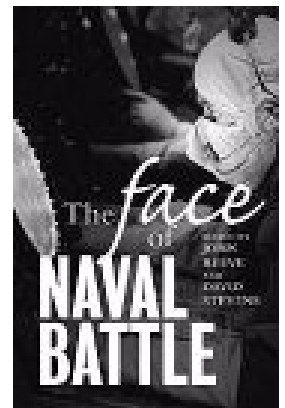


The Face of Naval Battle: The Human Experience of Naval War at Sea

John Reeve & David Stevens (eds)

**Reviewed by Rear Admiral Gerry
Carwardine**



This book is a collection of essays drawn largely from papers presented at the RAN's second King-Hall Naval History Conference held in Canberra in 2001. It seeks to show the human factor in warfare. The editors, both noted Australian naval historians and authors, have skilfully coalesced the conference papers into chapters with essentially a human theme, covering the past 100 years or so. That is, the life of the RAN.

The book covers not just Australian experience but includes distant wars and stories of friends and allies and even past enemies. It looks at most dimensions of war at sea including surface, air and sub-surface warfare and touches on joint service activities. Its contributors are both Australian and international and it is pitched at the local and international market. The inclusion of a few more chapters reflecting RAN experience might have been useful. But more of that later.

A first impression is that the theme wanders from its aim in some chapters with historical narrative stories and no analysis, and a few topics covering roles and capabilities; strategy and tactics; and even technical matters. Nevertheless most chapters with such an initial lean return to the theme and bring out the human factor.

Part one opens the book with 'Setting the Scene', two superb chapters by John Reeve and Andrew Gordon. The former considers the anatomy of the face of naval battle against an historical background and the latter operational command at sea. Both are worthy of expansion into books in their own right. Parts two and three address aspects of the face of naval battle and the warrior and his foe respectively. Many are quite excellent.

The chapter by Peter Overlack on Admiral Graf Von Spee and the German Cruiser Squadron in the Pacific in 1914 vividly shows the loneliness of command and the effect of the lack of clear, indeed largely any, strategic direction from his superiors.

David Parkin writes of amphibious matters and joint operations in defence of Australia starting with our first military operation as a nation, the capture of German radio stations in New Guinea by the Naval and Military Expeditionary Force in September 1914. Michael Dowsett tells of the compassion and care extended to Emden survivors by HMAS *Sydney* and her medical team after the battle at Cocos Island. This aspect is also mentioned by David Stevens in his interesting chapter on the faceless foe. After HMAS *Voyager* recovered survivors from an Italian submarine they 'were pleased to find the Australians did not kill without mercy'. Similar acts of kindness (following the custom of the sea) in the Mediterranean included leaving boats with provisions and oars at the scene of actions and even making plain language signals to the enemy advising of the position of survivors. However, such care was not without considerable hazard. And Admiral Cunningham, the Commander-in-Chief, directed that as distasteful as it is to leave survivors, Commanding Officers (CO) must harden their hearts, for the operations in hand and the security of their ships and crew, take precedence.

Guy Griffiths provides a personal perspective on naval battle based on his 43 years in the Navy and experience in three wars. He was a midshipman in the battle cruiser HMS *Repulse* in World War II in the chase for the Bismarck and a survivor of the former when sunk by the Japanese off Malaya. He served in the cruiser HMAS *Shropshire* at the Battles of Leyte Gulf and Lingayen Gulf. In the Korean War he had two tours as a gunnery officer, firstly, in the carrier HMAS *Sydney* and then the destroyer HMAS *Anzac*. As CO of the guided missile destroyer HMAS *Hobart* his final war was Vietnam. His experiences are fascinating and he brings out the critical human aspects including lack of information, exposure, boredom, stress and fear particularly during suicide air attacks. The importance of mail, food, air

conditioning, training, motivation and confidence in weapon systems is also emphasised, not least the improvement evident in many of these areas during command of Hobart.

The story of 'The Gunner', J.E. Macdonnell, whose books were required reading in the mess decks of HMA ships in the 1940s and 1950s is told by Peter Stanley. Excerpts of turret action are amongst the best descriptions of naval war one can read. And the story of 'Joe the Cook', as perceptively noted by Stanley, shows the mutual bonds of support and obligation that criss-cross the ship, making individuals part of a wider and stronger whole. It matters not if one is a gunner, steward or a stoker, or the chaplain or the dentist because the crew of a warship are 'all of one company'. Each has a job to do in war and the whole is no stronger than the individual.

The chapters by Lee Corder and Michael Whitby look to sea command. The former relates to experience in command in war and peace. The author, who commanded two guided missile frigates, gives account of command in the 1991 Gulf War and of a second deployment to undertake maritime intercept operations in the Red Sea. It provides keen insight into the demands of command, and the author is frank in analysing what he perceives as his own shortcomings. Whitby provides possibly the best chapter in the book. It tells by way of the diaries of Commander Layard, a World War II Escort Group Commander, of the 'strain of the bridge' during the Battle of the Atlantic. His personal thoughts are brutally honest. He writes of self-doubts, lack of confidence and indecision. He agonises over past decisions and those yet to be made. He was nonetheless an admired and highly decorated successful war at sea commander. Most COs with courage to do so would no doubt have admitted similar concerns.

Most of the remaining chapters also provide good coverage of their topics. Though in truth one or two are well removed from the human face of battle.

To return to the Australian content, some further inclusions may have been worthwhile. It could be argued that it is difficult to reconcile an Australian book about the human face of warfare with that subject when the book excludes some notable Australian figures. These could include for example our two treble DSCs, Stan Darling and K.R. Hudspeth (both alive at the time of the Conference); our four mine disposal George Crosses; our sung heroes such as Hec Waller and Teddy Sheean; our unsung heroes such as H. Henty-Creer, the CO of the third X-craft to reach the Tirpitz (the other two COs, Place and Cameron, received the VC); and perhaps Rankin, the CO of HMAS *Yarra*, whose

engagement of a vastly superior enemy was not dissimilar to that of Fogarty Fegan, the CO of HMS *Jervis Bay*, or G.B. Roope, the CO of HMS *Gloworm*. Both the latter received the VC.

As for the human factors of life at sea in peace and war, most are covered except perhaps one critical aspect—that is belief. The need to 'throw themselves on the mouth of the cannon' or go in harm's way, whilst seldom demanded of sailors is never more than a heartbeat away. Sailors must have complete trust in their superiors particularly their CO and belief in the cause in which they are involved to accept willingly the rigors and dangers of the enemy and indeed the sea. This is mentioned but briefly. Gordon Johnson in writing of Hobart saw two factors as contributing to her miraculous survival in the war. One was the extraordinary skill of the 'revered Captain Harry Howden' who 'undoubtedly saved our lives'. Corder also mentions the belief, trust and respect that a CO must engender in his crew.

Having said that, the book is an enjoyable and interesting read. In short it achieves its aim. The editors are to be commended. It is educative and many chapters are good 'Boys Own' yarns. It gives excellent background reading for those interested in the Navy and for all students of naval history. It also provides good insight into the ways of the Navy for members of the other Services. And just as this reviewer was issued with Volumes I and II of the Admiralty Manual of Seamanship 50 years ago on entering the Naval College, today's midshipmen entering the Naval College and ADFA should be provided with *The Face of Naval Battle*. The final paragraph by Peter Jones fittingly concludes the book: 'Historically, the best-trained and led sailors have invariably won the war at sea, and the maritime war of the future is unlikely to be significantly different'. ♦

John Reeve & David Stevens (eds), 'The Face of Naval Battle: The Human Experience of Modern War at Sea', Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003, paperback, 363pp, RRP \$39.95.

It would be desirable if every Government, when it comes into power, should have its old speeches burned.

—Philip Snowden