

2022

The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War

Pat McKim

Malcolm Gladwell

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

Recommended Citation

McKim, Pat and Gladwell, Malcolm (2022) "The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 2, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss2/12>

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.

war, but under Dönitz's leadership it was changed and revitalized, on the basis of his childhood knowledge of the hunting habits of wolves (pp. 35–38).

First gaming tactics for U-boats attempting to pierce the convoy formations, then tactics for defending against those U-boats, Roberts and his team created a countertactic they code-named “Raspberry” (p. 161). Later, another tactic, known as “Pineapple,” was employed when U-boats were detected far from the convoy by reconnaissance flights, intelligence reports, communications intercepts, or other means.

Parkin opens his narrative with a chance meeting between Dönitz and Roberts on 23 May 1945, as Dönitz was coming down a ship's gangway on his way to be interrogated and Roberts was boarding the ship. From this coincidental moment, during which each acknowledged the other, the author's story begins. A colorful and interesting retelling of one aspect of the naval war in the Atlantic ensues.

The book's excellent character sketches weave a tapestry of human interest and military history. Drawing on numerous archives, including unpublished diaries of Roberts and other Roberts family holdings, the author is able to provide details and offer insights that have eluded others. He also tells a story of unit leadership, camaraderie, and effectiveness. In so doing, Parkin creates a book that reminds us of the dedication displayed by the many individuals who worked toward a common cause of victory. Even with continued postwar secrecy regarding much of the work that was done, there remained lasting friendships. One interesting link Parkin presents is between the work

of the Wrens at Derby House and that of other Wrens at Bletchley Park.

The book offers a lot of background, including several pages on the history of the use of war games, especially naval war games (pp. 94–98). The story is not limited to the activities at Derby House. Coverage of the efforts and operations of U-boat commanders helps to portray the formidable challenge the Allies faced at sea, as well as those ashore who sought to develop tactics to overcome the German wolf packs.

Although it is probably publisher's hyperbole to subtitle the book's subject as the effort that “won the war,” Parkin's work does highlight the significance of war gaming before and during World War II. Sixteen pages of very interesting photographs enhance the book, as does a select bibliography and helpful endnotes. Although the story being told is not a new one, it is not well-known. One hopes that this volume will be read widely and do much to raise awareness of the value of naval war gaming and the substantial efforts of the Wrens and WATU during World War II. It is a book well worth reading.

TIMOTHY J. DEMY



The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War, by Malcolm Gladwell. New York: Little, Brown, 2021. 256 pages. \$27.

Malcolm Gladwell is well known for his books on popular culture and finding the unexpected in social science research. Writings such as *The Tipping Point* (2000), *Blink* (2005), and *Outliers* (2008) have received wide acclaim.

Reading Gladwell's latest book brings to mind two quotes by notable Americans. Author Tom Wolfe stated that "[a]n intellectual is a person who is knowledgeable in one field but speaks out only in others." The second comes from Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale in his October 1977 change of command speech at the Naval War College: "My experience, and it has been rather recent, puts me back in old Clausewitz' camp. He said, 'War is a special profession. However general its relation may be . . . war would still continue to be different and separate from any other activity which occupies the life of man.'" Gladwell's book, read with those words in mind, is interesting indeed.

On a subject that is complex both strategically and morally, Gladwell has written a short, breezy, and superficial book—attempting something that few authors would in two-hundred-plus pages of large print. It is about developments and conflicts during the 1930s and 1940s within U.S. Army aviation (and what would become the U.S. Air Force) over pinpoint, high-altitude bombing. More specifically, it is about the conflict between the two bombing archetypes of that era:

- General Haywood S. Hansell Jr.: "Bomber Mafia" member and romantic, "moralistic" proponent of daylight, pinpoint, high-altitude, strategic bombing
- General Curtis E. LeMay: practical, freethinking, "brutal" proponent of "get 'er done" strategic bombing, who led from the front

This conflict started in the heady early days of aviation, with the unlimited possibilities resulting from a set of new technologies for a future-focused Army Air Corps set against that entity's more

earthbound competitors, the Army itself and the Navy. Gladwell covers the development of the bombsight, which was essential for precision bombing. He accepts (and adds to) the hype at that time that helped the less-capable Norden bombsight be chosen over the better, newer Sperry bombsight. In doing so, Gladwell touches on only some of the deficiencies with the Norden bombsight that prevented truly pinpoint bombing from high altitudes. This is not the only area he misunderstands; he explains, for example, that aircraft "take off with the help of the usual strong tailwind blowing down the runway" (p. 129).

Unfortunately, Gladwell bypasses the issues involved in answering whether strategic bombing truly was effective. This issue would plague the U.S. military going into the Korean conflict with a disabled Navy, as well as in Vietnam, where the limits of airpower were learned (again), as Mark Clodfelter later analyzed well in his book *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (2006).

Gladwell likes Hansell for his uncompromising attitude of sticking with the "more moral" precision bombing, even though the more practical, innovative, and effective LeMay completely upstaged Hansell twice, once in Germany and again in Japan.

Gladwell blatantly instructs us how to feel: "We can admire Curtis LeMay, respect him, and try to understand his choices. But Hansell is the one we give our hearts to. Why? Because I think he provides us with a model of what it means to be *moral* in our modern world. . . . [T]he only way those new technologies serve some higher purpose is if a dedicated band of believers *insists* that they be used to that purpose. That is what the

Bomber Mafia tried to do” (p. 198). What Gladwell does not understand is that warriors more readily follow a successful leader, particularly one who shares risks with those they command. Additionally, Gladwell—like others so clever—does not understand how wars, limited or total, truly are won. While he interviews and quotes a few selected authors from military colleges, he does not appear to have included in his research any classic thought on the subject—concepts that have endured across time. Such would include Clausewitz’s dictum that “[w]ar is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” or even a more recent American, but still classic, one from William Tecumseh Sherman, that “[w]ar is cruelty, and you can’t refine it.” And finally, here is another instructive Sherman observation: “Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster.”

At the end of the book, Gladwell recounts his meeting with current senior active-duty Air Force generals, who discuss just how accurate their precision weapons have become today. One gets the feeling that “shock and awe” was on Gladwell’s mind as he was regaled with Tom Clancy-like precision examples. He concludes, “The genius of the Bomber Mafia was . . . *We don’t have to slaughter the innocent, burn them beyond recognition, in pursuit of our military goals. We can do better. And they were right*” (p. 206).

Were they? Gladwell ignores Clausewitz’s dictum that “[w]ar is thus an act of force to compel . . .” The sought-after precision? Instead of a “more moral” war, we just have more moral problems. We should remember that “you can’t refine it.”

PAT MCKIM



The Sailor’s Bookshelf: Fifty Books to Know the Sea, by James G. Stavridis [Adm., USN (Ret.)]. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021. 232 pages. \$24.95.

Admiral James G. “Zorba” Stavridis’s story is well known; he needs little introduction. His career started with the U.S. Naval Academy class of 1976; he advanced through service and command at sea and headquarters tours at the Pentagon. He then was Commander, U.S. Southern Command from 2006 to 2009 and finally Supreme Allied Commander Europe, NATO, through 2013. His postservice roles have included vice-chairman for global affairs of the Carlyle Group, chair of the board of trustees for the Rockefeller Foundation, and dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Stavridis has written ten previous books and numerous articles and papers, including *The Leader’s Bookshelf* (2017). This is another book about books, but of a more personal nature, in that it covers those works that shaped his views of the sea—the nautical milieu that has been at the core of his career. For anyone who ever has been afloat, the experience often is awe inspiring.

Exposure to a plethora of professional reading lists seems to be a part of modern military careers. However, these lists usually do not explain how to differentiate a classic from a best seller. There appear to be so many books and too little time to read them; in fact, professional education often teaches the virtue of speed-reading, just to stay ahead of the volume of material to be covered. At present, it seems that while people know how to read, many choose not to, in favor of gaining “electronic