

## Back List

Bernard Edwards. *The Decoys—A Tale of Three Atlantic Convoys 1942*. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword Maritime, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2016. xiii + 184 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. UK £19.99, cloth; ISBN 978-1-47388-708-4

In the fall of 1942, three Atlantic convoys were lost for lack of adequate escort. One of them, SC 107, heading east from Sydney, Cape Breton Island, was under the protection of then-LCdr Desmond “Debby” Piers, RCN, in HMCS Restigouche. Its story has been told several times before by Marc Milner and others. Those of RB 1 from St. John’s, Newfoundland, and SL 125, out of Freetown, Sierra Leone, will be less well known. This brings up my only real criticism of the book, the lack of even a basic track chart or layout of the three convoys and other ships that Edwards follows for almost all of the book. Unless one is reasonably familiar with the detailed arrangement of convoys in the North Atlantic and Western Mediterranean and their all-too-frequently scarce escorts and air cover, it is difficult to keep track of what is happening, and for this story, why.

The end of November was a desperate time for these three passages. The timing overlapped with Operation TORCH, an Allied thrust into French North Africa involving massive troop and equipment convoys. Ten British convoys and four from the US were heading for the Atlantic coast of Morocco and the Mediterranean coast at Oran and Algiers. The need to prioritize the protection of 70,000 troops in 600 ships required the support of almost every convoy escort ship available from battleships and aircraft carriers to destroyers and even corvettes. While the

author found no actual reference to the three trade convoys being used as “decoys” for Operation TORCH, to some extent that was how they served.

At this point in the war, Germany had broken the British convoy escort codes and were well aware of where these three convoys were at sea, disposing Donitz’s U-boat lines and individual boats accordingly. Meanwhile, thanks to excellent Allied radio security, the Germans had no idea whatsoever of the TORCH plans. That attack came as an almost complete surprise, while the U-boats savaged each of Edward’s convoys. Although the German B-Dienst decrypting service suspected something was afoot, they presumed it was probable an intent to force another relief convoy through to beleaguered Malta.

The three convoys of this story were all bound for the usual British ports. RB 1 left Newfoundland 21 September, consisting of eight ships defended by two elderly V & WRN destroyers; SC 107, from New York, had 25 ships, plus 14 more from Halifax and 5 from St. John’s as it passed, defended eventually by LCdr Pier’s destroyer Restigouche, three RCN and one RN corvette; and SL 125 departed Freetown on 16 October with 37 ships, defended by four RN corvettes. Within two weeks RB 1 had lost 3 merchantmen and one of the destroyers, SC 107 lost fifteen ships, and SL 125 eleven ships—29 valuable merchantmen and crews, or 24% of those that set out. In contrast, not one of the TORCH invasion ships was lost to U-boats at sea.

The story gives us a very good picture of the Battle of the Atlantic at its most difficult. Knowing the broader circumstances in retrospect, one suspects that the various merchant convoys were just assigned in the normal rotation, continuing their efforts to supply the United Kingdom with goods—food,

industrial and war equipment—with even fewer than the usually scant escorts due to TORCH. The evidence that they served to occupy the U-Boats’ attentions despite not being planned as ‘decoys’ was circumstantial. Edwards makes frequent use of direct quotations from those who survived to craft a very well told story. He focuses, convoy by convoy, on their all-too-slow progress, eastward and northward (out around the Azores) and the often-elderly and therefore, slow tramps. Frequent descriptions of torpedo hits, abandonments in major fall gales, poor discipline in convoy by over-use of ‘snowflake’ in ships next to those hit. The insoluble coverage protection problems of the young escort commanders (LCdr Piers was 30), most only fitted with early asdic and HF/DF, few of the escorts equipped with radar, and with still-to-be-learned experience.

Decoys offers an excellent picture of what convoying was really like, night-by-night, even hour-by-hour, as part of the crucial mid-war Atlantic battle, reminding me of Jimmy Lamb’s *The Corvette Navy*. What is missing is perhaps a wider understanding of how such convoys were organized. Why were they compelled to sail them, after three years of the battle, with so few, slow and ill-equipped escorts? Could not three or four more a/s warships not have been found, somewhere? Or was the need just not appreciated, at that organizing level? Unfortunately, the action occurred at a time when the Allies at Bletchley Park had lost most of their ability to read the German’s ‘Enigma’ codes, revealing where the waiting U-Boats were. Nevertheless, it is worth the addition to any Battle of the Atlantic bookshelf.

Fraser McKee  
Etobicoke, Ontario

Arthur Herman. *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, www.harpercollins.com, 2004. xix + 648 pp., maps, notes, index. US \$19.99, paper, ISBN 0-06-053425-7. (Available on-line.)

Only after reading this book did I realize that Ian Yeates had reviewed it for *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* in 2004. (See [https://www.cnrs-scrn.org/northern\\_mariner/vol14/tnm\\_14\\_4\\_73-116.pdf](https://www.cnrs-scrn.org/northern_mariner/vol14/tnm_14_4_73-116.pdf)). I recommend his review to readers, but would like to offer a second review because this book is still relevant 16 years after publication.

Adm. Jeffrey Brock reports in *The Dark Broad Seas (Vol. 1)* that John Diefenbaker said: “A service or country without traditions is like a man without a memory.” Britain is certainly a country with traditions steeped in time, as is the Royal Navy. *To Rule the Waves* delves into both naval history and traditions.

Herman is the author of *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*—another very popular book which this reviewer, and Ian Yeates, have read and enjoyed. In this book, Herman addresses the history of Britain and its involvement with the rest of the world through the activities of its navy, roughly from the early 1500s to the Falklands War (1982). As Yeates points out, Herman has had to rely on secondary sources so there are simplifications, omissions and errors as he glosses over so many events. As with biographies where the writer tries to convince the reader that the whole world revolved around that person, so too here with the British (I prefer Royal) Navy. Herman tries to convince the reader that five centuries of world history are all the result of actions by the Royal Navy.

Personally, I hated history as a