



Western Naval History Association

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The big news in this issue is the 2020 Symposium which was held on 29 February and 1 March on board the USS *Midway* Museum. Bill Heard has contributed an excellent report on the event starting in the next column. We thank the major nautical/historical institutions in San Diego, the USS *Midway* Museum and the San Diego Maritime Museum for supporting us with their facilities and staff and for helping us publicize the event and opening their facilities to attendees.

The other major article in this newsletter is a contribution by Michael Whitby who is the Senior Naval Historian for the Canadian Department of National Defence. I particularly like this piece because it all started when a stranger contacted me with questions he was trying to answer for his neighbors, two sisters looking to understand the circumstances of their brother's death in a night sea battle in the English Channel in 1943. It shows how even professional historians can learn from the public.

Contact the WNHA

Email to info@wnha.net for more information about the Association. Check out our web page at wnha.net. We're interested in members who are interested in naval history. Students are welcome.

Cold War, Historic Sea Battles Discussed at WNHA Symposium by Bill Heard

During the Cold War, the United States was competing with the Russians in the Indian Ocean, retired Rear Adm. Michael McDevitt said during a roundtable discussion at the Western Naval History Association's 2020 Symposium in San Diego, now it is competing with China. The former carrier battle group commander said the primary U.S. advantage, today, "is in submarines, although our ASW capabilities have atrophied since the Cold War ended."



Richard B. Frank delivering his keynote address about "the most important naval campaign of World War II you've never heard of."

The roundtable was just one event of the symposium, which was held on board the USS *Midway* 29 February-1 March. It included retired Navy Captain (Dr.) Sam Tangredi, Leidos Chair of Future Warfare Studies at the Naval War College and former commanding officer of USS *Harpers Ferry* (LSD 49), and retired Captain (Dr.) Bernard Cole, Professor Emeritus at the National War College and former commander of Destroyer Squadron 35.

Symposium 2020 was the WNHA's second such gathering of naval history authors, academics, naval wargamers, and modelers. Along with lectures, a roundtable, and several practical workshops about writing and publishing, it included a wargame demonstration, a naval diorama demonstration, and book signings by several of the authors. The two-day event drew 55 participants from across the nation, and from as far away as the United Kingdom.

"The USS *Midway* Museum's participation in the symposium was key to the success of this year's event," said Vincent P. O'Hara, WNHA President and co-founder. "The mix of sea stories, academic presentations, and practical sessions in subjects like getting your work published, modeling, or photography for publication worked really well."

Other speakers included:

Keynote speaker Richard B. Frank, author of the newly published *Tower of Skulls, a History of the Asia-Pacific War*, spoke about Japan's blockade of China. His talk included many little-known details, such as how the U.S. Navy deployed an average of 14 submarines in the South China Sea to attack Japanese shipping in 1944-45. He said 98,000 Japanese troops perished during U.S. submarine attacks on Japanese shipping.

Retired Navy Captain (Dr.) Charles MacVean, commanding officer of USS *Seawolf* (SSN 575), whose assignment to tap Soviet communications cables is described in the book *Blind Man's Bluff*, discussed his service experiences, and compared the two countries' submarine procedures. The U.S. Navy took great pains to ensure the

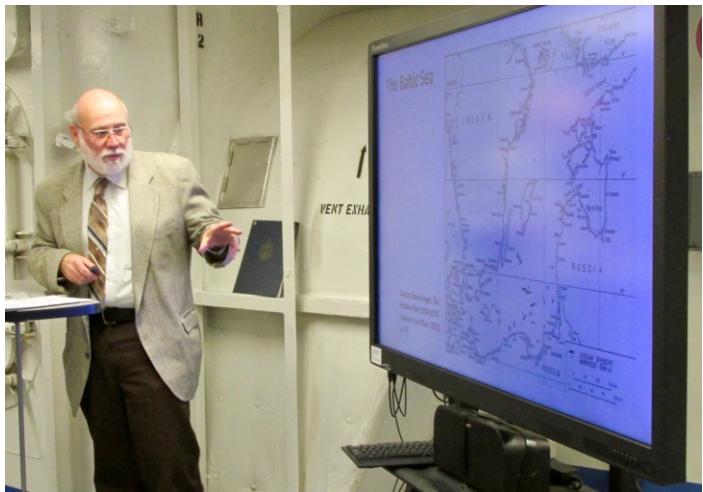


The tools of naval war gaming under inspection during one of the symposium's workshops.

randomness of evolutions, while Soviet submarine movements and communications were very controlled and predictable. "These habits made their submarines relatively easier to track," he said.

Mark E. Fiorey, Deputy Director of the Hattendorf Center for Maritime Historical Research, recounted Operation Passage to Freedom 1954-1955 – which he called America's first large-scale involvement in Vietnam. After Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel in July 1954, more than 100 Navy ships transported some 310,000 refugees to South Vietnam in what Fiorey said was the largest sealift in U.S. naval history.

Rick and Jack Russell, Naval Institute Press, discussed what the Press is looking for and how authors can work with them. Jack, NIP's sales manager, announced that NIP signed an agreement in December with the "World of Warships" multi-player game publisher, which counts 30 million players in the Americas. Naval Institute is betting that the deal will bring in a



Stephen McLaughlin presenting a fascinating talk on Russian Signals intelligence in WWI

new, and younger, audience for naval history.

Evan Mawdsley, British historian and author of *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II*, discussed his new work and sea power during the war. He contended that Germany was more dangerous than Japan, and that the United States devoted too much of its effort to the Pacific war at the expense of the war in Europe. He agreed that the enemy could not have been defeated without command of the seas, but stressed that “land and air power played an equally important role in the Allied war effort.”

Lonnie Gill, author of *GENERAL QUARTERS*, a leading naval wargame, demonstrated how wargaming can be used as a tool for historical analysis using as a case study a 9 November 1941 Mediterranean convoy battle in which four British destroyers sank seven strongly escorted Axis merchant ships of the Italian navy's Beta Convoy. The use of ship models and a large-scale gaming area permitted the symposium audience to rapidly comprehend complex and fast-changing relationships among ships engaged in battle that would be difficult to represent, much less understand on paper.

Stephen McLaughlin, author of *Russian and Soviet Battleships*, recounted how the Russian and British navies worked together in World War I to break the German code from signals books

recovered following the grounding on 26 August 1914 of the light cruiser *Magdeburg* in the Gulf of Finland. Reading German codes helped the Royal Navy ambush the High Seas Fleet at the Battle of Jutland, and in other battles.

Dr. Sam Tangredi of the Naval War College decried “history blindness,” a condition he said infects many government and military decision-makers. He said they often view their situation as new and unique, and are not willing to analyze mistakes using the tools of historical analysis. “There’s a preference for ‘futurism’ such as transformation and reform,” he said, adding, “Naval and military history are marginalized in university curricula.”

Dr. Cynthia Watson, Dean of Faculty and Academic Programs at the National War College, and author of *Military Education*, discussed the latest developments at NWC, and its academic program. She also dealt with the problems of “history blindness” in her own institution.

Dr. Bernard Cole, in an address titled “Adventures in Researching Chinese Naval History: Facts, Fiction, and Sea Stories,” described the sometimes frustrating path authors must take in preparing to write historical articles and papers.

Karl Zingheim, Staff Historian for the USS *Midway* Museum, displayed realistic dioramas of naval ships in action and discussed the detailed and meticulous research required to construct an accurate diorama.

Robert C. Stern, photographer and author of more than 20 works of naval history, including *Scratch One Flattop*, discussed the intricacies and technology of finding and preparing photographs for historical publications.

Looking back at this year's event, O'Hara said, “We've been very pleased that so many well-known specialists in naval history have participated in our first two symposiums. With the success in 2020, we're already looking forward to a bigger and better event for 2021.”

Operation Tunnel Revisited

by Michael Whitby

As an historian, it is always interesting when opportunity arises to revisit previous research; even when such a voyage reveals that you may have come to an inaccurate or misleading conclusion. Such an opportunity recently presented itself in connection with the tragic loss of life associated with sinking of the Dido-class light cruiser HMS *Charybdis* and the Hunt-class destroyer HMS *Limbourne* in the English Channel on 22/23 October 1943. A gentlemen from Devon, England recently learned the two elderly ladies from down the street had lost a brother in the *Charybdis*; and 76 years on, they were still unsure of the circumstances of the tragedy. Their neighbour kindly offered to look into it for them, during the course of which, he contacted Vince O'Hara, who, knowing I had interest in night actions in the English Channel, put us in contact. The insightful questions that followed and subsequent research have brought to light valuable new information, which may not change our understanding of what occurred that night, but adds to the context of how and why it did. If nothing else, this underscores the value of collegiality in our vocation.

So what happened that night? Vince O'Hara's account in *The German Fleet at War, 1939-1945* captures the story well, but if that's not on your shelf the site <http://www.naval-history.net/WW2Ships-CharybdisAsr.htm> includes the analysis of the Admiralty staff history as well as other useful information. The basic events were that HMS *Charybdis* was leading Force 28, the Fleet destroyers *Grenville* and *Rocket* and the Hunts *Limbourne*, *Talybont*, *Stevenstone* and *Wesleydale*, on an east-west sweep in line-ahead off northern Brittany in the hopes of intercepting the German blockade runner *Münsterland*, which intelligence revealed was being convoyed up the Channel from Brest. Despite being detected at 14,000 yards by

Charybdis's radar – confirmed by R/T intercepts by the destroyers – five Fleet torpedo boats of the Kriegsmarine's 4. Torpedobootflotille stole to within decisive torpedo range of the British formation, hitting *Charybdis* with two torpedoes and *Limbourne* with another. The cruiser went down in minutes while the destroyer was so crippled she had to be dispatched by a friendly torpedo. Some 500 British sailors perished. The German destroyers escaped into the night without being engaged or even sighted. In his spirited memoir *Destroyer Captain*, Grenville's CO, LCDR Roger Hill, RN, labelled the debacle, which was marred by poor planning, flawed communications and unsound tactics, the "classic Balz-up of the war."

What has been learned to shed further light on the incident? We now know that Operation TUNNEL, as the sweeps were designated, was run on a more frequent basis than previously recognized. Historians have generally acknowledged only two TUNNELs in October where the Plymouth forces encountered enemy destroyers – getting the worst of both actions. However, the TUNNEL program actually commenced in early September 1943 with at least four sweeps that month and three more in October. One would have thought such repetition would have sharpened operational effectiveness; however, the warships participating varied from sweep to sweep and it is evident that little was gleaned in the realm of "lessons learned." Worse, the sweeps were governed by "boiler plate" instructions and the forces involved followed the same track down the Brittany coast with little variation. Following what one British officer dubbed "a well-trampled route," they were repeatedly monitored by German coastal radar, enabling Kriegsmarine commanders to gain familiarity with the nature of the sweeps, which they took full advantage of on 22/23 October.

It is also now evident that the 22/23 October TUNNEL was mounted in haste, bringing significant consequences. Throughout much of 1943, except for a number of screening operations in the Mediterranean and Atlantic, *Charybdis* had been occupied on STONEWALL patrols in the Bay

of Biscay, where cruisers supported anti-submarine groups or sought to intercept blockade runners on the final leg of their homeward passage. This much was known but not the consequence of her movements immediately before the TUNNEL. In the afternoon of 18 October, *Charybdis* returned to Plymouth from a Biscay patrol, and two days later received orders from Plymouth Command to depart Plymouth at 1530 on 22 October for another STONEWALL patrol. These sailing orders were abruptly scrapped due to intelligence that the Kriegsmarine was planning to convoy the *Münsterland* up the Channel from Brest. In the evening of 21 October, Plymouth Command cancelled *Charybdis*'s STONEWALL patrol, and informed her commanding officer, CAPT George Voelker, he would instead be leading a TUNNEL that would depart Plymouth at 1900 on 22 October. Thus, the notice was short.

The leadership of the Hunt-class destroyers that often formed an important element of TUNNEL forces was also affected by the sudden decision to mount the 22/23 October mission. CDR Conrad Alers-Hankey was not only commanding officer of HMS *Limbourne*, but he had accrued valuable experience as senior officer of the division of Hunts that had participated in previous TUNNELs. However, earlier in October, he received orders to become executive officer of the aircraft carrier HMS *Formidable*, and on the afternoon of 20 October he relinquished command of *Limbourne* and as senior officer of the Hunts to CDR Walter Phipps. Phipps was a seasoned destroyer officer but he had never before served in a Hunt, and given the short time available to him, had little opportunity to know the ships under his command or familiarize himself with the nature of the operation ahead.

Mission planning suffered as a result of the last-minute decision to mount the TUNNEL. It is now even more clear than before that the pre-mission briefing conducted by Captain Voelker, who was also senior officer of Force 28, left aspects of the operation confused. It has long been known that Phipps, who was second-senior officer of Force 28, missed most of the briefing and was dissatisfied by what he did hear. Recent research provides examples of how that impacted the operation. In his after action report the captain of the Hunt HMS *Talybont* noted that Voelker insisted at the briefing he would assert tight control of Force 28 during the operation but "in fact this did not happen." He also told his commanders *Charybdis* would begin



HMS *Charybdis* underway in February 1943 (Wikipedia)

illuminating any contacts at 7,000 yards, but despite gaining radar contact at 14,000 yards he did not order starshell fired until the range was down to 4,000 yards, by which time the enemy had begun firing torpedoes. To be fair to Voelker -- who by all accounts was a highly regarded officer -- he had never commanded such a sweep before and he had only a few short hours to pull his plan together. Nonetheless, poor coordination and decision-making during the critical early stages of the encounter allowed the Kriegsmarine torpedo boats to approach to within decisive range.

As per procedure, a Board of Inquiry met in Plymouth to ascertain the direct causes of *Charybdis*'s and *Limbourne*'s loss. In the hours following the inquiry, according to the memoirs of Grenville's CO Roger Hill and Midshipman Michael Hutton of HMS *Rocket*, the Admiralty rushed the two destroyers out of Plymouth to the Mediterranean, to avoid, the memoirists suggest, their crews spreading news of the tragedy and the poor planning behind it. In fact, signals indicate the Admiralty had ordered this move much earlier on 6 October as part of a reshuffling of destroyers between the Home and Mediterranean Fleets – subsequent signals over the following weeks amplified the decision. There was no attempt at a cover-up – that rumour was probably the result of scuttlebutt amongst sailors who could not have been aware of the Admiralty's plans. Moreover, if the Admiralty wanted to suppress details of the tragedy why did they also not transfer the surviving Hunts?

The final discovery is more personal and relates to the history of the Royal Canadian Navy and my own research. In the spring and summer of 1944, four Canadian Tribal-class destroyers fought with distinction out of Plymouth in the 10th Destroyer Flotilla. Their success played an important role in raising the profile of a Canadian navy that was thirsting for a fighting reputation to help secure a healthy postwar future. Beginning with my graduate thesis, much of my writing had focussed on the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, destroyer night fighting and the RCN Tribals, and I have contended the *Charybdis* tragedy motivated the Admiralty to deploy more powerful destroyers to Plymouth and give them the training necessary to become an effective fighting unit. Under my cause-and-effect scenario, the *Charybdis* action was the spark that led to the success of the RCN Tribals. Not quite! My recent research revealed that on 19 October, or three days before the *Charybdis* TUNNEL, the C-in-C Plymouth requested the Admiralty bolster his destroyer strength, citing the increased German destroyer threat as well as the myriad demands his destroyers had to meet and the resultant strain on ships and sailors. After the action, he did indeed recommend a force of well-trained, powerful destroyers like Tribals be formed as a striking force out of Plymouth, but he

was clearly beginning to formulate that idea before the action three days later. Given that, it is quite possible that the RCN Tribals would have been moved to Plymouth whether or not *Charybdis* had sailed on that fateful TUNNEL.

None of this new information changes our understanding of the course of the battle or its tragic outcome. However, it does help explain the circumstances under which it unfolded, and accentuates the maxim there is no "last word" in history. Finally, one hopes it gives some solace to two elderly ladies still trying to come to grips with the death of their brother.

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