

**Geoffrey L. Rossano, Thomas Wildenberg.** *Striking the Hornets' Nest: Naval Aviation and the Origins of Strategic Bombing in World War I.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-390-4.



**Reviewed by** Laurence M. Burke

**Published on** H-War (December, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *Striking the Hornets' Nest: Naval Aviation and the Origins of Strategic Bombing in World War I*, coauthors Geoffrey L. Rossano and Thomas Wildenberg have provided the first book-length treatment of a largely forgotten episode of the war: the US Navy's wartime effort to create an organization of land-based day and night bombers for "round the clock" bombing of German U-boat bases in occupied Belgian towns. As they explain, the organization eventually known as the Northern Bombing Group (NBG) was one of the larger organizations of the First World War, whether in terms of effort expended, resources committed, or expectations for its effectiveness. Despite this, the NBG has been almost ignored—given short shrift in both airpower and naval historiographies. Rossano himself has paid the most attention to the unit, devoting a full chapter in his history of US naval aviation during the war, *Stalking the U-boat: U.S. Naval Aviation in Europe during World War I* (2010). The development of the NBG is also an important part of the story of Yale University's volunteer naval aviators in World War I, a topic

most recently addressed in Marc Wortman's *The Millionaires' Unit: The Aristocratic Flyboys Who Fought the Great War and Invented American Air Power* (2006).

The authors bring slightly different areas of expertise to illuminate this neglected corner of history. Rossano brings to this book his own familiarity with the period and sources. In addition to the aforementioned *Stalking the U-Boat*, he has edited the published papers of two naval aviators who participated in the NBG, Kenneth MacLeish (*The Price of Honor: The World War One Letters of Naval Aviator Kenneth MacLeish* [1991]) and David S. Ingalls (*Hero of the Angry Sky: The World War I Diary and Letters of David S. Ingalls, America's First Naval Ace* [2013]). It is no surprise that this book draws heavily on these previously published works. Wildenberg has also published several books on naval aviation topics: *Destined for Glory: Dive Bombing, Midway, and the Evolution of Carrier Airpower* (1998) examines the development of dive bombing in the interwar navy, while *All the Factors of Victory: Adm. Joseph Mason*

*Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower* (2003) presents the biography of one of the lesser-known but very influential officers in naval aviation. Most recently, in *Billy Mitchell's War with the Navy: The Interwar Rivalry over Air Power* (2014), he looks at the contentious relationship between naval aviation leadership and the outspoken army aviator "Billy" Mitchell during the 1920s. Although his previous books concentrate on the interwar era, they show Wildenberg's talent for historical analysis, a talent he brings to *Striking the Hornets' Nest*.

The authors do a very good job of drawing from a number of official and private papers located in numerous archives to trace the many wellsprings that contributed to the NBG's eventual creation. First and foremost was the desperation felt by all the Allies (the British in particular) to do *something* to address the unexpected success of the German submarines once they resumed unrestricted warfare at the beginning of 1917. This urgency led the Royal Navy to develop several schemes to use aircraft against submarine bases, but a lack of available men and planes hamstrung most of these proposals. When the United States joined the fight against Germany in April 1917, the British, French, and even the Italians viewed the Americans as additional resources in their fight against U-boat depredations. At the same time, recently arrived navy and marine officers independently developed plans very similar to those being pushed by America's new allies.

The book length allows *Striking the Hornets' Nest* to examine in detail the many considerations that gradually turned these various plans that called for seaplanes to attack U-boats in their ports (the source of the titular imagery of "attacking hornets in their nests," a metaphor often used at the time by Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels) into one using landplanes to attack the port facilities themselves. This subtle change had great consequences, which the authors have plenty of space to discuss. The greater length also al-

lows *Striking the Hornets' Nest* to pay more attention to the marines' participation in the NBG—something missing from Rossano's earlier *Stalking the U-boat*. In addition, *Striking the Hornets' Nest* adds Washington's perspective and other continental US events to the narrative of the NBG's development. (*Stalking the U-boat* focused exclusively on events in Europe.) The book under review also improves on the earlier work by adding historical analysis of *why* events turned out the way they did. This analysis is likely Wildenberg's contribution to the work.

In some ways, however, the book length is just a longer version of a story that has been told before, particularly in Rossano's *Stalking the U-boat*. It is particularly frustrating when *Striking the Hornets' Nest* makes errors in (arguably) small details: nothing that would change the narrative but noticeable to specialists in the field. For instance, this volume gives the impression that Killingholme, an airbase on England's east coast, was created from scratch once the US Navy decided to put an air station there (pp. 38, 64, 69, 201). In Rossano's earlier *Stalking the U-boat*, however, it is clear that the Royal Naval Air Service/Royal Air Force (RNAS/RAF) was already operating a sizeable seaplane base there, which they agreed to turn over to the Americans.

Rossano's reliance on personal papers from NBG participants gave his earlier work a human (versus organizational) perspective. Here these sources are a distraction from the authors' argument that the NBG was an organization with a new kind of mission. See, for instance, the discussion of "diversions" that occupied some of the NBG officers' free time on pages 168-169.

Despite the book's length, its narrative and analysis, like the war itself, ends rather abruptly with the Armistice. The final chapter, a mere four pages, is primarily a summary of the previous chapters. Rossano and Wildenberg present some broad lessons that the NBG could have taught the navy about naval aviation—how to manage it and

what it could be—but say almost nothing about more specific consequences of the NBG. Perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the book is represented in its final sentence, which asserts a connection between the NBG’s mission and the World War II aerial bombing of Berlin and Tokyo. However, the book does nothing to explain what that connection might be. If, as the authors claim, the NBG was indeed the first American unit to undertake strategic bombing—at the time, there was no question that its mission *was* strategic—what influence did it have on later developments of the practice? What were the consequences of this effort? The book does not address such questions.

*Striking the Hornets’ Nest* is an engaging narrative of events largely forgotten in histories of American participation in the First World War. Its organizational and operational history of the NBG is accessible to the casual reader while also offering something for the academic researcher. Serious scholars of World War I naval aviation, though, will likely find little new in this volume and may be frustrated by the occasional minor error and the lack of any narrative or analysis extending beyond the Armistice.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Laurence M. Burke. Review of Rossano, Geoffrey L.; Wildenberg, Thomas. *Striking the Hornets’ Nest: Naval Aviation and the Origins of Strategic Bombing in World War I*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45511>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.