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Book Reviews

by
Vic Jeffery¹

The U-Boat Far From Home. The epic voyage of U-862 to Australia and New Zealand by David Stevens

I was delighted when I learnt that the Department of Defence's Director of Naval Historical Studies, David Stevens, was to write a book on the German submarine offensive against Australia during World War Two.

A former naval officer and a high respected naval writer, David Stevens has produced an excellent book in "The U-Boat Far From Home", filling one of the few remaining voids regarding the undersea war off Australia's shores.

Commanded by Kapitanleutnant Heinrich Timm, U-862 sailed from Germany for the last time when she departed Kiel for the Indian Ocean on May 21, 1944. U-862 became singularly responsible for the largest submarine hunt undertaken in Australian waters before slipping quietly away to sail undetected around New Zealand. Over the period of 12 months and two war patrols, U-862 travelled farther from home than any other German submarine. As David Stevens points out, 'she achieved all of this in the last year of the war, when it was obvious that for Germany the cause was already lost, and when virtually every communication concerning the boat was being intercepted and read by her enemies'.

Apart from her successes, the confusion U-862 caused and the tying down of valuable Allied naval assets, her cruise was a remarkable feat of endurance, battling illness, uncertainty and life under the waves for months at a time.

Funnily enough, most people who are aware of U-862's epic cruise immediately think of the unsubstantiated story that her crew went ashore in New Zealand to milk cows!

It was more than 50 years ago that Germany planned to mount a submarine offensive against Australia during the final months of World War Two. "U-Boat Far From Home" reveals the full story behind this desperate 1944 mission.

David Stevens makes good use of personal accounts from German and Allied sources and recently declassified documents to give an insight into life aboard U-862.

Four German U-boats were deployed from Japanese bases in south-east Asia for a surprise strike deep inside Allied waters. U-862 was the only one to survive.

The U-862 sank seven merchant ships, shot down two aircraft, and was indirectly responsible for the loss of two others. My personal interest in this 'quiet achiever' came through my interest in the last Allied ship to be sunk by the enemy action in World War Two, the American Liberty Ship, *SS Peter Silvester*, in the Indian Ocean on February 6, 1945.

Peter Silvester was carrying the usual cargo of 317 US Army mules, 2,700 tonnes of cargo and 106 American servicemen as passengers. It was not until four days later that the alarm was raised and the Naval Officer-in-charge Fremantle, Commodore Pope, dispatched the corvette *HMAS Dubbo* and the patrol frigate *USS Corpus Christi* with their respective sister ships *HMAS Warrnambool* and *USS Hutchinson*.

Finally involving the RAAF, RAF, other ships including two British Pacific Fleet escort carriers, *HM Ships Slinger* and *Speaker* which had been diverted, it was later claimed that 'this was the largest and most thorough rescue search mounted during the war', mainly due to the spirit of cooperation between the Allies with little red tape involved.

It is worth purchasing this book for the chapter on the sinking of the *Peter Silvester* alone. But this is just one of the interesting facets of this 282 page book which is supported by 33 black- and-white photographs, 11 maps, three diagrams, and a table of U-boat numbers, losses and sinking rates of 1944-45.

My only disappointment, be it a small one, is that a book of this magnitude and historic importance is not published in hard cover. However, being produced in softcover has kept the price down to a very reasonable \$24-95, making it more affordable to more readers. Published by Allen & Unwin of 9 Atchinson Street, St Leonards, NSW, this book has been available in bookstores from March 14.

I have always claimed that 'fact is often better than fiction' and this book is a good example. Definitely one of the best naval books I have read for some time. Highly recommended.

The Armed Forces of Indonesia by Robert Lowry

This is a timely book and the first book in an exciting new range titled 'The Armed Forces of Asia Series' which will present single-country studies in the arc from Pakistan in the west to the Russian Far East in the north.

Published by the renowned Australian publisher Allen & Unwin, forthcoming titles are Australia, Burma, China, Japan, New Zealand, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, The USA in the Asian Pacific Region, and Vietnam.

Author Robert Lowry, a retired Australian Army lieutenant-colonel, provides an 'insight' into the Indonesian military, being a graduate of the Indonesian Army Command and Staff College.

Indonesia's armed forces have been major players in the country's politics and economics since its independence and will continue to play a major role in its future.

Straddling the important sea lanes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans to our north, Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia and is located in an area of rapid economic growth.

The book is divided into chapters covering defence policy and strategy, command and control, the armed forces, servicemen and women, ABRI (Indonesian military) business, internal security, social-political role and strategy, and a conclusion. Each chapter contains many subsections. The book is also supported by an Appendix - Summary of Forces.

This is a very clear and enlightening book to read and is packed with information which allows one to develop one's own views on topics. It should appeal equally to professional and amateur students of the Indonesian military alike.

Comprising 282 pages, "The Armed Forces of Indonesia" includes detailed tables, figures and maps, which support the text.

The first volume, softcover, and retailing at \$29-95, is destined to become keenly sought after if its following titles are of the same quality as readers attempt to backtrack to complete their series of "The Armed Forces of Asia".

Published on the 14th of February, this book is now generally available in bookstores. A recommended read.