

Naval War College Review

Volume 73
Number 3 *Summer 2020*

Article 15

2020

On Her Majesty's Nuclear Service

Angus Ross

The U.S. Naval War College

Eric Thompson

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

Recommended Citation

Ross, Angus and Thompson, Eric (2020) "On Her Majesty's Nuclear Service," *Naval War College Review*.
Vol. 73 : No. 3 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss3/15>

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.

evolved into its current form, the book disappoints readers who want to learn more about the implications of maneuver warfare on future battlefields. Although one might argue that such a discussion falls outside the scope of this work, it seems like a missed opportunity not to devote some pages to answering that question. How will the Marine Corps use maneuver warfare to fight in an A2/AD environment? What capabilities does the Corps need to exploit Russia's or China's critical vulnerabilities? How does the service operate effectively and jointly in a twenty-first-century great-power conflict? Similarly, one also wonders how changes to the Marine Corps's maneuver-warfare theory that may be necessary to succeed on future battlefields will alter the professional development and training of the service's next generation of recruits. Institutions such as the Basic School or Marine Combat Training might need a face-lift. Military occupation schools also will need to rethink how they equip their students with the skills necessary to support the Corps's war-fighting philosophy in future fights.

One question Piscitelli does answer about the future of maneuver warfare is how the service can promote the institutional change necessary to confront future challenges. His discussion of the informal civilian advocacy networks and formal top-down leadership that Marine leaders used to transform the Corps after Vietnam provides a possible blueprint to effect future force shaping. This might be the book's greatest contribution to current national security narratives, because it highlights how America's most unique service can facilitate effectively the necessary structural, service-level changes to the force.

ADAM TAYLOR



On Her Majesty's Nuclear Service, by Eric Thompson. Oxford, U.K.: Casemate, 2018. 269 pages. \$32.95.

The last few years have seen a surge in titles covering different aspects of the Royal Navy's submarine service during the Cold War. Together, these have provided the armchair naval enthusiast with welcome insights into a famously understated and secretive part of that service's recent history. Whereas the majority of these titles have been written either by those who have commanded ships and submarines or by historians with long naval connections, this book is distinctly different, coming as it does from neither of these backgrounds.

Instead, this is an intensely personal account of one man's naval journey: from curious schoolboy learning the naval "religion," through some early personal disappointments, and finally to his emergence as a successful and highly respected member of the elite brotherhood of nuclear-qualified engineers. The book is different because the mystique of command at sea is not the centerpiece, having been replaced by the equally demanding but far less well understood world of nuclear safety, with its attendant "zero defect" mentality.

Thompson is perhaps perfectly suited to weave this tale. A career naval officer and early volunteer for submarines who was forced to make an early "course change" into the engineering specialization on account of his eyesight, his destiny became inextricably bound up with the buildup of the nuclear submarine force in the United Kingdom. In his case, this was reinforced further by the adoption of the Polaris missile system and the ballistic-missile

submarine as the major elements of that nation's independent nuclear deterrent. Although he glosses over it, he was one of the few to make the transition successfully into higher-level nuclear management, which took him right to the pinnacle of his specialization. He therefore can offer his readers an almost unique perspective into the world of nuclear engineering, from the deckplates right through to higher-level policy making. Paradoxically, though, his illustrious career almost was cut off at the knees when his earnest, and in some ways naive, early efforts attracted some unwarranted judgment from colleagues with a less-than-nurturing disposition. How many others of us suffered similar, "there but for the grace of God" moments like these?

Endowed with a wry sense of humor and a literary bent, Thompson paints at times a disquieting picture of the darker, human side of life in submarines. His characters are portrayed vividly, and anyone who has served will recognize their types instantly. Some may take exception with what, at times, seems a lengthy preoccupation with his own youthful insecurities, so the book will not be everyone's cup of tea, focusing as it does on the author's personal experiences and observations as opposed to the larger policy issues of the day. That said, the book does in passing provide some useful insights into the development of the Tigerfish wire-guided torpedo and the administration of nuclear safety directives at the higher command level. There are also memorable, lighter moments, such as the vivid description of "corporate constipation," caused by the failure of the sewage treatment plant, as well as the many mishaps that inevitably befall mariners who essentially

are deprived of their senses with regard to their immediate surroundings.

In sum, this is a book for those interested in knowing what it was like to live in submarines during the Cold War. Those seeking coverage of matters of policy and strategy probably will be better served elsewhere.

ANGUS ROSS



India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean, ed. David Brewster. New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. 348 pages. \$40.99.

Americans often think of the vast Indian Ocean as the "rear area" of the Pacific Ocean—a featureless expanse notable mainly for the goods, services, and military forces that traverse it. The view from New Delhi and Beijing is profoundly different. Beijing recognizes that the flow of energy, raw materials, and finished goods across the Indian Ocean is essential to China's economic success. Chairman Xi Jinping's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative is, in part, a strategic investment in securing these sea lines of communication. In just over a decade, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has gone from being an occasional visitor to the Indian Ocean to a constantly deployed presence, supported by its first formal overseas base, at Djibouti. The Indian Ocean will become, as one Chinese scholar writes, "a normal region for the PLAN's combat reach in the future" (p. 94). India, traditionally the dominant regional power, views these developments with concern, even as it considers its own interests in the traditionally Chinese-dominated areas of the western Pacific.