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Little Ship, Big War: The Saga of DE-343

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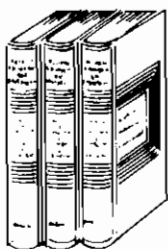
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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

H.G. Rickover

William S. Dudley

Stafford, Edward Peary. *Little Ship, Big War: The Saga of DE-343*. New York: Morrow, 1984. 336pp. \$17.95 paper \$3.95

The naval history of World War II has often been told from the perspective of the big picture, the author attempting to scan all major events, sifting the elements for grand strategy. Fewer accounts exist of small unit actions. Such histories are perhaps the most difficult to research and write successfully.

Usually, all the essential sources are not available, and even if they were, it takes an exceptionally skilled author to weave the detailed, sometimes trivial concerns of the men on a single small ship into the story of the major task forces of which they were a part. But in Commander Stafford, we have the man for the job.

Stafford and most of the men described in this book served in the U.S.S. *Abercrombie* (DE-343) from the day she was commissioned, 1 May 1943 at Orange, Texas, until mid-November 1945 when she returned to San Diego. But the book is more than an account of the men of the *Abercrombie*; it is a biography of the ship itself. This 306-foot oblong steel matchbox filled with noisy, smelly machinery and deadly ordnance took on a life of its own.

Assigned to the ship before commissioning, Stafford viewed on arrival, with some dismay, "a mastless, gunless yellow hull with empty hawsepipes

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and gaping holes in her decks." Yet only two months later, the *Abercrombie* was en route to Bermuda, a vibrant, deadly beauty.

Historian Stafford writes with the flair of a novelist, in perfect control of the hundreds of details and dozens of routines in the life of a warship. Even those who have not served at sea will comprehend why "it felt good to be free of the clamor and clutter of the yard, to feel the rise and roll of the deck under my feet and the fifteen knot flow of cool night air across the bridge . . . it was good to feel the latent power of the new ship, to hear her breath in the rumble of the blowers forcing air below and to hear the long repeated pings of her sonar."

To read of the extensive training of the crew, undertaken in countless drills and exercises, to say nothing of schooling ashore, reminds one that effective navies cannot be instantly created. It takes months of shipboard repetition under all conceivable conditions to train men for combat.

This feature is amply documented in *Little Ship, Big War*. Drills such as man overboard, loss of steering control, damage control, communications exercises, squadron tactics, general quarters, antisubmarine exercises, antiair and surface gunnery practice were often daily, sometimes hourly events. The *Abercrombie* came through the war relatively unscathed, but she was not just a lucky ship.

Her crew was well disciplined, morale was generally high, and the men were exceptionally well trained. It was an added advantage that the *Abercrombie* experienced little personnel turnover during approximately two years at war. As a result, the various divisions, whether they fought fires, or manned engine rooms and gun mounts, worked as teams. Division officers, petty officers, and enlisted men knew what to expect from each other and their commanding officer.

The *Abercrombie* and the six other destroyers in Escort Division 69 served in three major actions in the Pacific during 1944-1945, the Battles of Leyte and Lingayen Gulfs, and Okinawa. Stafford skillfully controls suspense as these dramatic battles unfold. Even though the reader may know the general circumstances surrounding each battle, he is probably unaware of the role played by the *Abercrombie*.

The author also varies the narrative with coverage of DE-343's sister ships, for the destroyer squadron and division assignments were similar. One ship's fate, brought by an enemy shell, bomb, torpedo or suicide plane, might easily have become another's. Stafford takes care to explain the overall operational situation in relation to the destroyer-escort's tactical environment.

The *Abercrombie*'s first brush with danger occurred during the Battle of Samar on the morning of 25 October 1944. Taffy 3 to the north took the brunt of a surface attack by Admiral Kurita's Central Force. The *Abercrombie* was in the screen of Taffy 2, protecting the slow escort carriers whose planes covered the amphibious landings in Leyte Gulf and did extensive damage to Kurita's force.

The DDs of the screen prepared to attack while the DEs formed an antisubmarine screen ahead of the fleeing carriers. The ships of Taffy 2 suffered no damage that day; all hands sensed the dangers of battle. The *Abercrombie's* men heard later about the epic struggle and sinking of their sister ship the *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413) as she attempted to defend the carrier *Gambier Bay*.

The *Abercrombie's* base between assignments was in Seadler Harbor at Manus in the Admiralty Islands. There the exhausted crew found some opportunity for relaxation and the ship could be repaired with parts not available underway. Yet not even this spot was trouble-free. On 10 November 1944, the ammunition ship *Mount Hood* (AE-11) blew up, killing 372 men, wounding 371, destroying 10 landing craft, and damaging 34 ships anchored in the vicinity. Again, the *Abercrombie* was unscathed, but her men were shocked by their close call in an anchorage remote from battle areas.

Commander Stafford's shipmates experienced their first exposure to kamikaze attacks during the invasion of Lingayen Gulf in January 1945. Their ship was designated control ship for a group of landing craft, to serve as a navigational reference point as they formed up and headed for the beach. The *Abercrombie* had to anchor close to shore and remain there for as long as it took to guide several waves of landing craft to their designated landing areas. She was an obvious target for Japanese shore batteries and kamikazes, but luck and good shooting kept her in one piece. Following control ship duties, the *Abercrombie* assumed station position offshore, patrolling in antisubmarine and antiair defense screens for the ships at anchor.

In her last major operation, DE-343 steamed for Okinawa as part of a screen for ships attacking the island of Kerama Retto, whose anchorage became a supply and repair base during the prolonged battle. Often, during the 3-month struggle, the *Abercrombie* took station in the outer screen, also known as the "ping line," as one of 39 DDs and DEs protecting the invasion force from submarine attack.

Bomber and kamikaze attacks came in great numbers, dwarfing the submarine threat. Lack of sleep from constant calls to general quarters sapped men's energy, and they never knew whether the next attack would be the one that sent the *Abercrombie* to join the list of damaged, ruined or sunken ships. By 22 June 1945, 21 American ships had been sunk and 66 damaged in what Stafford terms his Okinawa "nightmare." Miraculously, the *Abercrombie* was not among them. She had survived by dint of hard work, endless training, repeated alerts, good discipline, high morale, and good luck.

Commander Stafford's excellent history was assembled mostly from primary sources, the ship's deck log, visual signal log, action reports, war diaries, personal journals, interviews with members of the crew, taped memoirs, and a solid reading of the overall studies of the Pacific War. Veterans will nostalgically recognize the authenticity of this account;

students of naval history should acknowledge *Little Ship, Big War* as the historical building block it is. Small unit histories may pave the way for a new vision of naval warfare in World War II. Finally, junior officers in surface warfare school and ship division officers will gain a sense of reality and purpose from reading this book. This is what it was, and will be, all about.

Collins, John M. *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance: 1980-1985*. Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1985. 360pp. \$50 paper \$29.95

This book, chockablock with figures and tables, is probably not the kind you would curl up with before a fire. On the other hand, if you are the least bit interested in national security matters, it had better be in your library.

The book is split almost evenly between narrative chapters and statistical annexes. The major annexes are full of every table conceivable, although the narrative chapters are also laced with charts and tables. The narrative is split into four parts. Part I, "Postures and Policies in Perspective," has introductory chapters on the military balance and the changing policies from 1960-80. Part II, called "Building Blocks, 1980-85," looks at defense budgets and manpower as well as defense technologies and industries. Part III, "Nuclear/Chemical Trends," has chapters on strategic and theater nuclear weapons with a separate very interesting chapter on "Naval Tactical Nuclear Trends" and then another on "Chemical and Biological Warfare Trends." Part IV, "Tactical/Mobility Trends," has a chapter on policy and then another

on the "Conventional Force Inventories" listing all conventional forces including sections on amphibious forces, the 600-ship navy, and sealift programs. Finally, Part V, called "Integrated Trends," has chapters on the various regions of the world: NATO/Warsaw, Middle East and Northeast Africa, East Asia and Western Pacific, a separate chapter on the "Naval Balance Related to Regions," and then a wrap-up chapter on the "Global Balance Compared with 1980."

There are five annexes, with the major one being the 130-page Annex A on "Statistical Summaries and Force Characteristics." Included in this annex are charts and tables on manpower comparisons, nuclear forces, general purpose forces, and mobility forces—these include merchant marine, regional balances, organizational summaries of the U.S. and Soviet military forces, and then a recapitulation by country. (I did not see a table comparing the proverbial kitchen sinks, but that was about the only thing missing.)

Annex B, "U.S. Budgetary Statistics," has interesting data in both constant and current dollars on military spending broken down by title, program, and service and as a percent of Federal spending and GNP. These