

1995

## Escape

James R. Holmes

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### Recommended Citation

Holmes, James R. (1995) "Escape," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 48 : No. 3 , Article 30.  
Available at: <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol48/iss3/30>

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Fleet's blockade of the short sea route from the Zonguldak coal mines to the mouth of the Bosphorus—which nearly closed down Turkey's primitive industry and threatened to immobilize the German battle cruiser *Goeben*, masquerading as a Turkish ship under the name *Jawus Sultan Selim*—but also about the Imperial Russian Navy's successful task forces built around makeshift seaplane carriers.

German U-boats drove the Grand Fleet to the edge of impotence, not so much by direct attack but by sinking the merchant ships the fleet was supposed to protect. It was upon those ships that not only Britain (including its fleet) but the whole alliance depended. Halpern tells us the familiar story of how, even though the U-boats were winning, the Royal Navy recoiled (because it was a "defensive" scheme) from the only solution in sight, the convoy. Finally, in the spring of 1917, just as the U.S. Navy's destroyers came on the scene, the Royal Navy tried that repulsive tactic. At one stroke this simple, old method of sea warfare reduced the number of targets that the submarines could find, from many individual ships to only a few groups of them, and those in fairly compact formations. If a U-boat were to locate such a convoy, she would find it screened by destroyers or other small warships, each eager to sink the raider. The number of U-boats sunk went up, the number of merchant ships lost went down, and the threat of allied defeat in the Atlantic faded in time for a new, American army to cross that ocean. In turn, the new army helped defeat the Germans in France. It was the German failures, first at sea, and then on

the Western Front, that brought the war to an end—or, at least, that is how this reviewer understands it.

The United States fought during the last third of the war. Halpern's assessment of the U.S. Navy's contribution to the victory seems fair and well balanced, though one wishes he had said a bit more on the subject.

One wishes also that Halpern had shown more clearly the effect of action afloat upon the course of events ashore. How important to the development of the war and its outcome were the battles and campaigns in the wide ocean and the narrow seas? Most narrators of the war seem to have trouble with that issue. Halpern, like them, has left readers to figure it out for themselves. Alas!

Still, perfect books do not exist. Paul Halpern's is a very good one. Let us hope he writes more.

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Messimer, Dwight. *Escape*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 288pp. \$29.95

*Escape* is high adventure. It is a chronicle of the wartime experiences of Medal of Honor recipient Edouard Isaacs, the only U.S. Navy line officer captured by the Germans during the First World War. It is a delight to read.

The author, Dwight Messimer, is a history professor at San Jose State University and a specialist in American and German naval history. Although his authoritative account is extensively researched from Isaacs's family

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documents, it reads like an action novel, an impression reinforced by the book's fast-reading, third-person format.

*Escape* details the ill fated last voyage of USS *President Lincoln* in May 1918. Returning after delivering troops bound for the Western Front, the six-masted steamer was torpedoed by the *U-90*, although it had, supposedly, cleared the U-boats' hunting grounds. *President Lincoln* quickly sank, and assistant gunnery officer Lieutenant Isaacs was retrieved from his lifeboat by the German submarine, whose crew had orders to capture the most senior officer surviving an attack. Isaacs quickly acted to deceive the German captain and protect his own captain from capture; consequently he himself was taken prisoner.

During the voyage to Germany, Isaacs learned several startling facts through the carelessness of the submarine's crew and his own vigilance. First, the U-boat patrol area extended one hundred miles further to the west than previously thought, leaving unescorted allied transports like the *President Lincoln* vulnerable to attack. In addition, the German submarines had shifted their return routes in order to avoid the ever more effective British minefields, adopting a circuitous track around Ireland and the Jutland Peninsula and through the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal. That knowledge kindled in Isaacs the determination to escape and deliver what he believed to be intelligence vital to the allied war effort.

Upon arrival in Wilhelmshaven he was transferred from one prison camp to another, the first of them in

Karlsruhe. After two escape plans were forestalled by bad luck, he was moved by train to his final camp, at Villingen, in the Black Forest. During the train journey Isaacs seized an opportunity provided by a momentary lapse of his two guards to dive through an open window. Seriously injured by the jump, Isaacs did not escape. The Germans beat him severely with their rifle butts, shattering a weapon in the process, and marched him the remaining five miles to the prison camp.

At Villingen Lieutenant Isaacs's tenacity continued to manifest itself. His paramount objective was to regain his health, which he accomplished with remarkable speed considering the appalling quality of medical care provided to prisoners. Once more he began to plan his escape, which was complicated by the mixed population of the camp, split roughly evenly between American and Russian officers. On several occasions, ready to carry out his plan, he and his American comrades were preempted by Russians, leading of course to German searches and loss of vital equipment. The Americans' frustration mounted.

The onset of winter in 1918, together with the Germans' increasing suspicion and vigilance, forced the prisoners' hand. Displaying his natural aggressiveness, Isaacs forged the fragmented escape groups into a cohesive team for an all-out escape attempt. Their well thought out plan included shorting-out camp lights, creating a diversion, and even mixing-in with pursuing Germans. It worked. Five of thirteen American prisoners of war escaped; three swam the icy Rhine

to Switzerland, Isaacs among them. Unfortunately, by then the war was nearly at an end, and his intelligence was rendered useless. Consequently, despite the heroic efforts that earned him the Medal of Honor, Isaacs was haunted by a sense of failure.

*Escape* is of value not as a guide to intelligence gathering or escape from POW camps but as an illustration of honor and commitment to duty. Edouard Isaacs's uprightness and steadfastness are a case study in—dare we use the term?—"core values" that often appear to be lacking in today's armed forces. This work should be required reading in all officer accession programs.

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Smith, Joseph. *The Spanish-American War: Conflict in the Caribbean and the Pacific, 1895-1902*. New York: Longman, 1994. 262pp. (No price given)

A new president, preferring to focus on the domestic economy, finds himself drawn reluctantly toward foreign crises. The Caribbean is in turmoil. Cuba's imperial patron is collapsing into bankruptcy, unable to support its far-flung outposts. Because of its proximity and ties to the region, the United States finds itself pulled into the situation. While there are many differences, the problem the United States faces today parallels that of a hundred years ago, the days leading up to the Spanish-American War. The past, in many ways, foreshadows the present.

Joseph Smith's book is a good starting point for those who wish to learn from that conflict. *The Spanish-American War* is the third in a series entitled "Modern Wars In Perspective," the aim of which is to "advance the current integration of military history into the academic mainstream," its books being "not merely traditional campaign narratives, but [meant to] examine the causes, course and consequences of major conflicts, in their full international political, diplomatic, social and ideological contexts." Thus the series intends to fill a serious gap in scholarship. Armed clashes no more represent the entire human effort of warfare than visible portions represent the entire iceberg.

The Spanish-American War is an excellent subject for such a study; it represents a cusp in U.S. history, when, having satiated its drive to tame a continent, the nation turned outward toward the international arena—a focus that still exists today. The war has an inevitable pull for those interested in naval warfare, because, besides the Santiago campaign (itself aimed against the Spanish Navy), its action took place almost entirely on the sea. Also, not only had U.S. naval forces been shaped by the theories of Alfred T. Mahan, but he was available at the time to comment on events that appeared tailor-made to confirm those theories.

Smith largely succeeds in his efforts. While its shape is similar to that of most books describing a war (the roots, preparations, execution, and conclusion of the conflict), his text differs in the length of coverage of each of these subjects. More is devoted to