

The summer of 2020 has been one of research and writing concerning naval warfare and the U-Boat threat. This came about from a book order placed with the Naval & Military Press Ltd of Uckfield, East Sussex, United Kingdom.

The Naval & Military Press regularly offer reasonably priced sales from its vast holdings. One area of interest has been the U-Boat war and Maritime Air Warfare, especially Coastal Command. From Naval & Military Press most recent offerings I recently acquired:

- Stephen Roskill, **Churchill and the Admirals**, Pen and Sword Maritime, 2013 (paperback), 351pg.
- Patrick Beesly, **Very Special Intelligence – The Story of the Admiralty’s Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-1945**, Seaforth Publishing, 2015 (paperback), 296pg.
- Eric Wiberg, **U-Boats off Bermuda – Patrol Summaries and Merchant Ship Survivors Landed in Bermuda 1940-1944**, Fonthill, 2017, 288pg.
- Bernard Edwards, **The Decoys – a Tale of Three Atlantic Convoys 1942**, Pen & Sword Maritime, 2016, 184pg.

The key difference and perspective from several of these readings was that it was drawn primarily from the enemy’s perspective. This is quite unique for the unilingual English-speaking reader. Second, the works also provided a valuable insight into the war from the perspective of key subordinates, that is, the point of view of Captain and below. Third, the works provide an insight of the war, that is often all too sadly lacking, that is the perspective from the enemy’s point of view. Finally, the works also provide an insight into the Allies’ conduct of the war from the perspective of interservice rivalry, missed opportunities, and actions from the perspective of subordinate leaders. These men often reported and advised war leaders both for and against operations. Most notably, were the impressions of Winston Churchill as war leader from our side of the coin. There are also some useful insights from the enemy’s perspective on the same points.

A separate stand-alone review was done for Stephen Roskill’s **Churchill and the Admirals**. It is one work that should be read first in this reading list. It establishes the tone and parameters under which Churchill’s subordinates acted in what they faced in doing their jobs and their role in the war.

Patrick Beesly’s, **Very Special Intelligence – The Story of the Admiralty’s Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-1945**, Seaforth Publishing, 2015 (paperback), pp. 296 is a most interesting read. His book is an interesting confirmation of personality struggles that existed

in the Allied Command. This was especially so before the entrance of the United States as a protagonist in the war. Beesly reports “However, as World War II wore on... talented officers were casualties of either enemy action or—at senior levels becoming persona non grata with Churchill...”.¹

This is a most interesting observation, for it explains in part some of the difficulties and shifts of personalities from key portfolios at critical times throughout the war.

Information, analyses and its use were key to managing and influencing outcomes in the operational control of the Second World War, especially maritime warfare. An Achilles heel for Britain was its reliance on the importance of its maritime trade. In 1939 alone, there were upwards of 2,500 ships at sea which their lordships would state were ‘on their lawful occasions’. Additionally hundreds of foreign vessels also carried goods to various ports of the United Kingdom.²

Strategic intelligence and analyses were important at the start of the war, as well as the assessments in 1939-40 to ascertaining an accurate estimate of the Germans’ total strength. The rendering of that assessment was not without a modicum of “internal” conflict. An Assessment Committee met regularly to decide what Britain’s surface and air forces had destroyed in U-boats.

Its Director, Captain Talbot of the Anti-submarine Warfare Division, and the D.N.I. were responsible for the findings of the Committee. The committee was soon in direct conflict with the First Lord and Winston Churchill. The problem was that Churchill refused to accept their analyses of U-boats sunk and preferred to broadcast his own extremely optimistic opinion of U-boat killings. Nor would Churchill accept D.N.I.’s future growth of the U-boat fleet. In the end Godfrey and Talbot were proved right and Churchill wrong.³

That is the crux of Beesly’s story and the road taken to gain confidence in the intelligence provided. Also under scoring the main tale was a most interesting observation on personalities, for it explains in part some of the difficulties and shifts of personnel from key portfolios at critical times throughout the war.

This was especially true for Coastal Command, who had been arguing for its share of Very Long-Range Aircraft to close the mid-Atlantic Ocean Air Gap. Churchill had a strong desire for offensive action and protecting convoys did not quite fit the bill (see Review Stephen Roskill, Churchill and the Admirals).

¹ Patrick Beesly, pg. X

² Patrick Beesly, pg. 25

³ Patrick Beesly, pg. 36

Coastal Command would see its leader Air Chief Marshall Bowhill replaced and moved to Canada at a critical juncture in the war. To some the internecine war between Bomber and Coastal Command was another grave error. It stemmed from the long wrangling with the Royal Air Force about the control of maritime air, from what was a continuing twenty-year argument, where neither service had correctly thought out the true role and capabilities of aircraft in a war at sea. As Beesly put it, "...insufficient attention been given to their strategic and tactical use and to the development of suitable types of machines and of the most weapons with which to arm them."

And as a sidebar, I was pleased to read consistently throughout Beesly's work, the growing role and importance not only of civilians and women in his expanding network and organization, but also that of the role of "Paymasters". The principal contends that "There was however one class of regular officer who was by the nature of his Service training and experience, already fitted for Intelligence duties, and that was the Paymaster".⁴ A very pleasing observation to a retired "Paymaster" for it serves to illustrate the importance of all the cogs that make things go!

This was the underlying tension with which all the subordinate actors faced daily with Churchill. Beesly's work concentrates on the special naval intelligence unit which got off to a very rough start, was mistrusted by the principal actors, and whose need and purpose had to be proven time and again.

Beesly's, **Very Special Intelligence – The Story of the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-1945** is a must read for all students of combined operations who need to understand the role and importance of all the cogs of the war machine, warts and all.

Eric Wiberg, **U-Boats off Bermuda – Patrol Summaries and Merchant Ship Survivors Landed in Bermuda 1940-1944**, published by Fonthill, 2017, is the story, as one U-boat commander wryly put it, one that "he worked for the largest ship-scraping effort in world history." And it was a great endeavour that saw the Germans sink some 2,779 vessels amounting to over fourteen million gross registered tons of Allied shipping that was sent to the bottom and whose cargo never reached the shore of the United Kingdom or other vital ports.⁵

The U-boat war was one where the enemy desired to fulfill Admiral Karl Donitz's, and Hitler's, vision of control of the seas. Britain may have ruled the waves, but beneath them

⁴ Patrick Beesly, pg. 5-6

⁵ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 14

the Axis in fact, controlled the battle. Their control continued until May of 1943.⁶ Wiberg's work is a chronological account of that battle from October 1940 to April 1943.

Wiberg's principle focus concerns the major role Bermuda played in the U-Boat war off eastern North and South American shores. Bermuda was an Allied staging area that sent forth convoys, escorts, and aviators to attack or evade submarines. In the tome of this battle Bermuda welcomed over twelve hundred survivors from wrecked merchant marine, Royal Canadian Navy, and US Navy survivors and generously nurture and cared for them.⁷

Bermuda was a pivotal hub. Over 200 vessels-submarines and merchant ships were in action about this tiny Island. Some envisaged Bermuda as a rescue ship. It was a highly welcome destination and landing spot for desperate survivors.

Fifteen sailors are known to be buried at Bermuda between 1940 and 1944. But most astoundingly was that nearly 4,657 Allied sailors were thrown into the ocean by German or Italian submarine attack around Bermuda. Sadly, 1,208 (roughly a quarter) perished. The lucky ones either saw their way to Bermuda by good seamanship or luck of a passing ship. The others, the balance, were retrieved from the water by Bermuda-based aircraft.⁸

Wiberg's book provides many interesting accounts of such tales of desperation and salvation. Many were saved, and other's lost. But those saved were succored and cared for at Bermuda. It was a hard-fought battle and an outstanding effort of human kindness and care extended by this tiny Island. But loss was not only felt on the one side.

The Allies eventually gained dominance and ascendancy in maritime warfare, which began by addressing its shipping losses. Some say that the nail in the Axis' coffin was mass-production. American industrialists like Henry J. Kaiser built Liberty Ships in droves. The United States and Canada produced materiel in capacity that the Axis could never achieve.⁹ The weight of the economy, allied tactics and profusion of material was now on the Allied side. Consequently, German and Italian losses mounted.

The German and Italian stories are important. Their sacrifice began with the 143 Axis submarine patrols sent to the area. U-Boat patrols resulted in attacks on eighty Allied vessels, including one naval ship (USS Gannet). The most intense period was between

⁶ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 14

⁷ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 15

⁸ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 15

⁹ Eric Wiberg, pg. 14

January and August 1942, and the German offensives known as Operation Drumbeat (Paukenschlag) and Operation New (Neuland).¹⁰

In the end though, the U-boat branch suffered death rates which were the highest compared to any branch of German services.¹¹ To put matters into perspective, some 28,000 German U-boat crew of the total 40,900 men recruited into that service, lost their lives during the war. Another 5,000 were taken prisoners. Balanced into this ledger of losses, are the approximately 30,000 allied merchant sailors who died at the hands of the U-boat force.¹²

Interestingly Wiberg points out that the most intense period of attacks was from January to August 1942. To reach the US coast off New England, New York, the Virginia Capes, and Cape Hatteras, Bermuda was found to be the most direct route to eastern North America. It was also the route taken home on return voyages to bases mostly in France.¹³

Uncharacteristically, Wiberg's work paid considerable attention to the Royal Canadian Navy, the Battle of the Atlantic, as well as the Gulf of St Lawrence. Notably Wiberg recounted many patrols off Canadian shores and Nova Scotia in particular. It was an incredibly detailed piece of investigative research that was presented in a fair, balanced way.

Eric Wiberg, U-Boats off Bermuda – **Patrol Summaries and Merchant Ship Survivors Landed in Bermuda 1940-1944**, is a professionally written and researched account that is a worthy addition to the holdings and library of any student of Second World War Maritime history.

The final work reviewed here is Bernard Edwards, **The Decoys – a Tale of Three Atlantic Convoys 1942**, Pen & Sword Maritime, 2016. It is the tale of three convoys that were allegedly sacrificed to protect and to ensure the successful landings of Operation Torch in North Africa.

The Allied invasion of French North Africa was a compromise designed to placate the Russian dictator Stalin, who demanded the opening of a second front in 1942. That was

¹⁰ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 15-16

¹¹ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 19

¹² Naval Historical Society of Australia

Source: <https://www.navyhistory.org.au/british-and-german-submarine-statistics-of-world-war-ii/#:~:text=In%20terms%20of%20human%20lives%2C%2028%2C000%20German%20U-boat,to%20an%20unknown%20number%20of%20Allied%20naval%20personnel.>

Accessed: 30 Aug 2020

¹³ Eric Wiberg, Pg. 17

virtually impossible given the timelines and resources available, but Churchill proposed a compromise solution to take the pressure off the Russian bear, the invasion of North Africa.

Churchill proposed that the enemy's defences had to be tested. One such test was Operation Jubilee, on 19 August 1942. The German occupied port of Dieppe was an Allied attack by a force of 5,000 men of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, 1,000 British Commandos, and a minor contingent of US Forces. That attack was a miserable disaster and was used to justify that a second front in 1942 would be ill-advised.

Operation Torch was then proposed as an attack to the enemy's underbelly that would relieve pressure on Stalin. It was timed to begin at dawn on 8 November 1942. Significantly this was to be an American led operation to land in North Africa mounted from US ports. These forces had to be protected. Little evidence exists to support Edwards' contention, that three UK bound convoys were used as the bait to decoy the Kriegsmarine's attention away from the troop train bound for North Africa.

Donitz had 330 U-boats on any given day, and at least 140 were out and operational. North Atlantic convoys were poorly defended at the time. The vast area that they traversed between Newfoundland and Iceland were dangerous known passages. And then there was the "Black Pit", a void that lacked air cover, so aptly named by those who sailed through it. This Pit mid-Atlantic, was 600 miles wide, and undefended from the air¹⁴

And perhaps most interesting from a Canadian perspective was Edwards, detailed account of SC107. Uncharacteristically as often either forgotten or overlooked, was Canada's contribution in the Battle of the Atlantic. Edwards has the RCN front and centre, illustrating its daring and innovation as well as both the good and bad in the operations. More so was the attention given to the Battle of the Gulf of St Lawrence in the context of SC107.

Bernard Edwards' "**The Decoys – a Tale of Three Atlantic Convoys 1942**", is a professionally written account. He covers the trials of each convoy in depth. Although Edwards did not provide conclusive proof that these convoys were sacrificed for the wider good of Operation torch, there is little doubt that they attention paid to them, spared the huge troop train from any harm as no ships or lives were lost.

"**The Decoys – a Tale of Three Atlantic Convoys 1942**" is both a gripping and a highly recommended addition to one's personal library.

¹⁴ Bernard Edwards, , pg. xi-xiii

