



2012-013

Ed Offley, *Turning the Tide: How a Small Band of Allied Sailors Defeated the U-Boats and Won the Battle of the Atlantic*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Pp. xxviii, 478. ISBN 978-0-465-01397-5.

Review by Alan D. Zimm, The Johns Hopkins University (alan.zimm@jhuapl.edu).

How to judge something that is simultaneously rather good and very bad? You could take a statistical approach, as did the mathematician with his head in a furnace and his feet on a block of ice who concluded that he was, on average, comfortable. Or, you could follow the dictum of the US Navy nuclear power program where “one ‘ah, shit’ cancels out a thousand ‘attaboys.’” In writing history, certainly the “nuke” standard is more appropriate. A historian, like a physician, has a first responsibility to do no harm to the historical record.

Ed Offley is not a physician, certainly not a historian, and definitely not a Navy Nuke, but a journalist and self-styled “military reporting specialist” who writes for newspapers and online publications. *Turning the Tide* is his second book-length foray into the world of submarines. In his first, *Scorpion Down*,¹ he did violence to the laws of physics, acoustics, and common sense by contending a Soviet Echo-2 class submarine sank the USS *Scorpion* (SSN-589) in a peacetime underwater dogfight. One representative reviewer concluded, “*Scorpion Down* goes on to peddle out more ill-researched innuendo and second and third-hand accusations with each passing chapter, ... not to mention a number of forehead-slapping historical errors.... *Scorpion Down* isn’t just bad or merely incompetent, it’s an affront to common sense”²

In comparison, *Turning the Tide* is a better book. Though evidently writing a popular history, Offley draws extensively on primary source material—military and intelligence documents, private manuscripts, and oral history interviews—in a workmanlike account of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) at a critical stage of the Battle of the Atlantic in the spring of 1943. A great mass of information is couched in a writing style that enlivens a compelling narrative. And, too, Offley’s research yields at least one insight into the context of a strategic situation that has been overlooked for many years. His book’s 478 pages include appendices giving important information on convoys, U-boats, and escort warships, as well as helpful photographs and charts giving the chronology and location of the relevant events. Diagrams of the convoy formations are a special enhancement. Unfortunately, there are also enough gaffes, inaccuracies, fabrications, exaggerations, and interpretive errors to cause any Navy Nuke to suffer a core meltdown.

The book is an interconnected story of several convoy battles in the North Atlantic. In March 1943, the convoy escorts were too weak to fend off German U-boat “wolfpacks” that sometimes numbered above thirty vessels. Convoys that failed to escape detection suffered severely. Offley effectively illustrates the escort commander’s dilemma by following convoys SC122 and HX229, whose porous screens were repeatedly penetrated as U-boats decimated their ships. Since dedicated rescue ships were lacking and other merchant vessels refused to rescue survivors, escort ships had to be diverted to lifesaving missions. While picking up survivors, they fell far behind their convoy, further attenuating its already inadequate shield. Moreover, the outnumbered escorts could not afford the time-consuming process of prosecuting whatever contacts they made, so U-boat losses were light. Offley’s descriptions vividly evoke the frustrating decisions forced on the escort commanders.

That same month, the Western Approaches Command staff set up a fateful wargame, in which three fictive support groups reinforced threatened convoys. The game’s favorable outcome lent theoretical force to a planned request for more escorts. In a later meeting between Winston Churchill and Adm. Sir Max

1. Subtitle: *Sunk by the Soviets, Buried by the Pentagon: The Untold Story of the USS Scorpion* (NY: Basic Books, 2007).

2. Daryl Carpenter in *SUBSIM Review* – www.miwsr.com/rd/1202.htm.

Horton (Commander in Chief, Western Approaches), the prime minister asked how Horton might reduce convoy losses. He confidently replied, “Give me fifteen destroyers and we shall beat the U-boats” (215). Churchill examined the wargame results and granted Horton his requested destroyers and more, including additional very long range (VLR) patrol aircraft with centimeter-band radars. This coincided with the introduction of escort carriers, used to close the Greenland-United Kingdom gap that convoys had previously had to transit without air cover.

Offley then shifts to May 1943 and the battle of convoy ONS5, one of the first to enjoy augmented escort forces and newly-trained support groups. The results were dramatically improved: fewer U-boats pierced the screen, fewer merchant ships were lost, and enemy losses skyrocketed. The contrasting fates of the March and May convoys clarified both the problem and the solution.

All this is to the good. But despite—or because of—Offley’s experience writing *Scorpion Down*, his tale is rife with inaccurate terminology, arithmetical errors, incorrect descriptions of ships’ systems and capabilities, and serious interpretive problems.

In regard to terminology and ships’ systems: convoys were designated by a two-letter code and a number, the first letter indicating the departure port, the second the destination. “SC” convoys went from Canada to the UK. Offley would have the reader believe that “SC” stood for “slow convoy.” He improperly uses the terms “gun mount” and “turret” interchangeably. He tends to use modern or Cold War terminology and slang inappropriately to liven up the narrative, referring to “warshots” and submarines diving “into the cellar.” He depicts acoustic torpedoes homing on the ship’s wake, but wake-homing torpedoes were a 1970s development. He has escorts dropping “spreads” of depth charges, even after quoting World War II sources stating that depth charges were dropped in “patterns” while submariners fired “spreads” of torpedoes. His descriptions of hedgehog attacks leave the reader wondering if projectiles were used, or the mortar launcher itself was flung into the ocean.

ASW is a contest of sensors and detection—in this area Offley fails badly. He confuses the efficacies of active and passive detection systems, often attributing modern terminology and capabilities to Second World War systems. For example, a World War II hydrophone could give an approximate bearing to the target, plus or minus ten degrees (or more), with only a vague indication of range. But Offley asserts that it gave the submarine commander “a clear spatial awareness of the enemy’s movements against his own” (90), a stretch even for present-day systems and certainly unachievable in 1943. He uses the term “hydrophone arrays,” apparently unaware that they were a postwar innovation. He describes high frequency direction finding (HF/DF) as “radar-finding gear” (236), when in fact Allied HF/DF systems did not cover radar frequencies. He also claims that HF/DF could “pinpoint a line of bearing to a U-boat” allowing a “rapid and accurate attack” (59). With a bearing uncertainty of between five and fifteen degrees, HF/DF was a cueing system only, permitting escorts to head in the general direction of a U-boat to obtain a more precise bearing and range from other sources. He also states that catapult ships launched and recovered aircraft on “a makeshift flight deck” (241), when no such decks existed. In short, Offley has no clear grasp of the systems and processes in place during the Battle of the Atlantic.³

Regarding errors of interpretation: given a history so dependent upon an understanding of ASW technology and tactics, casual readers must rely on the author’s judgments, for example, that “this decision was brilliant” or “that decision was poor.” But Offley simply does not understand his subject well enough to make such evaluations reliably; or, he accepts others’ judgments too easily; or, he simply has not thought the problem through. Three examples will suffice.

Offley praises an escort group commander for bringing through four convoys without loss (234). But earlier (104) he writes that the Germans found only as few as one convoy in ten. Is the escort commander

3. Mistakes in arithmetic compound Offley’s difficulties with systems capabilities. E.g., he would have us believe that seven ships patrolling a twenty-one-mile perimeter were “between five and ten miles apart” from each other (xi). We are informed that a pattern of eight depth charges was delivered by four shots off K-guns and six off the stern rails. He maintains that a convoy moving at seven knots would take between thirty-six and forty-eight hours to cross the 600–800-mile wide Greenland air gap (46), while most of us would calculate that it could cover only 336 miles in forty-eight hours.

being praised for not losing ships that were never attacked? Nor does Offley verify whether the escort group had ever previously encountered opposition.

In another case, Offley discusses a message from Western Approaches Command informing the escort commander that thirty-two submarines were in his vicinity and that an attack was imminent at a certain hour from a specified direction. Offley uncritically repeats the assessment of one officer that he was “doubly impressed” by the situation awareness shown in the message. But he does not seem to notice that the attack never materialized as forecast in the message with regard to time, direction, or intensity.

In a third example, an escort commander stacks his defenses to the port side of the convoy, leaving the starboard side undefended. Offley praises this “astute move” (269). One page later, a submarine appears on the unguarded starboard side, requiring one of the poorly positioned escorts to cross ahead of the convoy directly into heavy seas that slowed it to only eight knots. Consequently, having dropped depth charges, the perilously slow destroyer suffered shock damage. Plainly, neither the commander’s disposition of his defenses nor Offley’s praise of it was warranted.

Historical gaffes abound. For example, in discussing radar, Offley writes that it “wasn’t until after the outbreak of the war that both sides realized the potential military applications of this new technology” (59), a breathtakingly silly assertion. He also believes that “beginning in late 1941, the U.S. Navy followed the British lead and organized its own code-breaking section, although for the first year it focused on Japanese naval codes” (104). In fact, OP-20-G, the US Navy’s signals intelligence and cryptanalysis group, was organized in 1922, in no way following the British lead.

The book also suffers from a certain monotony. Offley recounts many U-boat attacks in a formulaic manner. First, he describes the experience level and training of the captain and crew; then come some words on the target and its cargo; next we have targeting data such as the torpedo type, speed, and angle, likely lifted from logs and all rather meaningless absent any specific information on the location of submarines relative to convoys. If a torpedo hits, we get a description of the damage caused, the reaction of the stricken ship’s crew, the lifesaving efforts, and casualty particulars. Then, the escort’s counterattack is described. If the U-boat escapes, a gloomy postscript typically notes that it was sunk at some later time. There were seventy-seven known attacks in the ONS5 battle. Thank goodness, Offley does not detail each one. The thirty or forty he does present become mind-numbing without a full situational awareness or better explanation of the German forces’ dispositions.

Offley tries to liven up his material with human emotions. His subjects are “determined,” “frustrated,” “frantic,” or “in a bleak mood,” among other states of mind. He actually documents only one such psychological characterization. For the rest, sadly, we have to do with a blend of history and outright fabrication.

There are also good guys and bad guys, with the German staff and Grand Admiral Doenitz wearing the black hats. Doenitz, according to those who served under him, was an effective and sympathetic leader, well in touch with his men. In *Turning the Tide*, he is a little bit unhinged, variously “on the verge of hysteria,” “shrill,” “bemoaning,” or “gloomy”; in a naval message characterized as a “screed,” he “groused” to his U-boat commanders. Offley’s Doenitz is an officer totally disconnected from reality.

One other issue needs addressing: does Offley actually believe his wordy subtitle’s triumphalist claim for Allied sailors? Clearly, no. In the May 1943 battles he describes, five U-boats were sunk and the overall total for that month was thirty. It was in fact the encompassing efforts of thousands of sailors, aviators, staff officers, electronics technicians, and civilian specialists that turned the tide of the ASW war, hardly a “small band.” Now a specific convoy did indeed lead Doenitz to abandon the North Atlantic, but it was not ONS5. A subsequent convoy was so strongly protected by destroyers and carrier aircraft that German submarines simply could not breach the screen. Thus, a battle that did not happen broke the back of the U-boat offensive.

Offley in many ways duplicates the material in an earlier, better book: Michael Gannon’s *Black May*.⁴ Both works present background information on ASW weapons and tactics, both concentrate on convoys of

4. Subtitle: *The Epic Story of the Allies’ Defeat of the German U-Boats in May 1943* (NY: Dell, 1998).

March and May 1943, and both discuss the statistical aspects of the Battle of the Atlantic. In Hollywood terms, *Turning the Tide* is a remake. Gannon, in his intelligent and accurate history, provides a superb explication of ASW and the Battle of the Atlantic as a whole. By contrast, in a journalistic style that plays fast and loose with the historical record, Offley tries to convey the human drama of the battles and the tragedy of lives lost by tapping the reminiscences of some of the participants. For the general reader, Offley's approach will have its appeal, but too many errors cancel out all the "attaboys." Historians will prefer Gannon's more dependable history.