

Review of *Nightraiders*

While it took two atom bombs and the entry of Russia into the Pacific war to bring Japan to its senses politically, economically by mid-1945 Japan was already on its knees, throttled by sea power - in particular by the destruction of its merchant fleet and the denial of its ports and harbours, by submarine and mine warfare. This is the story of mine warfare in that conflict, told in very considerable detail.

Even before the Japanese attack, defensive fields were being laid to defend Singapore, Hong Kong and Dutch possessions. As the Japanese advance unfolded, scattered island groups had also to be protected right across the vastness of the Pacific. Most of that was done by surface ships, a raggle-taggle assembly where even the relatively professional destroyer minelayers were top-heavy conversions of old destroyers that were otherwise pretty well due for retirement. Let's raise a cheer to their engineers who kept their Old Ming going, often at high speeds and over vast distances. Where lays were needed close to Japanese activities, a usually unsung contribution to many major operations, the minelayers' puny anti-aircraft armament proved virtually useless; high courage was nevertheless met with high cost. The career and fate of every one of these ships, including some odd-jobbing as well as minelaying, is presented in such detail as to make this categorical account a standard work. However in 1944 new-built destroyer minelayers (and sweepers) with a more credible armament became available. In the same year British submarines joined the laying, particularly in Malayan and Dutch East Indies waters.

Much of the offensive work against Japan itself was necessarily done by aircraft, in spite of losses, latterly by USAAF B-29s whose considerable contribution has generally elsewhere gone unremarked. Capabilities by aircraft type (several of them) are provided. RAAF Catalinas were used, stealthily, to sow ground (influence) mines in shallow water across the South and West of the area.

From the Philippines on, the focus of the book shifts from minelaying to minesweeping, with the small wooden 'Yard Minesweepers', designed for inshore work, operating far and wide. The layers found a role as dan layers and in guarding the sweepers, particularly against Kamikaze attacks. Victory left a legacy of thousands of mines to be dealt with.

The authors explain that, for all the fine grain detail of particular operations, the total scope of mine warfare in this theatre was so vast that much has had to be merely hinted at or omitted. Even so, something like four hundred ships feature in the index.

Tauter editing could have ironed out the occasional overlap between narrative and tabulation, some repetitions, and the odd illustration out of phase with the narrative, but those are niggles. The illustrations themselves - well over a hundred photographs and diagrams - reflect some highly creditable trawling of archives for relatively obscure subjects, and the source citations show the remarkable spadework that has gone into this topic. Over thirty useful maps are provided. The general progress of the big war is sketched in as background to give the strategic setting. There is good detail on all sorts of arcane niceties. The basic strength of the book is that both authors are mine warfare specialists, every finger a marline spike, and one need have no doubt that they serve up a true bill.

Review by "Seaweed," www.amazon.co.uk, 6 February 2019