

## International Journal of Naval History

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April 2006

Volume 5 Number 1

Vincent P. O'Hara. *The German Fleet at War: 1939-1945*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004. Appendices. Notes. Index. Pp. 308.

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*The German Fleet at War: 1939-1945* is a synopsis of sixty-nine surface engagements between Axis and Allied warships. The chapters cover the German Navy's engagements (and one Romanian Navy engagement) by time and region. Each chapter contains a summary of the naval situation and a large-area map of the region and the general location of each engagement. The scope of engagements covered is somewhat arbitrary since Mr. O'Hara defines a large surface combatant as one having greater than 500-ton displacement. He further limits the coverage to battles between "purpose-built" warships so that merchant ships configured as raiders and auxiliary cruisers can be eliminated. The definitions, however, seem more suited to limit the size of the book than to describe the actions of "large" surface combatants.

A short summary of the meteorological conditions (where available) and the missions of the opposing forces also accompany the details of each engagement. A separate table lists participants, basic armament, and damage sustained. Although the book's strength lies in the coverage of dozens of lesser known battles and engagements in a single volume, that coverage is inconsistent when it comes to complex engagements. Some sections have a small-area map showing ship maneuvers while others lack maps that are available from a number of sources. Thus, the reader requires a secondary source to track and understand some of the more complicated engagements in the book. Some of the maps provided have errors, for example, listing battles after D-Day on a map of northern France that occurred and are covered later in a chapter on the Mediterranean. Another map omits the location of a battle in the Black Sea.

Although each chapter opens with a short summary of the naval situation in the area at the time, the rest of the chapter is divided by individual battles. However, changes in the strategic situation and battles that do not meet the author's definitions are interspersed within the accounts of the named battles. The reader would be better served if the author had described developments outside the scope of the principal battles in separate sub-chapters that provide changes in the strategic picture.

Overall, coverage of the battles is uneven. Although some lack of information can be attributed to the destruction of the ships, personnel, or associated documents, the participant data in the tables are still incomplete in several cases. The tables also fail to list the participants in a consistent fashion. At times, ships that don't meet the Mr. O'Hara's definition of "large" or "purpose built" are listed in the table and sometimes they are omitted. As such, the loss of the heavy cruiser *Blücher* during the invasion of Norway is dealt with in passing, but a later battle in the Black Sea between the Romanian and Soviet navies is given the full treatment when the only German participants were two shore batteries. Furthermore, inclusion of the Romanian Navy without mentioning the Italian Navy until its surrender in 1943 ignores a major player in the Mediterranean theater. These discrepancies and omissions reinforce the notion that the definitions serve mainly to limit the scope of the book.

The bibliography is limited to primary U.S. and U.K. archival sources despite the availability of original and selected translations of German war diaries and other records in the archives at the U.S. Navy's Naval Historical Center or the National Archives and Records Administration. Books and articles written by German participants are listed as secondary sources even though these accounts are arguably primary sources as well as the principal sources of information on several battles.

The appendices, while helpful, suffer from several shortcomings. Not all sources used in the appendices appear in the bibliography. For example, the source for German naval command organization throughout the war is not cited. The list of U.S. Navy rank equivalents to the German Navy is dated 1937, disregarding wartime changes to U.S. rank structure that created the rank of fleet admiral that could be equated to the German rank of Grossadmiral. Careful review also revealed that some of the definitions of the damage in the appendix are inconsistent with the damage notations and descriptions in the text. The appendices also describe in

general terms the input to the “gun factor” formula, which is used in the tables throughout the book to show relative firepower between platforms. However, the actual formula and source for it would have made the tables more credible.

Poor proofreading or editing often detract from the integrity of the book. Translations are suspect since the German *Torpedoboote Ausländisch* is rendered as “ex-enemy torpedo boat,” vice the more accurate “foreign torpedo boat,” to describe ships that the German Navy had taken over from the French and Italian navies. In another example, German ships departing western France are described as sweeping eastward towards the open Atlantic. In at least one battle description, the headings described in the text do not match the tracks on maps for the same parts of the action. Finally, although the book contains a gallery of photographs in the center of the book, the captions appear to be written for photos placed inline with the text, making for some very awkward descriptions.

Despite its flaws, *The German Fleet at War* was enjoyable and informative to read, if limited in its utility as a scholarly source or an authoritative analysis of the German surface fleet. The competition for resources between the U-boat arm and surface fleet, between the navy and air force, and between the navy and army played a significant role that limited the effectiveness of the German surface fleet. These factors were equally as critical to the outcome of individual battles in the final analysis but the author does not develop the impact of these forces on the German fleet. With some corrections and clarifications a future edition of *The German Fleet at War* will make an excellent primer on tactical German surface operations from the Allied point of view.



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