

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 2 Number 3

December 2003

Curtis L. Nelson *Hunters in the Shallows: A History of the PT Boat*. Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2003. Paperback, 242 pp. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Gregory Weeks

The International University

Vienna, Austria

This is an unchanged paperback edition of the 1998 hardcover *Hunters in the Shallows*. The original book was based on a term paper that the author, Curtis L. Nelson, wrote as a graduate student in Naval Warfare Studies at American Military University in Manassas Park, Virginia, in 1995, and later expanded.

As the author correctly states in his Epilogue, the “PT boat is something of an anomaly in American naval history” (p. 203), and this is certainly proven by the examples he gives regarding PT boat planning and deployment in his book.

Nelson begins with the exploits of Lieutenant William Barker Cushing, USN, the first naval officer to use a spar-torpedo rigged to a picket boat to attack an enemy warship, the CSS *Abermarle*, on the night of October 27, 1864. Nelson makes a case for Cushing as the father of the modern PT boat. Unfortunately, following this interesting start, Nelson allows himself to be drawn away from the history of Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) to the development of the torpedo. Chapter Two “The Ship Killer” about torpedo development, although interesting as a side note, adds little to the depth of the PT boat story that Nelson is trying to tell. The torpedo information would have been better distributed throughout the other chapters as it specifically related to PT boats. As a result of this focus shift in Chapter Two and the poor placement of information in other

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 2 Number 3

December 2003

chapters, *Hunters in the Shallows* is fact heavy and sometimes disjointed, making it difficult to read. This is unfortunate since the book does contain a great deal of information, and it is clear that the author has an immense knowledge of his subject.

The truly interesting portion of the book begins with Chapter Three “They were Ignorable” about the development of the motor torpedo boat in the 20th century. It should be stressed here that the post-WW I period and the role of Secretary of the Navy Charles Edison, the son of inventor Thomas Edison, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, are well-described and well-supported by the evidence Nelson uses. In fact, Nelson does a commendable job outlining the development of MTBs before, during and after WW I, but once again allows himself to be steered off track in his characterization of the role of Douglas MacArthur in PT development prior to the outbreak of WW II in Chapter Six “To the Firing Line.”

In general, the discussion of MacArthur’s role in the development of the PT seems like a lot of wasted paper since, in the end, the decisions regarding PT boats were made by the Navy and not by the Army. MacArthur’s role may have been more to encourage the Navy since the naval authorities believed that the money the Philippines were willing to dole out for the purchase of PTs would help to fund the Navy’s own experimental PT boat program. Again, this information would have been better shortened in order to keep the main focus on MTBs and PTs.

Certainly, MacArthur did play a major role in making the PT boat famous with his decision to leave the Philippines using a PT boat captained by Lt. Commander John D. Bulkeley, USN, in 1942. However, the author goes a bit too far when he theorizes that it was MacArthur’s claustrophobia that prompted him to favor the PT as his preferred means of leaving Corregidor. Although this tidbit speaks for the author’s attention to detail, the conjecture is neither relevant to the history of the PT nor for that matter to the

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 2 Number 3

December 2003

history of the use of PT boats in WW II and would have been better relegated to an endnote.

In conclusion, Nelson sees PT boats as “weapons of opportunity” (p. 160) but notes that in many cases, the opportunity to use them often never came about. PTs in Nelson’s view may be described as more of a nuisance than a lethal weapon since they often served their major purpose by “rendering the transport of supplies and men exceptionally difficult” rather than by actually destroying enemy ships“ (p. 161). Perhaps the term “mosquito boat” more adequately fits this definition of the PT.

Despite its flaws, *Hunters in the Shallows* adds greatly to our knowledge of small attack craft, especially for the period prior to WW II, and is an important work for anyone interested in PT boats. It has a useful name and subject index and is illustrated with black and white photographs throughout.