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World War II at Sea: A Global History

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BOOK REVIEWS

WHEN ELEPHANTS DANCE

World War II at Sea: A Global History, by Craig L. Symonds. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. 792 pages. \$34.95.

Craig Symonds evidently believes in taking on roles that reasonably could be regarded as tough acts to follow.

He followed the eminent Professor E. B. Potter at the U.S. Naval Academy and he is currently Professor John B. Hattendorf's successor as (appropriately) the Ernest J. King Distinguished Visiting Professor of Maritime History at the Naval War College.

Consequently, whereas most scholarship on World War II tends to concentrate on single geographic areas, such as the Pacific, the Atlantic, or the Mediterranean, or specific themes, Professor Symonds has undertaken the daunting task of describing and explaining in one volume the complex, interrelated "impact of the sea services from all nations on the overall trajectory and even the outcome of the war" (p. xii). True to his word, Symonds includes, unusually, not only the major states engaged at sea (the United States, Japan, Great Britain, and Germany), but also the Italians, French, and Russians, who, in other accounts, usually appear in walk-on parts or as foils to the main combatants.

In many areas he is, of course, treading a well-worn, generally familiar path,

whose main features are hallowed by decades of specialist scholarship, folk memory, and innumerable memoirs and monographs. Having entered the field with influential contributions to the scholarship of the maritime history of World War II, most notably *The Battle of Midway* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011) and *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-day Landings* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), Symonds, in *World War II at Sea*, filters a very wide selection of primary and secondary sources to provide an authoritative, comprehensive account that covers the full range of maritime decision-making and combat. His main theme is that the sea provides the essential unity and definition to a world war. Moreover, if you want to win a world war, first you have to win it at sea.

The challenge for the narrative historian in emphasizing the seamlessly interrelated character of a world war at sea comes in maintaining focus and balance in the face of a wide range of parallel issues, simultaneous campaigns, and geographically dispersed combat episodes. Happily, the way in which maritime campaigns unfolded in World

War II—first in and around Europe, then across the Atlantic, before spreading to Russia and the Indo-Pacific region—assists in this regard. After Pearl Harbor it becomes more difficult, and Symonds employs a useful device by regularly reminding the reader what is going on elsewhere. For example, he notes that D-day in Normandy in June 1944 virtually coincided with the amphibious assault on Saipan. Indeed, the fact that “the Allies could mount two major invasions on opposite sides of the world only nine days apart underscored the global character of the war as well as the depth of Allied resources” at that stage of the war (p. 538). Elsewhere, the simultaneous fates of Malta and Guadalcanal are linked in a single chapter, while another entitled “Landing Ships, Tank (LSTs)” provides a useful unifying thread for amphibious campaigns in the Pacific (the Gilbert and the Marshall Islands), the Mediterranean (Anzio), and D-day in Normandy.

In three dispersed chapters on “the war on trade,” he neatly combines several disparate themes and underlines how the Allies’ ability to access the sea for their own use and to deny its use to their enemies was critical to victory. The Japanese, Italians, and Germans progressively were deprived of the raw materials, food, and, most importantly, fuel to sustain their fighting power and populations, while the Allies’ eventual control of the sea enabled them to secure their home countries from attack, maintain their populations, and project decisive combat power at and from the sea. In particular, Symonds details how the highly destructive antishipping campaign against the Japanese by American submarines and aircraft, the British interdiction of German and Italian supplies to North Africa, and the effective blockade of the European Axis

powers were decisive in this regard, even as Axis naval forces were destroyed at sea. Conversely, he describes how the Germans and Italians in the Atlantic and beyond were unable to—and the Japanese, in the Pacific, did not care to—interdict Allied supply routes decisively.

In this carefully researched and elegantly structured account, Symonds combines a highly engaging narrative style with the rare ability to describe both complex issues and potentially confusing maritime campaigns and actions in a concise and lucid way. A tiny scattering of technical inaccuracies will distract only the deep specialist or pedant. Meanwhile, both professional and armchair historians will recognize and appreciate his well-judged, finely drawn—if conventional—characterizations of the major politicians and commanders, distinctively illuminated by entertaining anecdotes and asides.

There are also plenty of lessons for the discerning practitioner, particularly in reminding the twenty-first-century navy, by implication, about the realities and exceptional demands of high-end maritime combat, most of which have been forgotten or discarded. The most striking strategic lesson is that in a global conflict at sea, choice and priorities really count; one cannot be strong everywhere simultaneously, whether in landing craft, antisubmarine escorts, or merchant shipping. In a faint echo at the tactical level, I recall serving on a destroyer under heavy air attack in San Carlos Water near the Falklands in 1982, earnestly wondering (complaining) why it was that the Royal Navy had not laid smoke screens, maximized the number of machine guns on deck, and deployed barrage balloons.

Another lesson that applies today is that none of the Allied powers could have prevailed in World War II

against Germany or Japan without the industrial muscle, logistical support, and fighting power of the United States, even before Pearl Harbor. This dependent relationship against major opponents persists today and links to the evidence in this book that a continental power cannot expect to prevail against a major power on another continent without the ability to use the sea to its advantage and to deny its use to an opponent. One might be forgiven for thinking that an industrially charged China has absorbed these lessons.

CHRIS PARRY



Admiral Bill Halsey: A Naval Life, by Thomas Alexander Hughes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016. 544 pages. \$35.

Fleet Admiral “Bull” Halsey was the object of wide-ranging publicity during the Second World War. After the war, Halsey published his memoirs, and since then half a dozen biographers have told his story and many have visited his campaigns in thematic approaches. With so much already done, readers might tend to overlook this volume as just more of the same. Doing that would be a mistake. Thomas Hughes’s well-researched study of Halsey is a masterfully crafted, revisionist work that brings new insights to the understanding of one of the most complex and controversial commanders in American naval history. In this volume, Hughes draws a clear distinction between “Bull” Halsey, the wartime leader whom the press celebrated and made into a larger-than-life caricature, and the real Bill Halsey, whose story the author tells in this volume.

Halsey’s wartime career is well-known and continually debated, but few readers

have known much about his family background and earlier years. Hughes describes these aspects of life with great insight. Fleet Admiral Halsey liked to boast that he was descended from generations of hard-drinking, rowdy sailors and adventurers; this hardly was the case. The Halsey family had a distinguished heritage. On his father’s side, his ancestors had arrived in Puritan Massachusetts in 1638 and soon became large landowners on Long Island, New York. In the early nineteenth century, one of them, Charles Halsey, married the granddaughter of Rufus King, a signer of the Constitution, one of America’s first ambassadors to Great Britain, and a very wealthy man. Rufus King’s son Charles King married a daughter of Archibald Gracie of New York, whose stately home became the official residence of New York’s mayor. Charles King was publisher and editor of New York newspapers and became president of Columbia University. Charles Halsey’s son William married Anne Brewster, a direct descendant of Elder William Brewster, the primary author of the Mayflower Compact and the leading religious figure of the Plymouth colony. Their son was Admiral Halsey.

Before William Jr. joined the U.S. Navy, only a few of his Brewster ancestors had been seafarers, and none were of the swashbuckling variety. Admiral Halsey’s father and namesake entered the Naval Academy in 1869 and graduated in 1872. He retired as a captain in 1907 but continued to work for the Navy’s Bureau of Construction and Repair until 1919. While he was at sea in 1882 aboard USS *Iroquois* on the Pacific station, his son—the future admiral—was born at his wife’s family home in Elizabeth, New Jersey. During his career, William Sr. attended the summer course at the Naval War