

Book Reviews

Anti-Submarine Warfare in World War 1

By John J Abbatiello

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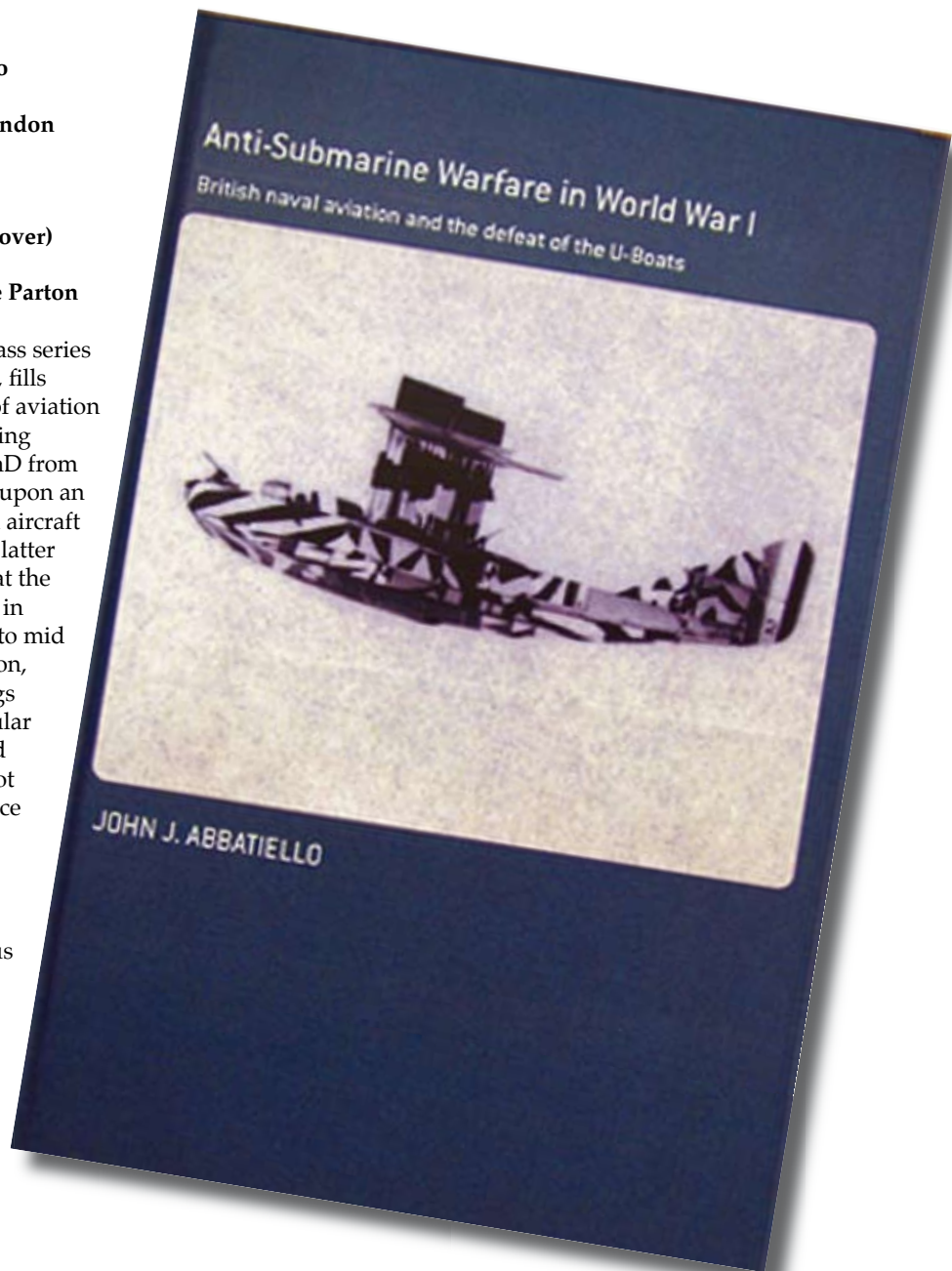
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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

This book, one of the Frank Cass series on Naval Policy and History, fills a unique gap in the history of aviation and naval forces. Written by a serving officer in the USAF who holds a PhD from King's College London, it is based upon an in-depth study of the use of British aircraft against German submarines in the latter part of the First World War. Being at the intersection of Air Force and Navy in Britain during the 1920s and early to mid 1930s was not a comfortable position, and much in contemporary writings revealed as much about the particular prejudices of the author(s) as it did about the subject. Abbatiello has not only gone back to the original source material for much previous work, but also introduces a new element in the form of a detailed analysis of the German submarine service's experience of British air power, thus providing a far fuller picture.

The book begins by providing a brief overview of the development of British naval aviation up to the end of World War I, before going on to examine the technology



involved in both the aircraft and the U-boats in Chapter 1. Not surprisingly it is the aviation aspects that are examined in most detail, with coverage of not only the technological advances in specific fields and their relationship to the efficacy of air power against the submarine, but also of the breadth of platforms used in the role – ranging from sea planes and flying boats through the various classes of lighter than air craft to towed kite balloons. The growing importance of wireless, both for communications and direction finding, is well brought out, and the use of hydrophones by both flying boats and airships as a means of detecting submerged U-boats is a fascinating element of the story. The problems of training and production are then considered in Chapter 2, and although nothing particularly new emerges in terms of the problems of producing the numbers of aircraft, aircrew and especially engines that were needed, the difficulties that resulted in terms of relationships between the War Office and Admiralty initially, and Admiralty and Air Ministry later on, are well laid out.

Chapter 3 is where the main effort of the work begins, by beginning to examine the actual operations undertaken, in this case, in terms of attacking the enemy at home — the bombing of the Flanders U-boat bases. Although the RNAS without doubt first introduced the concept of what would now be understood as ‘strategic’ or ‘independent’ bombing to the British military establishment, a combination of weaknesses in technology, doctrine and command meant that a sustained campaign against this particular target set was never effectively carried out. The author concludes that, particularly towards the end of the war, a sustained campaign *could* have impacted on the ability of the U-boats to operate from these forward-bases, but that in fact the activities that were carried out had a negligible impact. The next chapter looks at the use of air assets in patrolling Home Waters, and assesses the efficacy of this particular approach. Whilst previous studies had suggested that this method had not been particularly successful in terms of submarines sunk or engaged considered against the resources employed, a convincing case is made that the increasing use of air patrols, utilising both aircraft and airships, significantly reduced the effectiveness of many submarine patrols by forcing

them to submerge. The impact of a coherent intelligence system, together with systematic search patterns (such as the ‘Spider Web’ system developed by Felixstowe) certainly presaged the Second World War combination that was to prove so devastating in containing and then defeating the later U-boat menace. Chapter 5 looks at the role of air in the convoy escort system, from which it is clear that the combination of convoy tactics with air support proved extremely effective in reducing the threat posed by the German submarines. However, equally interesting is the examination of the different approaches taken by different commands to both patrolling and convoy escorting throughout the war, which reveals a far from coherent approach, albeit some of the differences come down to particular local circumstances.

The overall effectiveness of all air activity against the U-boats is considered in Chapters 6 and 7, comparing and contrasting the official British and German assessments. It is not possible within the scope of a brief book review to adequately represent the complex arguments made within these chapters, but a brief synthesis would be that on both sides the situation was not as black and white as has been made out in many previous accounts of this particular conflict. Whilst the limitations inherent in aircraft and airships of the time made them far less effective than their Second World War counterparts, they certainly played a significant part in defeating the German U-boat menace, and along with innovations such as the convoy system, minefields, hydrophones and in particular wireless communications, contributed to the development of a successful ‘system’ of anti-submarine warfare.

This is without doubt a book that should be read by anyone with an interest in early naval aviation, or submarine warfare, or both. It provides a refreshing perspective upon this interface of technologies, which as the author cogently points out, took naval operations from two dimensions into three, with both height and depth becoming important in naval tactics for the first time. It is also a fascinating read, and, due to the significant amount of detail contained within its pages, repays careful study.

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