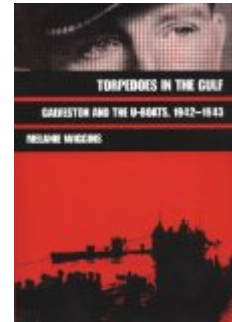


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melanie Wiggins. *Torpedoes in the Gulf: Galveston and the U-Boats 1942-1943* (Military History Series; No 40). College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89096-648-8.

Reviewed by Jonathan D. Beard (Science Writer-Photo Researcher)
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In 1942, a handful of U-boats made their way into the Gulf of Mexico and enjoyed yet another “happy time:” they found lighthouses and channel lights burning, ships sailing alone, silhouetted against the lights of non-blacked-out coastal cities, and lots of tankers that were not even zig-zagging. They ended up sinking 56 ships before the offensive petered-out in the autumn of 1943. This “Gulf War” was just a side-show of the Battle of the Atlantic, but it deserves a good book of its own.

Torpedoes in the Gulf is not that book. Despite the fact that the author has done a great deal of work, and included a lot of information, the results are so poor that it deserves a Health Warning on the cover: Caution, the Historian General has determined that reading this book may cause confusion, amusement and bewilderment.

Melanie Wiggins, a free-lance journalist based in Galveston, did her homework before writing *Torpedoes in the Gulf*. She not only cites such obvious sources as Admiral Doenitz’s *Memoirs* and Samuel Eliot Morison’s *History of United States Naval Operations*, but several other books on the U-boat offensive and American responses as well. She went to the trouble of tracking down and interviewing surviving participants, from the submarines, the ships they sank, and the soldiers and sailors who manned US defenses in the Gulf. But the rock upon which this book is really founded is a single source: *The Galveston Daily News*. Wiggins has apparently read it for every single day of the war, and she quotes from it, lavishly. And not just war news. She quotes at length from editorials, and, repeatedly, from one of its comic strips.

But basing her book on a small-town newspaper is not the worst of Wiggins’ problems. She makes a number

of the minor errors that infuriate military history readers: “P-47 observation planes....with .30 caliber machine guns,” a ship steaming with its “radio silent,” and U-boats armed with “artillery guns.” She adds a real howler when she describes the Gulf Stream as it flows into the Atlantic. The current, she writes, “had a maximum velocity of four knots, a thousand times swifter than the Mississippi.” These could be forgiven, though, if Wiggins had enough critical judgment or ability to organize her material. But she devotes as much space to irrelevant topics (nonexistent German spies, a hurricane that devastated Galveston during this period) as to the real meat of the book, which is her several chapters on the submarine war, from the U-boats’ perspective, and then from the American point of view. And even these potentially useful pages are rendered almost useless by her penchant for simply quoting her sources, rather than providing even the most basic analysis.

The best sections of *Torpedoes in the Gulf* are paired chapters, with the first giving the U-boats’ story of a series of actions, and the second narrating the same attacks as reported by ships’ crews and sailors and aviators on patrol missions. Unfortunately, she is completely faithful to her sources. If the German captain did not know what ships were in a convoy, their names are not given, even though Wiggins may well know this information. And the situation is much worse when she deals with the victims of submarine attack. The American sailors and gunners repeatedly report that the subs attacking them seem to be Italian, and this is left at that, though Wiggins knows perfectly well that no Italian submarine ever reached the US coast. And these same sources report U-boats shelling them with “3-inch and 5-inch deck guns.” Virtually every U-boat in these years carried a 10.5 cm

(4.1-inch) deck gun, and Wiggins ought to be aware of that. She may be. She simply repeats what her sources tell her.

Far more of this book is devoted, however, to the story that truly interests Wiggins: Galveston during the war. For readers unfamiliar with just how lackadaisical the American approach to war and civil defense could be in 1942, there are some good stories here: a mayor who opposed the blackout because Galveston's brightly lit boardwalk was a mainstay of its economy; the comic-opera beach patrols and air raid alerts; the ridiculous tale of Fort Crockett, where millions of dollars were wasted putting concrete casements over 12-inch guns that would have been useless against U-boats in any case.

This last point, in fact, may be the key to what went wrong with this book from the outset: no U-boats ever did come within range of Fort Crockett. A map on pages 114-15 of *Torpedoes in the Gulf* shows every ship sunk by U-boats during 1942-43. The sinkings were concentrated around the mouth of the Mississippi, and the coasts of Florida. No submarine ever approached Galveston. But, because it is apparently Wiggins' hometown, and certainly the subject of her previous book, she chose to make it the center of this study of U-boats in the Gulf of Mexico.

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