



*Decision in the Atlantic: The Allies and the Longest Campaign of the Second World War* ed. Marcus Faulkner and Christopher M. Bell.

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In his history of the Second World War, Winston Churchill famously asserted, “The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril.”<sup>1</sup> He also dubbed that conflict at sea the “Battle of the Atlantic,” which he considered

the dominating factor all through the war. Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea, or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome, and amid all other cares we viewed its changing fortunes day by day with hope or apprehension.<sup>2</sup>

In their new anthology of essays, editors Marcus Faulkner (King’s College London) and Christopher Bell (Dalhousie Univ.) and seven other historians seek to show that Churchill’s characterizations of the struggle have distorted and overly simplified what was “actually a protracted campaign—the longest of the Second World War” (1). It involved relatively little actual fighting, extended far beyond the Atlantic Ocean, and required a multi-dimensional Allied response. While the Allies’ efforts turned the corner in spring 1943, the threat from Nazi Germany’s submarines lasted until the end of the war.

In the first of the anthology’s ten chapters, Marc Milner (Univ. of New Brunswick) surveys the Allies’ campaign against the U-boats within the wider context of the war. He argues that, while the Allies’ sudden mastery over the submarine in May 1943 was a pivotal moment, it did not end the U-boat menace. He further maintains that the Allied victory depended on *avoiding* the U-boats, not engaging them in actual combat, because it “was the trade defense *system* that mattered in the North Atlantic, not the drama of battle” (9).

In chap. 2, editor Christopher Bell analyzes British grand strategy and Churchill’s role in the Battle of the Atlantic. As with many of Churchill’s wartime actions, it is not easy to discern his exact role and specific decisions regarding the effort to defeat the U-boats. While he was concerned about losses in the Atlantic, particularly in early 1941 and late 1942, he was willing to sustain them in order to achieve other objectives, like strategic bombing of Germany or the invasion of North Africa in late 1942. Churchill focused on offensive operations rather than such defensive actions as successfully convoying merchant ships to England. As Bell puts it, “Churchill’s commitment in 1942 to a grand strategy that favored strategic bombing over trade protection was both reckless and misguided” (44). Even so, he supported the request for long-range aircraft to provide aerial cover for ships and convoys, thereby ensuring Allied mastery over the U-boats in 1943.

Chapter 3, by Kevin Smith (Ball State Univ.), concerns the role of Great Britain’s naval repair yards in dealing with the effects of damage German submarines inflicted on British shipping.

1. *The Second World War*, vol. 2: *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1949) 529.

2. Churchill, vol. 5: *Closing the Ring* (1951) 6.

Through a detailed statistical review, he proves that merchant-ship carrying capacity was more adversely affected by ships awaiting repair or being repaired than by U-boat attacks in 1939–41. He also demonstrates that conflicts with trade unions so impeded the repair of damaged vessels that Britain had to rely on the United States for necessary shipping capacity from 1941 onwards.

In chap. 4, Tim Benbow (King's College London) examines inter-service clashes: "The period from 1940 to early 1943 saw bitter disputes between the Admiralty and the Air Ministry over the provision of air support for the Battle of the Atlantic" (123). The Royal Navy needed—and requested—air support to protect ships in the North Atlantic. However, the RAF, wedded to the interwar view that air power alone could win the war, steadfastly refused to allocate bombers for the fight against U-boats: the "superimposition of a narrow and dogmatic fixation on strategic bombing as the way to win the war meant that the Air Staff was in effect declining to provide the air power that the other services ... needed, on the grounds that the RAF had better things to do with it" (123). This changed only when it became clear that air power alone could not in fact win the war.

In chap. 5, Ben Jones (Univ. of Portsmouth) considers the role of the Fleet Air Arm in neutralizing German surface raiders, aircraft, and submarines. The need for aircraft carriers to support convoys became apparent early on. But, rather than accept such temporary measures as retrofitting merchant vessels to carry aircraft, the Royal Navy insisted on waiting for proper escort carriers to be built. When enough escort carriers finally became available in mid-1943, high demand meant they were often diverted to other operations, forcing the Admiralty to juggle competing calls on the Fleet Air Arm in meeting the submarine threat.

In chap. 6, James Goldrick (Univ. of New South Wales and Australian National Univ.) analyzes the use of mixed-ship escort groups in defending convoys and conducting anti-submarine warfare. He clarifies the nature of specialized groups—specifically, their operations, command and control, tactics, training, and responses to Germany's move toward shallow-water operations in the run-up to the invasion of Europe. Goldrick credits Allied victories at sea to "a sophisticated learning and training system to prepare ships and men for the [anti-submarine] war" (167).

In chap. 7, co-editor Marcus Faulkner asks two key questions about the Royal Navy's reaction to the potential threat posed by German aircraft carriers. First, what and how did Britain know about the German Navy's efforts to develop aircraft carriers? Second, how did the Admiralty's perception of those efforts before and during the war influence Britain's strategic plans and fleet deployments? Though Nazi Germany never possessed operational aircraft carriers, the Admiralty took the risk of such ships seriously until virtually the end of the war, based on available, incomplete, and misleading information. Faulkner seeks to fill "an existing gap concerning the Admiralty's view of German aircraft carriers and [contribute] to understanding the complexity of the maritime threat Britain faced during the war" (170).

In chap. 8, Kevin Smith builds on his argument in chap. 3, with a focus on the politics involved in Britain's need for US meat imports in winter 1942–43. He spotlights the little-known Claude Wickard, the American secretary of agriculture at the time. President Franklin Roosevelt promised to meet Britain's need for refrigerated shipping to transport meat across the Atlantic. However, while professing agreement with the administration's globalist goals, Wickard "slow-walked" compliance, ensuring that US frozen meat exports to England fell woefully short of promised levels. Smith concludes that

the meat export crisis of 1942–43 provides another lens for situating military and maritime history in the broader context of international history and the national histories of Britain and the United States. The U.S. became the dominant power in the alliance during the war, but struggled to adapt to its new global role. Claude Wickard illustrates this transition. (223–24)

In chap. 9, G.H. Bennett (Univ. of Plymouth) discusses the Royal Navy's success against Germany's *Schnellboote* (S-boats). Beginning with the Reich's conquest of France, the S-boat seemed to pose a major threat to British shipping in the Channel. Coastal shipping provided critical local distribution of goods from major ports to secondary harbors. Better weapon systems on better ships had to be developed to counter the fast-moving S-boats. British tactics were revised to take the fight to their home bases. The S-boats countered with new developments, including the use of radar, greater cooperation with the *Luftwaffe*, up-armorings and up-gunning. These moves and counter-moves culminated in a series of clashes between British Coastal Command ships and S-boats in late 1943. They caused minimal losses to British ships and convoys, but eroded the operational strength of S-boats. By 1944, they were no longer the offensive weapon they once were.

Historians have failed to recognize the significance of the coastal convoy battles of late 1943 as a key moment in the winning of the Atlantic campaign. Getting the convoys across the Atlantic was one thing—getting their cargo to the point of use frequently required transit through another stretch of dangerous waters. (251)

Finally, in chap. 10, David Kohnen (US Naval War College) examines how Allied intelligence tracked the U-188's combat patrols in the Indian Ocean and the negotiations between British and American intelligence personnel to conceal their decipherment of the *Kriegsmarine's* codes. After the submarine's return to France, Anglo-American special operations collaborated with Free French forces who captured U-188's captain and the valuable documents he carried (26 June 1944). The whole episode "illustrates the strategic bankruptcy of the German submarine operations on the grandest scale" (285–86).

Faulkner and Bell have fully succeeded in their efforts "to highlight the complexity of the Battle of the Atlantic by reassessing its place within Allied grand strategy and by examining some of its lesser-known aspects" (4). Thanks to the contributions of nine leading historians of the Allied fight against Germany's U-boats, *Decision in the Atlantic* offers a valuable, well-researched, and compelling new evaluation of all that was required to defeat the German submarine menace and win a critical victory in World War II.