

Review Essay

Reassessing U-Boats and Convoys

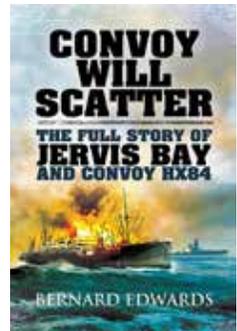
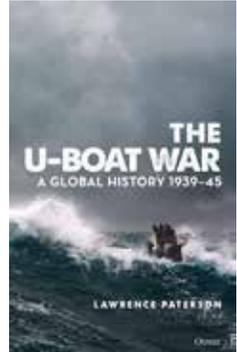
Fraser McKee

Lawrence Paterson. *The U-boat War. A Global History 1935-45.* Oxford, UK; Osprey Publishing, www.bloomsbury.com, 2022. 336 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. UK £25.00, US \$35.00, CDN \$47:00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-4726-4825-3.

Bernard Edwards. *Convoy Will Scatter. The Full Story of Jervis Bay and Convoy HX84.* Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword Books, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2013. 184 pp., illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. U.K. £19.99, US \$39.95, cloth: ISBN 978-1-78159-376-9.

With the plethora of books available on the Battle of the Atlantic and on German wartime U-boats, it would be reasonable to ask, why more of the same? Particularly in that Edwards' book was first issued some ten years ago. But after receiving Paterson's *The U-Boat War* to review and then acquiring a new printing (not a reprint, evidently) of Edwards' book about *Jervis Bay's* loss, I decided to re-read the second in light of the tone and implications raised in Paterson's more recent assessment of the same war.

In his book, Edwards has made a well-argued assessment that, in the long run, Admiral Doenitz's U-boat arm really never had an obvious or continuing chance of winning the "U-boat tonnage war." His is a wide-ranging re-examination of that back-and-forth struggle from the German perspective, rather than the usual assessment of Allied attacking ships based on aircraft reports and memories. Meanwhile, Paterson continues the emphasis on the diaries meticulously kept in Doenitz's headquarters, augmented by the *Kriegstagebuchs* (boat logbooks), personal reports and diaries of U-boat commanders and others. This provides a valuable and largely different view of



the submarine war.

With probably 1000 books in hand on the U-boat war of 1939-45, those of us with an interest in these subjects could reasonably cry, "Hold, enough!" Nonetheless, this excellently researched and written book is well worth its place on those shelves. Paterson has written several books on isolated aspects of the U-boat war and worked for the Royal Navy's (RN) submarine archives at Portsmouth, UK. Here he looks more closely into that vital struggle between Doenitz's growing fleet of increasingly valuable U-boats, concentrating on Germany's perceptions and its supervisory assessments, rather than earlier Allied views regarding their struggle to defeat the U-boats. Even after the war, in his histories, Winston Churchill said "The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."¹ After carefully looking through German records, particularly U-boat headquarters commentaries during the period and Doenitz's own biographies, Paterson justifies the assumption that the final outcome should indeed have never been in doubt. Like so many others on the subject, Paterson gives brief examples of when the Allies, in particular the Admiralty and those escorting early embattled convoys across the north and mid-Atlantic, had justifiable serious doubts of the final outcome. Yet, in retrospect, victory was always crystal clear. It was only a matter of time before American ship-building and concentration on support facilities ensured the Allies would eventually succeed.

Fewer than twenty percent of North Atlantic convoys were ever seriously attacked, either by U-boats or the German *Luftwaffe*. It just seemed like a constant battle. Doenitz, as the head of the U-boat arm, and his early superior, Admiral Raeder, had told Hitler in 1939 that the minimum requirement for a war-in-the-planning was 100 boats at the outset of such an enterprise. In September 1939, Germany had thirty-six, including training boats, those under alongside repair, and those in transit. Time and again Paterson quotes from the U-boat archives detailing shortages in even essential supplies like engine and periscope parts and construction schedules falling slightly and then more vitally behind mid-war forecasts as the air war swung in the Allies favour. Like the Allies, particularly the USN, German torpedoes suffered early failures. Even reliable boat commanders, such as Otto Kretschmer, could fire five torpedoes at a target, with all of them missing (presumably under) or failing to detonate if they did hit. A point continually made is the lack of almost any co-operation between Doenitz and the *Luftwaffe*'s commandant, General Goering and his staff. Goering's squadrons were assigned to ocean patrols, with too few suitable aircraft, and evaluated for the shipping tonnage they sunk by air

1 Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, vol II: Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 529.

attack, rather than cooperative scouting in support of the often much more successful U-boat arm. What the latter should have had access to were long range target locations, even movement, which could not be determined from the ocean-level perspective of the U-boats' conning towers. Hitler, as well, was constantly distracted by his land forces and sometimes his air warfare concentration. He directed U-boats away from the Atlantic battle to support the attack on Norway, the Italian debacle in the Mediterranean, and supply trips to their ally, Japan, and elsewhere. Reading Paterson, one gets the impression that 50 percent of Doenitz's problems were caused by his own side, not his nominal enemy.

The second book reviewed offers a closer look at the valiant fight by the modestly armed ex-liner *Jervis Bay* in November 1940, where it was the only armed escort for the thirty-seven-ship HX-84 convoy. When *Jervis Bay* was confronted by the German armoured ship, *Admiral Scheer*, Edwards, like Paterson, describes the shortcomings of German operations, namely shortages of heavily gunned armoured ships. While recounting the story of the valiant battle and sinking of *Jervis Bay* as well as the Victoria Cross awarded posthumously to its commander, Captain E.S.F. Fegen, Edwards also re-emphasizes the role played by a convoy ship, the Canadian Pacific freighter, *Beaverford*. This vessel turned to challenge the attacking Germans and was also sunk with the loss of its entire crew. Until Edward's version appeared, that part of the story rarely got more than a passing mention. Despite being ordered to disperse or scatter with the rest of the convoy, *Beaverford* turned back to face *Admiral Scheer*'s 11-inch batteries and their overwhelming firepower. The Swedish motor vessel, *Stureholm*, another member of that ill-fated convoy, quietly returned to the battle scene later that night to rescue sixty-five survivors from *Jervis Bay*. *Stureholm*'s master even asked his crew to vote in the decision to return to the site, a brave feat which deserves far more recognition than history has previously acknowledged.

Scheer's attack occurred as daylight was fading, but apart from *Jervis Bay*, only five ships of the convoy were caught after the ships scattered as night fell – only a few others were damaged, including the tanker *San Demetrio*. With the German's far superior speed, heavy gunnery, an early FMG39 radar (the merchantmen, of course, had none), sufficient searchlights and by then no opposition, it should have been possible to annihilate most of HX-84 ships. Edwards attributes this to Krancke's delay in attacking the actual convoy.

Just after noon that day, heading for the by-then assured location of the convoy, identified by one of his Arado scouting aircraft, Krancke came across the 5400 ton, also eastbound merchantman *Mopan*, armed with but one, elderly, 4-inch gun. The vessel had been invited to join the convoy when passing it, but with a somewhat superior speed and no orders to do so, its master had

declined, electing to press on toward England alone. It took over two hours for Krancke to persuade *Mopan's* master to abandon the vessel in the face of the battle-cruiser's threatening armament and bring its crew aboard as prisoners. Krancke then sank the abandoned vessel with considerable difficulty, plus the expenditure of much irreplaceable ammunition.

By the time Krancke pushed on after the convoy, it was about five p.m., and he faced *Jervis Bay's* valiant attempt to defend its charges. Again Krancke stood off, concentrated on dealing with this further distraction, plus the threat posed by *Beaverford*, enforced by just two, small, old guns. Demolishing this relatively feeble opposition took another several hours, by which time it was fully dark and the convoy's remaining ships had scattered to the southeast obscured by smoke floats dropped as they went and funnel smoke. Krancke could only find four other ships to sink and then turned away.

Based on Krancke's 1973 post-war biography, Edwards makes the point that the German commander was too nervous about possible damage to his ship, far from home, by his two first victims, and possibly, having to contend with other valiant opponents in a night fight. He admitted to being influenced by the fate of *Scheer's* sister ship, *Graff Spee*, which fled from a fight with Commodore Henry Harwood's three much inferior Royal Navy cruisers off Montevideo and was eventually scuttled, with its captain committing suicide in December 1939. The lack of repair facilities for major warships outside Germany was significant if the *Admiral Scheer* was indeed damaged more than superficially. (This German concern about repairs to potentially damaged battleships was to lead to the St. Nazaire Raid, a British attempt to destroy the large German drydock in that town in March 1942.)

This German nervousness about even potential damage early in the war is the link between these books. Paterson concentrates on Doenitz' problems with Hitler, Reichmarshall Goering, and the land-based hierarchy, and as the war progressed, delays and shortages affecting his distant U-boat operations. The impact this had on at-sea operations was similar, as Edwards suggests, to concern about occasional single or even small group-actions by heavy surface ships. The two books are worth more careful perusal in light of these recent reassessments.

Fraser McKee is the author/co-author of six books on Royal Canadian Navy and Merchant Navy history, and frequently writes book reviews and articles for journals on naval subjects. McKee is a veteran of the Second World War and served as the national president of the Navy League of Canada.