

World War II at Sea

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

In a packed single volume, historian, Craig Symonds, captures masterfully “the global naval war between 1939 and 1945.” Most World War II histories focus on specific theater campaigns or pivotal battles. Symonds, however, weaves a tapestry of vast swathes of oceanic conflict into a thematic whole, depicting maritime and overall Allied and Axis strategies, operations, and engagements across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans as well as the Mediterranean Sea. These world-wide events intersected as they influenced, impacted, or impeded each other. This was especially the case when the United States marshaled and shipped assets to the great fronts of the Atlantic and Pacific.

Especially suited for this expansive and daunting undertaking, Symonds’ vivid narrative of innumerable battles, venues, and personages flows mostly in a storytelling mode with gripping detail. He observes with keen insight what he deems the three core elements of large-scale warfare: strategy, logistics, and operations. A less skilled military writer might falter in trying to organize the abundance of such distant and seemingly disparate events conceived by the 20th century’s most memorable civilian and military leaders and carried out by numerous nation states and millions of combatants.

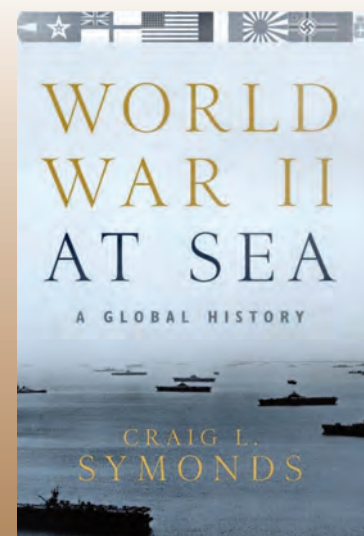
Placing these challenges in perspective, this was human history’s most lethal war, one that killed 60 million human beings, 3 percent of the earth’s population at the time. Symonds’ easy, elegant, style and his mastery of events deliver an informative, satisfying, and riveting experience.

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Author of numerous military and naval histories, notably including *Neptune: The Allied Invasion of Europe* and the *D-Day Landings* (2015’s winner of the Samuel Eliot Morison Award for naval literature), he currently sits as the Ernest J. King Distinguished Visiting Professor of Maritime History at the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI. In his hands, dozens of vignettes of the principal naval and island battles of World War II spring violently, relentlessly to life and fold seamlessly into the larger picture spanning years of conflict, spread over millions of square miles.

As he did so effectively in *Neptune*, Symonds in *World War II at Sea* not only opts wisely for a chronological presentation but also conveys the war’s contemporaneous risks, stresses, and concerns. He explains the overarching goal this way:

[T]o tell the story of World War II at Sea the way contemporaries experienced it: as a single, gigantic, complex story, involving national leaders and strategic decision-makers, fleet commanders and ship drivers, motor macs, gunners, pilots, merchant seamen and Marines; as a worldwide human drama that had a disproportionate and lasting impact on the history of the world.



WORLD WAR II AT SEA: A GLOBAL HISTORY. By Craig L. Symonds. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.
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Price \$34.95 (Hardcover)
792 Pages

This volume portrays the war’s oceanic vastness in which large opposing fleets often could not locate each other. When they did meet, unprecedented violence and destruction erupted with astounding numbers of sailors and ships sent to the bottom. *World War II at Sea* will intrigue, excite, and captivate both general interest readers and military professionals. Early on, the outcome of the war was uncertain, at best. German and Japanese juggernauts ran up their victories rapidly. In 1941 and 1942, the Axis powers already savored and planned for their post-war ambitions to carve up and rule most of the world. Germany’s U-boat capability threatened to decimate isolated England’s supply chain; Nazi submarines even sank numerous U.S. merchant ships off America’s east coast. Likewise, Japanese submarines roamed and threatened both commerce and Allied warships in the Pacific.

Winston Churchill’s stubborn and principled determination to never

negotiate with or yield to Hitler made England the last redoubt against a Nazi-dominated Europe. He struggled with colleagues who advocated for peace overtures to the Nazi dictator. Without Churchill as Prime Minister, England surely would have fallen or acquiesced—well before the American entry into the war after the Pearl Harbor attack on 7 December 1941 and well prior to Hitler's declaration of war against the United States a few days later. Symonds' renderings of the Dunkirk evacuation (26 May to 9 June 1940) and the sinking of Germany's great new battleship, the *Bismarck*, a year later (27 May 1941) will grip every reader. Meanwhile, Japanese leaders and a fawning national press trumpeted to a home audience their serial military successes as the preordained, natural order of things, with final victory only a matter of time.

Indeed, the Axis powers *could have won, and they might have won*, but for their own strategic mistakes and overreaching, coupled with measures of Allied good fortune, grit, and determination. Symonds describes the two most prominent early errors of grand strategy by Japan and Germany this way:

However tactically successful, the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor stands alongside Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union as one of the most reckless and irresponsible decisions in the history of warfare, and along with the Russian counterattack outside Moscow, marked a decisive turning point in the Second World War. It brought the United States and its vast industrial resources fully into the conflict and galvanized American public opinion in such a way as to ensure not only an eventual allied triumph, but what Roosevelt in his 8 December speech to Congress called "absolute victory."

Symonds' pace and rhythm forge fast moving back-and-forth developments across oceans and continents, from battles in and around Pacific War venues (like Pearl Harbor, Singapore, the Philippines, the Coral Sea, Leyte Gulf ["the largest naval battle in history"], Guadalcanal, Midway and Okinawa) to the Atlantic/Mediterranean area (including North Africa, the English Channel, France, Greece, and Germany) to horrific submarine ambushes of Allied convoys en route to Stalin's Russia. He also highlights, with apt descriptions and data, the steadily increasing impact of America's industrial might that emerged as an overwhelming logistical advantage. Starting after 1942, and especially in the waning months of the war in 1944 and 1945, America's production capabilities turned the tide.

Just as the Axis powers' fighting ability diminished, America's military might in men, equipment, weaponry, and mobility soared. American deliveries to the United Kingdom and Soviet Union became their indispensable lifelines, sometimes at the expense of U.S. forces in the Pacific. American leadership made agonizing decisions about how and where to distribute ships, aircraft, and other equipment (especially the critically needed landing ship, tank [LST] being manufactured by 24-hour-a-day assembly lines). Symonds' dramatic you-are-there perspective, with controversial command decisions, deadly mistakes, and frequent vigorous disagreements and personal antagonisms, contributes to making *World War II at Sea* a must-read for anyone interested in naval warfare as it entered the modern age.

Naval warfare in the Second World War embraced full measures of three-dimensional fighting: on land, sea, and air. Necessarily, Symonds depicts and dissects major Pacific island battles and amphibious operations; they were vitally linked to naval war missions, and often, they *were* the missions. For the first time, air power came to rule the day when fleets clashed, as seen at Savo Island, Midway, Guadalcanal, Leyte Gulf, the English Channel, European port cities, and in the Mediterranean. Symonds' eloquent, yet detailed, descriptions of the fleets invading and supporting D-Day at Normandy (6 June 1944) and the amphibious operations on Okinawa (1 April to 22 June 1945) are intense reminders of the size, scope, and cost (in blood and treasure) of the war's most expansive naval operations.

Before the end of the war, aircraft carriers had fully eclipsed battleships as the dominant sea vessels of war. The air assaults composed of large numbers and varieties of attack and bombing aircraft launched by Japan and the United States were effective and deadly against opposing warships. The sinking of the rarely deployed, but huge and heavily gunned, Japanese battleship *Yamato* by swarming American planes on 7 April 1945 illustrated the vulnerability of any vessel cruising without defending aircraft. By then, the Japanese cause was hopeless, and its leaders knew the *Yamato's* end-of-war deployment was a doomed mission. In addition, the ever-improving accuracy and devastation of American naval gunfire were instrumental in support of amphibious operations in both the Pacific and on the littorals of Europe. Warplanes emerged as predominant, whether from ships or landbase, as BG Billy Mitchell had foreseen in 1919.

Neither Allied nor Axis decision making or leadership enjoyed anything like consistent agreement or cohesion, or even cooperation, in many major decisions and strategies. Symonds revisits the controversies between Marines ashore and Navy decisions about pre-assault prep fires, continued support from the sea, and other priorities. Internal and inter-Service rivalries and personal disdain or resentment became evident among a large cast of America's generals and admirals such as Ernest King, Chester Nimitz, Douglas MacArthur, Arthur Vandergift, and Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith. For America, the "Germany first" strategy theoretically remained the prevailing policy throughout the war, but that priority was more a slogan than reality.

In Europe, GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower rode herd over an assemblage of British and American egos and sensitivities, especially when British Gen Bernard Montgomery was involved. At the top, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill had their hands full in accommodating their ally, Russia, and its paranoid dictator, Joseph Stalin.

Within their own highest ranks, the Germans and the Japanese saw similar internal bouts of “turf wars.” Hitler’s *diktats*, however, cut short the infighting among his admirals and generals whose sound advice he often ignored, to the benefit of the Allies. Symonds skillfully lays out these struggles in “real time.”

The opening Japanese destruction of a major part of the Navy’s Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor had left America at a significant deficit, one that mounted with the Empire’s onslaughts through objectives like the Philippines, Guam, Singapore, and other arenas. It was not until the Battle of Midway that American naval forces, with carrier and landbased airpower, achieved what many historians call the Pacific War’s turning point by sinking four Japanese carriers and downing or destroying 400 enemy aircraft.

Ultimately, the extended length of the war solidified the United States’ opportunity to flex its manufacturing muscle in producing ever-advancing naval vessels, aircraft, and other equipment. America’s production and logistical feats made all the difference:

Along with the resilience of the Red Army on the Eastern Front, American industrial productivity was the single most determinative element in the eventual allied victory in World War II. That said, the American industrial juggernaut was not infinite, and there was fierce competition among the various programs for the raw materials needed to produce the planes, the tanks, and particularly the ships needed to secure that victory.

From 1943 to the end, the production of ships, planes, and arms outpaced the massive destruction by enemy action. Symonds leaves no doubt in his conclusion, and casts the war at sea as outcome determinative:

While ‘boots on the ground’ were essential in this war (as they are in every war), it was supremacy at sea that eventually proved decisive.

The war’s denouement was, in Symonds’ words, a “supernatural intervention [which] arrived in the form

of a mushroom cloud.” With Nazi Germany having surrendered in May, Japan was alone thereafter in its futile fight against inevitable defeat. Until the devastation wrought by two atomic bombs, the invasion of mainland Japan was generally seen as necessary. Even so, there was no surrender after the first atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. Then, even after the second such bombing over Nagasaki on 9 August, it took Emperor Hirohito’s direct intervention and decision to surrender to bring the war to a close. In this, Symonds

joins the consensus that the atomic bombs, “by forestalling an invasion, ... saved several hundred thousand American lives,” and he also proffers his contention that “they also saved many millions of Japanese lives.”

World War II at Sea deserves a place on the Commandant’s Reading List. For a manageable study of how Allied naval operations drove the war’s eventual triumphs across oceans and continents, it does not get any better than this masterwork, destined to be a classic.



For Further Reading

VIETNAM: Remembrances of a War. By Chuck Mansfield, Lulu Publishing Services (June 15, 2018). ISBN-10: 1483486079 ISBN-13: 978-1483486079 406 pages

reviewed by Capt Dennis C. Golden, USMC(Ret)



It is a fact that all military personnel take an oath to defend the U.S. Constitution against all enemies both foreign and domestic.

It is a belief that those who take that oath and experience armed combat have a clear understanding of what happened in Vietnam against both foreign and domestic enemies.

It was Chuck Mansfield’s oath, beliefs, and Vietnam combat experience that inspired him to create his sterling book titled, *Vietnam: Remembrances of a War*.

***Remembrances* goes beyond terrain, tactics, and talk. It goes to the heart and soul of those who were in country even if they were never told why or fully understood why they were there in the first place. For the most part, however, they took their oath in the same spirit as their predecessors did in World War II with the understanding that certain people needed help and that freedom is not for free.**

Additionally, *Remembrances* serves as an alert indicating what you must do and what needs to be avoided if you really want to win a war. And if not to win, why ever engage in a war? Perhaps it is because certain people have arranged it that way—some would call these bad tactics, others would call it treason.

Mansfield stresses the patriotism and pride of those who actually fought in the Vietnam War. In this connection, it is perhaps timely to recall the words of *The New York Times* (Week in Review piece that appeared in print on 30 September 2001) bestselling author Blaine Harden who wrote:

Patriotism’s extraordinary power to expand and constrain the American spirit is hardly new. But it seems novel now because so many people—including many among the huge bulge of population that came of age during and after the Vietnam War—have never lived it themselves.

It was none other than the outstanding Marine Corps General Lewis W. Walt who is credited with saying, “This is first a political war, second a psychological war, and third a military war.” (See *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General’s Report on Vietnam*, Lewis W. Walt, [Funk & Wagnalls, Co., 1970]), Those priorities were not set by Gen Walt or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the results of the Vietnam War are self-evident. This, and so much more, will be learned by reading Mansfield’s epic book.

To order, go to: <https://www.amazon.com/Vietnam-Remembrances-War-Chuck-Mansfield/dp/1483486079>