the strategic and tactical conduct of the war has accorded great significance to unprecedented scale and scope, as well as the impact of revolutionary weapons evident in naval warfare—the maneuvering and fighting of turbine-driven dreadnoughts of unimagined size, speed, and firepower; the impact of the mine, torpedo, and submarine; and the unfulfilled promise of combined operations. These all served in varying degrees to cast the strategic potentialities of balanced naval power beyond the grasp of most statesmen, and its tactical implications outside the corporate experience of captains and senior commanders.

In assessing the evolution of these developments, Hough deftly juxtaposes two navies of sharply contrasting traditions and purposes.

With particular facility for tactical and technical considerations, Hough effectively develops the frustrations and failures typifying emergence of the “new” naval warfare: the quixotic attempt to relieve Antwerp; the suspense and ineptitude of the chase of the *Goeben* and *Breslau*; the tragedy of *Coronel* and the undisputed victory at the Falklands; the lack of a “second Trafalgar”; and a host of colorful, if occasionally obscure, developments;

e.g., Room 40 and the captured German ciphers, German raids on the English coast, and the legendary exploits of British submarine commanders in the Baltic and Mediterranean, as well as of the fabled Q-ships.

Materiel, leadership, and the frictions of war comprised the essential elements of this great conflagration, and it is here that Hough’s narrative power soars: the outgunned but better protected Germans’ intent upon attrition of elements of the Grand Fleet; the faster and more powerful British desirous of the decisive victory but constrained by the plodding caution of Jellicoe; the prudent but able German leadership of Scheer and Hipper; and a plethora of operational and technical failures. While judgments of operational decisions will remain contentious, Hough generally defends Jellicoe’s cautious approach as successful in thwarting Scheer’s objective of piecemeal attrition, instead confronting the German commander with the full weight of the Grand Fleet. For as Churchill noted, Jellicoe was the only man who could have lost the war in an afternoon.

Jutland was, and has remained, the greatest naval battle in history, replete with the inextricable question of who “won.” Strategically the British were clearly triumphant. Despite extraordinary violence, the Grand Fleet was ready for renewed action the next day; the Germans, with many units barely afloat, could not muster an effective force for months. But more importantly, there was little inclination to mount

another serious challenge. With the Germans thus confined to port, the British tightened their control of the world's oceans, moved rapidly to correct the technical deficiencies evident at Jutland, eventually contained the U-boat menace, and, with the surrender of the German Fleet, experienced the greatest naval triumph in history.

Hough's insights and expository powers in the tactical sphere should not obscure serious limitations with regard to strategic and policy considerations. For example, insufficient interest is evident in the organizational developments and policy battles of the prewar years in which, even after the 1911 decision in favor of a Continental strategy toward Germany, a policy for the optimum employment of naval power might have been salvaged. Concomitantly, efforts at naval staff development and actual war planning are inadequately appreciated. This skewed perspective is particularly evident in the author's treatment of the Dardanelles campaign, which has served as a foil for various strategic perspectives since. He attributes little merit to the effort, but not through appreciation of the strategic dilemmas confronting policymakers by early 1915. Rather, the enterprise is dismissed as a "sideshow," a misunderstanding of seapower (the "true" nature of which is obscure), and as a *naval* expedition promoted by the impulsive and erratic Churchill. Hough's lengthy enumeration of technical difficulties and tactical malfeasance is valid; but the critical

strategic question of widening the war militarily to accommodate the political dimension of war aims and termination is cursorily dismissed, yet ultimately comprises the strategic imperative of maritime power in global war.

These deficiencies notwithstanding *The Great War at Sea* is well worth the read. Its treatment of men in action is a model of the art, and its exposition of the radical alteration of naval war from the romantic ideal of Trafalgar to the exigencies of a modern global maritime campaign superb. There is much to learn here about the Elephant and the Whale.

FRANK JORDAN
Advanced Amphibious Study Group
Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps

Ulanoff, Stanley M., ed. *American Wars and Heroes: Revolutionary War through Vietnam*. New York: Arco, 1985. 378pp. \$19.95

This book is an adaptation—or perhaps more accurately, an abridgement—of *American Military History*, which is an ongoing project of the Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army.

As is true with many official histories, this is long on description and short on analysis, especially when social and economic considerations might be involved. But in fairness, a lot of military history is compressed into a single volume. Also to be expected is the focus on land operations, although sea and air come into their own from time to time. One interesting example can be drawn from the discussion of Gen. Ulysses