

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 60  
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 21

---

2007

# The Battle of Heliogoland Bight and Distant Victory: The Battle of Jutland and the Allied Triumph in the First World War

Holger H. Herwig

Eric W. Osborne

Daniel Allen Butler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Herwig, Holger H.; Osborne, Eric W.; and Butler, Daniel Allen (2007) "The Battle of Heliogoland Bight and Distant Victory: The Battle of Jutland and the Allied Triumph in the First World War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 60 : No. 2 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol60/iss2/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

Alton Keith Gilbert, a retired naval officer, uses a descriptive survey method of research through letters, operational documents, fitness reports, personal accounts, and awards to chronicle the biography of Admiral John “Slew” McCain.

The book builds a strong sense of the character and tenacity of McCain and his ability as a warfighter through one of the most difficult periods of World War II. From his commissioning as an ensign to admiral, McCain was influenced by the Navy’s greatest leaders. The author describes the development of McCain as he progressed through his sea and shore assignments. The study culminates in a detailed description of the war in the Pacific and the tactics used, particularly when dealing with Japanese kamikaze pilots, under McCain’s operational leadership.

An intriguing aspect of this book is the detailed description of the political dealings among the Navy’s senior leaders. This allows the reader to understand some of the activity behind the scenes that ultimately shaped the outcome of the war. It is clear that McCain was a warrior’s warrior who literally worked himself to death: “After Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945, McCain flew back to his home in the U.S. and died in his bed the next day—perhaps from heart failure but more probably from exhaustion.” His dedication to the country, accomplishment of the mission, and loyalty to his superiors are constant themes of the book.

The extensive resources and the author’s personal experience as a naval officer make this a credible, historically accurate work. Gilbert’s style brings to life the experience of the Pacific War. In addition, specific data regarding the

losses of personnel and equipment only enhances the understanding of the impact of that war on both the U.S. and Japanese forces. The bibliography is a great resource for anyone who desires additional information on the topic.

The only criticism I have relates to the title. The book comes up a little short on the actual leadership characteristics of McCain, and I found myself searching for those qualities in his style and character. Yet this is a must-read for anyone who desires to learn about another one of the great admirals of World War II.

THOMAS ZELIBOR  
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired)  
Naval War College



Osborne, Eric W. *The Battle of Heligoland Bight*. Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006. 141pp. \$27.95

Butler, Daniel Allen. *Distant Victory: The Battle of Jutland and the Allied Triumph in the First World War*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2006. 251pp. \$44.95

After two decades of unrelenting publishing on the land war of 1914–18, it is nice to see attention being paid to the war at sea, for that effort ranged from distant blockades, mine warfare, unrestricted submarine warfare, and dashing destroyer melees, to the largest pitched surface fleet battle to that time. Both authors tell their stories with a passion for narrative, paying close attention not only to admirals but also to the “common sailor” at war. Both come well prepared: Osborne, of Virginia Military Institute, has published *Britain’s Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914–1919* (2004) and *Cruisers and Battle Cruisers:*

*An Illustrated History of Their Impact* (2004), while Butler, a former U.S. Army officer and media commentator, is the author of *The Age of Cunard* (2004).

Osborne's *Battle of Heligoland Bight* is solid naval history. On 28 August 1914 British cruisers, destroyers, and submarines descended into the Heligoland Bight and surprised German scouting forces, which lost the light cruisers SMS *Mainz*, SMS *Koln*, SMS *Ariadne*, and the torpedo boat *V-187*, as well as 1,251 officers and men killed, wounded, or captured. The British, in contrast, suffered damage to one light cruiser and three destroyers, as well as thirty-five officers and men killed and forty wounded. Beyond these losses, the importance of the battle lies in the fact that it reinforced the already timid stance of the German High Sea Fleet command.

Osborne's two major contributions are at the command level and at the tactical level. Senior commanders, British and German, performed woefully. There was a lack of coordination with the forces at sea and among the forces engaged in battle. There were also problems with communication (delays in decoding messages and jammed transmissions) and an overall failure to provide commanders with intelligence on the composition and position of enemy forces.

Officers who today fear that in a "real" war the enemy may well deprive them of cybernetic capabilities must read this book. Heligoland showed what it was like to fight "blind" and under adverse conditions. Clausewitz's "fog of war" was omnipresent, especially on the British side: battle signals were misread; major units put out to sea without

notifying other commands; cruisers attempted to ram their own submarines; submarines made attack runs on their own cruisers; and destroyers engaged a Norwegian neutral, mistaking it for a German minelayer. The German command did not perform much better. It failed to appreciate the size of the British force and refused to recognize that it was supported by battle cruisers. It also hesitated to send out its own battle cruisers in time to assist. The fact that German battleships had to wait hours for high tide so they could cross the Jade Bar at Wilhelmshaven did not help matters, nor did the true "fog of war," namely, a heavy fog that swirled around Heligoland all that day. In short, this is a superb book on the all but forgotten first surface battle of World War I.

*Distant Victory*, of course, has the advantage that it is about a well known battle, the greatest in history to that date. On 31 May 1916, off Denmark's Jutland Peninsula, twenty-four British dreadnoughts and their escorts squared off against sixteen German dreadnoughts and their escorts—in all, 151 British warships against ninety-nine German warships. Butler relates the resulting battle in gripping, dramatic style. He has a keen eye for the bold narrative, whether speaking of a destroyer or a battleship, a commander or a gunner. He follows the traditional reading of Jutland, that it was a tactical German victory (fourteen British ships were lost to the Germans' eleven, and 6,784 British casualties as against 3,058 German) but a British strategic victory, insofar as the High Sea Fleet failed to break the Grand Fleet's iron grip on the exits of the North Sea. As the *New York Herald* trenchantly put it on 3 June 1916, "The German fleet has assaulted

its jailer, but it is still in jail.” Unfortunately, Butler fails to draw on the greatest strategic lesson for the Germans: on 4 July Admiral Reinhard Scheer, the “victor of the Skagaerrak,” informed Kaiser Wilhelm II that further fleet actions would be futile and that only “the defeat of British economic life, that is, by using the U-boats against British trade,” could swing the balance in the war.

Lamentably, Butler’s lack of familiarity with German documents and recent historiography mars an otherwise interesting book. Apart from misspelled German words and ships’ names, there are major howlers. Thus Ludendorff is raised to the nobility as “von,” Hugo von Pohl in 1914 is listed as the High Sea Fleet’s chief of staff rather than as Chief of the Admiralty Staff in Berlin, Karl Doenitz is cited as a World War I “destroyer captain,” and German diplomatic and naval files are situated at Koblenz rather than at Berlin and Freiburg, respectively. Further, while one can accuse the German naval command of timidity, it seems unjust to ascribe “cowardice” to them. Hyperbole abounds. Did Jutland really “dictate” that “Germany would lose the First World War”? Was it “the decisive moment of the First World War”? Did it “decide” the “very course of the war”? Was the German failure to intercept British cross-Channel troop transports in August 1914 the “lost opportunity” that “ultimately decided the course of the war”?

Finally, Butler’s claims that “three generations of histories” have failed to look at the “strategic aftermath” of the battle and that they have failed for ninety years to ask why the Germans never again faced the Grand Fleet in battle, or why they turned instead to unrestricted

submarine warfare, are not just inaccurate but make a mockery of that scholarship. Careful editorial work could have averted some of this. Regrettably, it did not.

HOLGER H. HERWIG  
*University of Calgary*



Henriques, Peter R. *Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington*. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2006. 256pp. \$26.95

The man who was “first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen” is also first as a subject in the contemporary revival of popular interest in the founding fathers. In this work Peter Henriques has provided a concise, balanced, and scholarly companion piece to the more comprehensive recent books concerning George Washington. Rather than a conventional biography, Peter Henriques, a professor emeritus of history at George Mason University and a distinguished scholar of the vast collection of Washington’s writings, has provided an analysis of ten of the arguably most important issues and relationships Washington dealt with during his life. Especially for those familiar with Washington’s basic biography, these thoughtful and fair-minded essays will inspire further reflection on the character and career of the indispensable man of the American founding.

Henriques’s erudition and balanced judgment may be at their most effective in his consideration of the private Washington, including an examination of his beliefs on slavery and religion, and a reflection on his final illness and death. Washington, who can be justifiably criticized as a slave owner, in