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David Fairbank White, *Bitter Ocean: The Battle of the Atlantic, 1939-1945*, Simon & Schuster, 2006. 350 pp. maps, illustrations, notes, appendices, bibliography, index.

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The Battle of the Atlantic – pitting German U-boats against Allied seaborne supply lines - has often been called the longest-lasting battle of World War II. It began on the first day of the war, in September 1939, and ended only with the German surrender in May 1945. In the course of those six years, as David Fairbank White explains, more than 36,000 Allied service men and women died on the Atlantic, in the air above it, or on associated installations ashore. Almost as many merchant sailors were lost, their vessels sunk beneath them, as well as some 33,000 German submariners. It was a bitter ocean, indeed, and a costly victory for the Allies. But, White argues, it was a necessary victory, for the whole of the war in Europe hinged on the supplies ferried across the Atlantic from the New World to sustain first Britain and then also the Soviet Union. Finally, it was those supplies that made possible the Allied landings in North Africa, Italy and France, and the ultimate defeat of Nazism in the heart of Germany itself.

None of this is new, of course, and the literature on the Battle of the Atlantic is vast; White has entered a field already well-developed. There are classic overviews from the likes of Samuel Eliot Morison and Stephen Roskill; stirring accounts by and about participants on all sides; specialized monographs on scientific and technological developments, on all types of vessels, on the merchant mariners and their fleets, on industrial production, and on the air war, as well as studies of Allied and Axis military and political leaders. White has consulted an impressive number of these, in addition delving into archival sources (mostly in Britain and Germany), and conducting interviews with participants and historians in Germany, Britain and the United States.

Using this preparation, White has set himself an ambitiously broad task. In roughly 350 pages he attempts to convey the campaign in its entirety. Naturally, this leaves little room for more than a fleeting mention of most of the topics. Indeed, the book has something of a will-o-the-wisp about it, alighting now here, now there, stopping briefly - usually to describe in colorful terms some particularly gripping convoy action - and then moving on. The result is a romp through the battle that touches on many, perhaps most, of the important issues. Those reading of these things for the first time stand to gain an appreciation for the complexity of the battle and a sense of the ebb and flow of fortunes mirroring the ups and downs of new or improved weapons, technologies,

intelligence sources, vessels, aircraft, tactics and training. The notes, mostly in bibliographic narrative form, are a useful introduction to the subject. However, anyone already familiar with the battle, and seeking a deeper understanding of it, may well be frustrated for, other than some interviews, there is little new here.

The book is divided into three main parts: the first covers September 1939 to the summer of 1941 as Britain and Canada struggled alone against the U-boats; the second brings the U.S. Navy into the fray, with the U-boats still holding the upper hand; and the third considers the rapid decline in German fortunes as the Allies' multifaceted efforts finally come together from May 1943 onwards.

White is at his best when considering the big picture, for example when he notes that "On any given day four or five convoys were in motion on the sea, heading for Britain or returning to America" (p. 60). Then, in a couple of pages, he succinctly describes the nature and composition of convoys and the complexity of controlling and directing them. At other times, White displays a journalist's eye for the telling detail, as when, after a section on the background, construction, and use of Liberty ships, he gives meaning to 2,708 – the total number built - by explaining that they came off the ways so fast it was hard to find names for them. Another strength of White's approach is his perspective. He moves easily among British, American, and German sources, enlivening his tale with first person accounts and insights from both the Axis and the Allied points of view.

Although White's use of language sometimes helps to convey atmosphere and immediacy, this reader found his excessive fondness for multiple adjectives ("the void , vacant, cold, shifting sea," p.222), his repetition of colorful descriptions (the convoy system was "groaning and sagging" on p.174 and then "groaned, sagged and creaked" on p.177), and his generally flowery prose (88mm deck guns looked as though they were "conceived by Moloch," p.176) so annoying that it made reading this book a chore. It is, in the end, a journalist's overview couched in a novelist's language based on a solid foundation of research.



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