



World War II at Sea: A Global History by Craig L. Symonds.

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In *World War II at Sea*, noted naval historian Craig Symonds¹ (Naval War College) discusses “the impact of the sea services from all nations on the overall trajectory and even the outcome of the war” (xi). In particular, he aims to tell

the story of World War II at sea the way contemporaries experienced it, as a single gigantic complex story involving national leaders and strategic decision makers, fleet commanders and ship drivers, motor macs [machinist's mates], gunners, pilots, merchant seamen, and Marines as a worldwide human drama that had a disproportionate and lasting impact on the history of the world. (xii)

The book comprises five multi-chapter parts: “The European War,” on actions through the *Bismarck* episode; “The War Widens,” on Japan's initial offensives; “Watershed,” on events in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific theaters in the mid-war period; “Allied Counterattack,” on the Allies' amphibious offensives in the Mediterranean and Pacific; and “Reckoning,” on D-Day through the end of the Pacific War.

A leading theme throughout is the critical importance of maritime traffic and amphibious warfare. While this will come as no surprise to naval historians, all readers will learn valuable lessons about sea traffic and projecting power over water in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Mediterranean, as well as how the major naval campaigns impacted each other. In one chapter, for example, Symonds describes the US Navy's struggle against the Japanese around Guadalcanal in August 1942, even as the Italians and Germans were resisting a major British effort in the Mediterranean to break their blockade of Malta.

In a book of such sweeping scope, hard choices must be made and small factual errors will inevitably occur. Thus, for example, Symonds devotes twenty pages to the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but only a sentence to the great carrier raids against Formosa a week before the Leyte landings, raids that decimated Japanese air power and inflicted a defeat larger in sheer numbers than the “Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.” And, too, entire naval campaigns in the Black Sea and the Adriatic are omitted altogether. Baltic Sea operations in 1941–42 and 1944–45 get sentences, not paragraphs, and the Canadian navy, the world's third largest by 1945, is barely mentioned.

Symonds writes with a fluency and dramatic verve that will keep readers turning pages. Typical is his description of naval gunfire support for the landings at Salerno in 1943:

The 88s² were a problem at the northern beach, too. Royal Navy Commodore Geoffrey Oliver, whom Cunningham characterized as “calm, imperturbable, and completely optimistic,” sent the destroyers *Laforey*, *Loyal*, *Tartar*, and *Nubian* shoreward to take them on. The *Nubian* repulsed one

1. His earlier work includes *The Battle of Midway* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011) and *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe and the D-Day Landings* (id., 2014).

2. I.e., German 88mm artillery guns.

German tank attack almost single-handedly. Several smaller *Hunt*-class destroyers also joined the fight, and even Admiral Conolly got into the act.... Noting a particularly active German artillery position, and unable to raise the destroyers on the radio, Conolly ordered his command ship, the USS *Biscayne*, which had two 5-inch guns, to close on the beach and take it under fire. That earned him the nickname "Close-in-Conolly," a moniker that followed him for the rest of his life. (456)

Another strength of his book is Symonds's explanations of key, yet not obvious, causal connections. For instance, he points out that the Germans' pressure on Italy to use capital ships in the traffic war in March 1941 was influenced by their own success that winter in the North Atlantic, when *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* raided British shipping.

Symonds is less accurate in his treatment of the Mediterranean war, which suffers from errors of fact and oversimplifications. For example, he writes that "In October 1941, fewer than half the ships that set out from Italy with supplies for Rommel's Afrika Korps reached their destination" (242), when, in fact, twenty-one of twenty-eight ships reached Africa. He is likely thinking of November, when only sixteen of thirty-seven ships made it through. He also states that Italian frogmen blew up *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant* and "sent both ships to the bottom" (*ibid.*), though neither of the severely damaged vessels actually sank. Nor did the MW-10 convoy have to "contend with the twenty-three U-boats that OKW had sent to the Mediterranean" (*ibid.*). By the time this convoy sailed, nine of the twenty-eight submarines Germany deployed had been sunk. Recounting the Second Battle of Sirte, the author asserts that "the Italian heavy ships had damaged all *three* [read *two*] of Vian's five cruisers and *six* [read *five*] of his twelve destroyers" (243; my emphasis). We also read that "While the battle was in progress, German bombers from Sicily attacked the fleeing transports, sinking one of the cargo ships and crippling the tanker so badly it had to be beached" (*ibid.*), but all the damage inflicted on the convoy during the battle happened *the next day*.

Symonds does at least get the large things right even in the Mediterranean. His account of the Second Battle of Sirte, for example, overthrows the conventional wisdom that it was "one of the most brilliant actions of the war, if not the most brilliant."³ Symonds, with his global perspective, dryly states that "Though the engagement could hardly be considered a victory, Churchill sent Vian his congratulations" (243).

Though containing some factual errors and inevitable simplifications, *World War II at Sea* is a welcome new study of a subject much neglected in the past sixty years.⁴ Craig Symonds tells a big story and tells it well, highlighting the global character of the conflict at sea that helped shaped the outcome of the Second World War.

3. Adm. Andrew Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951) 454.

4. I.e., since E.B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz, eds., *The Great Sea War: The Story of Naval Action in World War II* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960).