

Author's Perspective

VINCENT P. O'HARA

The U.S. Navy Against the Axis: Surface Combat, 1941-1945 relates the surface fleet's role in securing America's extraordinary success in World War II. The book provides a detailed synopsis of the forty-two major surface actions the U.S. Navy fought against the Japanese, the French, and the Germans and the context of these actions within the naval war.

The story of how the book came to be written is relevant to its format and content. It began, more than ten years ago, as an accumulation of specific details about naval surface actions. I was fascinated by the mechanics of naval combat and wanted to explore ways to model reality through accurate simulations. For this purpose, details such as expected percentage of hits at given ranges, or the probability of a shell detonating seemed important. It was easy enough to read accounts of famous actions like the Bismarck chase, the Battle of Savo Island, or Leyte Gulf, but I believed that for a model to be accurate, it needed to include data from every action, regardless of its fame or consequences. However, when I first began seriously researching the subject of naval surface combat I was surprised how little information – at least of the type I sought – was readily available. Thus, I began a systematic quest to identify and describe every naval surface action fought during the war.

One of the first things I realized was that I needed to establish parameters of what a naval battle was. Here is the definition of a naval surface engagement that I used in my previous work, *The German Fleet at War, 1939-1945*: "...an encounter between purpose-built surface warships displacing at least 500 tons full load where torpedoes and/or gunfire were exchanged."¹ This definition excludes the hundreds of actions involving MTBs, armed trawlers, armed merchant cruisers, and raiders. Within its parameters I count 163 surface engagements that occurred during World War II.

My search led, like many searches do, to unexpected discoveries and the growing conviction that much history written after the Second World War has inaccurately discounted the contributions of the surface fleets of all nations, dismissing gun- and torpedo-armed warships as relics of an outdated technology and a bygone era.

I have never understood how the Pacific War, in particular, could be considered principally a carrier war. For example: "These great carrier

battles, in which the rival Japanese and American fleets never saw each other and in which battleships became little more than embarrassing encumbrances, settled the outcome of the naval war in the Pacific.”² To question the accuracy of this depiction is not to discount the importance of the five great carrier battles that did occur. While one could more easily argue that the resources and industrial capacity of the United States settled the outcome of the naval war in the Pacific before it ever began, in fact, the war had to be fought before it could be won and critical to that victory were the contributions of the surface ships, even the dinosaur battleships, in their originally intended role as surface combatants. *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis* is replete with examples, but my favorites come from the Philippine campaign, after the last great carrier battle and at a time when both U.S. carrier and ground-based airpower was at its height and U.S. submarines were rampaging practically unhindered along Japan’s vital sea lanes.

Submarines and carrier airpower punished the Japanese strike forces headed for Leyte Gulf in October 1944, but could not deflect either one. Ultimately, surface warships had to face surface warships in the climactic naval battle of the war. This impressed both the Army and Navy. In January 1945 when Nimitz tried to withdraw the old battleships from the Seventh Fleet, MacArthur successfully petitioned to keep them because, as he saw at Leyte, airpower and submarine power could not be trusted to protect his amphibious forces from the Japanese battleships that still survived. In March 1945 the U.S. Navy itself concluded: “Actions covering this period illustrate most perfectly the potency of air power. On the other hand, they also illustrate the inadequacy of air power against armored and well armed units unless the attacks be unremitting...The afternoon attacks of 24 October should have prevented the enemy from coming out thorough San Bernardino Straits but they did not prevent this...On the other hand, our own surface vessels made short work of the enemy fleet attempting to enter Southern Leyte Gulf and we sustained very little damage in this action. It would therefore seem that, whenever possible, use should be made of our armored ships to sink enemy armored ships.”³

The U.S. Navy Against the Axis contains other subthemes. It documents the importance of accurately assessing intelligence to formulate realistic doctrine and plans. It illustrates the evolving impact of technology, like radar. Surface combat was unlike land and aerial warfare in that it was relatively rare, usually sudden, and often unexpected, and few men had the opportunity to become practiced at it. The fact that the rapidly expanding U.S. Navy became so effective that even destroyer escorts could stand off heavy cruisers points to the success of the process the Navy developed for training and fighting on the surface.

A final comment about the nature of surface combat illustrated in both

the *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis* and *The German Fleet at War* has to do with technology. The vast majority of both admirals and the general population considered large surface warships, as epitomized by the battleship and the large naval rifle, to be the supreme and most powerful weapon systems of their day. Navies developed sophisticated computing machines to ensure that ships could hit another ship at ranges of over ten miles, and elaborate systems to protect ships from enemy gunfire. Certain expectations about the effectiveness of these expensive weapon systems became gospel. As Samuel Eliot Morison expressed it: “Before World War II, most strategists thought that gun and torpedo fire had been developed to such a point that naval battles would be decided in a few minutes, at the end of which one side would either be annihilated or so crippled that it could fight no more.”⁴

Of course, this was not the case. Long range accuracy proved far more problematic than expected and in many battles the majority of the few hits obtained were duds. Torpedoes, at least U.S. torpedoes, were not deadly and even the infamous Japanese Long Lance had problems. In other words, weapons did not function the way they were designed to and this forced the Navy to embark upon a deadly, but ultimately effective process of evolution. The story of the Navy’s successful ability to adapt under pressure holds lessons relevant to today’s and tomorrow’s combat environments.

My publisher, Naval Institute Press, allowed me to deliver manuscripts of unconventional layout and to populate them with large numbers of tables, charts, and graphs. I was very conscious of length limitations, but when I exceeded the contracted word count in the second book, this presented no problem. The staff, particularly my editor, Thomas Cutler, were uniformly supportive and responsive. Naval Institute changed the title of both books, however. *The German Fleet at War* was originally entitled *Beyond Bismarck*, an allusion to the fact that there was much more to the German surface fleet than the *Bismarck*. I submitted *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis* under the title, *American Fleet at War*. One chapter covers U.S. actions against the French, and France was never a member of the Axis.

The German Fleet at War has received very favorable reviews. The biggest criticism has been that it did not employ German primary sources. While this is true, the book was never intended to be a work of original scholarship. It was designed to collect and bring together a consistent set of information about German naval surface actions that existed nowhere else. In the process, however, the book grew in unexpected directions, becoming a testimony to the surface fleet’s importance in the German war effort. I had the embryonic draft of *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis* before I ever started *The German Fleet at War*. However, when I set down to produce a publishable manuscript I realized that I had be-

come more ambitious and it would be necessary to start afresh.

For *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis* I was able to make extensive use of U.S. primary sources, thanks to the wonderful cooperation of the staff at NARA who faithfully, accurately, and speedily fulfilled my regular orders for materials. Internet websites like Hyperwar provided a valuable resource. The San Diego State University library likewise proved an unexpectedly rich font of information, holding the complete *Senshi Soshō*, the Japanese monographs, and U.S. material such as the U.S. Command Summary, Running Estimate and Summary for the Pacific Fleet (the “Grey Book”). I was lucky to find a capable translator, a native Japanese speaker who was a former student of Alvin Coox.

The U.S. Navy Against the Axis provides a complete record of surface combat undertaken by the U.S. Navy (and the Japanese Navy, of course). It gives a unique, even iconoclastic picture of the naval war that has been neglected by historians. It stands with *The German Fleet at War* to provide a unique World War II reference.

Notes

¹Vincent P. O’Hara, *The German Fleet at War, 1939-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), p. viii. This was the author’s first book in a set of volumes which will analyze every surface action fought by every nation during the World War II period, down to the destroyer action between Peru and Ecuador during their brief 1941 conflict.

²Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 322.

³United States Navy, *Battle Experience: Battle of Leyte Gulf, March 1945*, p. 97.

⁴Quoted in Vincent P. O’Hara, *The U.S. Navy Against the Axis: Surface Combat, 1941-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), p. 3.

VINCENT P. O’HARA is a naval historian whose research focuses on the Second World War. His work has been featured in numerous periodicals and annuals including *Warship*, *MHQ*, *Storia Militare*, and *World War II*. He is currently working on a companion volume to his U.S. and German books about the surface battles of the Italian Navy.