

1994

Thunder Below: The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II

Jacob V. Heimark

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

Recommended Citation

Heimark, Jacob V. (1994) "Thunder Below: The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol47/iss1/29>

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.

Fluckey, Eugene B. *Thunder Below: The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II*. Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992. 444pp. \$27

This account of five war patrols of the USS *Barb*, told by her captain, who earned four Navy Crosses and a Congressional Medal of Honor in this command, offers the excitement of the best of fiction. This inspiring true story of World War II is told in such human terms that the events themselves become background. *Thunder Below* is also an outstanding textbook on leadership. Nearly every page shows examples of how to lead successfully. In addition, a number of times superiors are shown being led in the direction that this *Barb* captain felt they should go.

Why did this naval hero have such extraordinary success in World War II? The highly skilled crew of this submarine was well led (which probably could be said about most World War II submarines), especially during the last third of the war, when commanding officers came with combat experience, the torpedoes worked, and proven attack doctrine was in place.

No doubt luck played a part, but probably no more than it does for the team that wins the Superbowl. After all, in five patrols the *Barb* had dozens of encounters with the enemy. The high percentage of successes achieved is a mark of superior performance. The expression the author uses, "Luck is where you find it," accurately

describes the contribution that factor made to the success of *Barb*'s operations.

However, another element may have been Commander Fluckey's deep curiosity. Two incidents illustrate this. While *Barb* patrolled between the Chinese mainland and Formosa, her captain began wondering why his patrol area was so devoid of shipping. He began to study charts of the coastal waterways along the China coastline, where he found that except for Hai-tan Strait, where the water was too shallow to allow ships to stay inshore, it was feasible for ships to move north and south without entering waters deep enough for submarines to operate. To find out if that shallow stretch had been dredged, he queried the Commander, U.S. Naval Group China directly and learned that dredging had been done. The tale of how this new intelligence was exploited is a most exciting one. A second example is that before his final patrol, Commander Fluckey believed he could cause more harm to the enemy by adding a newly developed rocket launcher to the *Barb*. To win over the "no-sayers" took a lot of perseverance on his part. He also used every bit of influence he had before he managed to arm the *Barb* with rockets. By effectively employing this new weapon system, he justified the faith his superiors had in him.

A fourth important factor was the resiliency that came from the author's ever-present sense of humor. This, coupled with his humility of spirit,

154 Naval War College Review

supported all on board the *Barb* through dark, fearsome moments. With this support, confidence grew until there was no room for either self-doubt or despair.

Thorough research into U.S., Japanese, and Chinese records makes *Thunder Below* accurate and complete. It also reflects the desire to "do it right the first time" that was a hallmark of the *Barb*. As one sailor put it, "We try to do our jobs all the way." How better to achieve success than to take this approach?

This story gives interesting insights into how the *Barb* was run. We are told why crewmen who had been Boy Scouts were given added consideration when choosing a team for a specially hazardous mission. Also, fresh new meaning to the tradition of "splice the mainbrace" is provided.

For those who wish to learn while reading for enjoyment, this book is a must.

JACOB V. HEIMARK
Captain, U.S. Navy, Ret.
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Chant, Christopher. *Small Craft Navies*. New York: Sterling Pub., 1992. 160pp. \$29.95

Small Craft Navies is a unique and interesting reference work that fulfills two separate and distinct functions. In its first section it provides a lively and entertaining look at the development of fast patrol boats and fast attack craft, beginning with what is generally recognized as the world's first attack craft,

the Royal Navy torpedo launch *Lightning*, which entered service in 1876. The second half provides a comprehensive technical directory of more than one hundred designs of fast patrol boats and fast attack craft, as well as illustrations of almost all the boats and craft featured.

Part One begins by making the important distinction between fast patrol boats and fast attack craft. The former are generally fitted with only light armament (such as machine guns, or cannon of less than 40mm) and minimal sensor and fire control suites. The latter are usually of higher speeds and possess much heavier, longer-range armament that can include antiship missiles, guns of up to 76mm, antiship torpedoes, and anti-submarine warfare weapons. The author faithfully retains this distinction throughout the book.

Part One moves quickly through the early years of patrol and attack craft and mostly discusses the post-World War II era. It ties together the development both of these craft and the weapons they carried (particularly the antiship missiles) that have made these vessels so formidable. Where appropriate, this section speaks to the effectiveness of the craft and weapons of various navies, offering information usually seen only in detailed accounts of battles or campaigns.

The author also attempts to define the rationale determining which boats or craft each navy operates. For example, he notes that China is the world's largest operator of fast combat craft