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The Battle of the Denmark Strait: A Critical Analysis of the Bismarck’s Singular Triumph

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of challenges: from the toppling of Qadhafi to the civil war in Syria, Israeli security, a resurgent Russia, the Balkans, and finally, of course, Afghanistan. Thus the first few chapters are a whirlwind of individuals, meetings, and events. Among all this, he often pauses within chapters to highlight some of the more important senior military and political officials that make up the NATO alliance.

Stavridis spends considerable time in these early chapters setting up the facts—stating what happened—and then trying to balance it against why it happened and what he learned from it. The first part of the book, however, feels rushed and compressed, and even in his best efforts the balance tilts toward more numbers and facts and away from a deep exploration of the why. If there was one weakness, this is it. You are left wanting more discussion on how the policy was shaped in Washington and in Brussels. What was the dialogue during these many meetings? And why was it persuasive?

The second part of the book shines. Here he discusses leadership, strategic planning, innovation, and strategic communication. All of these chapters are excellent and well worth the price of the book. In one chapter, Stavridis talks about the actions that led to Generals McChrystal’s and Petraeus’s resignations—and his own stumbles. It is here he almost passes the George Orwell test. Orwell once said, “Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.” And for Stavridis it is not all good. Stavridis explains that he was nominated to be the Chief of Naval Operations, following what was, by many accounts, a successful tour as the supreme allied commander. This was not to be. He describes, plainly, that some of his official travel was not properly paid for, and a single trip was deemed questionable by the inspector general. He accepted responsibility for his and his staff’s mistakes, and made reparations. Although he was cleared by the Secretary of the Navy from any wrongdoing, the long investigation was enough to complicate the political winds that are Washington, and the Secretary of Defense had to remove his nomination. While certainly not rising to Orwell’s definition of disgraceful, nonetheless, it was not his shining hour.

For this reader, the stories of his days commanding USS Barry, beautifully captured in his book Destroyer Captain, remain my favorite. Its style, written in a journalist's hand, is intimate and moving—a man that loves the sea yet knows he is human and only can go as far as his crew takes him. Still, his new memoir is a refreshing dose of honesty, intelligence, and reflection—much needed in today’s Navy and tomorrow’s leaders.

CHRISTOPHER NELSON


From Johnny Horton’s 1960 ballad “Sink the Bismarck” to James Cameron’s Expedition Bismarck for the Discovery Channel in 2002, the sole sortie of the German battleship in May 1941 has held the attention of both the general public and naval historians. The latter mainly concentrate on the destruction of
Bismarck on 27 May after a lucky aerial torpedo hit disabled the ship’s steering mechanism. Not so Robert Winklareth. His focus instead is on Bismarck’s “singular triumph” in destroying the British battle cruiser Hood three days earlier. A 38 cm shell from its fifth salvo sliced through Hood’s armored side below the aft turrets, setting off first the 4 in. secondary armament magazine and then the main 15 in. magazine. Only 3 of its complement of 1,421 survived.

So, what is new? Winklareth, a military weapons systems expert, traces all action at sea in five-second intervals. He primarily uses translated German records of the battle of the Denmark Strait to offer a salvo-by-salvo analysis, to re-create the speed and headings of the major combatants, and to determine the precise firing angles and effects of the heavy guns. Unsurprisingly, the book is highly detailed and a feast mainly for naval engineering and gunnery enthusiasts. It is complemented by countless charts, diagrams, photographs, and pencil drawings (by the author). Winklareth’s own battle is with the (unnamed) historians who claim that just before the engagement with Hood, Bismarck, in a mere six minutes, came up the port side of the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, crossed its wake to its starboard side, and then recrossed the cruiser’s wake to take up position on its port side again (15–16, 258). What he calls a “reversed photo” error resulted in this assumption. Few will cross swords with the author on this matter.

On the other hand, serious historians of the battle will take umbrage at two of Winklareth’s strong statements, both on the first page (11) of the book. His claim that the battle of the Denmark Strait “was undoubtedly one of the most famous and most important naval battles of World War II” will raise the hackles especially of historians of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific 1941–45. And his second claim, that the encounter between Bismarck and Hood “is perhaps the most documented event in naval history,” will come as news to German naval historians who are all too aware of the fact that Bismarck’s war diary (Kriegstagebuch) went down with the ship.

With regard to the broader aspects of the battle of the Denmark Strait, Winklareth spends a great deal of time sketching out the past histories of the German and British navies as well as the major ship designs of the two powers. The actual artillery duel between the German battleship and the British battle cruiser, in fact, consumes but half a dozen pages of chapter 13. Unfortunately, there is no attempt to place “Operation Rheinübung,” the German sortie into the Atlantic, into the wider context of Grand Admiral Erich Raeder’s double-pole strategy of attacking Britain’s maritime commerce with two modern battle fleets in the Atlantic Ocean, while a third fleet of elderly battleships tied the Royal Navy down in the North Sea. The reader deserved this analysis.

HOLGER H. HERWIG


The Washington diary is something of a lost art these days. Instead, we have to be satisfied with books of instant journalism using largely anonymous sources or memoirs too often tendentiously crafted after the fact. Chase Untermeyer is a